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The challenge of protecting South Africa's geoh heritage: the Barberton Greenstone Belt

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South Africans lead the continent in the natural/environmental sciences and in conservation. They include world-class scientists who have studied and mapped the country's geo- and biodiversity, both being recognised globally as exceptional. Resulting from understanding our ecosystems, an enviable network of parks and reserves has been created, foundation of our tourism industry. However, the equivalent geodiversity has not followed suit, and geotourism and educational trends of the northern hemisphere have failed to take root in South Africa. Why is this?

There is no public agency responsible for conserving geoh heritage in South Africa. The powerful Department of Mineral Resources focuses only on mining and related businesses. This is a limited focus common to virtually all developing economies. In contrast to the long-established government responsibility for nature conservation, our geological heritage has had to take its chances with whatever agency happened to be at hand. Public resources for geoh heritage protection are mostly channelled through museums, restricted to off-site preservation in support of their mandate for archiving, research and public education. Our most significant geoh heritage site, *The Cradle of Humankind* World Heritage Site (WHS), now basking in the international spotlight on *Homo naledi*, is managed by a provincial nature conservation agency with a legal mandate for biodiversity conservation.

The case for protecting the Barberton Greenstone Belt (BGB) illustrates this blind spot in South Africa's otherwise respectable record for conservation. These intensely studied mountains, conveniently buried and protected for > 3000 million years, are revealing a rich and previously untold story of how the early Earth evolved. Forty-five years of published research have firmly established the BGB as the world's best archive for the origins of life and the earliest history of the planet, laying the foundation for advanced studies on planetary habitats, planetary differentiation, and atmospheric and oceanic evolution. On these merits, the BGB is now registered on UNESCO's WHS Tentative List. Efforts towards WHS status have travelled a rocky road. Suggested first by geologists in 1988, and elaborated later by eco-tourism experts, the area's Tentative Listing in June 2008 started active planning for WHS status, subsequently stalled from lack of funding. With funds now re-instated, WHS planning re-commenced in December 2015.

In the lull between WHS planning efforts, the 40 km roadside Barberton Makhonjwa Geotrail was completed in 2014. It is located within the area proposed for the WHS and is the first geotourism product to be developed. Aspects of these planning and development activities are used to illustrate the challenges of ownership and responsibility for geoh heritage. These include lessons learned from South Africa's existing WHS, and recommendations for the future.

