OPENING OF PALEONTOLOGY CONFERENCE

8 September 2006

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues

A very warm welcome to Rhodes University, to Rhini/Grahamstown, to the Makana District, and the Eastern Cape.

We are honoured to host this Conference and trust that you will find us convivial and hospitable hosts.

My discipline is sociology and my research field is higher education studies. And so, to be honest, my knowledge of paleontology is extremely limited and does not stretch beyond a thoroughly enjoyable reading last summer of Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything* and its commentary on the work of Stephen Jay Gould.

Story of lost keys searched for under a street light

I don't know what proportion of time you spend in the light or in the dark.

But what I am clear about is that universities and scientific disciplines and fields, must focus not only on lit areas but must also illuminate areas of darkness as part of its role of advancing human understanding of our natural and social worlds.

I get the impression that as far as paleontology is concerned the Eastern Cape is an area of relative darkness. And so as part of our current size and shape debate I have posed whether there is need and scope for an academic programme in paleontology at Rhodes University, and what contribution might it make to our society. I await an answer.

Universities and scientific disciplines and fields must, however, also illuminate in another sense. Beyond communicating with a peer scientific community, they must also 'convey the power and beauty of science to the hearts and minds of a fascinated, if generally uninformed, public' (Stephen Jay Gould).

As Gould notes, there is a 'long and honorable tradition of popular presentation of science', and we should not make the 'mistake' of 'equating popularization with trivialization, cheapening, or inaccuracy'.

He rightly states that 'the concepts of science, in all their richness and ambiguity, can be presented without any compromise, without any simplification counting as distortion, in language accessible to all intelligent people'.

The issue of communicating beyond simply a scientific community is to pose whether universities, as part of their knowledge generation and dissemination roles, are engaging sufficiently with the South African public and serving as adequately as catalysts of public education, since we are meant to advance the public good.

The issue here is one of 'visibility', - about our proactive *engagement*, as knowledge institutions, with society at the intellectual and, more

generally, cultural level, which as its goals the intellectual and cultural development of citizens, and cultivating an engaged and critical citizenry.

In closing I wish you an illuminating, stimulating and productive conference, and an enjoyable stay at Rhodes and in Rhini/Grahamstown.

Paleontology is the study of the developing history of life on Earth, including ancient plants and animals, based on their fossil record (evidence of their prehistoric existence as typically preserved in sedimentary rocks). This includes the study of body fossils, tracks (ichnites), burrows, cast-off parts, fossilized feces (coprolites) and chemical residues.

Many people think paleontology is the study of fossils. In fact, paleontology is much more. Paleontology incorporates many different kinds of data from different fields. We provide three different areas in which to start your exploration of paleontology:

- ☐ **Phylogeny** — the "family tree" of life.
- ☐ **Geologic Time** — the temporal existence of groups of organisms.
- ☐ **Evolutionary Thought** — evolutionary topics and scientists in their historical context.