

Gauteng MEC for Economic Development, Environment, Agriculture and Rural Development, Lebogang Maile's Remarks on the Occasion of the Rising Star Event, Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site, 10 September 2015.

Programme Director

Minister of Environmental Affairs, Edna Molewa

Executive Mayor of the West Rand District Municipality, Mpho Nawa

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Nobel Laureate, Mr Randy Scheckman

Chief Science and Exploration Officer at the National Geographic, Terry Garcia

Professors Lee Berger, Paul Dirk and John Hawks

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is often said that scientists are the torchbearers of the human race in its quest for discovery and knowledge. Our celebrations today, as we announce the discovery of yet another new species of human relative Homo Naledi, affirm this assertion.

Today marks yet another pivotal moment for science and discovery, for history and knowledge. The declaration of the Cradle of Humankind as a World Heritage Site in 1999, and the various fossil discoveries that predated this have landed us a firm place in the annals of science as the birthplace of humanity.

Just as we thought things could not possibly get any better, the ceaseless work of the science community has once again given the world more evidence that Africa is undeniably the birthplace of humanity – Maropeng – where we all come from.

Today's announcement confirms that indeed the Cradle of Humankind is one of the world's most important fossil sites, producing some of the most intriguing discoveries about the origins of the human species.

We celebrate this discovery not only because it is part of the efforts of the science community to piece together fragments of humanity's past but also because it is a remarkable milestone for South Africa and Gauteng specifically.

Today, South Africa occupies a unique status in the world due to its immense diversity, antiquity and continuity of its geological, palae-ontological and archaeological records together with the richness of its genetic heritage.

This World Heritage Site is significant as it places the African continent as the birthplace of humanity thereby shifting current stereotypes of the country and continent and provides a unique tourism experience for visitors. Maropeng, the official visitor centre for the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site, is an iconic tourism magnet.

This place is an invaluable asset for Gauteng and South Africa. It is for this reason that the provincial government has committed over R250 million in strategic economic infrastructure for the Cradle as a tourism destination.

We are encouraged by the fact that since its listing as a world heritage site in 1999, the area has witnessed enormous growth in tourism products from 69 to 411 currently.

The site has also made a real and noticeable impact on job creation in the Western Corridor and contributes to over 6000 tourism jobs and other related jobs in the area.

Ladies and gentlemen, Maropeng is clearly the scaffold that supports our vision to use tourism as a tool to inject new life into our economy, create jobs and promote meaningful economic participation for the people of this province and beyond.

The economic value of conservation, heritage and paleo-tourism goods and services in the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site is currently estimated at R 911 million and visitor numbers, which continue to show an upward trend, currently stand at just over 120 000.

Moreover, the Cradle is fast becoming a meeting area for young and curious minds with school visitor numbers surpassing the 80 000 mark annually. It has also earned its stripes as a convention centre for the science community. All of these things give us inimitable pride and joy.

We have every intention to continue investing resources in the creation of world class tourism infrastructure and in the enhancement of visitor experiences at this iconic world heritage site.

On this note, the province has just completed the expansion of the Hominin House Student facility to include six additional self-contained teachers rooms, an enclosed dining room and new clubhouse area to enhance our ability to host larger school groups.

In partnership with the Department of Arts and Culture, we have also just installed a world-class fossil studio, which is linked via a virtual network to entire world.

This facility allows scientists and children from South Africa to talk to scientists and children in the rest of world in real time, thus meeting our real commitment to create open access to science.

We have exciting new infrastructure upgrades planned for the new-year, the first of which is to expand the virtual studio space to create an Experience Lab, an interactive 'laboratory' experience for learners and visitors that compliments the virtual lab offering.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are elated to have all of you here to witness this milestone. We are grateful for the light that science and discovery shines not only in the life of this iconic site, but also on our country and the continent at large. More than anything, I would like to extend out gratitude to our partners - Wits University, National Geographic and e-Life. It is my esteemed pleasure to welcome all of you here.

I thank you.