

# Heritage agency charts new course

By [Tiisetso Tlelima](#)

21 Jan 2013

A first of its kind in the world, Sahris, the South African Heritage Resources Agency's new online heritage resource, catalogues South African historical sites and offers users a unique platform that displays the diversity and richness of the country's heritage resources.



The Johannesburg City Hall is a colonial architectural jewel in the heart of the city. It boasts a beautiful pipe organ, which was until a few years ago, the largest in the world.

Sahris is a database of heritage sites that includes archaeological and paleontological sites, shipwrecks, graves and burial grounds, battlefields, buildings, cultural landscapes, meteorites and natural sites. Since its launch on 5 August 2012, 6 550 archive developments dating between the 1980s and 2009 have been uploaded.

Over 3 500 declared heritage sites are listed on the portal, including the country's 24 national heritage sites. Notable listings range from Robben Island in the Western Cape to Mapungubwe in Mpumalanga, Kadiitshwene in North West, the Sara Bartmann site in Eastern Cape and the Voortrekker Monument in Gauteng.

"Recording our past is an important part of our present as it is an essential key to people's sense of identity," explained Nicholas Wiltshire, the project manager of Sahris at the South African Heritage Resources Agency (Sahra). Heritage resources were not renewable and arguably we had a much bigger challenge to record these resources than our natural environment, he added.

"Documenting and preserving our heritage makes all of our lives more meaningful and we have a lot to learn from our ancestors. For instance, studies in human evolution would not be possible without proper archives being maintained by heritage custodians."

## Integrated management system

Approximately 855 people have registered to use the system thus far, and the site's traffic has grown from 6 000 page views since launch to just over 36 000 page views in November last year.

Sahris is the first system in the world where users can view developments in their area and comment on them online. More than 21 000 heritage sites can be viewed, with thousands more still to be loaded this year. These sites contain detailed research information and over a terabyte of photographs have been uploaded and are shared freely under the Creative Commons Licence.

It also lists thousands of heritage objects, moveable cultural heritage, declared as such by Sahra in order to control their export. Thousands of heritage impact assessments, together with the Sahra Records of Decision for each proposal, are now easily available online in PDF format, with descriptions.

The site provides a heritage management tool to all heritage bodies and custodians of heritage as well as to local planning authorities and provincial heritage resources authorities. "The system enables efficient and co-ordinated management of our heritage and the maximisation of benefit to be attained from our heritage resources by appropriate promotion and use of these resources," explained Wiltshire.

"Ultimately, we would like every South African to use Sahris in some way to learn about their heritage and to engage in the democratic and transparent planning system established in Sahris."

As an integrated management system, it also allows heritage managers to carry out their duties stipulated under the National Heritage Resources Act (NHRA) of 1999, which replaced the old National Monuments Act.

## **Free open source software**

It took 10 years for the database to be created because at R50-million (about \$5.7m), the initial quote for the software was too high. There were also very few people who had the necessary heritage skills blended with a sufficient knowledge of IT to take the project forward, added Wiltshire.

The first phase of Sahris was concluded between 2005 and 2006, after a thorough investigation and public participation formulated the scope of what would need to be included. Unfortunately, the quotes for phase two - the actual development of the database - ranged from R18m to R50m. This significantly increased the risks of failure.

Three attempts to establish Sahris failed between 2005 and 2011. To achieve the level of functionality required by the NHRA, it is only the recent software revolution created by the open source community around such platforms as Drupal, Joomla, Wordpress and others, that has made Sahris possible.

"Over the last five years, free open source content management systems have undergone a revolution, with Wikipedia being a notable example of a major success," said Wiltshire. "This paved the way for a radically different way of solving the development problem for Sahris."

Drupal, the largest free open source content management system, was chosen and the first version of the portal was completed in a little over three months before debugging and testing. This was possible as most of the coding is handled by the modules provided by the Drupal Community. The developer at Sahra applied the modules in a particular configuration for Sahris rather than wrote code from scratch, explained Wiltshire.

The portal also has a fully integrated geographic information system (GIS) making use of two modules, called Open Layers and G-map. These modules allow live mapping and input of spatial information into Sahris.

"We are running a dedicated map server called Geoserver, which is also a free open source software, and we use this server to help shape up files and spatial overlays such as the latest development footprints and cadastral information," said Wiltshire.

"Sites and developments are seamlessly overlaid and the GIS modules allow the user to navigate information spatially and

visually across the landscape."

Although the portal doesn't document oral histories unless these are related to the history of sites, landscapes or objects, Wiltshire has high expectations that it will cater for more of these forms of records in the future.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>