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The children of Taung: Journeying from a rural village to the global stage: The perception of the local community and views regarding the development of the site and the curation of the skull

The iconic Taung fossilised skull is widely known for its primacy as Africa’s first palaeoanthropological discovery with universal scientific relevance. Yet the details surrounding its discovery and current status remain an enigma to the community of Taung Village. A comprehensive conservation of the site, which was listed as a UNESCO cultural heritage site of outstanding universal value 25 years ago, is yet to be completed, much to the chagrin of the local communities. The noticeable disconnect between the management authorities and scholarly institutions probably adds to the slow development in regard to continued research and public engagements at the site. In this paper, we discuss the current state of the site and the ongoing development, as well as the knowledge gap and the lack of inclusiveness of the Taung local inhabitants regarding the site.

Significance:

We look at the discovery of the Taung skull from the perspective of all stakeholders of the site. The discovery of the Taung skull shaped the story of the evolution of humankind, and was a robust discussion for decades. To the Taung community, it did not have much influence on their daily existence, but rather became a mystery, still not understood by many. The paper presents the complex stakeholder relationships, challenges at the site, and the wishes of the Taung people regarding the skull.

[Abstract in Setswana]

Background to the site of discovery

Socio-political and economic situation in Taung at the time of discovery of the fossil

The year 2024 marked the 100th anniversary of the discovery of the Taung skull. In the context of this prominent jubilee, our view is that this heritage is more than just a fossil hominin discovered in the middle of rural South Africa. When viewed within the context of its locality and period of discovery, it is a potential resource for education, a sense of belonging, and cultural and economic development. We assess the role that these factors have, and could have, played in the story of the Taung Child and its journey to being a heritage resource of world renown.

The Taung skull was discovered in the village of Buxton, in Taung, in 1924, during the height of the lime mining activities of the Northern Lime Company, established in 1907 in the then Northern Transvaal, South Africa. Taung is located on the southern stretch of today’s North West Province. From its discovery, the skull found its way to the School of Anatomy at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) for examination by Raymond Dart, and a scientific announcement about its discovery was made in 1925.¹ To date, only the face, mandible and brain endocast have been recovered and described. For some time, its significance to the human evolutionary story and its position in the evolutionary tree were questioned and challenged by some Western scholars.^{2,3} However, as will be discussed, its role as a propeller of palaeoanthropological studies and a find that shaped the human evolution family tree is currently globally recognised.⁴

In contrast with the Western academic sphere, the skull remains a mystery with little to no heritage significance for the townspeople of Taung. To date, the people of Taung know very little about the discovery and the details surrounding the current existence of the skull. Any education or engagement about the skull is gathered through high school teaching, as prescribed by the national curriculum. In this paper, we assess the interface between this palaeoanthropological discovery and the local community and how the science has impacted the average Taung child. We conclude that the discovery of the skull has thus far had no significant positive impact on the average contemporary child of Taung. The skull serves no motivational purpose amongst the community of Taung, nor does it bring socio-economic benefits for them. There is no sense of pride, or of ownership with regard to the site and its finds.

We acknowledge the influence that the discovery of the skull had on Buxton Village in Taung; it put the village on the global scientific map. The site of discovery, the Taung Skull World Heritage Site (TSWHS), is now an extension of the UNESCO World Heritage Site Listing, the Fossil Hominid Site of South Africa. The sites are situated in three provinces in the country: Gauteng, the North West and Limpopo Province.⁵ However, outside a palaeoanthropological context, its effect has been negligible. A small town encompassing about 106 villages within the Greater Taung Local Municipality, Taung is administered under traditional leadership, with three main tribal branches: the Bathaping boo Phuduhutswana, Bathaping boo Maldi and Bathaping boo Mothibi.⁶ Although the tribes are currently under traditional leadership, political power has increasingly shifted towards the elected political office bearers.⁷ The area is today plagued by socio-economic challenges, similar to localities of its kind across South Africa. Today, the average inhabitant of Taung is a black African with a median age of 22 years old.⁸ In 2019, the district recorded 52% female inhabitants compared with 48% male inhabitants. Men are mostly migrant labourers, leaving the district for employment elsewhere in the country. The upper poverty line is defined by Statistics South Africa as the level of

consumption at which individuals are able to purchase both sufficient food and non-food items without sacrificing one for the other.⁹ In 2020, more than half (55.8%) the population in the district were reported to live below the poverty line (with an average income per month of ZAR1000). The main sources of employment are government sectors and retail businesses, with few informal seasonal farming jobs.

The region is plagued by high levels of poverty and dependency on social service grants due to the high rate of unemployment.⁹ The entire Dr Ruth S Mompoti District, which is inclusive of the Greater Taung Local Municipality, had a dependency ratio of 75.98% for the year 2020. This ratio is estimated to increase to 76.01% by 2026.¹⁰ In 1925, the economic outlook of the area was not much different. The discovery of the Taung Child took place after the enactment of the *Natives Land Act of 1913*, by which the “natives” were dispossessed of their lands and confined to only 7% of the arable land in the country.¹¹ Villages within Taung most probably relied heavily on pastoralism and subsistence agriculture to survive during those days. The then southwestern Transvaal where the Taung Native Reserve was located faced recurrent droughts and locust plagues which caused agricultural losses, the main source of employment for black labour. These inadvertently contributed to the rise in (lime and diamond) mining activities.¹² Africans from various parts of the country came to work on the diggings. However, by the mid-1920s, just before the discovery of the Taung skull, mining projects in the Taung magisterial district faced turmoil and alluvial diamond mining was de-proclaimed. Poverty, gambling and stock thefts characterised the area. It thus seems likely that the average inhabitant of Taung at the time of the fossil discovery was faced with socio-economic turmoil and an uncertain future.

A view from the community: Past and present

While it is difficult to ascertain the views of the local community during the time of the discovery due to the lack of records, it is likely that most of the community members, possibly the traditional leaders too, were not even aware of the discovery at the time, or, if they were, it was of little concern to them given the socio-economic circumstances. The discovery took place during the mining era, which had started in the late 1800s. Mining workers, who potentially were local and migrant black labourers, might have been privy to the discovery of the skull, although they likely had no knowledge of its final destination, let alone its significance. There is no evidence of any attempt to communicate with the local mine workers and the community about the discovery at that time. Neither was there any acknowledgement, let alone credit, given to the local miners who discovered the skull.

This pattern continued long after the discovery, and continues today. Over half a century after its discovery, the skull was still the subject of numerous scientific headlines (e.g.¹³⁻¹⁵); however, engagement with the people of Taung continues to be negligible to none. Locally, at Taung, there is still an extreme lack of information about the skull, what it is and what it represents, and the overall significance of the discovery within the evolutionary sciences and as a World Heritage Site. Heritage in post-colonial Africa has enormous potential for contributing towards developing the continent. Various policy prescripts have been enacted which proclaim to develop the palaeosciences; one notable plan is the South African Strategy for the Palaeosciences.¹⁶ This document identifies goals to address the development of the discipline. We quote its first goal, which is relevant here:

*...to transform the minds of South Africans so as to instil a sense of pride and provide the intellectual content to their African heritage so as to make them informed and responsible citizens, and to engage all sectors of society in palaeosciences matters, through information on discoveries that will allow them to appreciate the special place of South Africa in the story of life and humanity on Earth.*¹⁶

As a response to this directive, several public funding schemes, such as the National Research Foundation's African Origins Platform¹⁷, Genus Palaeosciences funding, and some private donors, have extended funding support to researchers to undertake scientific research in conjunction

with community outreach. However, extreme bias towards researchers as recipients of this engagement is observed, contributing to maintenance of the status quo. The National Research Foundation evaluation of the Centre of Excellence (2018) noted the inadequate transformation of the palaeosciences to be inclusive of African researchers, and also highlighted that the demographics of the Centre of Excellence remain dominated by white South Africans and foreign postdoctoral researchers.¹⁸ As in the past, and despite an increasing number of emergent researchers of black African heritage, the lead scientists that are granted access to the fossil continue to be white researchers of European descent. Furthermore, not much initiative has been taken by researchers to address the knowledge gap that exists within the locales of their research, and the Taung community is no different.

Based on recorded and published research enterprises, since the discovery of the Taung skull in 1924, the site has been the subject and destination of five major research expeditions: by Peabody and colleagues (1947–1948), McKee (1983–1993)¹⁹, Partridge (1985), Beaumont (1982)²⁰, and, most recently, Kuhn and colleagues (2012)²¹. However, none of these research expeditions makes mention of engagement with the research by the local community. At the time of Peabody's expedition in the 1940s, South Africa had just formally enacted the apartheid legislation, while Taung remained under the jurisdiction of the Taung Native Reserve. Therefore, engagement between Europeans and locals was not encouraged. Local communities in the past would be resourced as general labourers, with very limited interaction with researchers. Thirty years into the dawn of democracy, the relations between researchers and the community of Taung have not improved at all. Researchers partake in scientific excavations only to recover fossils and other relevant samples, and leave without undertaking any public engagement. Common public outreach practices, even in the form of educational activities, have never been implemented.

The first instance of engagement with members of the local community in respect of the Taung skull is not mentioned in academic journals, even though engagement between research institutions curating the fossil and the public of Taung has been ongoing for over a decade. The following quote vividly reflects the views of the local community: “We are living beyond the poverty line, whereas having the area with a massive historical background. We urge the North West provincial government to put pressure on the Witwatersrand University to return the skull to its origins.”^{22,23} In the face of lack of development of the site, it is no wonder that the community seeks restitution of a potential source of economic development through the fossil skull.

Goal 4 of the South African Strategy for the Palaeosciences¹⁶ speaks to the interface between the community and fossil heritage to “ensure that South Africa's palaeoscience heritage is well managed so as to attain international standards of heritage management and ensure that the country's palaeoscience heritage is well managed and used for the benefit of current and future generations”. However, from our perspective, the relationship between heritage management authorities, as major stakeholders and custodians of these heritage sites in the country, universities as the knowledge producers of heritage objects, and local communities has not been effectively managed.

South Africa has an unsavoury past in which researchers who discovered heritage objects (particularly fossils) treated them as their own private property. Since its discovery, ownership of the Taung Child has been a bone of contention between the curatorial facility and the local community. Unlike Dart who indicated ownership of the skull and even affirmed its status as his property, his successor at Wits' Department of Anatomical Sciences, Phillip Tobias, understood his role as guardian of the fossil and not necessarily as its private owner.²⁴ The Taung skull is a heritage resource under the national estate. Since the passing of the *Bushmen Relics Act* in 1911, several legislative amendments have been enacted to provide protection and conservation measures for heritage resources in the country. Ownership, or perceived ownership, or the task of protecting and safeguarding such resources, comes with accessibility to such heritage resources – a privilege that the masses lack.^{25,26} The fact that the Taung community has no access to the skull is exacerbating the ownership discussion, as the owner is perceived to have more rights and access to the specimen.

It is unfortunate that Dart's territorial practice is still very much in practice, even with all the legislative Acts in place regarding heritage management in the country. The *National Heritage Resources Act of 1999*²⁷ pronounces access to heritage resources to promote the use and enjoyment of these resources by diverse communities – scholarly and public. Although access to heritage objects in the country is provided based on the curating institution's policies, the academic community has far more extensive access due to the fact that they produce scholarly materials on these resources; even among the community itself, access can be influenced by several factors, such as perceived relations with the founding scientists. In his autobiography, Dart alluded to the Taung skull belonging to him when he remarked that:

[p]erhaps, like Davidson Black [who had revealed Peking Man to the world], I should have travelled overseas with my specimens to evoke support for my beliefs, and I was presented with this opportunity. The Witwatersrand Council of Education wrote to say they appreciated that, because of the lack of comparative material in the form of anthropoid skulls of corresponding age, it would be impossible for me to perform a satisfactory monographic study of the Taungs [sic] skull in South Africa. The Council said they were willing to defray the expenses of my going to England for this study provided I donated the skull to the university. After careful thought, I decided I could not be bound by such a conditional undertaking, nor was I prepared to absent myself for so long a time from the young department [of anatomy] and my newly established home.^{28(p.51)}

Since its inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1999, access to the main Taung site has been restricted to comply with the World Heritage Convention's requirement for states to protect these resources. Ndlovu's²⁸ question concerning access resonates: whose heritage is it? If the people of Taung have no access to the fossil specimen or the World Heritage Site, then the question remains: who has unabated access to these sites in their ancestral land?

Addressing the knowledge gap through science engagement

We believe that two layers of engagement with the Taung community are essential for developing the site and broader area via the palaeosciences. At the core of this lies effective scientific engagement and awareness, which will inform the heritage value of the site, while the historical and existing context within which the discovery was made should also be celebrated. The previously held science engagements at the site highlight the importance of flagging these engagements as a necessary teaching aid.

Several initiatives have been taken by non-profit organisations to address and improve the lack of basic knowledge about the Taung skull within the village and surrounding communities. Between 2008 and 2010, national Heritage Day celebrations and exhibitions were hosted within Taung, targeting scholars and the community associated with this iconic discovery. These celebrations were organised by a local non-profit organisation called the Taung Skull Consortium, in collaboration with the University of the Witwatersrand. During these celebrations, school learners and members of the public were educated about the significance of the skull, its discoveries and the role these discoveries played within the field of palaeoanthropology. The school learners were also introduced to the topic of evolution, as it is part of the national curriculum.

During these activities, teachers highlighted the challenges of teaching evolution in schools. However, this issue is not exclusive to the teachers within the Greater Taung area. Teachers in South Africa in general face challenges teaching human evolution for several reasons, such as the need for more teaching resources (e.g. replica casts) and personal perceptions of the topic.²⁹ Evolution was included in the national curriculum in 2008.³⁰ Therefore, the majority of the teachers currently teaching it did not study this topic at tertiary level. This creates a lack of confidence of the teachers in terms of their own knowledge of the subject, let alone in teaching the prescribed lessons.

To exacerbate the issue, even though South Africa is a secular state, the majority of the country (82%) identify as Christian, and, in the North West Province, the percentage is even higher.³¹ Evolution is a very controversial and contentious subject in Taung, due to the perception of it being against the biblical story of Creation. Teachers with strong religious beliefs are conflicted in teaching the subject. Even when they understand the concept well, they tend to not deliver it with passion and encouragement to learners. In our own experience, teachers have complained about the available textbooks not being consistent in presenting the subjects, and the six weeks allocated to teach the subject is insufficient, considering its complexities.³¹ This tends to lead to more confusion amongst learners, and an opportunity is lost to educate them as a captive audience about a subject relevant to the heritage history of the country.

All the interactions listed here, from the very beginning of research work at the site to the modern teaching of human evolution in local schools, highlight the glaring lack of knowledge among the local communities about the site and the concept of evolution in general. This proves a very noticeable disconnect between the palaeosciences and the communities of Taung. We therefore call for effective scientific engagement with the local community to encourage a positive understanding of the science of the Taung skull.

The Taung skull as a heritage resource

The second layer of engagement revolves around the heritage value of the skull and the site. This ties in with the communication on the issue of the return of the skull to Taung. In the past, several discussions between the management authority and the University of the Witwatersrand have taken place regarding the return of the Taung skull to the area for permanent curation in its original village. It is interesting to note that, when initial discussions of this return of the skull were hosted, Tobias²⁴, who was then Professor and Head of Anatomical Sciences at Wits, had called for repatriation of heritage objects to their countries of origin. However, he was stern in his assertion that repatriation should only be considered in terms of countries and not local communities²⁴, thereby excluding the possibility of the Taung skull leaving the University and being returned to the local community.

The relationship between the heritage management authority and the University of the Witwatersrand, as the curator of the Taung skull, is important for the management of the site and the fossil skull. This is a resource-heavy endeavour which requires financial support. University researchers have access to funding platforms (notwithstanding the gruesome application processes that do not automatically guarantee success), and heritage management authorities have access to government allocations to conserve heritage sites, although these allocations have shrunk substantially over the years. Despite these resources at the disposal of the research communities, and the mandated role to be played by the management authority, the development at the site solely relies on the allocation from the provincial and local governments. A collaborative approach between these stakeholders could go a long way in achieving this goal, especially putting together financial resources to maximise efforts in implementing identified projects at heritage sites.

In our experience, the Taung community still feels excluded from the development at the site and, as expressed by some community members to the media, feelings of aggrievement are standard towards the *expatriation* of the fossil to Johannesburg and the minimal development that nomination as a World Heritage Site has brought.²³

We argue that, perhaps, the lack of investment in the communities where these well-known fossil specimens were discovered can be attributed to feelings of entitlement by the researchers considered responsible for the 'discovery'. Dart certainly set the tone for this behaviour and the way in which community engagement in human evolution has developed in the decades since. Access to these heritage objects was, and still is, limited to researchers or well-connected community members. Regardless of the legal statutes in place, access to these rare finds is still influenced by the scientists who continue to establish themselves as the de facto heritage owners and decision-makers. Because palaeoscience is not yet a transformed and inclusive science discipline, it is still a challenge for people of colour to have access to these research resources – a situation that could change with collaborative initiatives. It should be noted that, in most cases, to most African researchers, these collaborative

partnerships are scarce, and might be available as a compliance measure for government grant conditions to be met. The possibility of the Taung community ever having a chance to see the original skull is currently very slim, and one that relies on several stakeholders having open, candid discussions about the skull and its true meaning and value to the people of Taung.

Some infrastructural developments have been advanced at the site (Figures 1 and 2) in order to preserve its universal value and prepare for the possible imminent return of the Taung skull, as an investment towards local tourism and socio-economic developments of the region.¹⁰ The ablution facilities, internal roads and fencing are still under construction and will continue to be funded in the 2025 financial year.

The project was phased, with different phases budgeted for by the North West Department of Economic Development, Environment Conservation and Tourism (DEDECT). According to DEDECT, the department budgeted about ZAR460 million for infrastructure development from 2013 until 2025, but has spent about ZAR240 million to date. The outstanding infrastructure developments are scheduled to be implemented in line with the Medium-Term Strategic Framework (2020–2025). The interpretative centre or the intended museum is not yet operational. The site is not accessible to visitors at high capacity, but educational tours on Environmental Studies and Geography are currently presented at the site.

Darmas³² and Darmas and Manyane³³ noted that the Taung community indicated their need for more knowledge about the site, and to be involved in the decision-making process for the site. According to the community members, these initiatives from the management authority will increase the community's level of support of the developments taking place at the site. The Taung Skull National Heritage Site Management and Master Planning process lists community participation as one of the 'outputs' to be achieved.^{34,35}

During the process of drafting the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), of which the Taung Skull Infrastructure Development Programme is a part, community consultation did take place, although the frequency of consultation and the numbers of community members it reached are not reported.^{36,37}

The 2022/2023 Greater Taung Local Municipality IDP indicates 114 community-based planning meetings, to plan and draft the IDP, and a total of 4954 residents who attended these meetings. The Greater Taung Local Municipality recorded a population of about 202 000 in 2022. The residents attending these meetings are a small fraction of the entire population. Several reasons could be cited for the limited attendance, such as residents not being aware of the meetings, or being informed of the meetings at short notice. These would have an adverse effect on the level of community participation.

However, the efforts of the management authority and researchers working on the site are yet to be intensified with regard to the involvement and inclusion of the Taung community, in order for the community to be apprised of the development status and all the research and knowledge production taking place at the site. Management authority of the site seems, at this stage, to not be fully effecting its stakeholder engagements with the Taung Community. There must be extensive community engagement, especially during the legislative processes, including budget appropriations. The site lies 'off the beaten track' and very far from major economic centres in the country, which possibly adds to its lack of appeal for prospective research projects by researchers.

Looking towards the future: Heritage's socio-economic benefits in the face of poverty

While site development activities at Taung took such a long time to realise, and are by no means adequate, there has been significant



Figure 1: The Powerhouse before and after refurbishment at the site.



Figure 2: The Mine Manager's house before and after refurbishments at the site.

development that merits credit to the management authority. The infrastructure of the site was developed to include the old mine/heritage buildings, archaeological and palaeontological sites, mining history and the existing topography. The restoration, upgrades and refurbishments of the buildings were done for alternative uses, but still provided for interpretation of their previous uses. This was done to highlight and accentuate the site's lime mining history and heritage significance through historical architecture. Minimal intervention was made to the landscape to maintain the authenticity of the site, thus blending the facilities and planned activities into the visual and physical landscape.

Several infrastructure projects have been completed, and some are at an advanced stage. The completed infrastructure developments are Thomeng Road, the Mine Manager's office (Figure 2), the powerhouse (Figure 1), museum, stone cottage, picnic ablutions, community boreholes, and network infrastructure. The now operational 10 km Thomeng Road is 8 km of asphalt and 1.7 km of paving and parking. The powerhouse has been restored for use as an academic/research facility. The building is complete, and is spacious enough to accommodate multiple offices and has enough open space for lab work and shelving of heritage materials. The old mine manager's office has been restored to serve as the site manager's office. The building has been restored to its original 1940s Victorian design and emulates the materials used at the time, such as the pull-up wooden window frames and Oregon pine flooring.

The museum consists of a cluster of three old mine buildings fused together as one building to serve as an historical and educational exhibition space, auditorium and ablutions. This allows for secure vault and private storage space for fossils. It will also serve as a central security control unit for the entire site and key visitor facilities on site. The stone cottage is operational, and has already been handed over to the Baphuduhucwana Traditional Council in the village to serve as their sub-office and provide services such as issuing of proof of residence letters. The incomplete projects so far are the Thomeng ablutions, trails and signage of the site and fencing of the core area.³⁷

The conservation of heritage sites is mostly not prioritised, or managed well, at local government level, compared to other societal issues such as health services and economic development.³⁸ Local governments tend to leave most of the responsibilities of heritage site administration within their vicinity to concerned provincial and national government bodies. The lack of local investment in the site itself most definitely affects several aspects regarding the development of the site. However, it is worth noting that the Dr Ruth S Mompoti District and the Greater Taung Local Municipality have made provisions for the development of the site. The District Development Model, as an intergovernmental relations mechanism, allows for collaborative measures between all three spheres of government. A single strategic and focused joint-up plan (One Plan) has been drawn up, targeting key strategic areas worth improving within the district. The One Plan reflects and focuses on issues such as economic positioning, spatial restructuring and environmental sustainability, to name a few. The Taung Skull Fossil Site is listed as part of the One Plan project identified by the Dr Ruth S Mompoti District for implementation to improve the district's economy. The Greater Taung Local Municipality 2021/2022 IDP¹⁰ and the Dr Ruth S Mompoti District IDP fifth generation³⁹ list in detail the identified projects from the One Plan to be carried out at the site for the financial years from 2021 to 2024. The following are listed as projects to be undertaken: completion of Thomeng ablution, Taung Skull WHS fencing of the powerhouse complex, Taung Skull WHS – entrance complex and parking, Taung Skull WHS restaurant and Taung Skull – protection of sensitive sites, to name a few.^{10,40}

The site also has a wetland feature at Thomeng Waterfalls that serves as a popular local tourist destination, attracting a high volume of visitors, and it is also used for spiritual cultural activities. The wetland also serves to meet socio-economic needs such as providing a source of water for irrigation purposes, crop production and fishing.⁴⁰ The management authority faces challenges in implementing conservation plans for the wetland because of the abovementioned roles and dependencies that the wetland serves within the community. The situation could be remedied by an extensive educational and awareness programme, that will in turn strengthen stakeholder engagement and aid an informed level of community participation in regard to the conservation of the site, and the

use of natural resources in a responsible and sustainable manner, so as to efficiently manage and conserve the site.⁴¹⁻⁴⁴

Recommendations

The impact of limited funds allocated towards heritage management in South Africa and the Taung Skull World Heritage Site is negligible and unsustainable⁴², because the hard truth is that heritage is not a well-funded mandate. Collaborations funded through public-private partnerships are essential to increase resources for the management of heritage, towards a common cause.

Engagement and centring of local communities as critical stakeholders are essential in the conservation, safeguarding and managing of their heritage. Their buy-in, as indigenous and original site conservators, is a critical resource towards heritage conservation. Including communities as stakeholders in the developing process of the integrated management plan would promote a sense of ownership for the communities. It would also reduce any chances of vandalism of the sites. Even with cultural and spiritual practices and beliefs attached to the site, communities will most likely use these resources sparingly and sustainably, because they view the site as their own.

To re-enforce all these initiatives, awareness, education and promotion of the site are essential steps, as a large part of the population are not aware of this invaluable heritage. Education and awareness of the laws that govern these sites is likely to encourage a sense of duty towards site conservation and management, and ultimately contribute towards sustainable conservation. Complete denial of access to these sites, either for preservation or as part of the legacy of the past, defeats the purpose of heritage ownership and its conservation.

Conclusion

The Taung fossil site is integral to the history of the people of Taung, and so are its finds. The manner in which the communities at Taung previously were, and still are, excluded as stakeholders from activities taking place at the site can no longer be accepted as the norm. The inactive research status and current lack of public engagements are discouraging efforts to capitalise on its unique universal value, and maximise its possible socio-economic returns. A lot more ought to be done, with each stakeholder owning up to its respective accountabilities, and addressing the elephant in the room concerning the unpleasant legacies and current status of the site. Transparency is key regarding the discussions on and future plans for the Taung skull. We therefore stress a collaborative, consultative and participatory stakeholder engagement for a well-managed and conserved site, yielding extensive research outputs and an empowered community. As we celebrate the centenary of the pivotal discovery that positioned Africa as a focal point in human evolutionary studies, it must be with a beacon of hope to redress the wrongs of the past and begin a new century – one in which genuine inclusiveness and compassion are mediated by our shared heritage whose discovery was possible because of Taung as an African site.

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Data availability

All data pertaining to this study are included.

Declarations

We have no competing interests to declare. We have no AI or LLM use to declare.

Authors' contributions

M.T.: Conceptualisation, methodology, data collection, data analysis, validation, data curation, writing – initial draft, writing – revisions. D.W.K.: Conceptualisation, methodology, data collection, data analysis, validation, data curation, writing – initial draft, writing – revisions. B.B.: Conceptualisation, methodology, data collection, data analysis, validation, data curation, writing – initial draft, writing – revisions. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.



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