

LARGE METEORITE IMPACTS CONFERENCE
WELCOMING ADDRESS BY MEC NEO MASITHELA
VENUE: PARYS COUNTRY CLUB
DATE: 17 AUGUST 2008

Professor Gibson

Professor Reimold and Members of the Organising Committee

Members of the Free State and North West Provincial Governments,

Mayors and Ward Councillors present here

Members of the Vredefort Dome World Heritage Site Steering Committee,

Conference delegates,

Members of the Vredefort Dome community and members of the Media

I would like to welcome you to the Free State Province and, more especially, to the Vredefort Dome.

Available body of research indicates that what happened here in the Vredefort Dome two thousand million years ago, an event that took less than 10 minutes, has had enormous effect all around the world. This has become an incident of historical, scientific and cultural significance affecting and attracting interest across the spectrum of people throughout the whole world. Our presence here bears testimony to that.

Apart from the creation of a massive crater extending hundreds of kilometres across, with the Vredefort Dome in its centre, the global environmental consequences were devastating. We are told that the dust and chemicals thrown into the atmosphere by the impact would have caused initial massive global cooling and acid rain and surface water pollution. However, this was most likely immediately followed by global warming triggered by greenhouse gases liberated by the impact. It is therefore not surprising, then, that this event holds such a fascination not only for scientists, but also for ordinary people. That event is upon us now and is meant to change the lives of the people of this country and this place for ever.

Almost exactly 21 years ago a conference was held not far from here in the former Riviera and Echoes Hotels at which a fierce argument raged about how the Vredefort Dome formed. Professor Reimold has informed me that at the end of the conference, no agreement could be reached by the delegates and so a momentary truce was called. However, this truce was not a failure, because what the conference achieved was to allow scientists to formulate a series of questions that needed answering if the riddle of the origin of the Vredefort Dome was to be solved, and to put in place international research teams to find the answers.

These answers were found over the next few years and the Vredefort Dome was eventually acknowledged as part of a much larger, ancient, impact structure. The Vredefort impact structure is today still acknowledged as the oldest, possibly the largest, and definitely the most deeply eroded impact structure yet discovered on Earth.

On 14 July 2005, the departments of Tourism, Environmental and Economic Affairs in the Free State Province and of Agriculture, Conservation and Environment in the North West Province submitted a proposal via National Government to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation to have a part of the Vredefort Dome declared as a World Heritage Site in recognition of its significance to humanity. This proposal was accepted unanimously.

The Vredefort Dome World Heritage Site is the first and so far the only World Heritage Site in the Free State. You therefore have to appreciate the attention it continues to receive from the Government. We would want everybody to understand why we say it receives "intensive care". Government, scientist, academics, business, culturists and communities around this place and across the land should ensure that we preserve and conserve this heritage for coming generations to appreciate. This heritage site is the latest inclusion in world heritage sites in South Africa. Others are the Cradle of Humankind, Cape Floral Region, Robben Island , Drakensburg Park , Mapungubwe , Richtersveld Cultural, Botanical Landscape and the Greater St. Lucia Wetland National Park.

On invitation of South African Government, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre undertook an evaluation mission between 27 April and 2 May 2008 to assess progress made since inscription. This mission was undertaken by Dr Elizabeth Wangari, Chief: Africa Unit at the World Heritage Centre and Mr Ali Kaki, Expert from Conservation Union (IUCN).

On conclusion of the mission, the evaluation team commended the government and other participants with progress made so far. Mr Kaka told us that they are encouraged by the fact the support demonstrated by all towards the world heritage status of the site. Among others he drew our attention towards development in and around the Heritage

Site. We were urged to protect the uniqueness of the site because “both its future and the needs of the owners should always be taken into consideration”.

At it's the 32nd Session held in Quebec Canada from the last month the World Heritage Committee acknowledge progress made at the World Heritage Site so far. In response, we will be submitting the state of conservation report to early in 2009 as yet another proof to demonstrate our commitment towards the world heritage status of this site.

Today, in addition to opening the Large Meteorite Impacts Conference, we celebrate the striking of the Commemorative Gold Coin for the Vredefort Dome World Heritage Site. This is a special moment indeed and for that we wish to congratulate the South African Mint for seeing the wisdom of combining this historic moment with this auspicious occasion. Still as part of this important conference and in the presence of our eminent geologists in this area tomorrow, we will celebrate the official opening of the first phase of the new road network that will link different parts of the World Heritage Site, allowing visitors better access to Vredefort Dome. On Wednesday, delegates will visit the new World Heritage Site Visitor and Interpretation Centre that is likely to be officially opened in the middle of 2009. All these efforts seek to present the geological heritage of the Vredefort Dome to local, national and international people, with the goal of managing and developing the tourism potential of the Vredefort Dome. Whilst the mandate required of us by UNESCO is to preserve and present this important heritage for all the people of the world, we are ever-mindful that the opportunity presented to us provides important employment and revenue benefits to the people of the Vredefort Dome.

To the delegates, who have travelled from so many countries to be here: may you have a rewarding and relaxing stay. We hope that this conference will be the start of many new friendships and collaborations, and that this will not be the last time you visit us to share your knowledge. May you ask many new questions, and may you find their answers whilst you enjoy one of South Africa's beautiful world heritage sites

And so, in the language of the people of the Vredefort Dome, I say to you *Le Amohetswe* , *Welkom*, *Welcome* and I would like to declare the Fourth Large Meteorite Impacts and Planetary Evolution Conference open.

Thank You