

Thieves nab rare gold relics

By DAVE CHAMBERS

● SA National Parks is under fire after centuries-old gold artefacts were stolen from one of its museums.

The artefacts include a necklace, bracelets and beads excavated from two graves at the Thulamela archaeological site in Kruger National Park, which was inhabited between the 13th and 17th centuries.

The artefacts were stolen in December from the Stevenson-Hamilton Knowledge Resource Centre at Skukuza, but SANParks has yet to officially inform the Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History in Pretoria, custodian of the artefacts.

"Gold artefacts are an extreme rarity and that is why the Thulamela theft is a travesty," Sian Tiley-Nel, who manages the museums at the University of Pretoria, told Nature.com.

Kevin MacDonald, an archaeologist at University College London, told the scientific journal's website that new techniques were providing more information about the composition and provenance of ancient metals.

Samples such as those from Thulamela could help researchers trace the origins of Africa's pre-colonial gold trade.

Tiley-Nel said the University of Pretoria was also seriously concerned about the state of the Mapungubwe collection on loan to SANParks and kept at the Mapungubwe Interpretation Centre in Musina.

"Site inspections have revealed deteriorating conditions, poor curation and improper collections management practices at the [centre], which was not originally designed to

house original museum material," she told Nature.

Mapungubwe, a 13th- and 14th-century trading centre, was excavated from the 1930s, while Thulamela was uncovered in the 1990s. Between them, the sites yielded the most significant archaeological gold discoveries in Southern Africa.

Leading South African science journalist Sarah Wild reported that the theft had raised questions about growing efforts to return culturally important materials to the region where they were found.

"There is always a trade-off of security ver-

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sus local relevance and tourism benefits at remote regional museums," said MacDonald.

"If I were custodian of such materials, I would think twice before putting them into vulnerable situations."

A SANParks spokesman told Nature: "SANParks has a duty to tell the full story about its parks and, where it necessitates exhibiting artefacts, steps are taken to put such on display."

But the University of Pretoria and other curators said they were considering withdrawing artefacts from SANParks and halting talks about future loans.