

## **PAGE HEAD: CONSERVATION**

### **HEADLINE: Making a killing, making a living**

**Sub-head: Conservation and hunting may not seem to go hand in hand, but the combination is proving vital in ensuring some rural communities have meaningful incomes, writes Steve Felton**

The dawn sun peeks through the trees at the hunting camp. A springbok carcass hanging from a tree is lit bright crimson. Figures emerge from the shadows and stir cups of tea. High velocity rifles are loaded onto bakkies as the day begins to take shape.

The camp is in Torra Conservancy. Here is where Namibia's vast north-western landscapes begin, and the land is dotted with springbok, oryx and other game. What looks like paradise to tourists passing through is, in reality, a harsh landscape to scrape a living from. That's a paradox that the communal conservancies are there to address. Through them, local people can improve their standard of living, adding money from tourism and hunting to a meagre farming income.

The first bakkie trundles out of the hunting camp. On board are Abilio Kiwilepo - Namibian professional hunter, Dirk Nesenberend - gun shop owner, and Neels Nel, a South African trophy hunter. By midday 32 springbok will be on the back, part of an annual quota that the Ministry of Environment and Tourism has allocated Torra Conservancy for 'own use'. The meat will be given to conservancy members. That's income as far as most people are concerned - meat they don't have to buy from a butcher or provide from their own livestock.

### **Conservancy revolution**

There are 64 communal conservancies in Namibia, covering 17 percent of the country. Think of a conservancy as a farm. The owner can raise and sell livestock, shoot game for sale, or set up a lodge for tourists. Until 1996, when new legislation allowed the creation of communal conservancies, rural people in the old apartheid homelands had no rights over wildlife, and no means to make a living from tourists. With the Nature Conservation Act of 1996, rights over wildlife and tourism were given to legally gazetted communal conservancies. Although the land belonged to the state, the people living on it could begin to benefit, just as private landowners do.

Torra conservancy was gazetted in 1998. Not everybody who was born in the conservancy is a member. Registration is voluntary and based upon residence. Members are expected to turn up to annual general meetings if they want to benefit from the conservancy. The conservancy earns income from hunting and, quite separately, from tourism. Torra has a tourism joint venture agreement with Wilderness Safaris, which runs the upmarket Damaraland Camp within the conservancy, and the ever popular Palmwag Lodge nearby. Companies like Wilderness provide employment to local people, and also pay direct levies to conservancies.

Income from hunting is very important to conservancies with wildlife. First of all, it takes a long time for joint venture lodges like Damaraland Camp to get up and running, so there is little income in the first years. Trophy hunters provide immediate cash. Torra has an agreement with Savannah Safaris and professional hunter Henk Fourie, but the conservancy can't just shoot anything in sight; strict quotas are laid down by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism.

The MET sets quotas based on the annual game count, and Namibia has the largest annual road-based game count in the world. Every year teams of MET rangers and conservancy game guards fan out across the conservancy lands, meticulously noting the game by species and location. Over the years, the conservancy game guards have radically reducing poaching, which has helped wildlife numbers to recover. As populations grow, controlled hunting is possible, providing income to the conservancies.

### **Rare species**

The battered Land Cruiser veers off from the veterinary fence separating the Palmwag tourism concession from Torra conservancy. Abilio Kiwilepo has spotted a group of springbok. Abilio is a bit of a rare species himself: a black Namibian professional hunter. He lowers his binoculars and signals to Dirk and Neels on top of the bakkie. "170 metres," says Neels, peering through a rangefinder. Nobody moves. The vehicle must be stock still as Dirk calibrates his sight and takes aim. With a crack a springbok falls, shot clean through the head.

Abilio can talk again. He started work as a migrant farm labourer back in 1969. Despite his youthful looks he is 60 years old and worked as kitchen hand, bird catcher and fisherman before he found work with a trophy hunter and was encouraged to become a professional himself. That was 14 years ago. Now he works with Savannah Safaris, and today it is his responsibility to choose which animals are shot. This is a cull for meat. Another time, trophy hunters will return for animals with large horns.

In another part of the conservancy, Henk Fourie and a hunter from the USA are setting up hides for a lion hunt. This year Torra has a quota for two lions, a male and a female. The trophy hunting quota for 2011 includes 30 kudu and 30 oryx as part of a total of 191 animals. An oryx will fetch the conservancy US\$275. The hunter earns his own fee, and the MET makes a small licence charge, so that the remainder of the income can go into conservancy coffers, boosting sustainable conservation. A male lion could bring Torra US\$8,000, against US\$250 for a springbok.

Springbok is the most plentiful species; 40 are on the trophy hunting quota and 760 are allocated for other uses, which include meat distribution, traditional festivals, and live capture, another income earner. This year 500 springbok will be captured in Torra and sold to commercial farms.

### **Keeping it clean**

Keeping hunters and tourists from crossing paths is part of conservancy management. The last thing a tourist wants to see is a bakkie full of dead springbok and a hunter giving a cheery wave. Conservancies like Torra are zoned. There is no hunting near the Damaraland Camp or Palmwag. Tourists won't even hear gunshots, thanks in part to the quality of the weapons. Dirk Nesenberend is a partner in Windhoek's Gun Shop, and he is using a 2880 Remington with a Swarovski sight and noise suppressor. "Don't believe that James Bond stuff about the silencer just going 'phut'," he says. The rifle makes quite a crack. "But if I fired without it every springbok in the area would disappear." The noise startles the herd of springbok. One falls, but the others stand, confused, giving Dirk another shot before the animals scramble in every direction.

Accuracy is of paramount concern. Richard Fryer is the wildlife utilization specialist for IRDNC, Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation. The IRDNC gives support and training to conservancies, including Torra, and Richard stresses that the cull must be clean, saying that shooting game in the veld is probably more humane than killing cattle in an abattoir.

In the past, conservancy members did the culling themselves, but without top quality weapons and regular practice, it was difficult for conservancy staff to shoot all of the quota humanely, and a lot of ammunition went to waste. Torra's agreement with Savannah Safaris includes the culling. That way, the hunting company keeps the best animals for the trophy hunters, as well as providing sharpshooters for the cull.

The hunters do it for practice. Neels Nel comes up from South Africa to trophy hunt whenever he can afford to. Joining the guys on the shoot is in his blood, he says. For Dirk Nesenberend, it's an opportunity to use his rifle, and he pays for his own ammunition. None of the springbok are taken by the hunters. If they want an animal, they pay for it. Conservancy Chairman Bennie Roman is very happy with the arrangement, but insists that his staff could do the job if necessary.

Conservation and hunting go hand in hand. It's a concept that some people find hard to grasp. But at bottom, conservancy members are farmers, and farmers rear animals for slaughter. The key concept is management. With active game guards paid for by income from hunting and tourism, and with the MET's game count and quota system, wildlife populations are increasing in the conservancies, so everybody wins.

At a hunting camp, conservancy staff are hauling springbok carcasses up on chains, so they can be cleanly skinned and butchered. While the meat is still fresh, a conservancy bakkie drives out to make deliveries. Farmer Lazarus //Hoeb and his wife Hansina are typical conservancy members. Their farm at Bersig Pos has just over a hundred goats, a few sheep and 15 cattle. The whole springbok delivered to their farm is a welcome addition to the family's food. Half will be quickly eaten, and the other half dried for biltong. Once in a while the family receives meat from animals shot by trophy hunters. Oryx, kudu and springbok – but not lion.

Back at the camp, a dead lioness is lying under a heap of salt, waiting for the taxidermist to take over. The Texan hunter is on his way to the airport and Torra conservancy is N\$28,000 better off.