3 Forests, Farmers and Furnaces: The Potential Ecological Impact of Prehistoric Mining and Metallurgy in Zimbabwe

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INTRODUCTION

Ecological problems in parts of Africa are largely considered as caused by recent land use practices. However, some problems of ecological imbalance began as a result of human activities centuries ago (e.g. Lane *et al* 2001). As the social sciences begin to depart from a conventional view of ecology where traditional societies existed in a balanced ecology, disrupted by modern change, it has been suggested that an interdisciplinary approach which acknowledges interaction between culture and environment should be adopted (Scoones 1999). Archaeological research in particular is a branch of social science which by nature explores change through time. Dynamic relationships between past societies and their ecological setting have been the subject of archaeological studies which have incorporated information from various scientific approaches to explain shifting archaeological settlement patterns.

Considerations of environmental change as an important factor both resulting from and influencing social change in southern Africa has proved a useful tool in archaeological interpretation of the past. The relationship between climate change at the beginning of the Little Ice Age, the abandonment of Mapungubwe and succession of Great Zimbabwe as the regional capital (Huffman 1996; 2000) is the most obvious example. Environmental degradation caused by over-exploitation of the environment