

**“CONSERVATION, NOT INTERPRETATION”,
ROCK ART IN ZIMBABWE IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

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Zimbabwe has the largest number of prehistoric rock art paintings in Southern Africa. 4,500 sites have been recorded to date, but the total number of sites is estimated to be above 20,000. The paintings are 20,000 – 2,000 years old approximately. The history of rock art conservation in Zimbabwe reflects a lopsided story. Interpretation of the paintings has out-paced conservation efforts. This paper will trace the history of conservation in Zimbabwe. Factors influencing the conservation trend shall be traced back to historical times. These include influence from South Africa, manpower and training, political factors, legislation, and lack of an interdisciplinary approach in conservation.

The discussion will show how rock art conservation has been marginalised in Zimbabwe due to an emphasis on stone walled sites known as ‘zimbabwe sites’ belonging to the Great Zimbabwe type of site. Also, the conservation projects that have been implemented will be critically evaluated. Then an insight will be made into the future of rock art conservation not only in Zimbabwe, but throughout Southern Africa as the deterioration phenomena are influenced by the same climatic regime. The future of rock art conservation lies in understanding the technology of stone deterioration and the effect of this deterioration on the paintings.

What is required is an interdisciplinary approach to have a holistic assessment of the problem and, finding treatments which minimally damage the art. Lessons should be learned from the Australians who have the community involved in the conservation strategy. The paper argues that the imbalance between interpretation and conservation research should be redressed if Zimbabwe is not to lose this irreplaceable heritage.