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THE GREAT WHITE PLACE

Namibia's Etosha National Park

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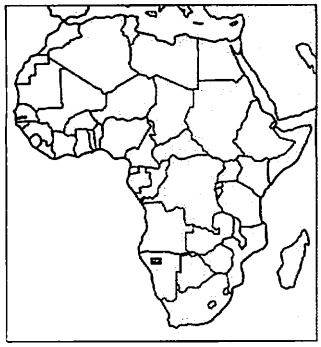
Etosha, for many months of the year a place of dryness and mirages, is one of the world's greatest national parks. It stretches more than 350 kilometres from east to west and covers 22 275 square kilometres in the far north of Namibia. At the centre is a shallow 6 133-square-kilometre pan, once a vast inland sea that gradually dried as the climate changed and the Kunene River altered course. When the rains come the water spreads out to cover the cracked earth, but briefly, and only here and there does it lie more than a few centimetres deep. All too soon the pan dries, once again to become 'the great white place'.

In many parts of Africa, fragile ecosystems such as Etosha are under great stress, but Namibia, the driest country in sub-Saharan Africa, is fiercely protective of its wilderness areas and is the first African country to have included environmental clauses in its constitution. These provide for the state to adopt policies aimed at '...the maintenance of ecosystems, essential ecological processes and biological diversity of Nambia and the utilisation of natural resources on a sustainable basis for the benefit of all Namibians, both present and future.'

How well has this environmental law done in the years since Namibia became independent? And how has it affected its national parks and the quality of the experience offered to eco-tourists? Maria Johns visits Etosha to find out. ▶

Male lions, Panthera leo. *Etosha is well populated by large carnivores and is home to some 300 lions.*

Above Moringa ovalifolia, *a strange looking baobab-like tree which only occurs in Namibia.*



Although it is the Etosha pan that gives its name to the national park, the main lifeline is the surrounding sweetveld savanna founded upon Kalahari sands. It is this that sustains the herds of zebra, wildebeest, elephant and antelope, which in turn support healthy populations of lion, cheetah, hyaena and jackal.

Etosha is also home to a substantial black rhino population. Black rhino usually occur in dense bush and being shy and solitary, are difficult to see. In many areas they have also become locally extinct because of illegal poaching for their horns which command high prices on the black market. In Etosha, black rhino are both abundant and easy to see because of the flat terrain and low, scrubby vegetation that covers much of the park.

One of the special treats at Etosha is to witness a mother and calf coming to drink at the Okaukuejo waterhole during night. The floodlights pick out the jagged outlines of the two seemingly prehistoric animals. But even the 1 000-kilogram mother appears strangely small against the great hulking shapes of the elephants that have monopolized the waterhole all afternoon.

Etosha's black rhinos are doing so well that 30 have been 'loaned' to private game reserves. This is a way of spreading the risk of poaching and also of encouraging the development of ecotourism facilities. Managing poaching and promoting ecotourism are challenges facing conservation everywhere in Africa. Wildlife management is of a high standard in Namibia's parks; something that began under South African control and has continued since independence four years ago. The Namibian government is acutely aware of the importance of tourism, struggling as it is to free its economy from dependence on mining and farming of questionable sustainability. 'After South Africa, Namibia spends more on developing ecotourism than any other African nation,' says Dr Malan Lindeque, chief ecologist at the Etosha Ecological Institute.

Ecotourism offers one of the few sustainable forms of land use in a country that has, arguably, the most fragile environment south of the Sahara. Low and erratic rainfall and lack of perennial rivers mean that vast tracts of land are arid or semi-arid. Nearly 60 per cent of the country is dominated by the sand dunes of the Namib desert in the west and the Kalahari in the east.

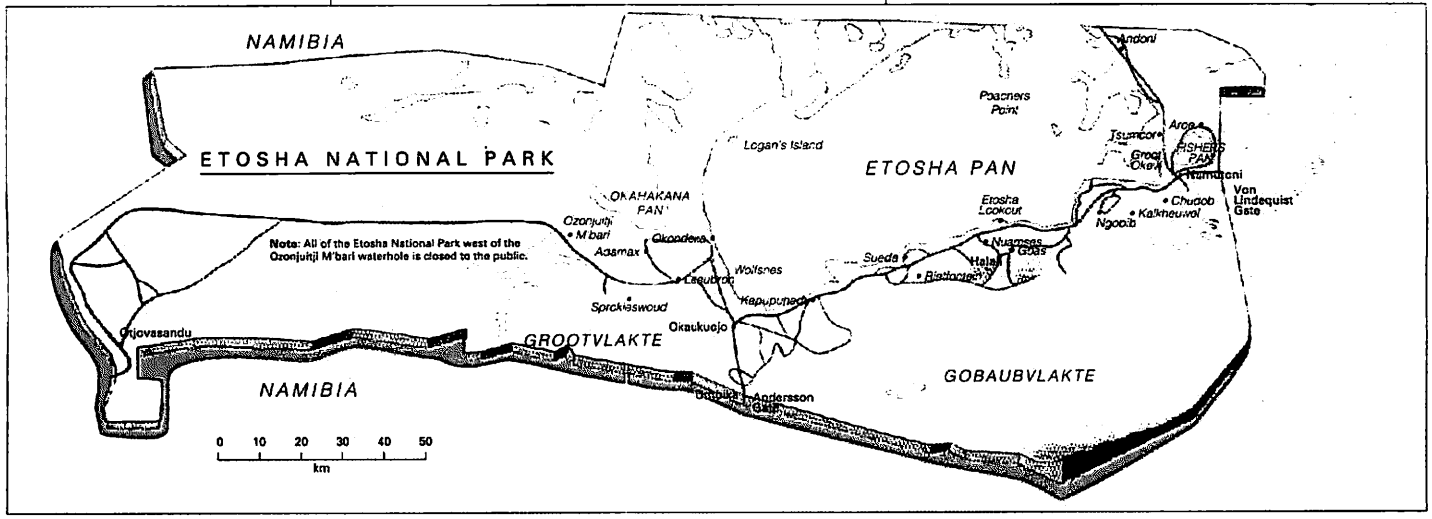
Besides being sustainable, ecotourism has considerable financial potential. According to Brian Jones, writing in *Restoring the Land* (published by the London-based Panos Institute) in his capacity as a journalist for Namibia's Ministry of Wildlife, Conservation and Tourism, the ministry has estimated that the utilization of wildlife in the West Caprivi Game Park alone, could bring in as much as R2 million a year in direct benefits for the estimated 4 000 San (Bushmen) living there.

This raises the question of just what benefits could Etosha bring to its neighbours, aside from limited employment opportunities?

Although Namibia's population is not dense by African standards, certain regions such as central Ovamboland, the area above the Etosha National Park, are comparatively so. This area is part of the *oshana*, a network of low-lying, interconnecting ephemeral water courses originating in Angola and ending at the Etosha Pan. Despite its importance as a life-support system in which seasonal floods bring fish, fertile soil and renewed grazing, not enough is known about the functioning of the *oshana* system at present. What is known, however, is that the majority of *oshana* dwellers are poor (per capita earning is around US$70 a year) and make a living from subsistence farming supplemented by cash income. Grazing, fresh water and fuelwood are being overexploited and at present the productivity of the area is declining due to deforestation, overgrazing and sheet erosion. At present, more than a quarter of Namibia's population lives in the *oshana* of Ovamboland and the number is expected to double in the next 20 years. Prospects for the area look bleak, unless novel development approaches can be implemented.

Haphazard development of roads and canals interferes with the integrity of the *oshana*. Sustainable development in harmony with the system is urgently needed to raise living standards and to prevent overfarming of marginal lands. Planners and politicians face two scenarios; a Sahel type desertification or rural self-sufficiency resulting from a balance between an acceptable quality of life coupled with sustainable human and livestock numbers. Another important consideration is 'drought-proofing' the region by ensuring that biodiversity is maintained. Many wild trees yield edible fruits. The challenge is to prevent them from being cut down for firewood or being cleared by tractor to create fields. The old-fashioned way of clearing fields by hand and leaving the valuable trees standing is far more appropriate. Wild foods act as a buffer against absolute poverty.

'We are still researching the best ways of working ▶



with our neighbours,' says Dr Lindeque. 'Etosha has unique problems,' he continues, 'for example, there are five ethnic groupings on the boundaries: Ovambos and Kavangos to the north, Hereros to the east, and Damaras and white farmers to the south.'

Another problem is that present legislation does not allow for the park to enter into exclusive relationships with communities. There is no autonomous national parks board which is responsible for raising and spending its revenue. Park revenues go back into central coffers. Although park personnel may want more money for conservation, they realize that Namibia is a developing country, and housing, health and education quite justifiably get the lion's share of central funds.

Dr Lindeque indicates that the legislation is under review, however, and that parks may be granted more autonomy. Legislation may also change to allow for subsistence hunting and the gathering of herbs and wood in national parks. At present, these activities are illegal.

'Within the constraints of current legislation, there have been some projects with neighbouring communities,' says Dr Lindeque. For example, the endemic black-faced impala (slightly larger than the more common impala with a black blaze running down the face) have been reintroduced to the Kunene region where the people exploit them as a protein source.

Etosha was the first park proclaimed in Namibia; established in 1906 under German rule. Part of Etosha was a hunting reserve for Ovambo kings, and Bushmen were allowed to live in the park until the 1960s. According to Brian Jones, the South African administration put paid to both these 'land claims'. Dr Lindeque argues that large parts of Etosha have no surface water and have never been suitable for human habitation.

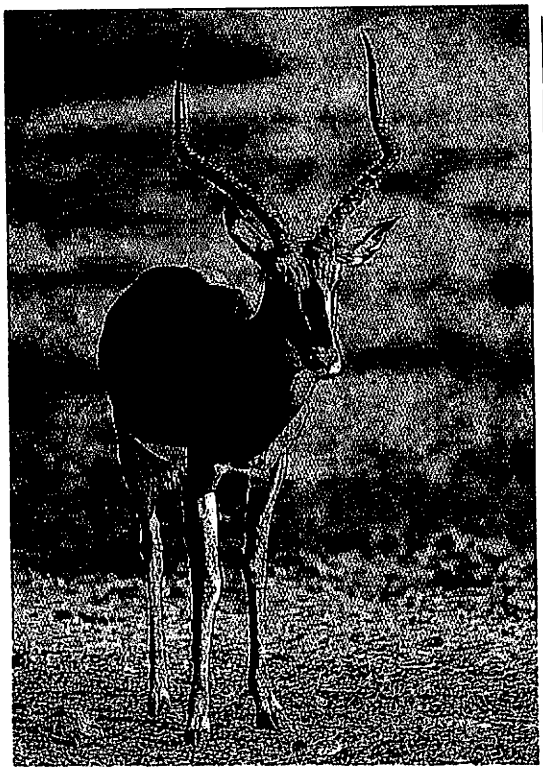
Large-scale removals may not have taken place, but in 1970 the ideological knife of South African apartheid also carved the then South West Africa into ethnic homelands under the infamous Odendaal Commission. Etosha National Park did not escape the butchering. Two-thirds of 'excess land' was hacked off and turned into tribal homelands.

'This was done against all advice. No consideration was given to ecological boundaries,' says Dr Lindeque. Brian Jones writes that in 1973 the park's boundaries were formalized by a three-metre-high game fence encircling the entire reserve. Important migratory routes were severed and there was increasing grazing pressure. Reserves had to be created elsewhere in Namibia for the relocation of rare and endangered species.

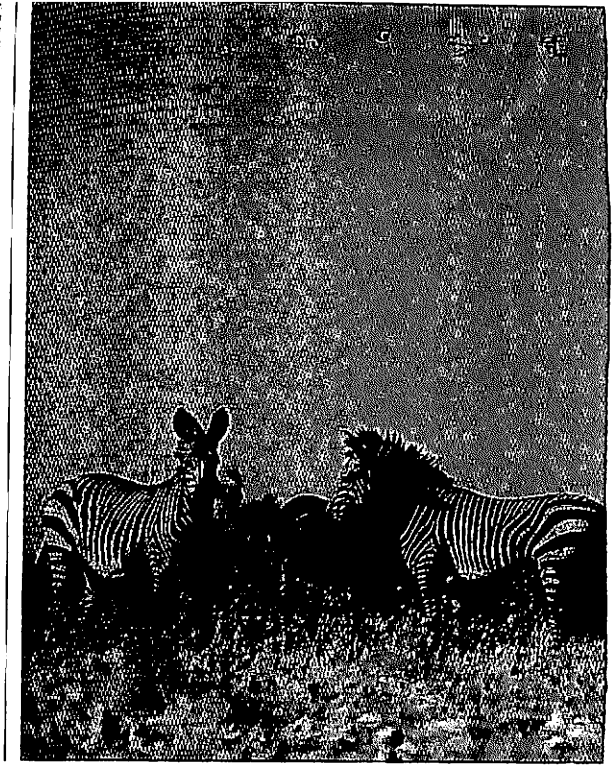
When the park was proclaimed, it measured 93 000 square kilometres and was a fully functioning ecosystem complete with migratory routes. In 1947 the western side was removed, leaving only 23 000 square kilometres. Following the recommendations of the Elephant Commission in 1956, the size of the park was almost doubled to 99 000 square kilometres and the important coastal portion was reinstated. Today the park covers only 22 270 square kilometres, 77 per cent less than before the Odendaal Commission.

According to Brian Jones, the impact of the reduction of size of Etosha could be lessened if buffer zones on areas adjoining the park, such as the Kaokoveld, were negotiated with neighbours.

The contribution that neighbouring tracts of land can make to a national park is greatly enhanced if the ▷



Left *The black-faced impala,* Aepyceros melampus petersi, *is endemic to Namibia and is distinguished from its eastern and more widely occurring relative by the black blaze down the front of its face.*
Below *The greater flamingo* Phoenicopterus ruber. *Etosha Pan is a most important breeding ground for flamingoes and in the wet season more than a million birds may congregate.*
Bottom *The fearless honey badger,* Mellivora capensis.



Above After the eland, the roan antelope, Hippotragus equinus, *is the largest of all the antelope species in Africa. It occurs widely in other parts of Africa, but in the southern part of the continent is restricted to the north and northeast where it is considered rare.*
Above right Hartmann's zebra, Equus zebra hartmannae *is only found in Namibia and marginally in southeastern Angola.*

landowners are environmentally literate. This is where the environmental education offered by conservation personnel can be invaluable. An environment centre is being established on the eastern side of Etosha and school groups are encouraged to visit the park. Park extension staff are finally able to enter Ovamboland (during the latter years of South African rule the region was a military operational area) to spread environmental awareness, something sorely needed in these poverty-stricken parts.

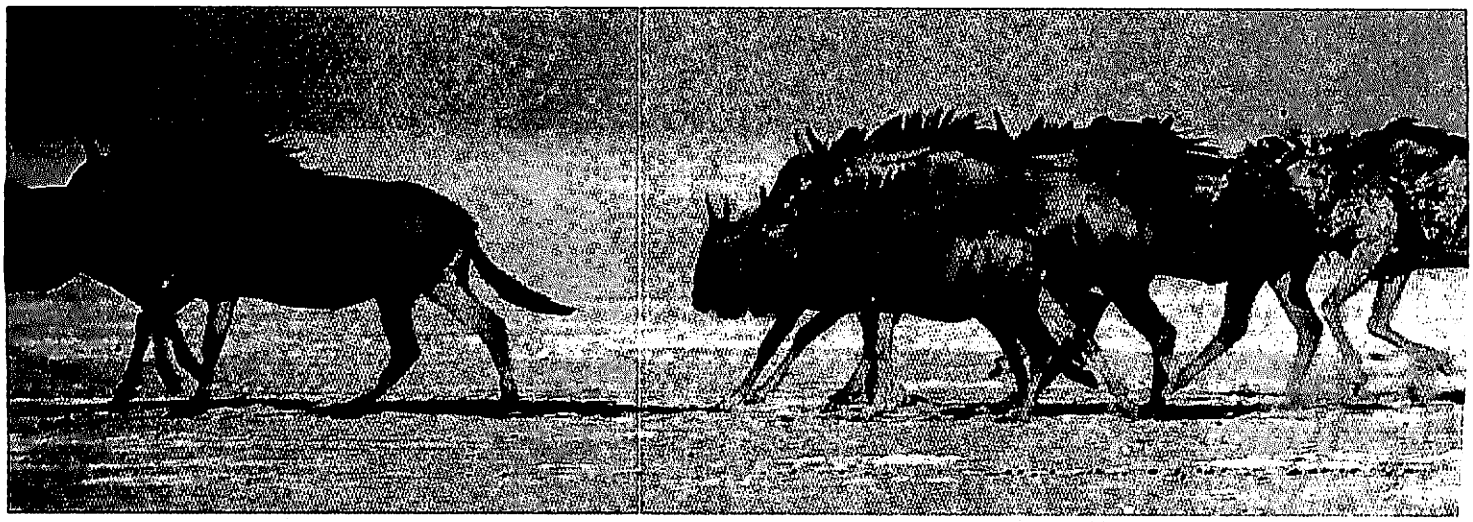
Are the poor, subsistence farmers of Ovamboland turning their eyes to Etosha for supplementary grazing? Although Dr Lindeque acknowledges that there have been limited requests for cattle grazing rights within the park, he maintains that the greater pressure has come from bushclearing outside the park. He believes this might be affecting rainfall and groundwater salinity.

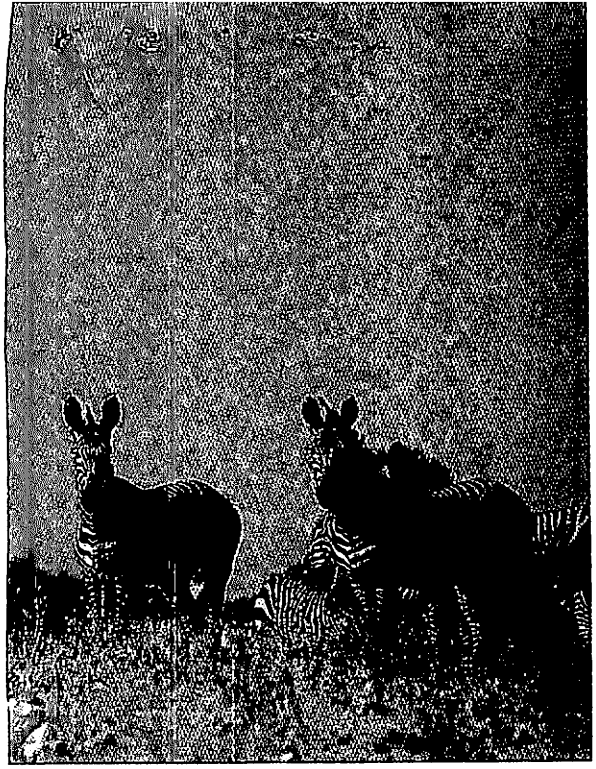
If working with communities is still relatively new in Namibian parks, conservation management is not only firmly entrenched, but backed by scientific research. 'Etosha is not a piece of unspoiled nature that we can leave to its own devices,' says Dr Lindeque. 'It is a fenced area which we have managed for many years by controlling animal numbers and conserving habitats; using such techniques as live capture and culling, waterhole monitoring, fence maintenance and veld burning.'

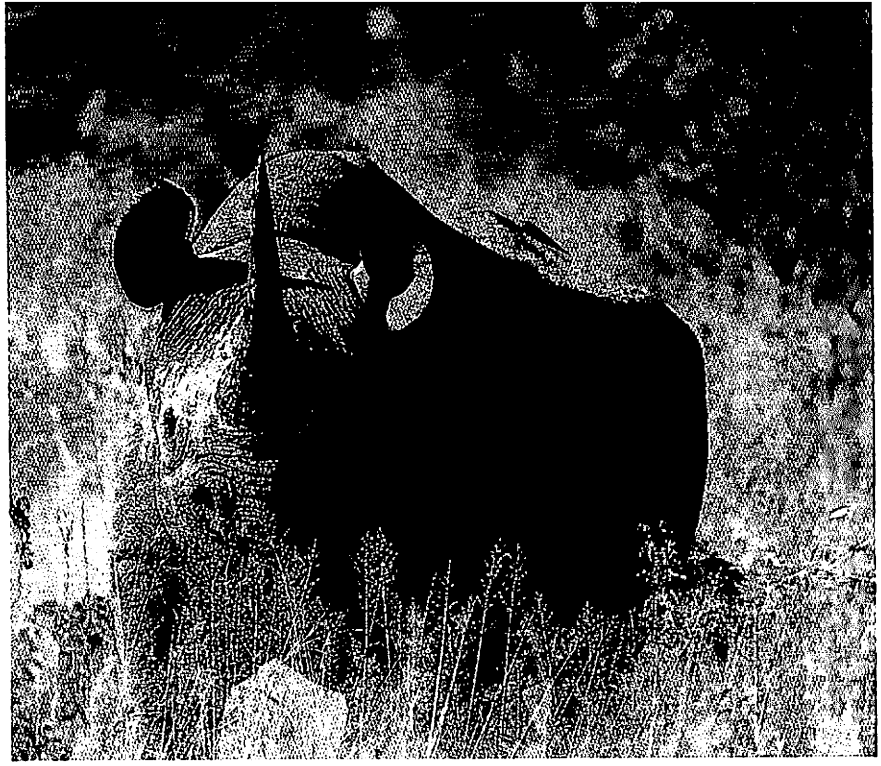
The Etosha Ecological Institute, which was founded in 1974, encourages long-term studies that have a direct application to ecosystem management.

For example, the Institute's researchers have undertaken a study over many years of the effects of anthrax on ungulate populations, and have thus far observed that elephant and wildebeest numbers are particularly vulnerable. This research will lead to decisions on how best to control the disease within the park. Other projects include:

- the social behaviour and ecology of black rhino and the effects of dehorning;
- landscape evolution and soil status comparing Etosha with neighbouring lands;
- the status of black-faced impala populations;
- vegetation monitoring via remote sensing to gauge the effects of human activity, fire and rainfall; and,
- cheetah behaviour and the impact of this predator on ▷







game numbers in Etosha National Park.

While one cannot quibble with the management of ecosystems, there may be room for improvement in the management of personnel. I met a top delegation from the Namibian Department of Wildlife, Conservation and Tourism and noted that there was not one black face among them. At the Etosha Ecological Institute, I did not see one black scientist. I talked to the head ranger and a number of his staff and was left with the impression that senior positions are held by whites and the more lowly, patrolling rangers are black. In Okaukuejo camp one of the restaurant managers is black. Most of the office clerks, waiters and cleaners are local Ovambos.

'Affirmative action' employment policies are controversial. Some people believe that past injustices are best redressed by promoting as many black people to senior positions as quickly as possible. Others argue that positions should be awarded on merit not because of some perceived moral obligation. It is not often that one can look to South African institutions to show the way forward, but it is encouraging for the future of conservation in that country that the parastatal South African National Parks Board, is taking a fairly aggressive approach towards including black employmees in its management ranks.

One common factor shared by both South African and Namibian parks is the fact that the tourists are overwhelmingly white. Among the visitors to Okaukuejo only a handful are black and most of those I saw were government VIPs on business. This is a pity because facilities at the government camps offer excellent value for money and the game viewing is magnificent. As *National Geographic* has said, 'Wildlife is visible even to the most casual visitors because of the restricted number of waterholes. It may just be possible to enter the lives of a more spectacular array of creatures with greater ease and intimacy here at Etosha Pan than anywhere else on the globe.' One hopes that one day more Namibians will take up their seats at a waterhole 'grandstand' to view this great natural wonder of the world on their own doorstep ... and, perhaps, to dispel the accidental irony implicit in the meaning of the word Etosha, 'the great white place'.

Above *The black rhino,* Diceros bicornis, *is battling for survival and sadly, in many parts of Africa the struggle appears to have been lost to illegal trade in horn. Namibia provides a ray of hope for the species, however, and in Etosha it is thriving.*
Below *Blue wildebeest,* Connochaetes taurinus, *move across the wastes of Etosha Pan.*