

Wildlife Conservation in Namibia for the 1990s

By John Ledger

An innovative wildlife protection scheme, using local Auxiliary Game Guards, has been operating in Namibia for several years. John Ledger, director of the Endangered Wildlife Trust, reviews the success of the scheme and looks at the careful balance that has to be maintained between tourism and wildlife in Namibia.

The year 1989 saw the world focus its attention on politics and wildlife — the politics of Eastern Europe and Southern Africa, and the wildlife of Africa. There is a strong connection between politics and wildlife, and the decline of the two spectacular megaherbivores of the continent, the African elephant and the black rhinoceros, has a political origin. In fact, the plight of the elephants and rhinos seems to be the direct consequence of an inappropriate conservation philosophy being imposed on Africa during the colonial era.

Pre-colonial Africa was characterized by strong tribal political systems, usually headed by powerful leaders who exerted discipline and promulgated regulations governing most activities, including hunting and conservation. Certain types of animals were protected or reserved for the use of the chief or for medicinal or magical practices. Certain areas were set aside where only the chief could give permission for a "royal hunt."

Meat from these ceremonial occasions was distributed among the people, enhancing the status and authority of the chief. The Umfolozi Game Reserve in Natal was originally the royal hunting reserve of King Chaka of the Zulu nation, while the Hlane Game Reserve in Swaziland served the same function for King Sobhuza. By and large, wildlife in pre-colonial Africa was abundant and well "conserved" under the tribal systems.

The "game reserve" pro-

ected by "gamekeepers" was a concept brought to Africa from Europe by the settlers, who established themselves as the landed gentry. Rural Africans were evicted from "national parks," while in the tribal areas the power of the traditional chiefs was broken and replaced by the administrative commissioners appointed by the colonial powers. Rural people found themselves totally alienated from the continent's wildlife that had provided protein, raw materials and wealth for centuries.

The game on the settler farms was untouchable, the "game reserves" were "out of bounds" and, even in tribal areas, authority over wildlife had been removed from Africans. Faced with this situation, many rural people took matters into their own hands, and became "illegal" users of the wildlife that had sustained them in pre-colonial days. They became "poachers," criminals in the eyes of colonial authorities, but honorable and brave men among their fellow black countrymen.

As African countries became independent of their colonial masters, there was regrettably no rethink on the philosophy of wildlife conservation. Most governments took over their national parks as going concerns, and merely replaced the white game-rangers with black ones. In many cases the power of the tribal chiefs was reduced even further by independent African states and authority for rural areas concentrated in the hands of government officials based in the capital cities.

As rural populations burgeoned and poverty increased, the pressures on wild animals, particularly the more valuable ones, became uncontrollable. Sixty-five thousand black rhinos have been slaughtered since 1960 and perhaps a million elephants have been killed since 1980. The slaughter has now been

drawn to the attention of the world. Is there anything that can be done to stop this shameful exploitation by man of the great creatures of the African plains?

Yes, there is another way, and Namibia has been a testing ground for an alternative to the inappropriate colonial efforts to preserve wildlife. The story began in the 1970s when a large area of game reserve connecting the Etosha National Park with the Skeleton Coast Park was deproclaimed in order to establish the ethnic homelands of Damaraland, south of the Hoanib River, and Kaokoland, north of the river. There followed a shameful period during which people from all walks of life slaughtered the game for short-term benefit and again it was the valuable elephants and rhinos that were most severely affected.

Due to the tortuous politics of the time, the Kaokoveld (Damaraland and Kaokoland combined) was being administered from Pretoria, and the local nature conservation authorities in Windhoek found themselves unable to act in the area. In April 1982, a group of concerned private individuals founded the Namibia Wildlife Trust, with the aim of assisting the State authorities in the task of conserving the country's natural resources. A number of other non-government bodies, including the Endangered Wildlife Trust, came to the aid of the fledgling organization, and during 1982 and 1983 the Namibia Wildlife Trust employed a full-time field staff of four, supported by aerial surveys and other logistic help from various quarters.

It soon became clear to both private and government agents trying to promote wildlife conservation in this huge area of nearly 25 million acres (10 million hectares), that the task was impossible without the involvement of the local communities. The idea of the Auxiliary Game Guards system



Dr. John Ledger, director of South Africa's Endangered Wildlife Trust.

was born, and has proven highly successful. Rossing Uranium Limited is a partner in this cooperative effort, which holds great potential for conservation in Namibia in the 1990s, as well as being a model for countries elsewhere on the continent.

The key to this program has been trust and responsibility. In the first instance, traditional tribal leaders had to be convinced of the wisdom of protecting wildlife. The animals needed to recover from the ravages of uncontrolled hunting and drought, to become a sustainable source of protein and animal products, as well as a potential source of tourism. Chiefs were given the responsibility of appointing their own chosen men as Auxiliary Game Guards to act on their behalf to protect the wildlife. The funds for the game guards came from non-government sources, as the government lacked the flexibility for this informal employment arrangement.

The Endangered Wildlife Trust has been providing the funding for the Auxiliary Game Guard program since April 1984, and for the past three years has been generously sponsored in doing so by Rossing. Some 25 men are now employed in the program.

While they do not have the authority to take direct action against the illegal activities, they work very closely with officials of the Directorate of Nature Conservation who do.

Evidence of wildlife offenses is reported to government conservators, who investigate and prosecute where appropriate. The partnership is a three-way arrangement between the local people, the government and conservation authorities, and the "private sector" in the form of the Endangered Wildlife Trust and Rossing.

Is the system working, and if so, who benefits? The answer is that the cooperation of the traditional authorities and the activities of their appointed representatives, the Auxiliary Game Guards, have resulted in a dramatic improvement in the wildlife populations of the Kaokoveld. Although vast areas remain depleted of rhinos and elephants since the killing orgy of the 1970s, numbers of both species are increasing steadily. Faster breeding animals like gemsbok, springbok and Ostrich have increased to a level that has allowed some controlled hunting to provide

meat to Kaokoveld communities. As in the days of old, this has been welcomed by the people and has reinforced the authority and status of their traditional leaders, who otherwise would appear to derive little benefit from the wildlife.

The increasing game herds, in particular the allure of the "desert" rhinos and elephants, and an end to military operations have resulted in a dramatic increase in tourism in the Kaokoveld. Tourism *per se* can actually be detrimental to rural communities, who seldom benefit from exposure to bad-mannered strangers whose foreign exchange goes into the coffers of central government. With the involvement of veteran Namibian conservationist Garth Owen-Smith, and social scientist Margaret Jacobsohn, a pilot tourism project has been under way in the Kaokoveld for the past two years, providing hope that a mutually beneficial and

dignified arrangement between tourists and rural people is possible.

Specialized tours have been arranged through Desert Adventure Safaris, using Palmwag Lodge as a base. Led by Garth Owen-Smith, the party travels through a variety of habitats and spectacular scenery, often being fortunate enough to see rhinos and elephants among other game species. On arrival at Purros, a small Himba community on the Horuasib River, the tourists are introduced to their hosts and given the opportunity to learn more about the customs and life style of these proud people. They also have an opportunity to purchase woven items and jewelry from the local craft market. When the group departs the next day, a levy is paid to the Purros community leaders, who are responsible for the equitable division of the money among the various families who live there.

This arrangement is proving highly successful. The tourists learn enough about the people they are visiting to act in a dignified way towards them. The skills of the community in making handicrafts are once again a matter of pride and they receive fair prices from the tourists, under the watchful eye of Margaret Jacobsohn. And all of this economic activity is closely linked to the presence of wild animals in the area. The people of Purros know that without rhinos, elephants and other wildlife in the area, their source of revenue would dry up. There is a vested interest in the well-being of the wild animals. If this had been the case all over Africa, how different the status of rhinos and elephants might be today!

The challenge of the 1990s is to expand this concept of rural community involvement all over Namibia. The tourism potential for the country is outstanding and it is infinitely sustainable as long as there are wild animals and wild places that tourists will pay to see. The Endangered Wildlife Trust is committed to continuing and expanding its involvement, and the World Wildlife Fund in Switzerland has recently announced financial support for the Trust's program in Namibia. A new initiative involving Auxiliary Game Guards will soon be implemented in Caprivi (a desert area several hundred miles to the east of Kaokoveld; Ed.) The partnership between rural people, government and the private sector needs to be nurtured and grown. With trust and responsibility on all sides. Together, we can do more for the wildlife of Namibia.

Editors Note: Although not specifically mentioned in the article, SAVE, a U.S.-based conservation organization donated a much needed four-wheel-drive vehicle to the Endangered Wildlife Trust for the desert rhino project. For more information about either of these two progressive conservation organizations contact the International Wildlife Rancher magazine.

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A fortunate sighting of one of the rarest mammals on earth: the endangered desert black rhinoceros.