Read’s letter (1) on our article (2) unfortunately misinterprets the conclusions we reached and hypotheses we proposed. We struggle to find a passage in which we state that the risk hypothesis does not account for the material culture differences that we observe between the Still Bay and Howiesons Poort cultural adaptive systems in Southern Africa. In fact, we state that, during Marine Isotope Stage 4, Howiesons Poort populations responded to this period’s relative increase in ecological risk by developing a cultural adaptive system that was reliant on flexible technologies. Thus, counter to the impression given by Read in his comment, we clearly propose that ecological risk was a factor in the changing complexity of Southern African Middle Stone Age (MSA) technologies between 76,000 and 59,000 y ago.

Despite this finding, however, we would argue that caution is warranted and one should be careful not to apply the risk model in a mechanistic way to the first instances of complex material culture associated with anatomically modern humans. Before the Still Bay cultural adaptation, no pronounced differences are observed between MSA toolkits found across a wide range of environments—environments that were certainly characterized by varying levels of ecological risk. We still do not understand what mechanisms and underlying factors led to the sudden cultural complexification that we observe with the Still Bay, a cohesive adaptive system that appears around 200,000 y after the appearance of modern humans in Africa (3). It is very possible that other factors, which we call out in our paper, such as transmission strategies, demography, and mobility (and perhaps even cognition), may have played a significant role at that time in shaping cultural adaptations—perhaps to a greater degree than is observed with more recent and historic hunter-gatherer populations. Conducting inquiries into this matter requires that we do not uncritically project findings based on studies of more recent hunter-gatherers onto temporally distant archaeological records.

To face this challenge, we must design approaches, like the one we applied in our study, which attempt to disentangle the interplay between cultural adaption and environmental change without assuming that ecological risk was virtually the only factor that shaped technological variability throughout human prehistory. Over the last 300,000 y, different regional cultural trajectories may have handled ecological risk in myriad ways, and we cannot assume that one size fits all.

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