GENERAL NEWS

Living on the edge of a World Heritage Site

The Namib Sand Sea has been inscribed as a World Heritage Site. What does this mean and what next?

Mary Seely

On 21 June 2013, UNESCO inscribed the Namib Sand Sea as a World Heritage Site. This was the culmination of a long process undertaken by the Namibia National Committee for World Heritage. The process entailed a large number of steps, starting with the inclusion of the Namib Sand Sea on Namibia's list of possible World Heritage Sites to be recommended, which it did in 2002.

The Namib Sand Sea is the first nomination in over ten years that was inscribed for all four natural criteria

When the decision to recommend the Sand Sea was made in 2009, German funding was obtained for the compilation of a Nomination Dossier and its multiple annexes. Gobabeb was selected to compile the Dossier and they, in turn, asked Dr Mary Seely to undertake the actual compilation process. Mary was supported in this by a variety of colleagues and interns.

After a year of focused attention by the nomination team, the Dossier (with several highly detailed annexes) was submitted through official channels to the UNESCO offices in early 2012.

Some months later it became clear that UNESCO had selected to evaluate the nomination and an IUCN evaluation team visited Namibia in September 2012. After this prolonged process it was a matter of waiting patiently before activity increased as the 37th UNESCO meeting in Cambodia loomed on the horizon.

Members of the national committee that intended travelling to Cambodia prepared a variety of celebratory provisions – Namibian beer and wine, "droëwors" and biltong and similar delicacies - in case the nomination was successful. Needless to say, these delicacies were all consumed when the stunning news arrived that the Sand Sea was accepted as Namibia's second World Heritage Site!

Namibia's first World Heritage site, Twyfelfontein or /Ui-//aes, was inscribed in 2007 as a cultural site.

The Namib Sand Sea is the first nomination in over ten years that was inscribed for all four natural criteria: *(i) Outstanding natural beauty of the Namib Sand Sea; (ii) Active geological processes of global significance; (iii) On-going natural ecological dynamics that drive the evolution and interaction among Namib Sand Sea fauna and flora; (iv) Extraordinary diversity of endemic species of special significance to science and environmental understanding*.

Gobabeb has been identified as the research and monitoring centre for the Namib Sand Sea

Inscription of the Namib Sand Sea has the potential to increase quality tourism in Namibia as many people are now selecting their national and international travel based on World Heritage Sites. This, of course, means that management of the Namib-Naukluft Park should be enhanced and appreciation of the Namib Sand Sea by local Namibians should be increased. Greater focus on this area now awaits official launching of the World Heritage Site by the President of the Republic of Namibia.

Meanwhile, Gobabeb has been identified as the research and monitoring centre for the Namib Sand Sea, and plans are now underway to enhance research and monitoring directed toward the fog ecosystem, a critical

factor that has driven the evolution of the unique biodiversity found here.

Funds from a joint Namibian – South African research support initiative that were awarded to Gobabeb in partnership with the University of the Witwatersrand and UNISA are now being focused in this direction under the *FogLife* programme (we will focus on *FogLife* in a future edition of *Gobabeb Times*).

This research will dovetail with a separate project aimed at understanding the role of fog in the Namib and the likelihood of it being affected by climate change – the SASSCAL-supported *FogNet* programme being established in March 2014 (see below for more information on that).

** If you want more information, please visit the Namib Sand Sea website www.sandsea.org, where you can also download the Dossier and supporting documentation.*

Training beyond 50

Gobabeb has been involved in training and education since its inception. How can we grow the training programme while capitalising on our research strengths?

Gillian Maggs-Kölling

Gobabeb has operated as a scientific and educational facility for 52 years. From the onset, education for sustainable development (ESD) has been a core component of its activities, with more than 100 Masters and Ph.D candidates executing the bulk of their thesis research at the Centre.

At Namibia's independence in 1990, Gobabeb expanded its educational activities to include learners at primary and secondary schools. Initially, it filled a gap by producing educational materials (mainly textbooks) to realign the school syllabi towards a more appropriate Namibian focus, particularly in geography, biology and agriculture.

Over time, Gobabeb again shifted focus to give hands-on learning experiences to nearby primary and secondary schools and training and outreach activities at Gobabeb evolved in concert with these developments. The Centre is currently recognised as a key player in ESD in Namibia.

At the same time, however, specialised training programmes at Gobabeb are unique in being symbiotic with the focussed, high-quality research being conducted at the centre. By adopting a research-based approach to learning about the environment and sustainable development, while promoting skills in critical thinking and problem solving, and knowledge of scientific processes, the value of what Gobabeb has to offer as a research centre has been maximised.

In recent years, training at Gobabeb has crystallised into three major streams: graduate training in terms of Masters and Ph.D. research involving students from Namibia and all over the world; introductory research training for newly graduated Namibian students (GTRIP and SDP); and exposure of senior secondary students (Grade 11), on the verge of completing schooling, to potential career paths in science and environmental fields (YES).

GTRIP 2013: Studying the effects of exploration and recreational off-road driving on the biota of the gravel plains.

The five-month GTRIP (the Gobabeb Research and Training Internship Programme) is aimed at postgraduates or graduates that have to do some form of in-service training. For the past five years, GTRIP has focused on restoration ecology as a primary research topic, with the result that not only are we producing