

MEDIA RELEASE

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GROUNDBREAKING RESEARCH INTO NEW AUSTRALOPITHECUS SEDIBA FOSSILS REVEALED

Yesterday, September 8, saw an exclusive media preview of rare new fossils found at the Malapa fossil site in the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site. The media event was held at the University of the Witwatersrand's Origins Centre in Johannesburg and Gauteng MEC of Economic Development Qedani Mahlangu and Deputy Minister of Science and Technology Derek Hanekom were among the guests invited to view these phenomenal new discoveries.

Professor Lee Berger, who led the research, revealed the rare new fossils that included a pelvis, hand and brain endocast. Berger spoke about their significance in relation to our understanding of human evolution and, in particular, what they revealed about early hominids' capacity for making stone tools.

New research, published today in five articles in the esteemed publication *Science*, investigates *Australopithecus sediba's* link to human evolution, with Berger arguing that *Australopithecus sediba* is a direct ancestor of *Homo sapiens*.

According to Berger the fossils demonstrate a small but surprisingly advanced brain, a much evolved hand with a long thumb like a human's, and a small pelvis. Significant is the foot and ankle shape that combines features of apes and human, and that has never been seen in any hominin species.

One of the papers focuses on the dexterity of the hand, and argues that *Australopithecus sediba* was capable of precision grips. This would have allowed it to make stone tools. Previously, the first species believed to have been capable of making tools was *Homo habilis* ("handy man").

The new fossils and images were studied some time after the initial excavation at Malapa in 2008, when the skeletons of *Australopithecus sediba*, now named MH-1 and MH-2, were found.

Maropeng Managing Director Tony Rubin says these new findings will add major insight to our evolutionary history: "It is significant for us all to acknowledge that these discoveries are a further link in the evolution of humankind. These findings also further prove our status as the Cradle of Humankind."

The team studying the *Australopithecus sediba* fossils is one of the largest in the history of archaeology or palaeontology. More than 80 scientists, computer specialists, students and technicians from across the globe are involved in the ongoing study, making *Australopithecus sediba* one of the best studied hominid species yet discovered. The publication of the five papers in *Science* is one of the largest collections of scientific papers ever produced by an Africa-based team or university, on a single subject to be published in a journal of this level.

The original fossils of MH-2 will be on exhibition at Maropeng, the visitor centre for the Cradle of Humankind, from September 9 to 26, 2011. They will be the focus of a new fossil display called *More secrets of sediba revealed*.

The return of the sediba fossils to the Cradle of Humankind is a huge honour for Maropeng, says Lindsay Marshall, Maropeng's curator and human resources manager. "Maropeng serves as a platform for the incredible research going on in the palaeo

sciences department at Wits," she says. "It is a huge honour for all of us at Maropeng to showcase this breakthrough research by the Malapa team. This research once again illustrates the critical importance of the Cradle's fossil record in our understanding of human evolution."

Maropeng is offering visitors the opportunity of a private tour of the exhibition with some of the great minds behind the new research. For more information go to www.maropeng.co.za.

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