Human Impact on the West Coast Marine Environments of South Africa

The South African coastline is one of the most diverse and richest in archaeological sites in the world. Coastal archaeological sites in South Africa range from some of the oldest caves dating to the Middle Stone showing some reliance on marine resources to more recent Later Stone sites including open shell middens and caves as well as fish traps and shipwrecks from historical times.

Among several Later Stone Age archaeological projects presently under way along this very extensive coastline, one on the west coast at Lamberts Bay and Elands Bay provide the largest data-sets. They contain clear indications of impacts on marine resources by local prehistoric populations. In addition, fine-grained studies of the modern marine ecology and palaeoenvironmental reconstructions support archaeological interpretations. Outstanding preservation of Holocene deposits at several sites, most notably Steenbokfontein Cave, helps to elucidate the ways that fluctuating sea levels, marine productivity, and population densities interact with shifts in subsistence and settlement patterns.