

The world's first cavers: dating the associations between man and caves over 3 million years of human history in South Africa

Andy Herries

Head of Archeomagnetism Laboratory, Archaeology Program, LaTrobe University

The association between our early ancestors and caves is so strong that when many people think of our earliest relatives they most likely think of the term 'caveman'. Be it 'walking with cavemen' or 'Captain Caveman' this image permeates our consciousness and society. But when did humans first utilise caves and why? and how has our use of caves changed over time? Human fossils are found in caves as long ago as 3 million years in northern South Africa, when we were little more than bipedal apes. Debates have raged over whether these early humans were living in the caves and eating the other animals that are found there, or whether humans were little more than the hunted themselves. This talk will explore the question of how caves have shaped our evolutionary history. From the dolomite Highveld caves of Gauteng Province to the coastal quartzite caves along the southern Cape coast, where groups of early humans struggling against the forces of nature first learnt to exploit the sea; perhaps even saving us from extinction some 200–150,000 years ago. Determining the age of many of these cave deposits has proven difficult and the talk will also focus on how new methods have been developed to date these ancient caves and how such methods are now being used to date marsupial fossil sites in Australia, like those at Wellington Caves in NSW.