

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE FIRST  
NAMIBIA CRANE WORKSHOP  
HELD AT ETOSHA NATIONAL PARK, 3-6 MAY 2004**



*Blue Cranes on the grasslands south of Etosha Pan, May 2004*

**Workshop organizers**

- Dr Chris Brown (Namibia Nature Foundation)
- Ann and Mike Scott (Swakopmund)
- Wilferd Versfeld (Etosha Ecological Institute, Ministry of Environment and Tourism)

*Namibia's first crane workshop on 3-6 May 2004 in the Etosha National Park resulted in a comprehensive conservation strategy and action plan for the three crane species in Namibia. The Namibia Crane Working Group has been established to implement this plan.*



*Members of the Namibia Crane Working Group and supporters from the African Wattled Crane Programme at Etosha, May 2004*

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*Blue Cranes with their chick at Fischer's Pan near Namutoni, Etosha, May 2004*

## **WORKSHOP PROCEEDINGS**

### **1. Introduction**

Three crane species occur in Namibia. The Wattled Crane is a breeding species on floodplains in East Caprivi, along the Kavango River and, seasonally, in the Nyae-Nyae area; the Crowned Crane is found along the Ekuma River when flooded (although no breeding has been recorded); an apparently discrete breeding population of Blue Cranes on the plains around Etosha Pan and in the grasslands up to the Lake Oponono area is of considerable interest to both scientists and recreational bird-watchers. All three species are threatened, not only in this country, but throughout southern Africa. They are all flagship species for wetland and grassland habitat conservation.

A small contact group of people in Namibia was established some two years ago to liaise with a broader Africa group on cranes. The African Wattled Crane Programme (AWAC) is a partnership between the US-based International Crane Foundation (ICF), the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) in South Africa and the various Wattled Crane range countries in Africa. Among these, Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe already boast crane working groups and/or established research and survey programmes. The Namibian representative on the committee has since relocated to South Africa, and ways are now being sought to strengthen Namibia's involvement both in the AWAC programme, and in the conservation of cranes and their habitats in general.

By targeting cranes as flagship species, we hope to promote wetland and grassland conservation in Namibia, and to benefit other endangered but lesser-known species. The intimate linkages between cranes and people are recognized through their dependence of the same systems. Humans will therefore benefit from increased conservation awareness and education, leading to the maintenance of a healthy environment. In addition, training and the development of income generating opportunities in the form of tourism and related activities are an integral aspect of the programme. The human component of the crane and habitat conservation programme is therefore fundamental to its long-term success. With the proximity of its northern areas to a large proportion of the Wattled Crane range countries, Namibia could also potentially play a leading role in the establishment of trans-frontier conservation partnerships that focus on both cranes and people, and their wetland habitats.

Due to the relatively central position of Etosha National Park and the occurrence of cranes in this area, a workshop was therefore organized at Okaukuejo, in May 2004, by the Namibia Nature Foundation (NNF), the Etosha Ecological Institute of the MET and private initiative, supported by AWAC. The participants were the chairperson of AWAC and the co-ordinators from the South Africa, Botswana and Zambia projects; people generally involved with cranes, bird data and wetlands conservation and management from Namibia, including interested staff of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET); and people from the areas in which cranes occur in Namibia – Caprivi, Kavango, Nyae-Nyae, the Lake Oponono area and Etosha. A fieldtrip was also planned in Etosha, up the west side of the Pan to the mouth of the Ekuma River, where both Crowned and Blue Cranes are known to occur when there is water in the system.

## 2. Objectives of the workshop

1. To share information, both Africa-wide and locally;
2. To identify threats to cranes and opportunities for crane conservation in Namibia on local, national and trans-boundary levels; and
3. To agree on a strategy and crane action plan for Namibia.

## 3. Presentations

### 3.1 The African crane perspective

#### 3.1.1 Water, wetlands and Wattled Cranes: a regional monitoring and conservation program for southern Africa

(Dr Richard Beilfuss, Africa Programme Co-ordinator, International Crane Foundation, USA; see Appendix 1 for *Power Point* presentation)

The Wattled Crane is a globally-endangered resident of sub-Saharan Africa. Because their survival depends on the annual flood cycles of river floodplains, Wattled Cranes are a flagship species for conserving wetland biodiversity and subsistence production systems that also depend on natural hydrological fluctuations. The International Crane Foundation and Endangered Wildlife Trust, in collaboration with individuals and organizations throughout southern Africa, direct a comprehensive regional program to monitor the status and distribution of Wattled Cranes, empower local ecologists to develop pro-active conservation programmes with local communities, and promote the wise management of wetland systems for the benefit of people and wildlife. The results of this programme reveal alarming trends for the status of wetlands and biodiversity in southern Africa. First-ever air and ground surveys across the entire range of the species indicate that the population of Wattled Cranes has declined by 50% in the past 20 years. In Mozambique and Zambia, where the crane population has decreased most severely, large dams affect the timing, magnitude, and extent of annual floods and reduce the availability of floodplain habitat. Innovative projects in these countries are evaluating the ecological, economic, and societal benefits of managed flood releases for rehabilitating floodplain systems. In Botswana, South Africa, Zimbabwe and elsewhere, local working groups are monitoring threats to cranes and wetlands as they arise. Budding projects in war-torn Angola and DR Congo aim to rebuild capacity for crane and wetland monitoring. Through this program, we are developing a framework for sustainable wetland management in southern Africa.

#### 3.1.2 The South African Crane Working Group

(Kerryn Morrison: South African Crane Working Group; see Appendix 2 for *Power Point* presentation)

The South African Crane Working Group (SACWG), a working group of the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT), was established in 1995. SACWG aims to ensure the long-term survival of South Africa's three crane species and their habitats through the active participation of all communities, and to co-operate with other institutions and like-minded people, for the benefit of all cranes and people.

SACWG has a team of nine full time and three part time staff. There are two organizations, the Overberg Crane Group and KwaZulu-Natal Crane Foundation, affiliated to SACWG, with a further three full time staff. SACWG's committee is

made up of all the full time crane staff and representatives from each of the provinces in which cranes occur.

South Africa is home to the Blue Crane *Anthropoides paradiseus*, Wattled Crane *Buggeranus carunculatus* and Grey Crowned Crane *Balearica regulorum regulorum*. Based on either the number of cranes in an area, or all three species occurring in an area, or a population is isolated, SACWG has identified 10 key crane regions in South Africa, eight of which have full time staff, and two which have well developed volunteer networks.

SACWG has four main conservation objectives.

1. Education and awareness: SACWG targets farmers, school children and farm workers.
2. Habitat management: SACWG focuses on wetlands and grasslands. To date, most of the work has been within wetlands, through liaison with landowners and the Working for Wetland programme. Increasingly, SACWG is becoming involved with grassland programmes, in particular the Ekangala Grassland Trust. Considerable input is made into Environmental Impact Assessments for any developments in crane areas as well.
3. Population management: SACWG aims to mitigate for the threats posed to cranes. The main threats to cranes are habitat loss, powerline collisions, poisoning and illegal removal from the wild.  
The Wattled Crane Recovery Programme (WCRP) is a programme whereby the wild population will ultimately be supplemented. Currently, the captive population is being grown to a sustainable level, using current captive facilities in South Africa.
4. Research and Monitoring: Cranes are monitored on an ad hoc daily basis and also through aerial surveys, the National Crane Census and Coordinated Avifaunal Roadcounts (CAR). As many crane chicks as possible are ringed each year as part of a national colour ringing programme. At the same time, blood is taken for genetics and disease determination and the relevant anatomical measurements taken. Both Blue and Wattled Crane Population and Habitat Viability Assessments (PHVA) have been completed in order to identify the priorities for crane conservation in South Africa. In both PHVA's, the need to determine the requirements for nesting sites was identified as the key priority. Both of these studies are currently underway.

SACWG is currently in a strategic planning process to re-evaluate its objectives and operations. Four main thrusts were identified (conservation, operations, people and partnership) and will form the foundation behind the future objectives and operations of the group.

### **3.1.3 Monitoring of wattled Crane *Buggeranus carunculatus* in the Okavango Delta, Botswana**

(Sekhowa Motsumi: BirdLife Botswana Crane Working Group; see Appendix 3 for *Power Point* presentation)

BirdLife Botswana Crane Working Group (BLBCWG) was established under the auspices of BirdLife Botswana (BLB). It is composed of dedicated volunteers with interest in conservation from local communities and institutions and is run by a full-time Project Coordinator. The group networks with and welcomes participation from the major institutions concerned with wetland and crane conservation in the country, and provides an opportunity for interested and concerned citizens to contribute to conservation initiatives.



A study of the globally threatened Wattled Crane (*Bugeranus carunculatus*) was commissioned by BLBCWG in 2001 in the Okavango Delta, Botswana. Three consecutive and comprehensive aerial surveys of Wattled Cranes have been conducted between 2001 and 2003. The results show that the Okavango Delta holds the largest single population of Wattled Cranes in Africa. The three population estimates indicate that the Okavango Wattled Crane population is also stable with August/September as the main incubation period. The main distribution of Wattled Cranes in the Okavango Delta was in the wettest and most productive parts of the Delta. Wattled Crane breeding success in the Okavango Delta was estimated at 6.7%. This estimate is low even though the Okavango Delta is relatively pristine.

In November 2003 three Wattled Cranes were ringed and another three captured, as a first step for a satellite-tracking project to study regional movements of cranes. We are also working on community participation in wetland and crane conservation. Our activities are guided by the Botswana Wattled Crane Species Action Plan, which we developed with other stakeholders. The implementation of this plan is our priority for action in the next five years.

#### **3.1.4 The Zambia Crane and Wetlands Conservation Project**

(Ben Kamweneshe: Zambia Crane and Wetlands Conservation Project; see Appendix 4 for *Power Point* presentation)

The goal of the Zambia Crane and Wetlands Conservation Project is to assess the status and ecology of endangered Wattled Cranes in Zambia, to establish the relationship between Wattled Cranes and various ecological factors that may control their distribution and abundance, and to ascertain the value of Wattled cranes as an umbrella species for wetland biodiversity conservation in the country. Project activities include a first-ever nation-wide aerial survey of Wattled Cranes and intensive field investigations in the Kafue Flats, a wetland of international importance that supports the largest remaining population of Wattled Cranes in Africa. The project is assessing the effects of different wetland management practices on Wattled cranes and their wetland habitats, and providing concrete measures for the conservation of wetlands for cranes and other lesser-known species through close collaboration with government agencies, non-government organizations, and local communities.

### **3.2 Cranes in Namibia**

#### **3.2.1 Status of Cranes in Namibia**

(Alice Jarvis: Dept of Environment Affairs, Ministry of Environment & Tourism and Dr Chris Brown: NNF; see Appendix 5 for *Power Point* presentation)

##### **Blue Cranes**

- World population (mainly South Africa) 20 000
- No evidence of movement to/from Etosha population
- Only found in dry and wet grasslands and pans in Etosha NP and grasslands immediately north, mainly in the wetter areas of this region and associated with perennial springs and isolated waterholes
- A survey in the late 80's estimated not more than 80 birds; a follow-up survey in 1996 estimated a maximum of 60 birds, suggesting a possible 25% decline in 6-8 years



- Distributed in pairs or trios but groups of up to 30 birds sometimes occur
- Single most important site where birds assemble to roost is Andoni water hole
- Egg-laying between December and March, peak in February, 1 – 3 eggs
- Red Data status: *Critically Endangered* in Namibia, population declining

### **Wattled Crane**

- World population (Africa) 7500 - 15 000, the largest and rarest crane in Africa
- Namibian population, estimated at around 200 birds, is an overflow of the Okavango population
- Feeds on small amphibians and tubers
- Recorded regularly in 13 wetlands
- Utilises large low-lying wetlands and swamps in northern Namibia, and ephemerally flooded pans
- Small numbers found on floodplains of Okavango, Kwando and Chobe rivers and in ephemeral pans near Tsumkwe. Also Oponono, Oshituntu, Mahango, Sishika channel, Linyanti swamps
- Little known about breeding in Namibia – only 4 records
- Red Data status: *Critically Endangered* in Namibia, population stable

### **Grey Crowned Crane**

- World population (southern Africa) 2 800 - 120 000
- Utilises the grass fringes of wetlands, feeding on frogs, reptiles, insects and also seed heads and grass tops
- In Namibia only in grasslands N of Etosha, Zambezi and Okavango Rivers, rarely seen in Etosha:
  - this population estimated at < 50 birds in late 80s
  - recorded mainly at Lake Oponono (6 records between 1994 and 1999)
- No breeding records in Namibia
- Red Data status: *Near Threatened* in Namibia, population stable/decreasing

## **3.2.2 A rural perspective on cranes**

### **3.2.2.1 East & West Caprivi**

(Chrispin Chizabulyo: MET, Aldrin Siyamla: Mayuni Conservancy and Vasco Silawa: IRDNC)

Chrispin: Wattled Cranes were recorded in Mamili in 1990. Up to 1997 small groups of 3-4 were recorded. The regional service in Katima now does no counts of these cranes; none are seen on patrols. The MET does not seem serious about monitoring them and officials are not encouraged to record what they observe. Bird cards are sometimes filled out but not forwarded to head office. Having a crane working group may help.

Ben: in 1996 four Wattled Cranes were recorded on Chobe but never seen again.

Cranes are seen in West Caprivi when the stream is drying up. A local birder, Len Greenwood, is keen to help.

Aldrin: At Kwando more than 11 cranes were seen one morning. Is it possible they eat fish when the stream dries up?

### **3.2.2.2 North-Central**

(Lotto Kuushomwa: Rössing Foundation, Gabriel Fillipus: Oponono Oyike Committee and Titus Shivolo: Ongushu Farmers' Association)

Lotto and Gabriel: We have had interviews with very old people. We have just heard about the cranes from our fathers. There is no programme in North-Central to deal with cranes. According to our senior citizens, cranes do exist. About 15 km west of Oshakati, in the Lakes area of the Cuvelai system, cranes can be seen during the wet season. In the old times the feathers on top of the crane's head were used as a decoration on the head of the men. The women put the feathers with their traditional beads. They even say that if a crane was dead, some of the soft internal parts could be used as a handkerchief.

The cranes flew from the south in groups of three or four. When they fly they sound as though they are crying, telling people that very good rains are expected, they must work hard and expect a bumper harvest. When the cranes collect sticks and jump around in circles, we can anticipate lots of threshing of mahango and must be prepared to work hard. The cranes are there in October/November but it is hard to trace where they come from or go to. They lay eggs, but it is rare to find them. If you find them you are lucky. They lay not more than two eggs, beside the river, in grass or reeds.

We have tried to sing their song, tried to dance like the cranes. Maybe this project will come up with a detailed activity to revive this situation. People of 40-50 years old don't know about the cranes, only if they live near the reeds. The cranes feed on grass and insects.

Titus: The cranes have characters, especially the colourful Crowned Crane.

Lotto: The crane is a brave bird. Some elderly men named their bulls after the crane, if it is a brave bull, winning fights with "Erorane". Cranes predict the situation what will happen the next season. If there is a programme, the local community will support it. The reason the cranes no longer exist is that the human population is now very dense, the pressure is too much. There is competition with livestock and even livestock can't survive. The people need to find something else to do or the environment will be spoiled. Could aquaculture be linked with this programme?

### **3.2.2.3 Kavango**

(Dorothy Wamunyima: NNF Every River has its People Project and Mathias Mpepo: Manyambo Conservancy)

Dorothy: Wattled Cranes are recorded close to Mahango. Not much was known about them until Paxton began monitoring them. At Manyondo, a fish-farming conservancy, they pass through on the floodplains in groups of four but do not live permanently. The conservancies in these areas are really interested and local stakeholders would like to become involved.

Mathias: I am a representative of the Manyambo Conservancy and grew up west of Rundu. When we were boys we used to see Crowned Cranes, especially, and told stories and sang songs about cranes. Nowadays they are very scarce. We

heard about them in about 1965. We need to do studies about them. People might mistake them for other birds. We need to involve local people to share. Because they are scarce, people want to see them. They may be feeding on tubers, as in other regions.

### **3.2.2.4 Nyae-Nyae**

(Jacob Kolbooi: MET, Sebe Swartbooi: Nyae-Nyae Conservancy and Dr Chris Brown: NNF)

Chris: There are no permanent cranes in the Nyae-Nyae area. The Wattled Crane occurs seasonally only, from February to May, in groups of two-three but sometimes in larger flocks. There are 4-5 pans in the sub-complex. Numbers of cranes seem to depend on rainfall and may reach up to 100. Recently (in April 2004) we counted 78 Wattled Cranes there. The area is the core of the Nyae-Nyae Conservancy and no hunting is allowed by the Conservancy. It is a relatively important post-breeding dispersal area. The community doesn't hunt cranes but has cultural links with them.

### **3.3 Further comments and discussion on presentations**

(Holger Kolberg: MET, Wilferd Versveld: MET and Dr Tim Osborne: Kori Inc.)

Holger & Wilferd: The MET does wetland bird counts twice a year (January and July. Some wetlands are also counted in April/May. The four RAMSAR sites counted are Walvis Bay Lagoon, Sandwich Harbour, Etosha Pan (including Lake Oponono area) and the Orange River mouth.

Tim: Some blood sampling and ringing of Blue Cranes has been done in Etosha.

## **4. Brainstorming session: main issues and threats, and the crane action plan**

### **4.1 Main issues and threats**

During round-table discussions (facilitated by Dr Chris Brown of NNF) the following key crane conservation issues and threats were identified. A more detailed breakdown of these aspects is provided in the table on the next page.

1. Lack of information
2. Lack of awareness/education
3. Cumulative impacts of crane habitat loss/degradation/fragmentation
4. Lack of co-ordination of conservation effort
5. Lack of capacity/resources
6. Need for localised management strategies and action

<b>Threats/issues for crane conservation in Namibia</b>	<b>Species involved</b>
<b>Lack of local information/data about cranes</b>	W C B
<b>Lack of awareness/education</b>	W C B
Ignorance	W C B
Loss of culture (not using crane culture - people forget)	W C B
Negative attitudes and values	W C B
Apathy, lack of political will to conserve cranes	W C B
Perceived low economic value of cranes in their natural habitat	W C B
<b>Cumulative impacts of crane habitat loss/degradation</b>	W C B
River basin developments (upstream, especially in Angola)	W C B
Cranes move outside protected areas - migration routes/safe wintering grounds - neighbouring populations - lack of park/neighbour partnerships	W C
Competition and disturbance by humans, agriculture	W C
Loss of habitat/degradation/change (food)/siltation	W C B
Habitat fragmentation	W C B
Competition for food/space - livestock coupled with drought	W C
Fire on floodplains (Caprivi)	W C
Low-flying aircraft	W C B
Power lines	W C B
Poison	?
Absence of natural herbivores	W C
Impacts of fishing methods	?
<b>Lack of co-ordination of conservation effort</b>	W C B
Lack of communication	W C B
Lack of policy incentive framework	W C B
Lack of compliance with legislation - illegal use, hunting, trade	?
<b>Lack of capacity/resources</b>	W C B
Training	W C B
Funding	W C B
<b>Need for localised management strategies and action</b>	W C B
<b>Other issues: natural limiting factors</b>	?
Drought, lack of rain/flooding at the right time	
Predation (jackals)	
Disease	
Long-term demographic effects on small populations (in-breeding)	

## 4.2 The Namibia Crane Action Plan

A six-point action plan was agreed upon. Detailed actions are supplied in the table below.

1. Co-ordinate conservation effort and promote networking
2. Obtain information
3. Conserve crane habitats
4. Promote awareness/education
5. Build capacity
6. Develop area-based management strategies

<b>The Namibia Crane Action Plan</b>	
<b>1. Co-ordinate conservation effort and promote networking</b>	
1.1	Establish a crane working group from founder members at this workshop
1.2	Task facilitators to promote internal and external networking, information sharing, communication
1.3	Draft a vision, mission, objectives
1.4	Identify and implement priority activities
<b>2. Obtain information</b>	
<b>2.1 Conduct research/monitoring</b>	
2.1.1	Investigate and monitor populations: numbers, distributions, breeding success (co-ordinate with neighbouring countries)
2.1.2	Compile a broad crane habitat classification, extent, status, trends
2.1.3	Investigate local threats
2.1.4	Make management recommendations
<b>2.2 Compile comprehensive crane species accounts for Namibia</b>	
<b>3. Conserve crane habitats</b>	
<b>3.1 Integrate river basin management (local, trans-frontier)</b>	
3.1.1	Provide commissioners with good information on cranes and habitats (OKACOM, PJTC, ZACPLAN, Cuvelai, Kwando)
3.1.2	Provide information to Basin Stakeholders
<b>3.2 Diversify land-use/income options</b>	
3.2.1	Promote community based natural resource management (visioning, management plans, development processes)
3.2.2	Develop park-neighbour partnerships as engines for driving regional development and opportunities for sustainable income earning activities
3.2.3	Work within traditional frameworks and support traditional leaders in developing sustainable income-earning activities
3.2.4	Enhance the economic value of cranes and their habitats in terms of tourism
<b>3.3 Develop incentives for conservation</b>	
3.3	Review policy with regard to cranes and habitats
3.4	Enhance incentives for conservation of cranes and habitats
<b>4. Promote conservation awareness/ education</b>	
4.1	Develop a crane resource package (local languages)
4.1.1	Posters, cultural booklet, pamphlets, radio and television programmes, media, theatre, songs, dances, plays; competitions; Short Sharp Info. for decision makers)
4.2	Identify target groups (decision makers, planners, politicians, schools)
<b>5. Build capacity</b>	
5.1	Conduct a needs assessment (local, regional, national)
5.2	Provide appropriate training and skills development
5.3	Compile funding proposals
<b>6. Develop area-based management strategies</b>	
6.1	Apply the above strategies to the local situation, where appropriate, in consultation with local partners and linked to appropriate ongoing initiatives (e.g. conservancy monitoring)

## **5. Field trip**

Led by Wilferd Versfeld of the Etosha Ecological Institute, the MET hosted an exciting field trip to the Ekuma River region in the north of the Etosha National Park. Most of the participants were also lucky enough to view Blue Cranes while travelling through the normal tourism areas of the park.

## **6. Next steps**

Ann and Mike Scott have been appointed to co-ordinate the implementation of the crane action plan. Expressions of interest in involvement in the projects of the Namibia Crane

Working Group are invited, together with offers of any other kind of support (please contact email [ecoserve@iway.na](mailto:ecoserve@iway.na)).

## 7. Close and acknowledgements

The active support of the MET, NNF and AWAC, in partnership with Namibia Wildlife Resorts, Rössing Foundation, IRDNC and with local communal conservancies, is acknowledged with gratitude. All the workshop participants are also thanked for their enthusiasm and commitment to implementing the project.

## 8. Contact details

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