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Curriculum reform can make a difference. The case of the introduction of palaeontology and evolution into the South African School Curriculum

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The vast majority of Earth Scientists and Biologists agree that the Theory of Evolution is the only explanation for the diversity of life and closely entwined with evidence for a very old Earth comprising a number of interrelated systems. In South Africa palaeontology was introduced into the curriculum for the first time in 2006 and evolution in 2008. Previously, palaeontology and related aspects together with evolutionary theory had been suppressed largely due to National Christian Education under the apartheid government. It is not surprising, therefore that most surveys of the South African public report that, in keeping with data in the United States and fundamentalist countries around that world, most South Africans do not accept evolution. However, since 2008 the situation appears to be changing, despite the generally conservative results from the general public, surveys of university students and visitors to the Cradle of Humankind show that many of them are surprisingly knowledgeable about aspects of palaeontology and evolutionary theory which they ascribe to learning they gained at school. The results are encouraging and suggest that the new curriculum content is making a difference and the introduction of palaeontology, including the geological timescale together with evolution is slowly transforming South African society and perhaps creating a new era of interest in the geosciences, independent of their utilitarian function for finding mineral resources. This view is supported by the unprecedented amount of interest amongst South Africans in the discovery of *Homo naledi* and massive support for travelling exhibitions of robotic dinosaurs and other paleontologically themed displays. There may also be a connection to the publicity that debates about climate change have received. All this positive data suggests a rebirth of the geosciences in South Africa may be predicted, and should have a favourable affect on our natural history museums, and related industries like palaeotourism.

