

# SOUTH AFRICAN Journal of Science

March / April 2010

Volume 106 No 3/4

## THE NATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION SCORES AN OWN GOAL FOR SOUTH AFRICA

The recent re-instatement of Phil Charles, Director of the South African Astronomical Observatory (SAAO), after a hearing cleared him of any misdemeanour, has raised grave reservations about the leadership of the National Research Foundation (NRF) (see letter on page 8 of this issue). Charles had been suspended from his post in January – ostensibly for having leaked confidential NRF documents – but the NRF has refused to reveal the precise nature of its charges, despite Charles having requested the foundation to do so.

It emerged during the hearing that the suspension was related to Charles disclosing to fellow astronomers the contents of an email sent to him by the NRF's vice-president of facilities, Gatsha Mazithulela, in December (<http://www.nature.com/news/2010/100317/full/news.2010.131.html>). This stated that the Ysterplaat site for MeerKAT's control centre had been approved and that the Minister of Science and Technology, Naledi Pandor, had been asked to announce the decision (something that she has wisely desisted from doing). MeerKAT is a prototype for the Square Kilometre Array (SKA), a mega-project that both South Africa and Australia are bidding to host – in the former case at an estimated cost of R2 billion to the South African taxpayer. The two sites under consideration are at the headquarters of the SAAO in the Cape Town suburb of Observatory and the nearby air-force base at Ysterplaat. Yet, on 24 February, the NRF's president, Albert van Jaarsveld, told the news editor of the journal *Nature* that documents relating to the siting of the control centre were not an issue in the suspension. Bernard Fanaroff, director of the SKA project, subsequently asked *Nature* to retract a news story (<http://www.nature.com/news/2010/100203/full/news.2010.52.html>) on the suspension on the same grounds – that there was no link between it and the operations centre.

Michael Feast, a former Director of the SAAO who represented local astronomers as an observer at the hearing, has argued that far from acting irresponsibly, it was in fact appropriate for Charles to alert his colleagues, as they had not been consulted about the decision. Incredibly, the NRF's response to Charles's exoneration was an ungracious statement concluding that the foundation believed that the issues that gave rise to the hearing 'may still exist and that they still require be dealt with' [*sic*]. Feast echoes the sentiments of many researchers when he says that 'the issues that remain to be resolved relate to the operation of the NRF executive, including its attempt to force through changes without proper consultation of the community that it is supposed to serve.'

John Skinner, President of the Royal Society of South Africa, has summed up the situation accurately in saying that 'the action taken against Charles has disturbed the international scientific community and placed a grave question mark against South Africa's international scientific reputation.' Robin Crewe, President of the Academy of Science of South Africa, has been mandated by the academy's council urgently to seek an explanation from the NRF board. The main concern is that the incident has left the international astronomical community with the impression that the NRF management is both inept and disingenuous and that this could damage South Africa's chances of winning its bid to host the SKA. But there is still time to rectify the situation, as a decision on the bid is expected only by the end of 2012. Rather than dispatching its chairperson, Belinda Bozzoli, to travel the country trying vainly to appease our astronomers, the NRF board should act swiftly to investigate the serious damage that has been caused by its management and, if necessary, dismiss those responsible. This step could be the salvation not only of South African astronomy, but of the wider research community that the agency is currently failing to serve. ■

## SOMETHING NEW OUT OF THE CRADLE OF HUMANKIND

Pliny the Elder, the Roman diarist of 2000 years ago, noted that 'there is always something new out of Africa'. Perhaps it is time for us to be more specific and say that there is 'always something new out of the Cradle of Humankind'. This rich World Heritage Site north-west of Johannesburg has given us at least six sites with fossils of early human ancestors and now, compliments of Lee Berger and his team at Wits, we have a new one called Malapa.

South Africa has been extremely lucky, not only in the fact that it has so many places with the evidence of human evolution, but also because we have had scientists who have been able to retrieve and describe this material. We have always welcomed foreigners as collaborators, but it has been local academics who have taken the lead. This is something that we need to emphasise in the future and the best way to do this is to train more South African students in palaeoanthropology and biological anthropology. Our pre-eminent school in this subject has always been the University of the Witwatersrand, but palaeoanthropology has gone through some troubled times since the retirement of Phillip Tobias.

The recent launch of the Institute for Human Evolution under its new Director, Francis Thackeray, is a sign that times are changing for the better once again. New research projects have been launched (including the Malapa investigation), new equipment has been purchased, the institute's offices and labs are being revamped and research posts have been filled. Although the institute is envisioned primarily as a research establishment, we need to be bold in drawing it into the training of postgraduate and undergraduate students. However, Wits is not the only institution at which this needs to occur, nor is palaeoanthropology the only field in need of attention. The cognate fields of archaeology, anatomy and palaeontology have become separated, but we have considerable expertise in these subjects residing in several local institutions and it would be very valuable to find a way to unite them.

The hype and publicity around the new discovery at Malapa will bring South African palaeoanthropology back into the limelight. It is anticipated that this will stimulate public interest significantly, resulting in an increase in students choosing to train in this field. So, let's give them the opportunity. Let's build pathways of lectures and courses in our universities that lead to postgraduate study and let's make sure that funding is readily available for postgraduate bursaries. ■

**How to cite this article:** The National Research Foundation scores an own goal for South Africa & Something new out of the Cradle of Humankind (Leader). S Afr J Sci. 2010;106(3/4), Art. #215, 1 page. DOI: 10.4102/sajs.v106i3/4.215