

NAMIBIA'S MOST VALUABLE RESOURCE

*By Garth Owen-Smith
Senior Field Officer
Damaraland/Kaokoland Desert Project*

One of the most persistent fallacies about Namibia is that it is a rich land endowed with fabulous mineral resources. The fact is, that the value of its diamonds, uranium and base metals, has generally been vastly exaggerated. Even were this not so, however, it would be foolish to believe that the country's long term economic prosperity can be based on non-renewable resources which, unless considerable new reserves are discovered, are likely to be exhausted within a few decades.

Namibia also has very little agricultural potential. Only the far north east of the territory receives adequate rainfall to support dry-land crop growing while for the rest, where farming is possible at all, it is limited to extensive free-range large or small stock raising. Furthermore, in recent years, regular droughts, large-scale bush encroachment and low market prices have resulted in the agricultural sector more often being a drain on the economy than an asset. If these facts are coupled with the very high cost of developing an industrial infrastructure in the territory's harsh and unforgiving natural environment, then the prospects for an economically, as well as politically independent nation in this arid corner of Africa are by no means bright. In fact one does not have to be a pessimist to forecast that the country will continue to be a net importer of food and other vital commodities in the years ahead.

How will we pay for these imports? In the long term, Namibia's most valuable resource is likely to be the very natural environment that makes both agriculture and industrial development so difficult, for within our borders we have a remarkable variety of virtually unspoilt natural ecosystems as well as some of the most spectacular scenery on the continent. We also have space — vast tracts of uninhabited and undeveloped land — a commodity that must increase in value as the world becomes more crowded and polluted by man and his works.

In Kenya, one of the wealthiest African states, tourism is now the second most important generator of foreign exchange and in many other African countries, tourists from Europe, America and Japan inject substantial amounts of foreign currency into the national economy. Here in Namibia, it would therefore be folly not to give the

conservation of wildlife and natural environments a very high priority in future development planning.

Today, Namibians can be justly proud of our world famous Etosha National Park as well as the lesser known, but equally impressive, Namib-Naukluft and Skeleton Coast Parks, but in reality we have only just started to develop the tourist potential of this vast land. The eastern Caprivi, a wonderland of verdant swamps, palm-fringed islands and glittering pans, is only now receiving attention. So too is the northern Kalahari, an endless sea of sand that supports a stately woodland of broad-leaved trees and rare antelope such as eland, tsessebe, sable and roan. A park has also recently been proclaimed on the mighty Okavango, the second largest river on the northern sub-continent; but what about the Kunene, one of the most spectacular rivers in all of Africa? And what about the southern Namib, a desert region that can receive both summer and winter rainfall — a unique climatic combination that has produced one of the most remarkable plant communities in the world?

As if this vast array of natural masterpieces were not enough for one country, Namibia also has the Kaokoveld, a single ecological region that has now been politically divided into Kaokoland and Damaraland. For long, the country's great northwest was shrouded in mystery and romance. It was a virtually unexplored region of incredibly rugged mountains and breathtakingly beautiful river valleys; of awe-inspiring gorges and golden grassy plains. Only two decades ago the Kaokoveld was also the stronghold of this country's black rhinoceros, and also contained its greatest population of elephant outside of the Caprivi. Great herds of plains and mountain zebra, gemsbok and springbok inhabited the region, as well as giraffe, kudu and the rare and endangered black-faced impala. The natural vegetation was also rich and varied, with numerous plant species that occurred here and nowhere else in Africa.

The Kaokoveld's wildlife was not only spectacular and abundant, but also ecologically unique. In the west of the region giraffe had forsaken the savannas to stride elegantly across the treeless plains of the Namib, elephant and rhino could be found deep within the desert, while prides of lions actually lived and hunted seals on the barren beaches of the Skeleton

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Coast. This combination of big game and desert habitat created an exceptional ecosystem that, together with the region's dramatic landscapes, gave it the potential to be one of the finest game reserves and tourist attractions on the continent.

Prior to 1968, most of the Kaokoveld was conserved as Game Reserve No.2, which in conjunction with the adjoining Etosha Game Park, formed a single unit over 80 000 square km in extent — by far the largest proclaimed conservation area in the world. At that time, on the recommendations of the Odendaal Commission, the entire Game Reserve No.2, as well as the western portion of Etosha, was deproclaimed and included in the ethnic homelands of Kaokoland and Damaraland. Despite promises by the South African Government that nature conservation would be maintained, this political decision in fact sounded the death knell for most of the region's big game. During the subsequent decade, no effort was made to control poaching which soon reached epidemic proportions. The total elephant population in Kaokoland and Damaraland was reduced from over 1 000 in 1970 to about 300 in 1982. The western desert-living elephants were reduced to a mere 70 from an estimated population of 300 to 400 prior to 1970. In the same period black rhinoceros numbers decreased from more than 200 to less than 50. Drought, aggravated by poor veld management as well as uncontrolled hunting decimated other large mammal species whose populations all declined to critically low levels.

Among conservationists, the future of the Kaokoland black rhino is of particular concern. By 1982, they had been totally exterminated in the eastern parts of both Kaokoland and Damaraland. A small but still viable population still occurs in the west of the region, however, incredibly surviving in a true desert habitat where the average annual rainfall is less than 150mm. From the evidence available, it was clear that, although the drought had probably caused the deaths of some rhino, the major reason for their dramatic population decline was undoubtedly illegal hunting by well-armed gangs of poachers supplying, and in some cases, actually working for wealthy middlemen who lived in the larger centres of the country. The most disturbing fact, however, was that, despite the appeals of many leading scientists and conservationists in southern Africa, the State auth-

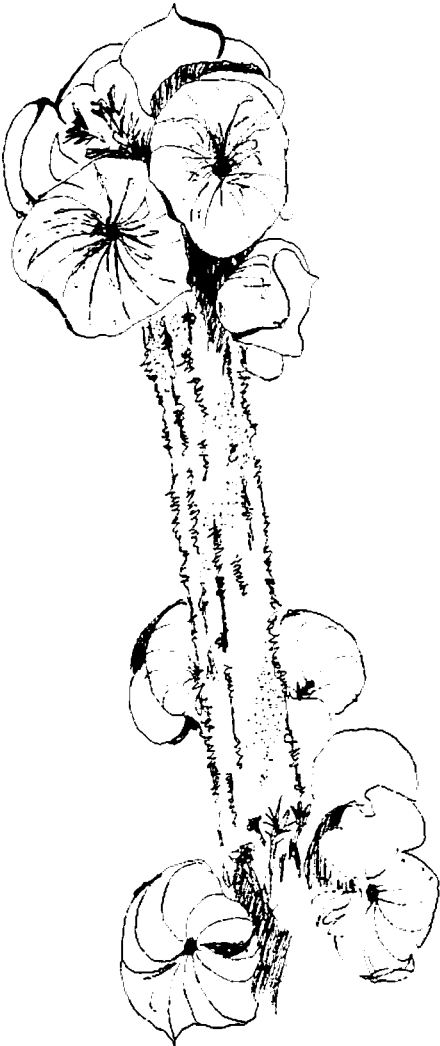
orities seemed unable to stop the poaching. The extinction of the remarkable Kaokoveld rhinos seemed inevitable within a few years.

P.J. (Slang) Viljoen, a research biologist sponsored by the South African Nature Foundation, the Endangered Wildlife Trust and the Pretoria University to study the Kaokoveld elephants, found well over 100 elephant carcasses during his three year study period. Eighty percent of the dead elephants showed clear signs of having been shot. In some cases, very senior Government officials were implicated and investigations, either by Viljoen or other junior civil servants, were soon quashed.

Some elephants had also been shot by a professional trophy hunter who had been granted a concession to hunt elephants and other game in northern Damaraland. By 1981, however, conservationists in Namibia felt that poaching in the region had become so serious that the game populations could no longer sustain trophy hunting. Late that year, a trophy hunter shot a well known elephant bull that Slang Viljoen had for some time, been observing as part of his study. This was the final straw.

At the time there was still only one Government nature conservator with a single black assistant covering the entire region of nearly 10 million hectares — over four times the size of the Etosha or Kruger National Parks. Their achievements were impressive but no two people could hope to adequately conserve an area of this size. Consequently, in April 1982, a group of concerned private individuals in Namibia got together to form the Namibia Wildlife Trust, a non-government organisation with the primary aim of assisting the State authorities in their vital task of conserving the country's natural resources. The initial funds to get the Trust off the ground were provided by the Endangered Wildlife Trust, the People's Trust for Endangered Species, based in London and the Foundation to Save African Endangered Wildlife (SAVE) based in New York. Mining and business houses, service clubs and numerous private individuals in Namibia and South Africa provided further funding and logistic support for the Trust.

During 1982 and 1983, the Namibia Wildlife Trust employed a full time field staff of four, with most of their operations being conducted in the arid western parts of Kaokoland and Damaraland. Since April 1982, in con-



junction with the nature conservators based in Damaraland and the neighbouring Skeleton Coast Park, they have convicted a total of thirty five persons in 16 cases for either illegal hunting or the illegal possession of ivory and/or rhino horn — a serious offence in Namibia. Eighteen of the convictions have stemmed directly from poaching cases uncovered by the Damaraland/Kaokoland Desert Project staff, or during air surveys sponsored by the Endangered Wildlife Trust. One such case discovered by Namibia Wildlife Trust officers was the poaching of a rhino cow in northern Damaraland during March 1983. As in previous cases, only the horn of the rhino was cut off — the rest of the carcass being left to the hyaenas and vultures. A three month old calf, belonging to this cow, was rescued and kept at the Namibia Wildlife Trust base for two weeks before being transferred to Etosha. Two men were arrested in connection with this incident, and one was convicted and sentenced to one year's imprisonment. Another case, initially uncovered during an Endangered Wildlife Trust sponsored aerial survey, resulted in six men being sentenced to long prison terms as well as fines of up to R3 000 for illegally shooting eleven elephant and two rhino in the region.

Unfortunately, although at least some of the persons responsible for the actual hunting of elephant and rhino have been convicted and given heavy sentences, to date very few of the men behind the slaughter — the buyers and sellers of poached ivory and rhino horn — have been brought to trial. In 1982, one of these illegal dealers was however trapped with 68 rhino horns and 17 tusks in his possession, but was effectively fined a mere R2 000. The local market value of the rhino horn and tusks was over R60 000, whilst at their final destination in the Middle or Far East, they would be worth many hundreds of thousands of rands. What is more important to conservationists, however, is that 68 rhino horns represent 34 rhinos — two thirds of the total number surviving in Kaokoland and Damaraland today! Ironically, the same dealer was sentenced to four years in jail, two of which were suspended, for being in possession of uncut diamonds. When are we going to realise that rhinos — magnificent living relics from prehistory that, by attracting tourists to this country, have the potential to earn us millions of rands in foreign exchange — are more valu-

able than diamonds?

From the start of the Damaraland/Kaokoland Desert Project, it was recognised that local participation would be essential if our conservation endeavours were to succeed. With this in mind, extension work among the residents of Kaokoland and Damaraland has been given a high priority and the local authorities have been consulted on all important issues as, and when, they arose. This has in turn stimulated the people's interest in nature conservation and encouraged their involvement in what we are doing. A direct result of this policy has been the setting up of a system whereby headmen in areas where poaching is a serious problem have appointed their own game guards. These men are expected to regularly visit waterholes within walking distance (± 25 kms) of their homes and report on game movements and human activities within the area. Damaraland/Kaokoland Project staff supervise the patrol work while the Trust provides rations and a small cash allowance to each man. The scheme was started over a year ago and there are now six 'auxiliary' game guards operating in northern Damaraland and western Kaokoland. To date they have played a key role in two important poaching cases as well as providing a wealth of valuable information. Their mere presence is also a major deterrent to would-be poachers in the area.

A further objective of the Damaraland/Kaokoland Desert Project has been conservation education. In 1983 a start was made in this field by the conducting of outdoor environmental awareness courses for teachers and high school students. During these courses, basic ecological principles are illustrated with real-life examples readily available in the participants own home area. The importance of nature conservation followed on as a logical conclusion. Judging by the enthusiastic response from students and teachers alike, there is obviously a great need for this type of education in Namibia. Unfortunately the constraints of finances and manpower have limited our activities in this field.

Apart from the law enforcement successes that have been achieved, perhaps the most gratifying developments of the past two years have been the very positive response of the Damara and Herero authorities to our actions as well as the co-operation and team spirit that has developed between the Damaraland/Kaokoland

Project field staff, the nature conservation officials in Damaraland, Kaokoland and the adjoining Skeleton Coast park, the local South West Africa/Namibia Police and the South African Defence Force personnel stationed in the area.

If we can build upon this situation then the magnificent big game of this fascinating region can still be saved so that the Kaokoveld can return to its place, along with the country's other natural masterpieces, as part of Namibia's most valuable resource.

In April 1984 the Namibia Wildlife Trust decided to withdraw from the Damaraland/Kaokoland Desert Project in order to spread their resources over a wider field of activities. Upon their relinquishing control, the Endangered Wildlife Trust took over the management and funding of this very successful project in conjunction with the Namib Centre of the Wildlife Society of South West Africa/Namibia.

