Colourful archaeologist who discovered a new human species on a remote Indonesian island

Mike Morwood was an archaeologist who made headlines around the world when he reported the discovery of a new human species, Homo floresiensis (dubbed the "Hobbit"), at Liang Bua cave on the Indonesian island of Flores.

A courteous and inquisitive man who never swore and rarely drank, but with a fondness for Dunkin’ Donuts and the odd clove cigarette, Morwood embodied the old-time image of the dogged fossil hunter always looking at the horizon for new and greater discoveries. His unconventional and at times bull-headed nature led him to think bigger and dig deeper than anyone else in the frontier world of south east Asian archaeology. He inspired devotion in his students and younger researchers and revolutionised the field with his simple but inexorable principle of deep-trench excavation: do not stop until you hit bedrock.

Morwood was born in New Zealand and, after receiving his PhD from the Australian National University, joined the University of New England in Armidale, New South Wales, in 1981, lecturing in prehistoric archaeology and leading projects that uncovered evidence of early human occupation in Australia. It was while working in the Kimberley region in the early 1990s that he began to cast his mind towards the remote and little explored islands of eastern Indonesia, which he knew the first inhabitants of Australia must have reached some 50,000 years ago.

After a few seasons’ work at fossil sites in central Flores, Morwood persuaded the “gatekeeper” of Indonesian archaeology, the scholar-statesman R. P. Soejono, to allow him to re-excavate Liang Bua, where Soejono had dug in the 1980s. Australian researchers had long courted Soejono fruitlessly. Morwood’s request coincided with Soejono’s retirement, but the latter was also impressed with his enthusiasm, and privately joked that he admired Morwood’s curiously magnetic appeal to women.

Morwood knew full well the immense potential of Liang Bua. Soejono, like most archaeologists at this time, was interested only in the uppermost layers of sediment in the cave, stopping his excavations at about a depth of three metres and before bedrock. Morwood believed that this enormous cavern contained much deeper and older deposits, however, and with his seasoned team.
of excavators, led by Soejono’s protégés Thomas Sutikna and Wahyu Saptomo, resolved to find the earliest cultural remains at the site.

There is a good reason why archaeologists rarely dig deeper than three or four metres in soft cave deposits. At such depths the weight of the surrounding earth exerts tremendous stresses on vertical trench walls. A cave-in can occur at any time and without warning, bringing in tons of soil and seriously injuring or killing anyone down the trench. Consequently, Morwood employed methods used by Sydney gravediggers to shore up trench walls, installing a self-supporting framework of timber uprights and interlocking cross braces.

With the walls safely supported — more or less — they dug to six metres, and with growing confidence extended their shaft-like trenches to 10 metres and below. This was innovativework: later, at a cave in Java, Morwood, Sutikna and their Indonesian crew would take their shored trench down to a staggering 16.5 metres, an apparent record that pushed the luck of even this expert team.

The difficult and dangerous work of deep-trench excavation paid big dividends. Morwood discovered that Soejono had stopped digging at Liang Bua just above the layer where things become really interesting. In 2001, after spending a week chiselling away at a huge boulder deep below the surface, the team broke through and hit archaeological paydirt: metres more of stratified clays containing thousands of bones of extinct animals and a vast array of stone tools.

These deposits, now known to be up to 100,000 years old, yielded the discovery that would make them all famous: the near complete skeleton of Homo floresiensis, a 1-metre-tall hominin with many primitive traits including a grapefruit-sized brain.

This remarkable find marked a turning point in the history of human origins research in Asia, proving that a previously unknown and now-extinct hominin had overlapped with modern humans.

Events took on their own momentum and Morwood was soon embroiled in a high-stakes standoff with a rival group of human fossil experts, who were not involved in the project but laid claim to the bones — specifically to test their theory that the “Hobbit” fossils were those of diseased modern humans. Under the international spotlight, and facing intense pressure from the Indonesian scientific community to resolve the situation amicably, Morwood’s position, as the Indonesian expression goes, was akin to that of an egg balanced on the tip of a horn, and it is a testimony to his political skills that he managed to hang on and assert his team’s custodianship of the fossils.

However, the affair left him bruised and stymied his research at Liang Bua for several years, but doors did not close permanently. From his new base at the University of Wollongong, New South Wales, Morwood initiated fieldwork in Java, Timor and Sulawesi, and in 2010 launched a major new project on Flores, aimed at finding fossil remains of “Hobbit” ancestors.

Morwood was a character. He once turned up to an uneventful dig in Sulawesi, and, within moments, collapsed the side of a newly made trench and fell in, roaring like a bull, and then stood oblivious as a coconut fell from a tree, ricocheted off the edge of the trench and narrowly missed his head. His characteristically loud, rapid-fire speech and tendency to stammer when excited made conversing with him awkward, particularly when he unleashed his poor and atrociously accented Indonesian on baffled villagers.

His absentmindedness was renowned. He was also frugal with money. He often carried wads of cash but stayed in the worst hotels and ate at the cheapest restaurants. His policy of paying major expenses in instalments to thwart overspending infuriated field managers tasked with running things on the ground including payments to machete-wielding locals.

Although he liked to portray himself as a humble dirt archaeologist who eschewed theory and always “dug first, asked questions later”, Morwood was a prolific scholar who published five books and more than 80 scientific papers. He had a fierce work ethic and expected junior researchers to pay their dues through long fieldwork stints in Indonesia, over six months a year, and was unforgiving of those who demurred or failed to produce results. His final days in a Darwin hospice were spent writing articles and planning new research expeditions.

Morwood had no pretensions, little guile, and few interests outside archaeology other than gardening, samurai swords and binge-watching DVDs. He is survived by his wife, Francelina, his former wife, Kathy, and their daughter. Another daughter predeceased him last year.

**Professor Michael Morwood, archaeologist, was born on October 27, 1950. He died of cancer on July 23, 2013, aged 62**

0 comments

Adam Brumm

http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/obituaries/article3859715.ece