

Michael John Morwood

(1950–2013)

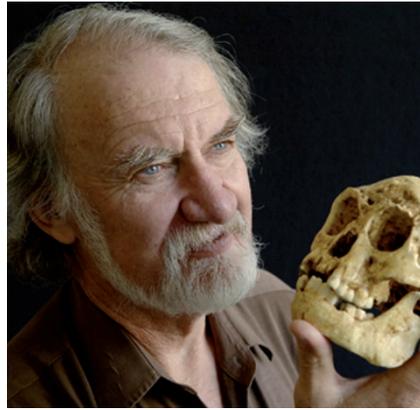
Rock-art archaeologist and driving force behind the ‘Hobbit’ discovery.

Michael John Morwood — Mike to his mates — was at heart what Australians would call a larrikin. Shaded by his battered bushman’s hat on his frequent trips in the field, he wasted no time with small talk, and his quizzical stare gave him a slightly zealous demeanour. But his vision, intuition and leadership resulted in the 2003 discovery of *Homo floresiensis*, a species of archaic human identified from fossils found in eastern Indonesia. Given the type specimen’s short stature, Morwood dubbed it ‘Hobbit’ after the fictional inhabitants of Middle-earth in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*.

Born in 1950 in Auckland, New Zealand, Morwood died of cancer in Darwin, Australia, on 23 July, en route to Indonesia. He was fascinated by Aboriginal rock art, the origins of the first Australians and their ancient connections with southeast Asia. As a state archaeologist in Queensland and during his PhD at the Australian National University in Canberra, Morwood pioneered studies that integrated rock art with artefacts recovered from excavations in Queensland. After joining the University of New England in Armidale, New South Wales, in 1981, he concentrated on sites in northern Queensland, culminating in the monograph *Quinkan Prehistory* (Tempus, 1995). This comprehensive work, edited with his long-time colleague Douglas Hobbs, gives a multidisciplinary perspective on 50,000 years of human activity in an environmental context, and set the tone for Morwood’s subsequent projects in Western Australia and Indonesia.

Morwood served as president of the Australian Rock Art Research Association from 1992 to 2000, and in 2002 published *Visions from the Past* (Allen & Unwin). In this acclaimed book, he offers a continent-wide analysis of the rock art and archaeology of ancient Australia, drawing on his first-hand experiences spanning almost three decades. In 2007, he became a key figure in the nascent Centre for Archaeological Science at the University of Wollongong in New South Wales, where he planned and led further expeditions to Indonesia, and mentored the next generation of archaeologists.

In the mid-1990s, evidence of ancient contact between people of northern Australia and Indonesia led Morwood to launch a series of projects on Flores, an Indonesian island separated from mainland Asia by



several sea crossings. Morwood ventured first to central Flores, where in the 1960s the Dutch priest and amateur archaeologist Theodorus Verhoeven had contentiously reported finding 750,000-year-old stone tools. Morwood collaborated with researchers at Pusat Survei Geologi, the geological survey institute in Bandung, Indonesia, and with Australian geochronologists to prove that Verhoeven’s conclusions were essentially correct. His team subsequently extended the antiquity of tool-making on Flores to 1 million years (possibly by ancestors of *H. floresiensis*) — the earliest evidence for humans east of Wallace’s line, which separates the fauna of Asia and Australia.

Next, Morwood revisited another of Verhoeven’s sites, a limestone cave in western Flores, looking for traces of ancestors of the first Australians. His direct and dogged style of negotiation with archaeologists at Pusat Arkeologi Nasional, the national archaeological centre in Jakarta, succeeded where previous Australian archaeologists had failed, and he jointly led an Australian–Indonesian team to the cave in 2001. Two years later, after Morwood had returned to Java, leaving one of us (T.S.) to complete excavation of a 6-metre-deep hole at the site, Hobbit was discovered there unexpectedly. The news was relayed immediately to Morwood, who arranged safe transport of the fragile fossils to Jakarta for detailed study. A political and scientific saga unfolded, colourfully chronicled in Morwood and Penny van Oosterzee’s popular-science book, *The Discovery of the Hobbit* (Random House, 2007). As other researchers jostled for the skeleton, bones were damaged, altered and sampled for DNA, resulting in acrimonious accusations and strenuous denials of incompetence and ethical misconduct.

Published in *Nature* in 2004, the discovery attracted intense scientific scrutiny and media coverage, propelling Morwood into the spotlight — sometimes reluctantly. That a 1-metre-tall human species with archaic features had survived until after *Homo sapiens* reached southeast Asia and Australia was a finding welcomed enthusiastically by some, but viewed sceptically by others. In response to concerns that *H. floresiensis* was not a new species, but a diseased member of *H. sapiens*, Morwood invited other human-evolution researchers to study and sample the fossils. This spirit of open enquiry epitomized his integrity and insistence on transparency. *H. floresiensis* is now generally accepted as a valid species, but its evolutionary lineage, geographical distribution and period of existence remain open questions that Morwood spent his final decade striving to answer.

Morwood prized his long-term collaborations in Indonesia and was always deeply respectful of indigenous communities and egalitarian in his dealings, treating senior colleagues and students alike. He took great care to educate, nurture and enthuse archaeology students and young researchers in Australia and Indonesia, and he inspired strong loyalties in his collaborators.

Field trips with Mike were memorable because of his insatiable curiosity and thirst for discovery (especially of another human species unknown to science), his whimsical sense of humour (Mike only half-joked that Hobbit should have been named *Homo hobbitus*) and his delight in adding a sword to his swashbuckling collection. He could also be exasperating: Mike paid scant attention to anything — or anyone — outside his immediate field of vision, and he had no patience for administrative paperwork that might impede his progress. But it was this single-minded drive and tenacity that enabled him to accomplish so much. We and many archaeologists in Australia and Indonesia will sorely miss Mike’s camaraderie, restless energy and zest for adventure. ■

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