The use of ex-political-prisoners’ reference groups as a research method for conserving the intangible/tangible significance of the Robben Island Maximum Security Prison (a case study)

Background
Robben Island is located in the Table Bay near Cape Town. Its small size (5.4 square kilometres) contrasts with its powerful symbolic value, representing today the resilience of the human spirit against adversity. Robben Island has been a prison for much of its history, housing indigenous leaders opposed to colonial rule and political prisoners under the Apartheid regime. It was used as a hospital for mental patients and people living with leprosy and as a training camp for black and female soldiers during the Second World War. What transformed Robben Island and bestowed its unique quality has been the triumph of human spirit over such conditions, leading to the birth of a democratic nation. Out of conditions of extreme hardship, pain and suffering has arisen a spirit of hope and tolerance that, in the words of former President Nelson Mandela, turned this island into a world-wide icon of the universality of human rights, of hope, peace and reconciliation. The island was declared a national monument in 1996 and opened its doors to the public as a national museum on 1 January 1997.

Robben Island was inscribed as a World Heritage Site in 1999 because of its symbolic value. The heritage citation emphasizes the symbolic values of the resilience and eventual triumph of the human spirit over oppression leading to the birth of a democratic nation. The historical value embedded in the buildings reflects a sombre history of colonialism. The island also has a long history of human habitation revealed by the recent discovery of stone tools, possibly used by indigenous people when the island was joined to the mainland thousands of years ago. The island is not only rich in cultural heritage but also natural heritage. For years, Robben Island has served as home to thousands of penguins and seals. Today the diversity has increased to include guinea fowl, rabbits, antelopes, and ostrich. Most of the vegetation that has dominated the landscape is introduced.

Vision and mission
The spirit of Robben Island Museum (RIM) as a national as well as an international heritage – a heritage for humanity – is engrained in its vision and mission. Within the vision and the mission, the museum aims to develop the island as a national and international heritage site. In managing its resources and activities, RIM strives to maintain the unique symbolism of the island, nurture creativity and innovation, and contribute to socio-economic development, the transformation of South African society and the enrichment of humanity. In implementing its vision, RIM focuses on the following core essences: maintaining the political and universal symbolism of the island, conserving and managing natural and cultural heritage and resources of RIM, promoting RIM as a platform for critical debates and lifelong learning, and lastly managing RIM in a manner that promotes economic sustainability and development.

Conservation principles
According to the Conservation Management Plan Summary Document (2003), four main principles underlie Robben Island’s approach to conservation:

- There is an evolving understanding of Robben Island’s meaning and value which has both tangible and intangible manifestations
- Robben Island’s heritage value is both local and universal
- Robben Island’s heritage value is related to current social debates about for example, stigma, human rights, reconciliation and healing
- Robben Island is committed to a conservation-based approach that seeks to balance the island’s tangible and intangible meanings, its future, present and past.

The conservation plan has been informed by the use of intangible heritage (memories) and other cultural practices (oral history, folklore, rituals, dance, smells, sounds, traditions etc) which in turn gives meaning to the tangible heritage. RIM’s intangible significance is strongly linked to its symbolic value. The conservation of intangible significance requires the use of oral histories and personal recollections to inform our understanding of the island as a whole and to interpret and conserve the physical elements that relate to these memories.

Because the significance of the island (including intangible significance) is complex and layered, it is difficult to protect. However at a basic level we need to limit major changes to the island’s cultural and natural fabric. RIM has also utilized alternative ways, such as interpretation and marketing, as means of protecting and enhancing the intangible values associated with the site. RIM has adopted general conservation policies which recognise for example: the requirement for minimal intervention; authenticity; contribution of all periods; consideration of all cultural significance; oral histories; intangible values and memory; determining compatible use; and an appropriate visual setting. These policies should assist in making appropriate and consistent decisions in managing the site.
An additional factor is ICOMOS’ recognition of the indivisible nature of intangible and tangible heritage. ICOMOS therefore supports the adoption of the UNESCO international Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage. The World Heritage Committee and ICOMOS have recognised that the concept of intangible heritage provides confirmation of the cultural significance of Robben Island.³

Site register

A site register has been developed, drawing on historical records, plans, photographs and histories. One of the many aspects of the RIM Memories project is the collection of oral histories of those who were once associated with the Island, especially political prisoners. The oral histories form an important component of the Site Register, as do descriptions, chronological and contextual information as well as an assessment of vulnerability of each individual site on the island. Reference groups as described below have also been used as a tool to develop and inform the site register database.⁵

Background of the reference groups

According to Juanita Pastor-Makhurane (Heritage Manager 1997-2002) the reference group process was developed in July 1997 as a means of meeting the requirements for public participation in the development of the site to obtain World Heritage status. While broad public forums were held in the first months of the museum, a strategy was developed whereby focus or interest groups were established in order to include a broader group of people in the development of the museum. Initially there were six reference groups: historical research (advised on subjects for historical research); environment management (concerned with putting in environmental management principles especially with natural environment); built environment (policies for conservation and developing buildings on the island); archaeology (advice on the process by which archeological studies should be carried out); and materials development (what kind of educational materials could be developed). The Prison Museum/Exhibition Development group consisted of ex-political prisoners who contributed their views on the interpretation of the Maximum Security Prison.

Following discussion with the Prison Museum reference group, it was decided that the Prison exhibitions would be developed by involving a broader group of ex-political-prisoners in collecting memories of the prison. The Memories project led by the research unit was the initial platform which aimed at collecting life histories of the ex-political-prisoners. In that way it was hoped that through life histories ex-prisoners would be able to remember as many aspects of the prison as possible. Questionnaires (including family background, political influences, arrest, charges, journey to Robben Island prison, prison routine and release) were used as guidelines for interviewers.⁶ Over 300 life histories interviews have now been done.

Another element of the Memories project was the use of site visits as an additional tool of collecting memories. Unlike the life history interview which is normally done outside RIM, site visit gives an opportunity for individuals to relate their story directly on the site. The site visit helps in remembering small details such as the colour of the paint, the layout of the place, some anecdotes about prison life, and walking in the footsteps of the prisoners. People associated with the island during World War Two and the apartheid era, either ex-warders, ex-prisoners or people who were residents of the island, have been invited for this purpose. More than 50 such site visits have now been arranged.

Processes of ex-prisoner reference groups

The Heritage Department has developed the strategy of preserving this intangible significance through the use of Robben Island ex-political-prisoners’ reference groups. Unlike individual interviews or site visits, reference group discussions involve a group of ex-prisoners getting together to share their experiences with the museum. The ex-prisoners are invited according to their choices or working spans (the working groups into which prisoners were divided) indicated on the completed survey form. Sometimes they will indicate more than two choices because they were sent to numerous working groups throughout their imprisonment. Sometimes they would be moved from one section to another or one working span to another during their time on the island. In such cases the ex-prisoner is contacted and asked to indicate in which working span they spent most of their time or which one they chose to participate in.

The reference group gathering runs for four days (from Thursday afternoon until Sunday afternoon). On those days the ex-prisoners are accommodated on the island in order to minimize travel and save time. Four video cameras and two still cameras are used for documentation of the discussions. Two cameras focus on close shots and the other one covers the background for editing purposes. The first day is used for welcoming, the second and the third days used for discussion based on the objectives or content of the group, and the last day is used for summarizing, recording the message (a 5-minute video message directed at visitors to the museum which is played in one of the cells). After editing, all participants will get the VHS copies and some photographs generated during their group discussion. The information is archived at MialiBaye Archives and at Heritage Department RIM.

Objectives of the reference groups

The concept of the reference group process started in the beginning of 2001. Prior to this, there were several meetings and workshops between some members of the Heritage, Tours and Education departments.

The objective of the meetings was to design new visitor experiences which would encompass interpretation of the range of sites within the island. In a survey organized by the Tours Department visitors requested the option of walking tours and more information about the general sections of the prison.⁷ They also requested more time on the island. The prison guides requested the use of artifacts or replicas which would enhance their narrations. The Prison Precinct Committee, responsible for the initiative, developed a number of tour options, including the stone quarry walk through the old prison back to the new prison, and the lime quarry walk passing through historical graves and sites back to the harbour.⁸

The reference groups have been designed to facilitate the development of an integrated visitor experience in the prison precinct, using the personal/collective memories of political prisoners and their spiritual resilience. The integrated visitor experience will be developed though the use of minimal intervention, multiple voices, the layering of history and critical
debates. Aspects of minimal intervention include conserving memory rather than changing the space. The use of many voices contributes to a full understanding of the past. The layering of history is important because it provides a holistic approach to the prison history, not emphasizing one period over another. Critical debate is not only a visitor need but also a core essence of the museum that the staff need to engage with in their professional work and their own personal development.

Interpretation and conservation strategies

Three decades/periods of use form the basis of the interpretations and conservation approach at the prison. The early period refers to the time between 1962 and the late 1970s, the late period from around 1979/1980 to 1991, and the museum period commenced in 1997. In practice one cell in each section will reflect the early period, a second cell will reflect the late period, and a third cell will reflect the museum period (where the prison guide will narrate his story to the visitors). The last cell will project a video message generated through the reference group discussion. Throughout, an approach of minimal intervention to the fabric has been taken into consideration.

The approach of using distinct chronological periods for interpretation is based on various changes that occurred within the prison during its period of operations. For example between 1962 and 1977 there was little change in the prison operation. Prisoners were still sleeping on sial mats, and eating different food according to whether they were black, colored or Indians. However many changes occurred between 1978 and 1979. To quote an ex-prisoner, "We mounted campaigns to ensure better food, for every prisoner to have bed, pillow, underwear, library, television and movies. So by 1978 I'm proud to say this BCM [the Black Consciousness Movement] revolutionized Robben Island." Pressure for changes in prison operations and layout came from both external resistance and support/campaigns, and from the pressure warders received from prisoners who came after the 1976 Soweto Uprisings. These inmates resisted all forms of authority in prison, and as a result the prison officials resorted to erecting walls to separate each section which allowed for greater control over prisoners.

During the late 1980s several international campaigns for the release of political prisoners took place which had an impact on the prison. The Apartheid government started to release political prisoners through remission during that period, and by 1991 only common law prisoners occupied the maximum security prison. This latter period also needs to be conserved and interpreted although it is outside the core political theme. When the last prisoners left the island in 1996 the island was declared a museum and opened to the public.

Interpretation approach

Isolation Section

Currently when the tourist enters this section, they are referred to two photographs taken around 1964-65 exhibited outside the courtyard. One of the photos shows Nelson Mandela and the late Walter Susulu talking, while the other shows prisoners chopping knaplyn in the courtyard. These photos are intended to showcase the conditions in B-Section (isolation), and it is proposed to paint the building in the colours of the period, as well as to use artifact replicas to reinforce the interpretation. A minimal fabric intervention has been adopted, including the retention of later walls and other fabric whose removal would have facilitated the interpretation of the U-shape of the Khulukuthu (single cells) section as it was during the 1960s. To the ex-prisoners there are memories and significance associated with this later-built fabric.

General Sections

Sections D, E, F and G have also been subject to change over time. A consistent interpretation and conservation approach is proposed for these areas, demonstrating contested memories in the space, so that visitors will be able to understand the similarities and differences within each without visiting all four sections. In accordance with the overall interpretive approach, the main chronological periods of use are portrayed within the cells. For example one cell will focus on the early period (with sial mats, plates, spoons). Painting and lights will reflect this period so that the visitor can have an understanding of life within the prison in the 1960s. Another cell will be used to reflect the life in the late period, and may include beds and other artifacts identified by the reconstruction team (two selected ex-prisoners members from each section reference group). A third cell will be used to showcase the museum's ongoing research work done through the reference groups, and visitors will be able to experience the message to future generations formulated by the ex-prisoners.

Ex-prisoner reference groups: relationship to sections of the prison

B Section

B Section is an isolation section where the ANC leadership were incarcerated, including the former president Dr Mandela. Seventeen ex-prisoners were invited to share their memories and experiences in B Section, including their daily routine, political debates, culture, education, sport and recreation and working spans. They also explained the structure and appearance of the section during the 1960s including items such as paint colour, floors, roof, windows and doors. Cell identification was a problem because prisoners were occasionally moved from one cell to another; however the ex-prisoners generally managed to identify the cells where they spent most of their time. The idea of putting their names on the door as they used to do in their time here is however a challenging one because many people occupied the cells sequentially.

D Section: Namibians

Namibian prisoners were kept on the island separate from other prisoners. Namibia was under the South African government up until 21 March 1990 when it gained its independence. With the assistance from two Namibian ex-political prisoners Shityuwete and Ya Trivia, ten Namibians were invited to share their experiences which involved total confinement to D-Section. One of the cells will be used to project the message of these ex-prisoners and to conserve their memories of the experience.

Old Jail

Old Jail is where the first political prisoners were kept together with the common law (criminal) prisoners while they were constructing the new jail, and this section is associated with the humiliation and beatings of prisoners. When the prison authorities ended the hard labour regime in the late 1970s the Old Jail was used as a workshop where prisoners were trained in different skills such as tailoring, plumbing and bricklaying. The
administrative, hospital and kitchen components of this section were originally constructed of timber and demolished at a later stage. However, using the foundation structures the ex-prisoners were able to identify each building and its function, and to recall the atrocities and memories that took place within. Conservation and interpretation of the Old Jail will require the museum to reflect the different layers that exist within this section of the prison.

**Landbou**

Landbou was one amongst a number of places where atrocities took place. Prisoners were forced to take sand using iron wheelbarrows from one place to another, ostensibly for agricultural purpose but in reality for punishment. For prisoners Landbou was a place of hard labour where beatings took place. To quote an ex-prisoner: 'I found myself buried and covered up in the earth except for the eyes, then they urinate on the face.' Landbou was subsequently closed for a year when the underground network exposed the prison conditions onto the world stage. The path where prisoners pushed the wheelbarrows was identified during reference group sessions, but a new footpath (for walking tours) will be required as allowing visitors to walk on the site would create conservation problems, as there is evidence of heaps of sand collected by prisoners.

**Bou Span**

Bou Span is the name of the group of prisoners who built the Maximum Security Prison. The work commenced in 1963 and was completed between 1964 and 1965. During the work prisoners found human skulls and bones when digging the foundation, due to its earlier habitation by prisoners. The museum will conserve the fabric of the prison using the information and skills gathered during ex-prisoner reference group discussions.

**Zink Tronk**

Zink Tronk was built out of zinc and corrugated iron, also around late 1963, as the number of prisoners housed in the Old Jail was leading to overcrowding. Unfortunately this section was demolished in the late 1960s and the cleared land was used as a sport field. Through the use of ex-prisoner reference groups the layout of the building, together with all its functions was established. Conserving the space provided a challenge as some said the museum should reconstruct a small structure of the zinc jail to symbolize the prisoner's experiences, which could be used as changing rooms during soccer or rugby matches. Others said it should be left as a sport field because prisoners also used that field, and that people should be encouraged to have tournaments or other sports activity in the field to continue this usage. The museum has responded to these different views by displaying a photo of part of the original Zink Tronk and by including an explanation in the interpretation by the prison guide.

**Draad Span**

Draad Span was the name of a group of prisoners who were responsible for fence installations. During 1963 prisoners were used to dig a tunnel from the prison to the bluestone quarry, but the tunnel (other prisoners refer to the tunnel as a trench) was closed after several months because it was a health hazard and dangerous. At that time, armed warders would walk on top of the tunnel (or trench) with guard dogs whilst prisoners walked inside the tunnel. After closure a fence was constructed from the prison to the quarry because of the fear of prisoners being exposed to the outside world. The fence was demolished when prisoners stopped working at the quarry during the late 1970s, and interestingly during the reference group discussion two contradictory views about the route of the fence emerged. Eventually a probable route was established, although it is proposed not to reconstruct the fence but to simply allow visitors to walk in the footsteps of the prisoners as part of the walking tour.

**Gardens**

The Gardens reference group consisted of ex-prisoners who were responsible for tending the prison gardens. This activity commenced during the early 1980s when political prisoners were no longer doing hard labour and were used to plant vegetables and flowers and for trimming the trees and grass. They were able to share the produce among the other prisoners. Some of the gardens on the island can be traced back to the period of the Dutch East India Company, and two years after the Dutch set up a refreshment station in Cape Town in 1652 the first vegetable gardens were established on the island. A year later it also served as a prison for the settlement, and the British military prison on the island had vegetable gardens in the early nineteenth century. The nineteenth-century hospital also used the garden to grow certain plants which were regarded as medicinal.

During the apartheid-prison period, prisoners also used certain indigenous plants and roots for medicinal purposes. Among the many notable prisoners the late Elias Motsoaledi and Robert Sobukwe were allowed to have gardens. Various subtle messages were communicated between prisoners through the gardens. For example Sobukwe would pick the soil from his garden when other prisoners were passing by his house and let it gently drop down, symbolizing that they were the sons of soil. Mr Motsoaledi's flowers and fruit garden symbolized the hope for freedom.

Each year between January and February each year the museum staff enjoy grapes planted by the Motsoaledi Garden reference group. The group have also planted a tree next to the kitchen as a sign of memory, honour and respect to all of their comrades who died on the island.

**Pad Span**

The Pad Span refers to the group of prisoners who undertook maintenance of the roads on the island, using sea shells, lime and loose stones. Unlike the situation in the early 1960s, monitoring prisoners whilst working during the late 1970s was not very strict, and prisoners could walk along the sea shore to get imbaza (periwinkle) for cooking. According to ex-prisoners Pad Span was popular because they were able to walk around the island and smuggle newspapers from the tip for information. Due to the need to improve the roads for tourist busses, the Museum has changed the road material (on the tour route only), but has used grey paving to reflect the original colour. Elsewhere the original road surfaces have been left intact.

**E Section**

E Section (communal) has been defined as a section in which were kept militant, rebellious, arrogant and 'klop gooi' (stone, throwing) prisoners. These attributes can be linked to the 1976 Soweto uprisings and the influence of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). The BCM was the only movement during the 70s which organized and mobilized
political activities as other political organizations were banned. It was the resistance to all prison regulation by this group which brought about a lot of changes to prison conditions. To quote an ex-prisoner: ‘We went on numerous hunger strikes, we had running battles, dogs were set on us, [we were] tear-gassed because of the various demands wanted from the prison authorities’.26

The whole prison became uncontrollable, and in order to reintroduce order this group was separated from the rest of the prisoners. Walls were built in order to divide one section from another, but it was only through the intervention of the old prisoners, stating that warders should mix them with the young generation of prisoners, that some of them were sent to other sections. Prison conditions eventually improved – for example diet became the same for all prisoners, beds and television were introduced, hard labour was abolished. Prisoners started to be exposed to the various skills and training that could equip them with a skill. Unfortunately little information about 1976-78 could be collated from the E-Section reference group as the group had few members who were imprisoned during that time.

F and G Sections25

F and G Sections were also communal areas with approximately 50 to 60 people in each group of four cells, and ex-prisoners who had been incarcerated in these sections were invited to share their memories with the museum. The conservation and interpretation plan developed for these sections is that each cell will reflect the prison life of a certain period; consistent with the approach used elsewhere. The plan has some limitations especially for the period between 1991 and 1996 because some, such as the passage and the main corridor, reflect the common law prison use rather than that of the political prison. According to the political ex-prisoners the existing graffiti and paint colour were not in place during their incarceration, and some do not feel comfortable about the interpretation because it does not fully reflect their period. The museum is considering whether it should document the common law prison layer and then overlay this with the finishes of the political period layer.

Hospital28

Ex-prisoners who worked at the hospital section and those who were patients were invited to talk about their experiences. During the 1950s the hospital was characterized by lack of proper medication, poor medical treatment and lack of infrastructure which eventually led to the deaths of some prisoners. Despite these hardships, prisoners, especially those involved in dispensing drugs and care of the patients, managed to provide hope and encouragement to their fellow prisoners. Other prisoners who were cooking and serving special diets for patients played a crucial role in the hospital section, and they used this activity as an opportunity for underground communication throughout the entire prison. Important information was passed to certain prisoners who were coming for their treatment, and also distributed by those who were delivering special diets to other sections of the prison. Besides being a place of hardship and humiliation and associated with death, the hospital was regarded as a source of hope, inspiration and ultimately victory over harsh prison conditions.

Kitchen27

Ex-prisoners who worked in the kitchen were also invited to talk about their experiences at the kitchen. Unlike other prisoners, kitchen staff had good interactions with the warders and some common law prisoners. The underlying motive behind the relationship was to facilitate the smuggling into the prison of newspapers. The sessions revealed that certain prisoners were responsible for scribing information extracted from the newspapers onto small pieces of paper so that it could be wrapped in plastic and put it in the food pot for distribution throughout the section.

Stone Quarry28

Many prisoners worked in the bluestone quarry where the stones used for building the maximum security section were mined. It is a place where brutality, beatings and torture were frequent, and as one ex-prisoner recalled, ‘I was cut by the stone at the stone quarry whilst loading stone and the warder told me to throw sand as I was bleeding, the ankle got swollen’.28 It is a place where many prisoners lost their lives due to the dangerous working conditions, and where the intangible significance of the prison experience is palpable. On the other hand, it was at this quarry that prisoners, many of whom came to the island without any education, were able to learn to read and write. Political discussions took place using underground methods, and traditional music played a role in boosting the morale and spiritual well-being of the prisoners. Prisoners were forced to build a stone wall around the quarry in order to prevent the sea from breaking in. The method used was of loose stones packed on top of each other using only sand in the joints between the stones. Construction took approximately a year and a half, because on many occasions the sea would wash away the foundation of the wall.

In September 2001 some parts of the wall were badly damaged by a storm. With the information gathered during the discussions with the stone quarry reference group, the museum has managed to get an understanding of how the prisoners constructed the wall, and some ex-prisoners showed an interest in the restoration and conservation of the wall. The museum management is now seeking a specialist in the conservation of dry-stone walling to provide technical assistance in the rehabilitation/restoration of this significant feature on Robben Island.

Challenges of the reference group methodology

Communication

Contacting ex-prisoners using the prison register was difficult because it only contained the addresses obtained prior to arrest and many ex-prisoners had relocated after their release. In March 2001 Grant Shezi (an ex-political-prisoner) and Nolubebelo Tongo commenced a project to travel around the various provinces to inform people about RHM's plans and the objectives of the reference groups. They distributed a survey form including: names; surname; address; contact numbers; period of imprisonment; working spans; and the section/s where the prisoner had been incarcerated.29 The respondent was also asked to mark the topic of his interest. The project was a success because the team managed to gather as many as 1000 addresses and put these into the ex-prisoner database.

Although the above process has been done through the consultation of ex-prisoners it has some limitations and dilemmas. For example to some extent it did not manage to reach out to a larger number of prisoners. This is in part due to the difficult communication mechanism between the museum
and ex-prisoners, and lack of information sharing between the ex-prisoners themselves. Some ex-prisoners had some reservations regarding the operation of the museum and as a result they were reluctant to participate. Other reasons can be linked to the torture prisoners had undergone. As a result they said they did not want to come to the island anymore. Some people passed away long before the start of the museum and others passed away during the museum period but before they could be reached.

**Group dynamics and management**

Unlike the site visits or individual interviews where the interviewer can control the session, reference group discussions poses a serious challenge. With the big number of participants it is difficult for the facilitator to get maximum contributions from everyone. Sometimes the group will be dominated by certain individuals who are highly vocal, and other people will contribute less. However using an ex-political-prisoner in facilitating the discussion help to control the group. With him leading, it becomes easy to intensify the discussion because he shared the same experience as the group.

**Counselling**

The reference group discussion deals with traumatic experience and has a high level of sensitivity. Some of the ex-prisoners never went to counselling after release, especially those who were released in the late 1960s and early 1970s because of the banning orders imposed on them. They carried the whole experience suppressed throughout their lives, and as a result when they come to the island as reference groups these experiences can burst out. Although the museum staff were not prepared for handling such situations, and no trained psychologists were involved in the reference group sessions, the process was positive. In cases where an individual ex-prisoner was uncomfortable with the situation, other group members would provide reassurance and comfort (which was what occurred in the prison).

**Use Agreement Form**

The Use Agreement Form has been designed to indicate the proposed usage of material collected from ex-political-prisoners by RIM, and it confirms the safekeeping of the material. Because of the absence of a clear policy between RIM and the stakeholders, signing of the use agreement by the participant was a great challenge, and sometimes the ex-prisoners would raise issues that were difficult for the museum staff to resolve. Indeed, out of the 15 reference groups who have participated, the Pad Span and Kitchen groups refused to sign the form. However the museum is confident that the issue of agreement will be resolved at the end of the reference group process (there are eight more groups to complete the programme) with a meeting with representatives selected from each of the groups.

**Representation**

A problem which was not foreseen at the survey form stage is the issue of political party affiliation. The form does not have a space for one to indicate his political affiliation, and as a result some ex-prisoners would question the dominance of the members of a particular political party compared to others in the reference group. However RIM intends to develop the museum with a particular emphasis on the political imprisonment era irrespective of particular political affiliations. Most ex-prisoners acknowledge that although different political parties existed in the prison, all prisoners were treated the same way by the warders irrespective of their different political ideologies, and all fought against the Apartheid regime.

Some participants questioned the dominance of the Eastern Cape ex-prisoners, especially in the early 1960s reference groups. However the prison registers demonstrate that many of the prisoners during that time came from the Eastern Cape, and many of the prisoners who were arrested in Cape Town after the Langa March (1960) were banned and forcefully removed from Cape Town to the various parts of the Eastern Cape by the Apartheid government. The segregation and pass laws also emphasized the relocation of prisoners to the Bantustan regions and these were never allowed to return to Cape Town. Many of the leaders also came from the Eastern Cape and consequently the number of the followers outnumber those from other provinces.

**In-depth interviews**

The reference group methods do not accommodate the life histories of individuals, but are intended to assist the ex-prisoner to introduce himself and his period of imprisonment, and to describe specific sites, routines, routes, and experiences. Because of the number of participants, there is not enough time for individual interviews, but as part of the Memories project one or two members of the staff visit the homes of ex-prisoners for in-depth interviews, looking at when the person was born, his ancestors, why he joined the struggle, his prison experience and what he is doing now.

**Tour operations**

Another challenge which threatens the progress and implementation of the new Robben Island visitor experience is the number of visitors who have complained about the limited time scheduled for the tour. Every hour (from 9.00am to 3.00pm depending on the season) more than 150 visitors arrive via the connecting boats, which makes it difficult for the museum to deliver a qualitative and in-depth visitor experience. The RIM management needs to address these issues and to ensure an integrated approach pursued between different departments within the museum.

**Conclusion**

The collection of important information and memories about Robben Island relied on three main sources: life histories, small group site visits and the reference group discussions.

Faced with the challenges around issues of public participation, the island has to define the stakeholders and other affected parties. For many years the island has been used by different people for different reasons; therefore it is important that the museum open its doors to such discussions. From the experience gathered during various reference groups, the museum should clarify the issue of intellectual property and copyright with the ex-prisoners, as they are crucial to the process of conserving the political and social memory of Robben Island. The lack of policy on these issues between the museum and the ex-prisoners has some implications for the use of material gathered during the reference group discussions.

The museum also needs to develop a better working relationship with its corporate partners, including for example the Aushumato ferry company. The museum is unable to respond to the needs of the tourists because of the limited time scheduled for each tour. A memorandum of understanding
should be drawn between the museum and the ferry company in order to improve the museum experience.

As the use of oral history has proved an important tool in conserving the history of the island, the museum should continue to use all means to reach out to ex-prisoners. It is important to recognize that RIM is a totally unique place, and that its management and development rest not only on the professional staff of the RIM, but also on the memories and contribution of political ex-prisoners in the context of a true spirit of reconciliation.

Appendix

ROBBEN ISLAND MUSEUM REFERENCE GROUP SURVEY:

Name: ..................................................

Address: ..................................................

Phone number: ...................................... Fax number: ..........................................

Period of imprisonment: 19 .............. to 19 ..............

2nd sentence [if applicable] 19 .............. to 19 ..............

Ex-political prisoner reference groups:
Mark 2 reference groups you would like to participate in with an X.

Spans:

☐ Landbouspan
☐ Draadspan
☐ Blou stone quarry span
☐ Bamboespan

☐ Wasspan
☐ Bougroep
☐ Lune quarriespan

Prison:

☐ Cu tronk ☐ Censor's office
☐ Zink tronk ☐ Visitors' Centre
☐ Hospital
☐ Gardens
☐ Kitchen

☐ Khulu kuthu/Single Cells [sport, education, recreation, culture, politics and daily life in prison]
Please indicate the section and the period you were held in that section:
    Section from .................................. 19 ...... to .................................. 19 ......

☐ General sections [sport, education, recreation, culture, politics and daily life in prison]
Please indicate the section and the period you were held in that section:
    Section from .................................. 19 ...... to .................................. 19 ......

Comitees:

☐ Sinke
☐ Sports and Recreation
☐ Other ..........................

Other suggestions for reference groups .................................................................

Enquires: Nolubabalo or Grant on [021] 409 5116 or toll-free 0800 228880
Please return this form to Robben Island Museum in the self addressed envelope or fax form to [021] 4111 930.

44 historic environment volume 19 number 2 2005
Endnotes

1. Quote from the Statement of Significance: World Heritage Site Nomination Dossier, 1999
2. Robben Island Management Plan Summary 2003
5. RIM Conservation management plan overview of contents. May 2002
12. 17 ex-prisoners who were sentenced during the 1960s. They came in June 2001 for three days.
13. 10 Namibian ex-prisoners who were imprisoned on Robben Island. They came in July 2001 for three days.
14. 27 ex-prisoners who were imprisoned at the old jail. They came in October 2002 for four days.
15. 16 ex-prisoners who were working on site. They came in July 2000.
17. 33 ex-prisoners who built the prison. This group came in June 2003.
18. 30 ex-prisoners who were kept on that site. The group came in November 2002.
19. 11 ex-prisoners who were putting wire fences on the island. This group came in March 2002.
20. 13 ex-prisoners who were responsible for maintaining gardens. They came in February 2002.
22. 15 ex-prisoners who were doing road maintenance on the island. The group came in June 2001.
23. 21 ex-prisoners who were kept most of their time in E section during different periods. The group came in August 2001.
25. 24 ex-prisoners who spent most of their time in F section over different periods came in August 2001. 24 ex-prisoners who spent most of their time in G section over different periods came in July 2001.
26. 14 ex-political-prisoners who worked at the hospital and those who were patients there. The group came in January 2004.
27. 38 ex-prisoners who were working at the kitchen. The group came in March 2004.
28. Due to the number of ex-prisoners who used to work in the quarry we divided the number into two different groups. One group (34) came in April 2002. This group focused mostly on the songs that were sung in the quarry. The idea was that walking tour visitors would use a hearing device to listen to songs and information about the quarry experiences. The second group (35) came in October 2003. This group talked specifically about how they built the wall. The wall was damaged by the storm in 2001.
30. See survey form.