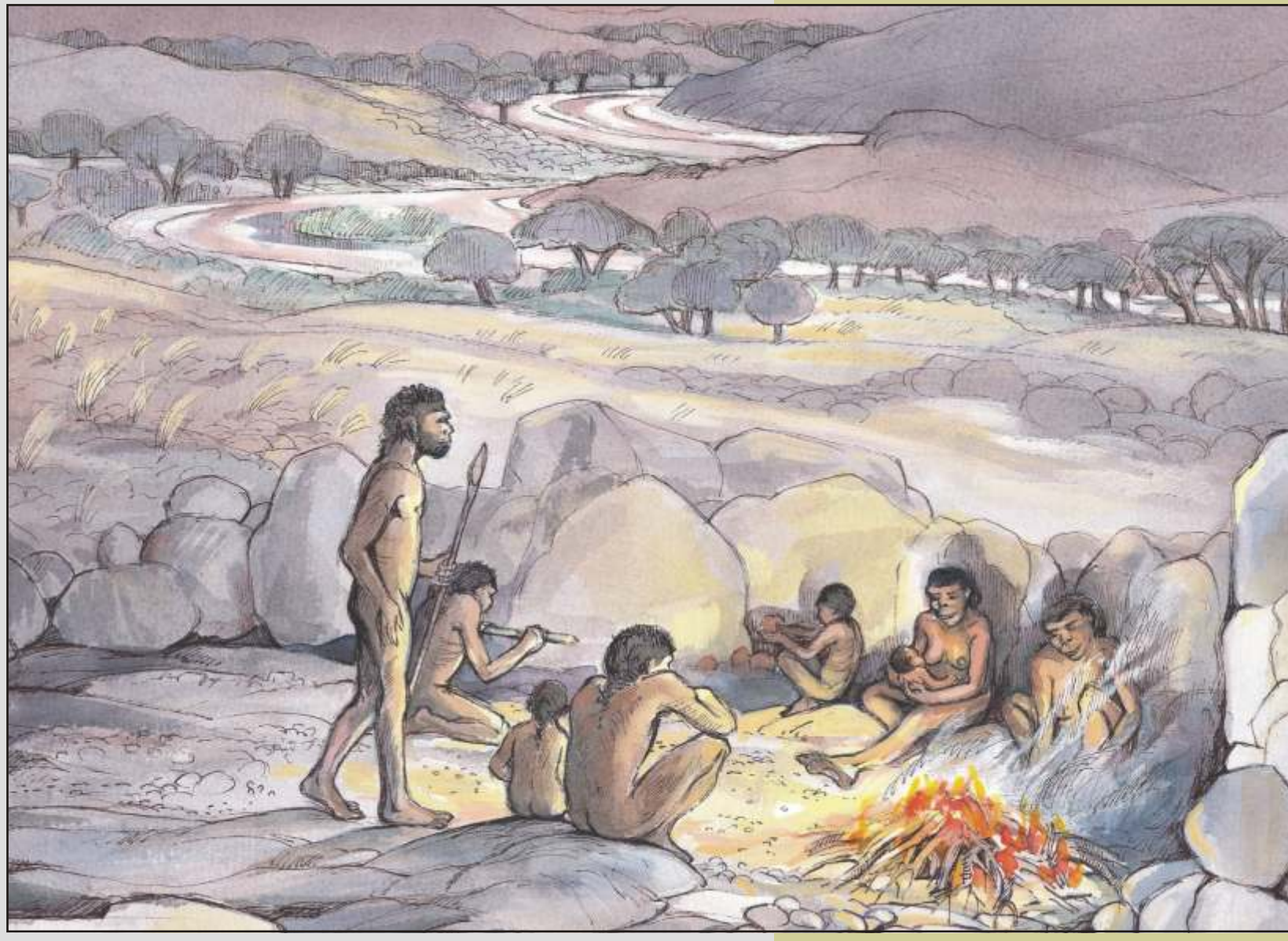


Earth and Man - a controversial relationship



Archaic *Homo sapiens* lived in Namibia 50 000 to 100 000 years ago. With a brain capacity of ca. 1000 cc he stood between the more primitive *Homo erectus* and ourselves, but already had the use of fire and hunting tools (above, artist's impression by C. Marais). A fossil skull, found on the beach near Oranjemund in 1988, is on display at the National Earth Science Museum in Windhoek (right)

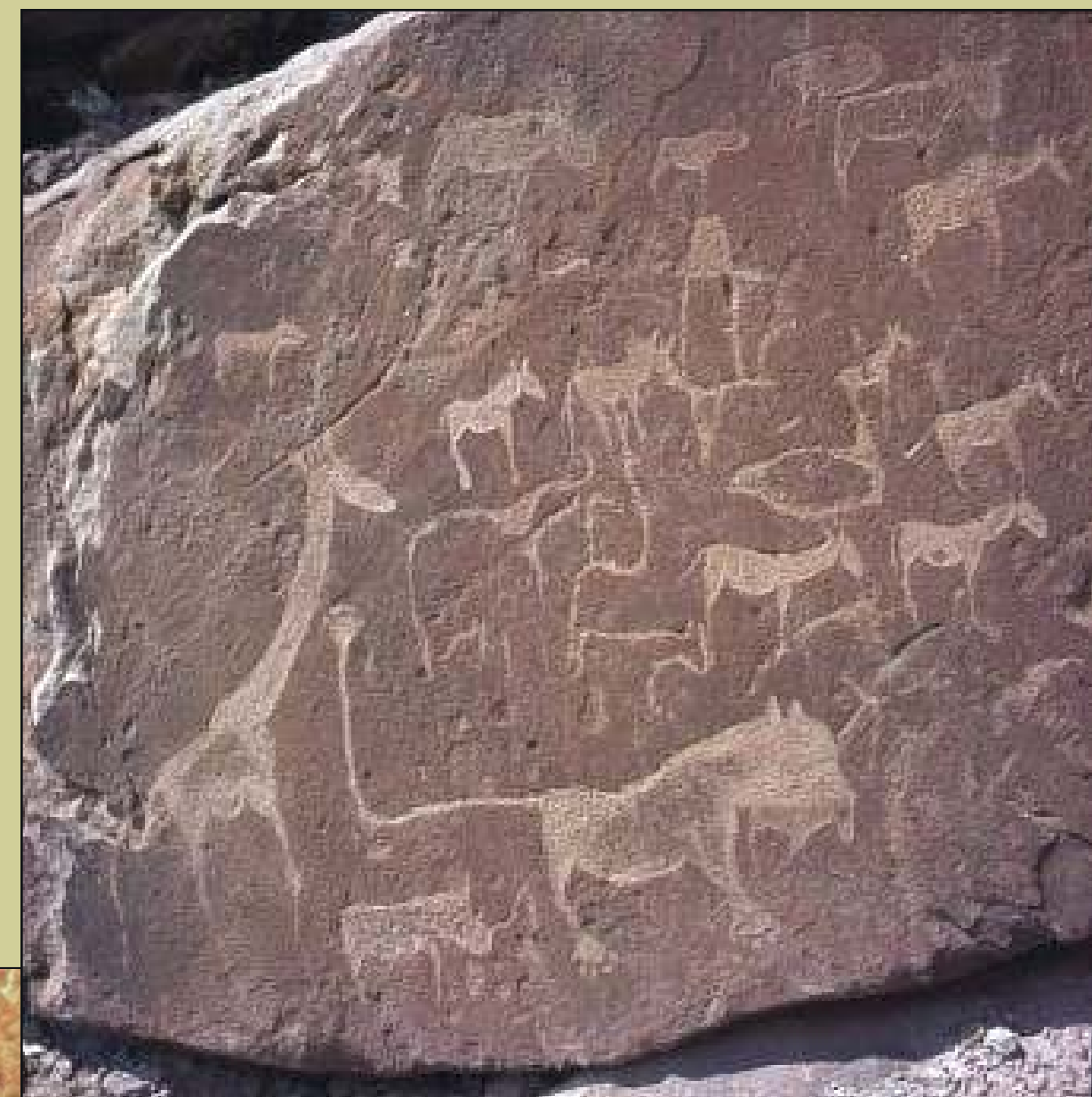


Although "Earth and Man" is not one of the research topics within the International Year of Planet Earth framework, it seems appropriate in this context to look at Man's relationship with his home planet... a conflict-ridden bond, for no species has made a comparable impact on its environment - if one does not count the first prokaryotes, which by producing oxygen as a waste product of their metabolism succeeded in altering the face of the planet forever.

While the earliest hominids were content to make use of whatever materials Earth voluntarily offered, their successors soon began to ravage the planet for her natural riches, which had been accumulating through eons. Suitable stones to make tools were among the first things coveted, but as Man's ingenuity to manage his environment grew, so did his requirements of other raw materials, like iron, for ever more ambitious projects.

As Man is at the Mercy of Untamed Natural Forces, Earth is at the Mercy of Man's Ambition

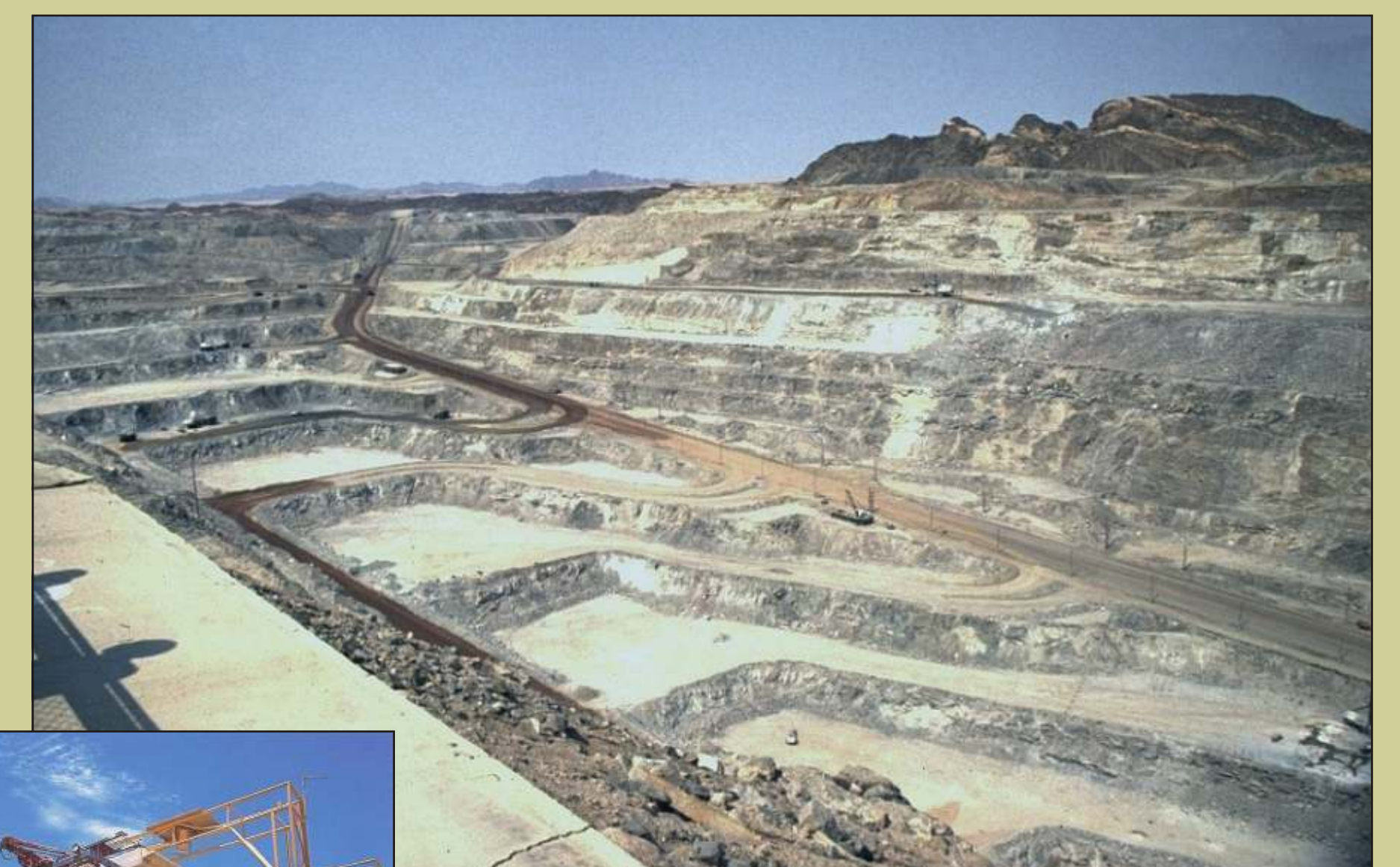
Having managed his environment as well as his fellow-creatures to ensure survival, Man turned his awakening mind to Art - at first no more than the recording of everyday life - using suitable rock faces for his canvas (Brandberg, below; Twyfelfontein, right)



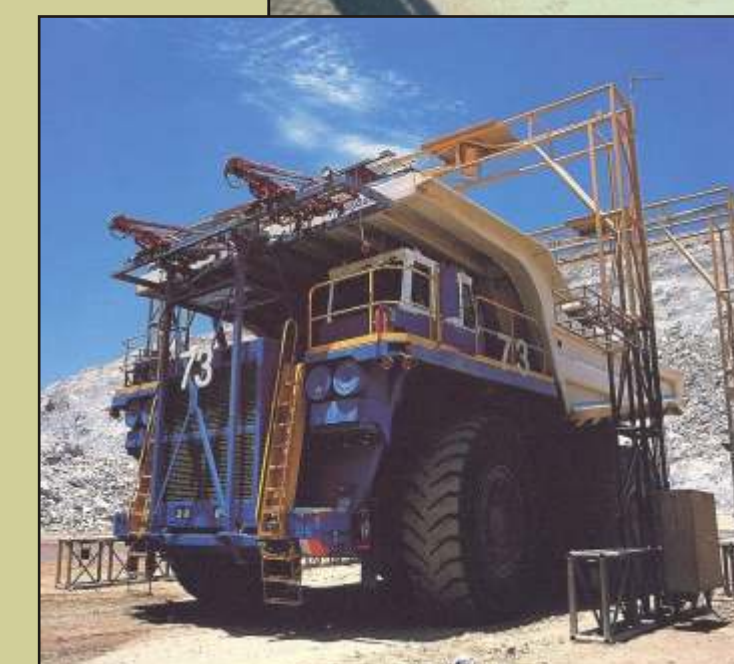
Diamond mining in Namibia around 1900 - already simple but effective machinery has been designed to rip the valuable gems from the ground

Within little more than a hundred thousand years - a ridiculously short time in geological terms - hunter gatherers have spread from the African plains all over the globe, in the process acquiring the skills needed for survival in colder climates first, and finally developing a highly technological civilization with an ever greater demand for raw materials. Now, after centuries of exploiting Earth's riches unguardedly, the realization has at last dawned upon Man that by abusing the environment, which is his life support system, he hurts himself in the long run. Legislation ruling environmental issues has been put in place in most countries, but good intention is not enough if the vital necessity that environmental protection must start at home, is not realized by every citizen!

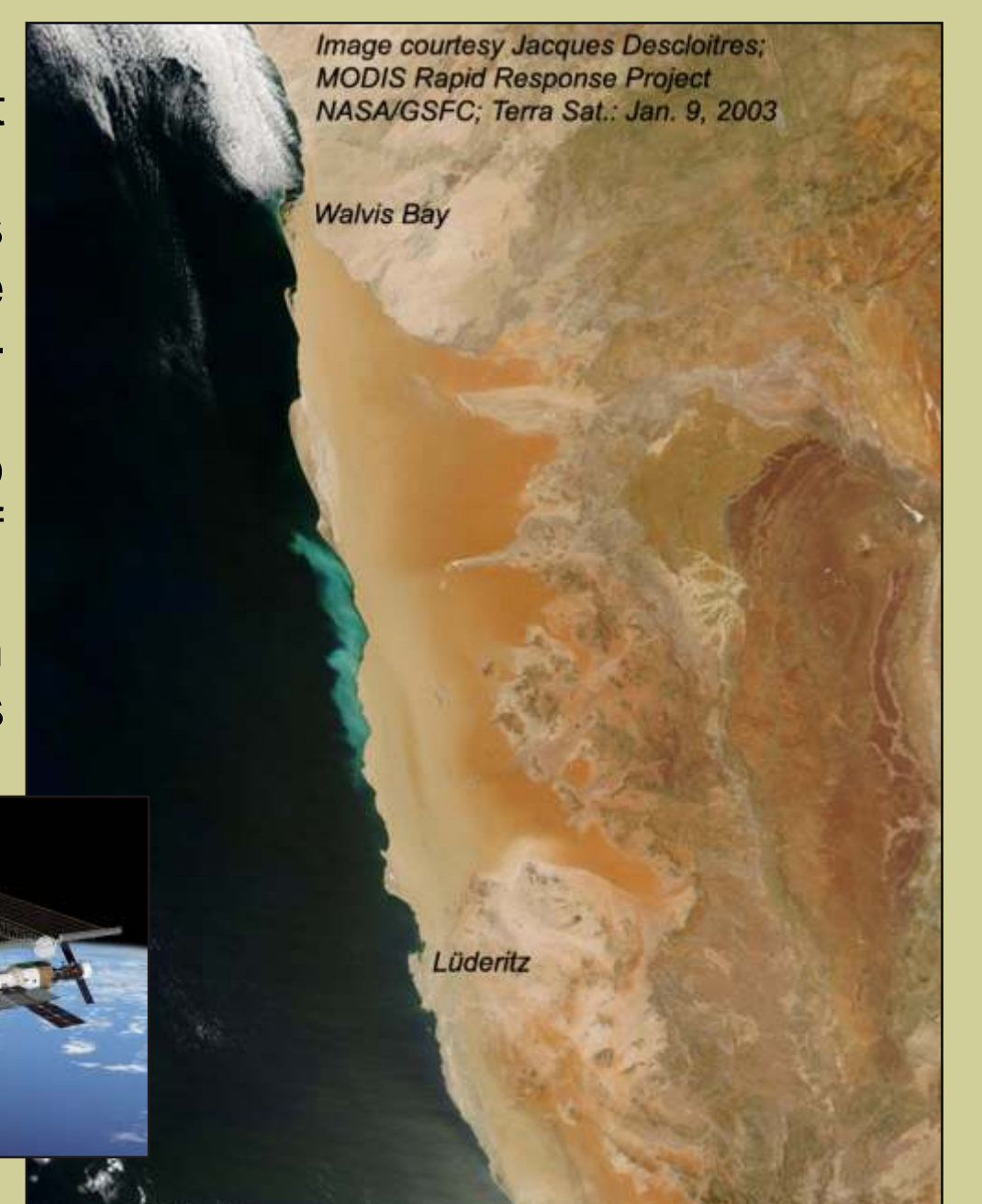
Mankind has now reached the stage where considerable effort and money is spent not only on finding new raw materials, but also on disposing of the harmful waste products of energy generation and other industrial processes. An arid climate and a scarce population make the Namib Desert a potential target, that in future might be considered for the final disposal for instance of nuclear waste. As a mostly agricultural nation, Namibia's direct contribution to this problem is as yet comparatively small, but - with its citizens increasingly expecting the same amenities that are already taken for granted in other parts of the world - it is nevertheless involved in this vicious circle. Therefore, if Man does not want to make his planet too hot for himself - literally as well as figuratively - the peoples of the world have to start working together to solve these problems of their own making!



Although one of the world's biggest uranium producers, with thousands of tons of ore being hauled away by gigantic trucks every day, Rössing Mine near Swakopmund is by far not the largest open pit mining operation in the world



Almost fifty years after the first human left Earth to go into orbit, Man is studying and observing his home world from a variety of space borne platforms, e.g. the International Space Station (below), and unmanned satellites, to improve his understanding of global dynamics and processes. The image of central Namibia on the right was taken by NASA's Terra satellite



Travel being made easy by jet planes, to visit out-of-the-way places is an understandable desire of Modern Man. The expectation, however, to find there the same amenities as at home - and the willingness of tour operators to fulfill these expectations for the sake of business - not only leads to severe environmental problems, but spoils the original attraction of Nature's last hideouts



As even the sustainable development of non-renewable natural resources can only be of limited duration, the time will come when Man has to look elsewhere for his raw materials. Already today tentative studies for mining the Moon and/or near-Earth asteroids are underway (artist's impressions of a hypothetical lunar mining plant, left)

International Year of Planet Earth