

# Quagga

No. 17 Autumn/Herfs 1987

Journal of the Endangered Wildlife Trust/Joernaal van die Trust vir Bedreigde Natuurlewe



**Kaokoveld • Vultures • Alternative Conservation**

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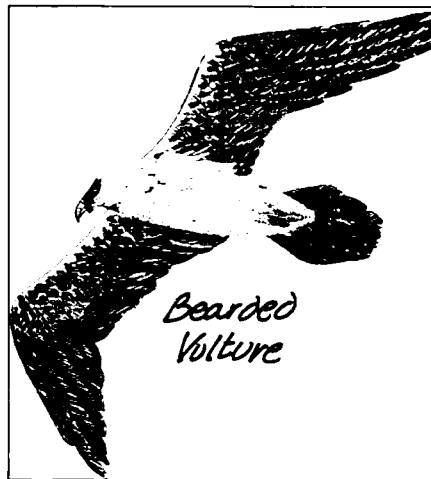
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*Magic of the Kaokoveld*



*Vulture Study Group*



*Conservation - Another way*

The cover features the desert-dwelling Black Rhinoceros of Damaraland, painted by Alan Ainslie for our limited and signed edition of prints entitled "Desert Dwellers" (see page 24). This issue of *Quagga* has an update on the status of conservation in the Kaokoveld.

This magazine is named after an animal which our forefathers hunted to extinction, because they did not know any better. The Endangered Wildlife Trust is dedicated to preserving the diversity of life on earth, and to ensuring that no species will become extinct through our ignorance or apathy.

Hierdie tydskrif is genoem na 'n dier wat ons voorvaders tot uitsterwing gejaag het, omdat hulle nie beter geweet het nie. Die Trust vir Bedreigde Natuurlewe is toegewyd om al die verskillende lewe op aarde te bewaar en om te verseker dat geen diersoort deur onwetenskap of ongevoeligheid sal uitsterf nie.

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# THE MAGIC OF THE KAOKOVELD

*John Ledger*

*"To see a lone elephant negotiating a sea of sand dunes  
or a herd crossing an endless gravel plain  
is to be rewarded with one of the great sights of a lifetime."  
Mitch Reardon, 1986. The Besieged Desert. Collins.*

My own opportunity to see such a great sight only came in 1986, for despite the Trust's long involvement in projects in the Kaokoveld I had never been in the right place at the right time...

Most visitors to Wêreldsend arrive in style, in six-seater Cessna 210s. We arrived on foot, because somebody had locked the gate in the veterinary cordon fence, and Margie Jacobsohn and I completed our ten hour road trip from Windhoek with a brisk stony walk into the sunset on the 29th of November.

A gathering of conservationists sat around the fire that evening - Marcellus Loots, Principal Nature Conservator from Khorixas and his men; Blythe Loutit, desert rhino researcher from Ugabmund; Steve Braine and John Patterson from the Skeleton Coast Park; and our host, Garth Owen-Smith, who lives in this most remote of places at "the end of the world"! We talked mostly about the way the wildlife of Damaraland and Kaokoland has recovered after the drought, about the increasing numbers of rhinos and elephants in the area, about the need to keep up the successful anti-poaching activities of the auxiliary game-guards, and about the needs of the area in the future.

Next day we set off for the north, and I travelled with Marcellus, who told me about the very difficult year he had experienced, involving a court case in which a member of his own Department had been charged with poaching. The vastness of the area under his control, logistic and communications problems, and many other factors make life quite hard for conservators in this harsh paradise!

Garth's vehicle ahead had stopped - "Elephants!" Away in the distance I could see grey shapes in a dry water-course. On foot I followed the tall Owen-Smith, secure in the knowledge that he knew what he was doing.

Quietly we approached from downwind, and came upon three large elephants accompanied by a tiny calf - unused to this sort of thing, my heart pounded as I marvelled at the huge beasts in their dry and stony home. A great sight in my lifetime, and one of many I would experience in the days to come.

We stopped at Palmwag, the attractive oasis that has been upgraded by the Damaraland authorities as a base for tourism. Lunch under the palm trees next to the swimming pool saw us finalising ideas for group visits to the Kaokoveld that the Trust will launch in 1987 - but more about that on page 10.

We drove north from Palmwag to visit auxiliary game guard Elias Musia in his humble dwelling, surrounded by his family and his livestock. Setting out on regular 3-4 day patrols, Elias keeps a check on everything that goes on in his area. Any suspicions of unlawful hunting are reported to Marcellus Loots, and the process of investigating the case begins.

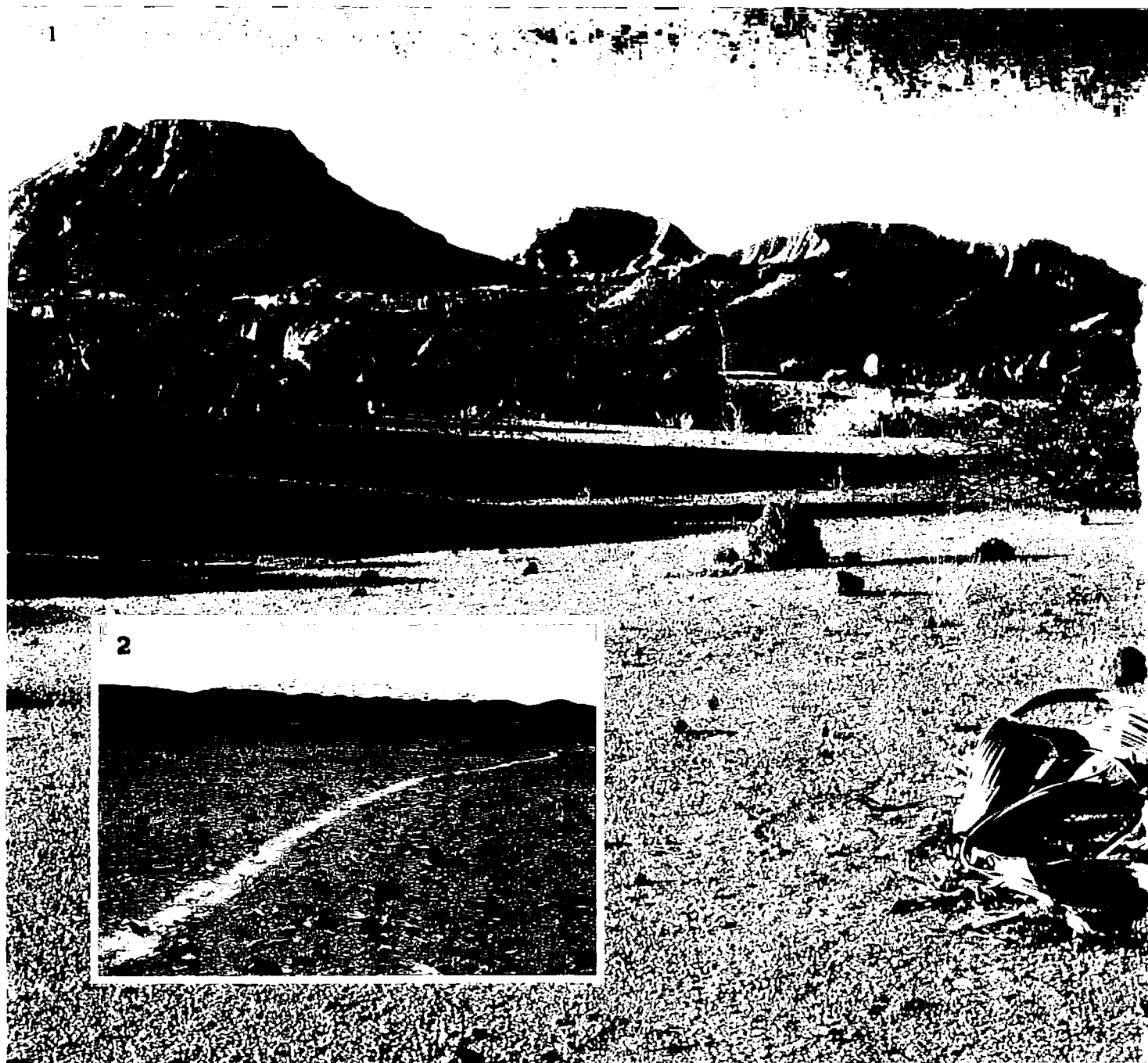
The auxiliaries are supported by the Endangered Wildlife Trust. There are eight of them in the Kaokoveld, and they receive a monthly allocation of rations and a small cash payment from the Trust. They are appointed by the local headman, and enjoy his support for their anti-poaching activities. The system of auxiliary game guards is a unique experiment that seems to be succeeding where traditional law-enforcement is failing all over Africa.

Then followed an amazing drive that took us through "Klein Serengeti", a vast plain of golden grass with blue mountains rising on the horizon. We drove up the dry bed of the Ombonde River between tall, pod-bearing trees from which groups of fast-flying parrots burst as we passed. Giraffe stared at us from the sides of the river. Marcellus bade farewell and headed south to Khorixas while we made camp in lion country and Garth showed us how to operate his shotgun in the event that he might be compromised first...

The visual feast that followed the next day as we made our way to Ses-

*Garth Owen-Smith with Kamathetu, auxiliary game guard based at Purros.*





fontein via the Khowarib Schlucht cannot be described - you have to experience it yourself. Sesfontein is rather a sad place with a crumbling fort built by the Germans, but we didn't hang around too long before heading down the Hoanib River bed.

Garth stopped to show us piles of bleached elephant bones, and skulls from which the tusks had been hacked with power saws during the orgy of slaughter in the early 1980's when everybody climbed in to greedily plunder the wildlife of the area. It seems difficult to believe that there were any survivors, but thanks to the efforts of several dedicated people, the elephants once again walk the Hoanib valley in peace.

Mitch Reardon has told part of the story in his book, which is recommended for anybody interested in this fascinating area. The people involved in the fight to end the slaughter were as diverse as the landscape itself. But history will probably tell our grandchildren that Ina Britz, Blythe Loutit, Chris Eyre, Garth Owen-Smith and a few others were the names that will be remembered. The concern now is for the immediate future, to hold on to what has been saved, and to nurture the game populations back to strength again.

The elephants are doing *their* bit, for we saw plenty of babies and all the evidence indicates that good rains and protection from hunting has resulted in



a healthy increase in the population.

We left the Hoanib, climbing past Lappetfaced Vultures roosting in low trees. We spent the night on the vast Giribis plain, with the bright starry sky stretching to the horizon on all sides. The silence was uncanny, and the vast emptiness of the place gave me a peaceful sense of isolation and quiet, an experience of wilderness that is increasingly difficult to discover on the face of our crowded planet. Garth told us that the nearest humans were those few at Möwe Bay, sixty kilometres to the west on the Atlantic Coast!

Next morning we found Cheetah spoor around our camp site, and then set off for the Hoarib River valley to the north. At the Himba village of Purros the water comes out of the sand to create a verdant paradise of green in the desert. I marvelled at the wonderful Himba people that I had read about but never seen - fine, good-looking humans with dignity and grace. Our auxiliary game guard at Purros is Kamathetu, and I observed with fascination the long, drawn out way of communicating that is the mark of people who live in rural Africa. First the passing around of tobacco, the charging of the peculiar straight smoking pipes, firing up with matches or the handmade flint lighters that some of the Himbas carry. Then a lot of slow puffing and some small-talk about family, sick goats, the weather, and then gradually the nitty-gritty. Who has been poaching, what has been going on, and the information that Garth has been waiting for finally comes out after an hour of conversation.

Garth speaks Afrikaans which goes via a translator to Kamathetu in Herero and then back again. Garth also speaks fair Herero himself, and occasionally queries a *nuance* of expression. I see that the people here and elsewhere like and respect Garth - and that's a very important aspect of the people business that is the key to the conservation of the wildlife of this desert.

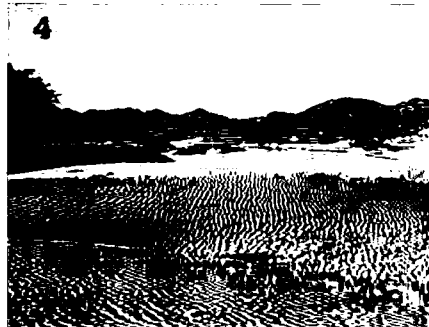
We leave Purros reluctantly to get back to Sesfontein for an important meeting. The road across the mountains is unbelievably bad, and my respect for Landrovers reaches new heights!

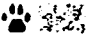
A colourful gathering assembles about the garden furniture of ranger Duncan Gilchrist. The headmen and council members, the auxiliary game guards, the translators, the government officials, and various others drink sweet tea and munch pilchard sandwiches. Marcellus Loots handles the meeting, and introduces me as "Die groot mahona van Johannesburg". I tell them that the Endangered Wildlife Trust is very pleased to support the conservation efforts being made in this area, that we are proud of the work done by the auxiliaries, and that all of our supporters are delighted that the wildlife is increasing in the Kaokoveld. Communication is more difficult today because our Afrikaans has to be translated into both Damara and Herero so that all present will understand.

Everybody has the opportunity to say his say. The auxiliaries have their problems - they have no waterbottles for the long, hot days on patrol. They need donkeys to carry their equipment when



1. A magnificent desert sunset in Damaraland.
2. An ancient path through the desert, walked by many generations of Black Rhinos in search of water...
3. A giraffe pauses in time against the stark landscape of Damaraland.
4. A wind-sculptured dune field in Kaokoland.
5. Centuries of rubbing by itchy rhinos have left this stone smooth and shiny...
6. Gemsbok etched on the desert skyline.
7. The grandeur of the Hoanib Valley and the Kaokoland mountains turns giraffes into tiny figures in the landscape.





Ancient rock engravings at Twyfelfontein.

they go out on extended trips. The cost of feeding and clothing their families has gone up over the past year, and perhaps the people in Johannesburg can bear a thought for the problems of people living here in the dry country!

The politicians are well-spoken and make their points with considerable skill. Councillor Joshua Kangombe has been a staunch supporter of nature conservation for many years. He is immaculately attired in a suit, and asks a number of pertinent questions. He says that the auxiliaries are doing a good job, they are respected in their communities, and would it perhaps be possible for the Endangered Wildlife Trust to provide the men with some sort of uniform to make them stand out from the rest?

Fortunately this matter was raised months before by Garth, and I produce olive-green overalls with EWT cloth badges on the pockets. Just what Mr Kangombe had in mind!

Our meeting went on until dark, but it was an extremely fruitful and rewarding experience to be at the interface where the real work gets done, where people speak their minds, and where the future of the wildlife of the Kaokoveld will ultimately be determined. I was struck by the spirit of goodwill and eagerness to communicate that pervaded the meeting - a good omen for the future.

The hectic pace continued, and the following day saw Garth and myself in Khorixas at a meeting of the Executive Council of the Damara Representative Authority. Those who believe in the universality of the English language

would have been surprised when Mr Justice Garoëb, Chairman of the Executive Council, politely asked whether I spoke Afrikaans - when I replied in the affirmative he said "Thank goodness, I was worried that we would have to hold the meeting in English!" Both he and Vice-Chairman Mr Tjongarero have a great interest in nature conservation, and the latter holds the conservation portfolio in the Executive Council.

This is not the place to discuss the problems that have been experienced in setting up a conservation area or national park in Damaraland. Suffice it to say that the Endangered Wildlife Trust is committed to co-operating with the Department of Agriculture and Nature Conservation, the Damara Representative Authority, and anybody else who is interested in conserving the wildlife resources of Damaraland as the first priority. I left the Council chamber with positive feelings that the time is right for some real progress to be made in nature conservation in Damaraland.

Back to Wêreldsend for the night, then we re-packed the Landrover with fresh supplies and headed towards Springbok River and up the Huab valley to Twyfelfontein. The geology and resultant topography of each of the rivers that cut through from east to west is astounding. The rock engravings at Twyfelfontein are amazing, and I was interested to find that some ancient person had pre-empted Clive Walker's "Signs of the Wild" book thousands of years ago when he covered a big rock face with accurately engraved spoor of various animals. I suppose distribution problems prevented him from becoming famous!

*Blythe Loutit, artist, botanist and Black Rhino researcher...*



Blythe Loutit met us at Twyfelfontein, and next day I rode in her Landrover 110 to hear about her work on the Black Rhino in Damaraland. We climbed a steep rocky slope on foot to examine a big *Euphorbia virosa* that had been demolished by a hungry rhino, notwithstanding the 8 cm long thorns and potent latex that can burn human skin! We saw the waterhole at "Rhinowasser" where rhinos drink, and the polished rubbing stones where itches have been scratched for thousands of years.

Blythe Loutit is another of the remarkable personalities that have made their mark in this country. A botanist and artist, she became aware some years ago that she was not alone with her plants in the desert, but that elusive Black Rhinos were there as well. Today she is an authority on the desert rhino, and has just completed a study of their feeding ecology in the Doros area. The Trust supports Blythe's work by making a monthly grant towards fuel costs, which are a big component of the project in the rugged terrain where four-wheel drive is constantly used.

We camped near the Doros crater, and watched the sun set over dragon-backed mountains. Next day we headed south, and the mighty Brandburg glowed like a dome in the distance. The rhinos in the Doros enjoy good food, but there is no water, so every third evening or so they set off on a 27 km hike to drink from a waterhole in the Ugab River - a 54 km round trip! They travel along ancient paths trodden through the stony plains, to reach the water, moving down valleys that are impassable even to the mighty Landrover. And search as we may for these great beasts among the rocky plains, not a single one was seen - so I shall have to return for another visit to this magical land to collect another great sight of my lifetime!

My visit to the Kaokoveld came to an end as we drove down the Ugab River bed to Ugabmund, and thence to Swakopmund. A fruitful meeting with the Namib Centre of the Wildlife Society of SWA/Namibia was held, and the Trust's support was pledged for future collaborative efforts with all interested parties concerned about the people and wildlife of the Kaokoveld.

#### Acknowledgements

Garth Owen-Smith, Margie Jacobsohn, Marcellus Loots, Blythe Loutit and Dave and Loma Sandy are thanked for their assistance, companionship and hospitality during my visit.

