

Once a year, the people who run twenty per cent of the country get together. When you look at it that way, the annual Conservancy Chairpersons' Forum is an important event, organized by the MET – Ministry of Environment and Tourism. Namibia's 79 communal conservancies are spread right across the country, and the burning issues stem from their success: human-wildlife conflict and poaching are on the increase because wildlife populations are growing.

The Forum took place at the Safari Hotel on the 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> July. MET Deputy Minister, Hon. Pohamba Shifeta, gave the keynote address, noting progress and challenges. Two more Zambezi conservancies will be gazetted in August, bringing the total to 81 self-governing conservation entities, where local people have rights over the utilization of wildlife and the distribution of benefits derived from it. The MET's biggest challenge, stated Shifeta, is the recent upsurge in elephant and rhino poaching. He noted that the protection of wildlife is not only about reacting once an animal has been killed, but involves the prevention of poaching.

For many conservancies with an income from trophy hunting or joint ventures with tourism operators, the first and main expense is the salaries of game guards who are in the front line of poaching prevention. But not all conservancies are in areas with abundant wildlife or stunning scenery. For them, earning sufficient income to pay game guards is a pressing problem.

Kapenauarve Katjiveri is serving his second term as Chairman of Otjituuo Conservancy, in Otjozondjupa Region. Well off the beaten track, the area is flat, thornveld savannah, and home to important species like African Wild Dog. Like other Otjituuo residents, Katjiveri is a farmer who has lost stock to wild dogs, cheetahs and jackals. The conservancy has no income to compensate for the losses and the eight game guards are unpaid.

The hope for Otjituuo, says Katjiveri, is that the MET will create a core wildlife area that may attract a trophy hunter, and where a campsite could be started. If that works out, a joint venture with a lodge operator may follow. The income would pay for the game guards, and some benefits would flow to residents, providing potential compensation for livestock losses to predators.

Wildlife numbers have rebounded in many areas, especially Kunene, following drought and widespread poaching before the first conservancies were formed in the late 1990's. Conservancies have managed the increase, minimized poaching, and have been able to reap the rewards from photographic tourism, trophy hunting, and the harvesting of meat.

That's the dream for Jonathan Goliath, the Chairman of !Gawachab in the deep south of Namibia, close to the Naute Dam and National Park. Goliath is an old man now, but he remembers herds of springbok teeming in the south, before poaching wiped them out. !Gawachab has no game guards and no income. Goliath wants a hunting concession that will provide meat to the elderly and to vulnerable children. He sees no hope for an income from the conservancy in the future, unless it can set up a campsite. But meat would be some incentive for game guards.

The financial sustainability of conservancies was a key theme of the Chairpersons' Forum. Clearly, some are doing very well, some less so, and some see little hope. Otjituuo's Katjiveri says the MET must do more to support less well off conservancies. "If I have five children," he says, "and two go to the Polytechnic and do well, but the others not; I can't say the other three are not my children. I have to support them."

The challenges discussed by the Forum: human-wildlife conflict, poaching, and the increasingly vocal lobby against hunting, all stem from the fact that wildlife is increasing. "If you are seeing lions on the road, what does that tell you?" asked John Kasaona, Kunene Director of IRDNC, Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation. He went on to point out that other southern African countries are jealous of Namibia's conservation record and that the government should stand up to pressure from overseas about hunting. "People do not understand what we are doing," he said, "and are just tweeting."

The issue of the sustainable use of wildlife, which provides meat and trophy income for conservancies, is seen in more simplistic terms overseas said delegates to the Forum. "They should come here and see," says Raymond Kwenani from Salambala Conservancy in Zambezi, pointing to an aeroplane flying overhead. "If we stop hunting it will spell disaster for the conservancy. We pay compensation to farmers when crops and livestock are

destroyed. How will they be compensated if we have no income? Who will pay the funeral benefit of a person killed by an elephant? We have benefits now: jobs in the safari camp: skinners, trackers; meat from the trophy hunt and income from the hunter." IRDNC's Transboundary Coordinator John Kamwi points out that wildlife is harvested in accordance with strict quotas on a sustainable basis, and he puts the choice more starkly: "Without hunting, all the conservancies will stop and all of the game guards will be unemployed."