

Namibia: Leading the way in wildlife conservation

by David A Buitron

A first hand look at a place of great natural beauty with some of the most innovative conservation projects.

Namibia, the former German colony of South West Africa, became in 1990 the newest of Africa's independent states after decades of dispute over the legality of the South African administration that replaced German rule after the First World War. In so doing it also joined the ranks of those few African states that can lay claim to being genuine multi-party democracies, thus allowing it to be touted in some quarters as a model for political accommodation in the region. For these reasons alone Namibia briefly occupied a place at centre stage on the world scene, only to be quickly overshadowed by the other more dramatic international developments that made 1990 a truly remarkable year.

My own curiosity about Namibia, however, long predated the political developments that took place after the mid-70s, and stemmed rather from its reputation as a country of great natural beauty full of exotic sounding places like the Skeleton Coast or Burnt Mountain, with beaches where you can still find diamonds in the sand, and quaint little German-style villages seemingly lost in time in the middle of the country's vast deserts. With the apparently happy resolution of the long Namibian conflict, I therefore decided it was time to finally have a firsthand look, and so it was that less than a month after Namibia's independence I found myself in Windhoek at the start of a three week tour during which I would visit many of the country's more famous natural wonders and wildlife preserves, and even find the opportunity to speak to officials from the Directorate of Nature Conservation.

Clockwise from top: 300 metre high sand dunes at Sossus Vlei are the highest in the world; Namibia's Burchell's zebra; springboks looking very much like Thomson's gazelles; Welwitschia mirabilis, the desert wonderplant with a life-span of 2,000 years; gemsbok.

The superb state of Namibia's infrastructure, the unspoiled beauty of its seemingly endless stretches of desert countryside, and the huge amount of land that has been set aside for wildlife, cannot fail to greatly impress any first-time visitor. Having the advantages of a large territory (at 824,000 square kilometres Namibia is a third larger than Kenya) and a small population of just over one million, Namibia has been able to give nearly 17 per cent of its estate over to nature conservation. Much of this is within the Etosha and Namib-Naukluft National Parks, two of the largest national parks in Africa, and they were among the highlights of my tour.

Both parks contain an excellent variety of animal and bird life, and some fascinating plant life as well. As I quickly discovered, many of the wildlife species found in Namibia, although very similar to their East African counterparts, are in fact different. The common zebra in Etosha, for instance, is Burchell's (*Hippotigris quagga quagga*), and unlike the East African subspecies known as Grant's, it has a yellowish ground colour, conspicuous shadow-stripes, and weak or even absent striping on the rump and legs. Then there is the so-called Angolan sub-species of impala (*Aepyceros petersi*), also found in Etosha, which differs from East African impalas in having an almost black band down the middle of the face. It was also in Etosha that I saw my first springboks, and although they are a completely separate species of antelope, from a distance they look very much like their East African ecological equivalent, the Thompson's gazelle.

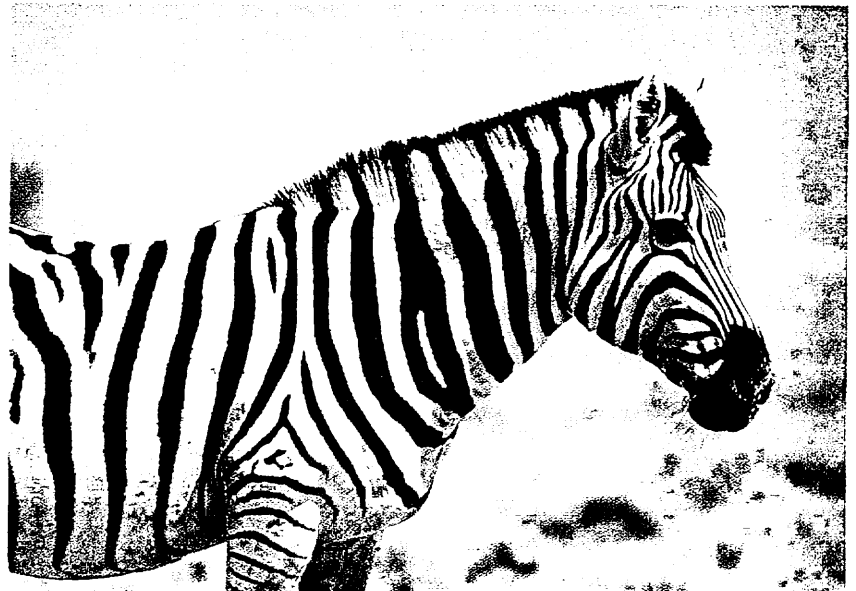
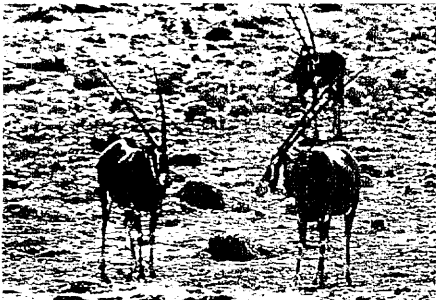
In the extreme south of Namibia is the Fish River Canyon, a gigantic ravine which in places is over 25 kilometres wide and 550 metres deep, making it second in size only to the Grand Canyon of the Colorado in the USA. Amid this dramatic scenery can be found Hartman's mountain zebra (*Hippotigris zebra hartmannae*), of which only some 6,000 remain. Adapted to the dry mountain and hill environment, these very shy creatures look much like the Grevy's zebra but without the large, rounded ears.

For birders Namibia is a delight, as many species common here are not found in East Africa. During my tour, which wasn't especially given to bird watching, I nevertheless added 45 new species to my personal tally. These included such beauties as Ruppell's parrot, the crimson-breasted shrike, the rosy-faced lovebird, and the shaft-tailed whydah. And as would be expected, along the country's atlantic coastline there is a huge variety of shorebirds, including many migrants from the antarctic, most of which would be new to any first time visitor from East Africa.

Namibia takes its name from the Namib Desert, much of which is protected by the Namib-Naukluft National Park, and among the most beautiful parts of this desert are the sand dunes at Sossus Vlei, some of which, at over 300 metres in height, are the largest sand dunes in the world. As it is one of the oldest deserts in the world, the Namib has also given rise to a number of unique plant and animal adaptations, the most interesting of which is the wonderplant (*Welwitschia mirabilis*). This very odd 'tree', which seems to have moved underground as a way of coping with the harsh desert climate, has an estimated lifespan of up to 2,000 years. Its trunk can be massive, growing to one and a half metres in diameter and five metres long, and more than two-thirds of its length will normally be hidden underground. The seeds of the *Welwitschia* also happen to be one of the favourite brows-foods of Namibia's desert adapted black rhinos.

I was not fortunate enough to see any rhinos while in Namibia but they are a subject of interest to me, and it was in the course of inquiring about their status that I learned about some of the more innovative conservation projects that have been started in Namibia. The three that I will describe here are all connected, directly or indirectly, with the effort to save Namibia's rhinos.

There are still an estimated 90 of the so-called 'desert rhinos' thinly scattered over the vast semi-arid region known as the kaokoveld in the northwest of the country. And together with another 350 rhinos living in and around Etosha, they comprise the



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total remaining population of *Diceros bicornis bicornis*, one of four currently recognized sub-species of black rhino in Africa.

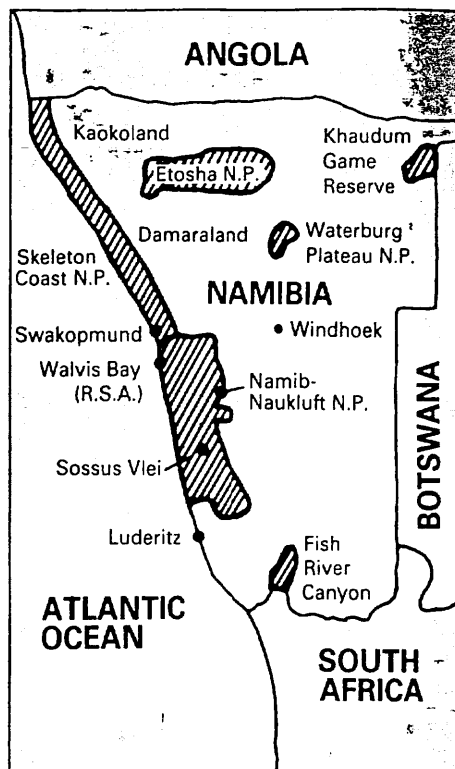
These rhinos have in recent years become a main focus of wildlife conservation efforts in the country. Their importance was first recognized at the 1987 meeting of the African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group (AERSG) in Kenya, during which all the remaining black rhino populations in Africa were assigned priority ranking for conservation action. The initial ranking was based on the biological importance of each population, taking into account present and potential size, genetic rarity, the diversity of the ecosystem occupied, and the likelihood of success for any conservation efforts that might be undertaken on its behalf.

Of the 38 populations studied, Etosha and the Kaokoveld were ranked first and fourth respectively. But in a subsequent ranking for field action priority, which took into account other considerations, including the perceived need for urgent action, the Kaokoveld rhinos were ranked second after those in the lower Zambezi Valley in Zimbabwe.

One of the long term management goals of rhino conservationists in Africa is to breed up minimum populations of 2,000 of each sub-species, and in Namibia there is already more than sufficient habitat for this under protection. Yet rhinos here are again under threat from poachers, and it is feared that if the Kaokoveld rhinos were to be eradicated it would be difficult, if not impossible, to re-introduce rhinos not already adapted to the very arid environment. Hence some of the importance attached to the remaining desert rhinos.

The AERSG was however also encouraged by the apparent success of some of the more innovative conservation programmes being carried out in Namibia. One of these, the Auxiliary Game Guard programme, was begun in Damaraland in 1982 to help counteract the poaching of rhinos, whose numbers in Damaraland and Kaokoland (the two regions are collectively known as the Kaokoveld) had dropped from about 300 to 60 since 1970. Funded mainly by private businesses and non-governmental organizations, this programme provided for the appointment of game guards by chiefs and other community leaders from among the Himba and Herero tribes resident in the region. The guards were then supplied with uniforms, rations of food, and small cash salaries in return for helping Nature Conservation rangers monitor the wildlife population. Although not empowered or equipped to take direct action against poachers, the guards worked closely with the rangers and reported any illegal activities.

The Auxiliary Game Guard programme was largely the creation of Namibian conservationist Garth Owen-Smith who is



one of the originators of the concept known as conservation extension. In simple terms this means involving rural communities in conservation efforts in ways that produce tangible benefits for these communities while at the same time encouraging them to take an interest in the protection of their wildlife heritage.

The success of the programme is evident in the remarkable resurgence that occurred in the Kaokoveld's badly depleted wildlife population after 1982, particularly among the rhinos. This was such that it even allowed the re-introduction of some controlled hunting of game, and the extra meat which this made available to the local people was a benefit much appreciated. This is exactly how conservation extension is intended to work, and a crucial factor undoubtedly was that the extra wealth and status acquired by the men who became game guards resulted from their having been chosen and appointed by their own community leaders rather than by outsiders from Nature Conservation. This in turn also bolstered the authority and prestige of the local community leaders, thereby encouraging their continued cooperation in the fight against poachers.

Unfortunately, just as the Kaokoveld rhino population was beginning to make real gains in numbers, severe poaching pressure on the rhinos began anew. Being thinly scattered over a huge area they were very difficult to protect in any direct way, and when several were killed in Damaraland over a brief period early in 1989, some kind of urgent action was called for. This resulted in the decision by Nature Conservation officials to launch Operation Bicornis, a programme involving both the de-horning and translocation of a certain number of rhinos (the exact figures are not being disclosed).

According to Peter Tarr, an official of

the Directorate of Nature Conservation based in Swakopmund, the de-horning side of the programme was a last ditch measure, undertaken only after it was agreed there was nothing to lose. It was done by darting the rhinos from helicopters, sawing the horns off with hand saws, trimming the stumps carefully with hoof-clippers and files, and then sealing them with Stockholm Tar to prevent infection.

As the Kaokoveld rhinos had been closely monitored for a decade, it was easy to select certain areas for the experiment where the resident rhinos could be de-horned, and then continue to monitor them to determine any possible effects of the de-horning on their behaviour. At the time of this writing, no ill effects have been observed, three calves that have since been born to de-horned rhinos are doing well, and the poaching of rhinos in Damaraland has stopped.

The notion of de-horning rhinos in order to protect them from poacher had only been a topic of debate prior to Operation Bicornis, but Namibia's decisive action has now given conservationists a case study to look at. From this, decisions might be made as to the applicability of de-horning to small and threatened rhino population elsewhere in Africa.

Namibia's remaining elephant population, estimated to be about 5,000, includes a few hundred still living in the Kaokoveld, and their protection has also been the focus of conservation efforts in the country. One such effort, the Purros Project, which was also largely the brainchild of Garth Owen-Smith, again demonstrates the potential of the extension approach to wildlife conservation.

Elephants had more or less disappeared from the area around Purros Spring in southwestern Damaraland after widespread poaching in the 70s. Then, because of the drought that affected much of southern Africa through the early 80s, the resident Himba and Herero pastoralists began planting crops below the spring to help supplement their diet. Crops are, of course, also very attractive to wild elephants, so when a few of these began to re-appear at Purros in 1986, the local people viewed them with some misgiving, to say the least. But this attitude has now changed, undoubtedly because of the Purros Projects.

The primary aim of this project was to counter the negative effects of the growing numbers of tourists in the area. Social disruption and division within the Himba and Herero communities was becoming a problem as families began competing for contact with the tourists so as to be first in line to receive any random handouts of food, sweets, used clothing and camping gear, etc. At the same time, a mutually degrading relationship between the tourists and the local people had also begun to develop.

The Purros Project grew out of the views expressed by the people themselves during a two-day meeting with officials from Nature Conservation. There were two tiers to the plan decided upon. One was the implementation of a tourist levy of about

US \$ 10 to be charged to every tourist visiting the area and paid directly to the community as a whole. It was also decided that this revenue should be distributed evenly among all families, regardless of who actually came into contact with the tourists. The second tier was the establishment of a craft market to allow the local people to sell their traditional crafts to the tourists at a fair price and in a mutually respectful environment.

Since the project began in 1988, the results have been very encouraging. The tourist levy appears to have reversed the earlier trend among people to abandon their traditional semi-nomadic lifestyle, for it provided a way for them to benefit from tourism without having to give up their normal pursuits and congregate near villages and alongside roads. The craft market provided incentive to continue producing traditional household items rather than become increasingly dependent on cash to buy plastic containers or western clothing. And perhaps best of all, these results seem to have made everyone better appreciate the value of the wildlife in the region, as it became increasingly apparent that the wildlife, especially the larger animals like elephants and rhinos, was one of the major attractions bringing tourists into the area. This is evident in the favourable way the occasional appearance of elephants at Purros Spring is now greeted by the local people, replacing the earlier fear for the safety of their crops. One old Herero man, upon receiving his share of the tourist levy, is quoted by Garth Owen-Smith as having said, 'It is as if we are farming wild animals, but instead of getting meat and skins from them, we get the money that tourists pay to see them.'

After three weeks in Namibia I was certainly taken by the beauty of the country and its wildlife, and encouraged by what seems a sound basis for political stability in the country's new constitution. But most impressive to me were some of the lessons Namibia has to offer the rest of Africa in the field of wildlife conservation.

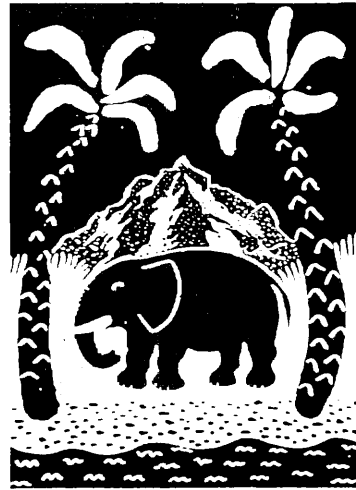
Namibia's experience certainly seems to support the claim of many modern thinking conservationists that the best way to insure the preservation of a significant percentage of Africa's wildlife for the long term is through conservation extension. Ways must be found for the people who will have to live near, or even among, Africa's larger wild animals to benefit directly from them or from the tourism they attract. This has been the principle behind the success of the projects described here, and it seems clear that its application to new projects tailored to specific situations elsewhere in Africa could produce equally good results.

With the recent restructuring of the management of its wildlife resources under the parastatal Kenya Wildlife Service, Kenya is already in a more flexible position, as demonstrated by the plan to allow for a 25 per cent share of the revenue from all park entrance fees to be given to rural development throughout the country (see 'Leakey', *Swara* March/April 1990). But this should only be seen as a first step in the right direction. With its vast network of

parks and reserves, and the large number of tourists visiting the country every year, there is surely tremendous scope for the application of the extension approach to wildlife conservation in Kenya.

Projects could be developed with a view to regenerating depleted wildlife populations in sparsely settled areas, better protecting threatened wildlife in more remote parts of the country, and reducing the negative impact that tourism is having in some of the more heavily visited areas. In all cases the key should be to bring some of the benefits of Kenya's largest foreign exchange earning industry directly to those rural communities adjacent to the wildlife areas in such a way that the connection between wildlife and its habitat, and more money in the farmer's pocket, is obvious to all concerned.

It is somewhat ironic that Namibia, until recently the longest surviving colony in Africa, should be one of the pioneers in moving away from outmoded, and for the most part colonial imposed, conservation policies which attempted to protect wildlife with little regard for the effect such policies might be having on rural communities. It is time for Kenya to follow suit, for conservation extension may prove to be the best way to reduce poaching, and other abuses of its rich wildlife heritage, to an acceptable level, and then keep it there once and for all.



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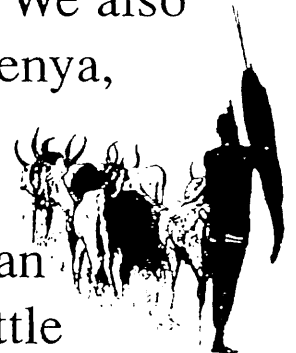


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