

Never mind the width...

There is an English expression that encapsulates the hard sell of a less than ideal product or proposition: 'Never mind the quality, feel the width'. This may be a slender issue of *Before Farming*, but behold the quality. The two research articles deal with highly topical and contentious issues, which will surely stimulate animated debate. The first paper was originally intended to be one of five specially commissioned overviews of current relations between hunter-gatherer communities and the nation states in which they live. Two of the planned contributions were postponed because of highly sensitive political contexts that require more time and confidence building among the parties involved. Other contributors struggled to draw boundaries around their topics because of ongoing developments in their respective regions. I hope some of these reports will appear in 2006. In the interim, the practical and political challenges raised by this exercise point to the need for a continuous reporting of the state of contemporary hunter-gatherers within the State. *Before Farming* can and should play an important role in this context because of the rapidity of its peer review process. We can bring the burning issues of the day to the attention of a wider academic community and provide a forum for discussion as a counterbalance to the typically rival claims of governments and NGOs alike.

Sidsel Saugestad reports on the long running legal dispute between a group of relocated or forcibly dispossessed San – depending on your point of view – and the government of Botswana. The core of this case is the legal status of a minority group within Botswana, and the rights of these former inhabitants of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) to choose paths of development that may be at odds with the State's vision, or that of well intentioned outsiders. The issue of indigenous rights in the context of the CKGR has already had a vigorous airing in *Before Farming* (see Suzman [2002/3_4 article 12] and Corry's response [2003/2 article 14]), and will no doubt continue as this particular court case reconvenes in 2006. It has also attracted the attention of the international media eager to portray David versus Goliath, with this particular David representing a romanticised primitive 'other'. Saugestad makes a reasoned assessment of the contentious impact of goats, diamonds and Survival International on local and international opinion, concluding that regardless of its outcome this case has brought a wider awareness of the history and individuality of the San. I wonder if such recognition will indeed have a lasting impact in Botswana and much further afield where similar rights issues are currently in the courts and in the press.

The new hominin *Homo floresiensis* has also generated its fair share of academic and media attention in the past year. Paul Taçon takes up the intellectual challenge posed by the behavioural evidence associated with this small-brained species. While biological anthropologists have debated the legitimacy of the species attribution (eg, *Before Farming* 2004/4), the implications of the archaeological record have not been subjected to equal scrutiny. Taçon argues that if the sophisticated stone tool technology, evidence for fire and cooperative hunting found at Liang Bua cave is the work of *floresiensis* then palaeoanthropologists must reconsider what it means to be behaviourally modern. If we can no longer equate anatomical with behavioural modernity, then traditional archaeological yardsticks of modernity need scrapping or merit considerable revision. This article also highlights what appears to be an emergent revisionist trend in the wider archaeological community with the concept of behavioural modernity coming under sustained challenge as witnessed at the recent 'Rethinking the Human Revolution' conference (reported in *Before Farming* 2004/3). Looking ahead, the debate over what it means to be modern is likely to intensify this year. The 150th anniversary of the discovery of the first Neanderthal fossil takes place in 2006 and we will be marking this milestone, all being well, with both quality and width of coverage.

The editor
Liverpool, January 2006