



# /Ai/Ais - Richtersveld Transfrontier Park

*/Ai/Ais meaning 'burning water' brings to mind the park's hot springs and offers a hint to the soul of this park. A true desert wonderland, this stark desert landscape hides a number of natural gems: Blistering sun, boiling springs, larval rock formations, and scorching sweeps of desert expanse – and nestled among this harsh vista in vivid patches of green and blue, is an abundance of plant life – a full third of all succulent plant species in South Africa. Here, life seems more vivid, more vibrant because of the very nature of the harsh desert environment within which it thrives.*

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| <b>Countries</b> | <b>South Africa, Namibia</b>                     |
| <b>Area</b>      | <b>5,920 km<sup>2</sup></b>                      |
| <b>Status</b>    | <b>Category A, Treaty signed 1st August 2013</b> |

## 1. AN OVERVIEW OF THE PARK

The /Ai/Ais-Richtersveld Transfrontier Park measures 5 920 km<sup>2</sup> and spans some of the most spectacular arid and desert mountain scenery in southern Africa. It includes the /Ai/Ais Hot Springs Game Park in Namibia and the Richtersveld Park in South Africa.

Recognized by UNESCO as the Richtersveld Cultural and Botanical Landscape as a World Heritage Site, the area is renowned as a biodiversity hotspot and boasts some of the richest succulent flora in the world.

The /Ai/Ais-Richtersveld Transfrontier Park also features the world's second largest canyon, the Fish River Canyon, which meanders between the spectacular cliffs characteristic of the desert landscape.

## 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Formally established in 2003, the park is rich in natural history. Bones uncovered at Kokerboomkloof indicate that some animal species currently present in the region (e.g. springbok, zebra and klipspringer) were also present over 4 000 years ago.

Geographical features include distinct periods of geological history dating back 2 000-million years.

The 350 million year old and erosion-rich Orange River gorge abounds with history, folklore and grandeur. Animal images found in caves, some estimated as being over 25 000 years old, also abound in the area.

## 3. NATURAL HERITAGE

The area is part of the Succulent Karoo biome which has the richest succulent flora in the world harbouring about one-third of the world's approximately 10 000 succulent species, and is also one of only two entirely arid ecosystems hotspots.

Geographically located in the South Western portion of Namibia and the north western portion of South Africa, the park is composed of unique metamorphic and sedimentary formations that have been dramatically eroded over time.

It contains two major climatic systems: a temperate winter rainfall region with high air humidity, and an inland region with higher temperatures, summer rains and low humidity, with a narrow transition zone of approximately 10 to 20km between them.



Occurring within a hyper arid area, with an annual rainfall of between 50 - 100 mm, all drainage lines except the Orange River flow only after it rains. Sparse rainfall occurs in winter due to passing cold fronts falling as light mist. The only permanent source of water is the Orange River, with poor quality ground water only accessible at deep levels. Few boreholes are used for water provision to game and livestock in the Richtersveld Park. The /Ai/Ais - Richtersveld Park only uses boreholes for the provision of drinking water at its two tourist centres.

Two floristic kingdoms, including a variety of dwarf shrubs with water-storing leaves belonging to the succulent Karoo region of the Greater Cape Flora and the East Gariiep Centre - the most important centre of the Nama Karoo Region – are found in the park.

Home to various mega succulents, and containing fully 30% of succulent species found in South Africa, new species are being discovered on an ongoing basis. A number of endemic plant





species occur in small colonies on the highest peaks with about 30% of the total floristic composition being endemic to the park. It is estimated that 50 genres out of a total of 160 from the Mesembryanthemaceae family occur here.

Two trees are particularly associated with the /Ai/Ais - Richtersveld: the bastard quiver tree and the half-mens (half-human), *Pachypodium namaquanum*, which the Namas revere as embodiments of their ancestors, half human, half plant, mourning their ancient Namibian home. The Orange River mouth is a wetland of international importance and a Ramsar site.

Wildlife found in the area is adapted to withstand the arid climate, with many species concentrated in the denser vegetation around the Orange River, including over 50 species of mammals and almost 200 bird species. The area also boasts a large variety of lizards, snakes, tortoises and scorpions. While the park has very few mega herbivores due to the harsh environmental conditions, populations of mountain Zebra and Oryx appear to be on the increase.

#### 4. PARKS AND COMMUNITIES

The Richtersveld is one of the last regions where the Nama people's traditional lifestyle, based on nomadic pastoralism, has been preserved. This component of the Park is land that belongs to the community (through a land claim) and managed by the South African Parks Board. The residents have the right to live in the park and are entitled to graze a total of 6000 head of livestock. However, the majority of Richtersvelders choose to live in four settlements adjacent to the park, with people who are responsible for caring for the livestock choosing to live within the park.

#### 5. TFCA MANAGEMENT PRIORITIES

The park was established with similar but varying management priorities; /Ai-/Ais Hot Springs Game Park is focused on conservation and tourism while the Richtersveld is focused on tourism, direct community beneficiation and conservation.

The establishment of joint management strategies and implementation plans remains a priority of both components of the park. To aid this, a variety of working groups and committees have been constituted. The signing of an international treaty between South Africa and Namibia has effectively transformed the technical committee into a joint management board, and these working groups into park management committees. The Park Management Committee has since, successfully jointly managed daily operations in the park.

#### 6. MAIN CHALLENGES

Mining remains the largest challenge to the park, with several areas along the river under Exclusive Prospecting Licenses. Some work is underway to enforce regulations for rehabilitation and reclamation.

Livestock grazing taking place in Richtersveld National Park to mitigate effects of increasing drought poses some challenges



to biodiversity. Joint committees currently work together to deal with arising challenges, manage grazing practices, and deal with matters of illegal grazing, fishing and poaching. Water management also remains an on-going challenge for the park due to the arid conditions.

A fourth challenge is the management of alien plant species in the park – especially *Prosopis glandulosa* and wild tobacco species.

#### 7. TOURISM INITIATIVES

Tourism initiatives have been varied and numerous within the park, including a range of facilities and adventure tourism initiatives. Adventure tourism includes a 5-day 300km Desert Knights Mountain Biking Tour aimed at showcasing the unique landscape and rich cultural heritage of the area, and on-going development of Desert Kayak Trails. Development of eco-tourism livelihoods among local communities to service adventure tourism needs, including the training of river guides, and catering and camp attendant training to service the Desert Kayak Trails is underway. Park staff have also recently undergone joint rescue training to improve the park's ability to respond to adventure tourism emergencies.

The newly refurbished /Ai-/Ais Hot Springs Resort was reopened for business in 2009, and is one of the main tourist attractions of the park, offering tourists a different form of eco-tourism.

#### 8. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In 2013, a joint radio network linking the two component reserves was launched. Work is underway to strengthen communications between Namibian and South African component parks, with hopes of improving management and implementation between the parks.

Park staff underwent GIS training in 2013 to enable them to create management maps of the area and effectively use monitoring tools needed in conservation processes. The next few years will see the development of updated park maps and strengthened monitoring strategies.

Further development of adventure tourism hikes and trails is also currently underway, as is training and development of community members to service this emerging area.

#### 9. CONTACT DETAILS

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