

Past and present distribution and status of the Wild Dog *Lycaon pictus* in Namibia

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ABSTRACT

The wild dog *Lycaon pictus* has undergone an extensive reduction in range and numbers in the southern African subregion in recent years. Little information is available on its distribution and status in Namibia. Results from a questionnaire survey show that wild dogs have become highly restricted in their distribution and that numbers are decreasing. This species is now the most endangered large mammal in Namibia and nowhere is it adequately protected in this country. Wild dogs cause minimal domestic stock losses but are aggressively hunted wherever they occur in livestock farming areas.

INTRODUCTION

Wild dog *Lycaon pictus* Temminck 1820 populations throughout Africa have shown large decreases in range and numbers in recent years. In southern Africa they are considered endangered throughout much of their range (Skinner *et al.* 1977; Smithers 1983; Lensing & Joubert 1977). The situation in Namibia has changed drastically since Shortridge (1934) wrote, "wild dog are widely distributed in South-West Africa, and hunting packs may be met with periodically almost everywhere except in the extreme south".

The reasons for this reduction in numbers and range are a variety of human pressures, which have isolated the species in southern Africa to a number of restricted pockets in and around conservation areas or areas of very low agricultural development.

In Namibia much of the information on wild dog numbers and range is conflicting and the species is generally poorly known. Joubert and Mostert (1975) regarded them as "one of the most endangered species" in the country but base this assessment on limited information. Lensing and Joubert (1977) were of the opinion that the conservation status of the wild dog in Namibia was "most critical". Little effort has been put into the conservation of wild dogs despite these dire warnings and the recommendation by Lesing and Joubert (1977) that research on this species should be accorded "priority over all other problem animal species".

Because of the paucity of information on the distribution and status of wild dogs in Namibia it was decided to investigate their status by means of a questionnaire survey. The objectives of the survey were:

- (a) to estimate the past and present distribution of wild dogs in Namibia and to attempt to determine what factors have led to their overall decline,
- (b) to assess the importance of wild dogs as problem animals in livestock farming areas, and
- (c) to propose some conservation measures to ensure the long-term survival of wild dogs in Namibia.

METHODS

A short questionnaire was sent to 200 selected individuals and institutions in Namibia requesting information on the past and present distribution of wild dogs in this country and their importance as problem animals. A 45% return rate was achieved.

Additional information on wild dogs was obtained through a search of both historical and modern literature.

RESULTS

Much of the information presented here came from personal discussions and communications with individuals. Place names, dates and numbers are often not precise. The review of historical literature yielded little information as few early explorers and travellers in Namibia documented their observations accurately. As pointed out by Skead (1980) some confusion is found in the literature as to what species is being referred to as "wild dog". Hyenas, jackals and feral domestic dogs have all been referred to as "wild dogs" in the past. However, as the principal objective of the survey was to develop an overview of the past and present distribution and status of the wild dog in Namibia, it was felt that the information gathered was valid. All information quoted from the questionnaire returns is marked QR preceded by the returnee's name. The information is presented per magisterial district/comunal area (Figure 1).

Lüderitz-Karasburg

There are no recent records of wild dogs for this area. Smithers (1983), however, quoted Sweetman as having seen wild dogs 150 km north of the Orange River mouth on the main coast road in 1967. Although Shortridge (1934) states that wild dogs were virtually unknown in the vicinity of the Orange River during the early part of this century, they do not seem to have been so rare in earlier times, e.g. Cook (1849) (in Skead 1980) reported them to the south of Warmbad in 1834 and wrote, "our fears for the safety of the cattle were aroused by the barking and howling of wild dogs

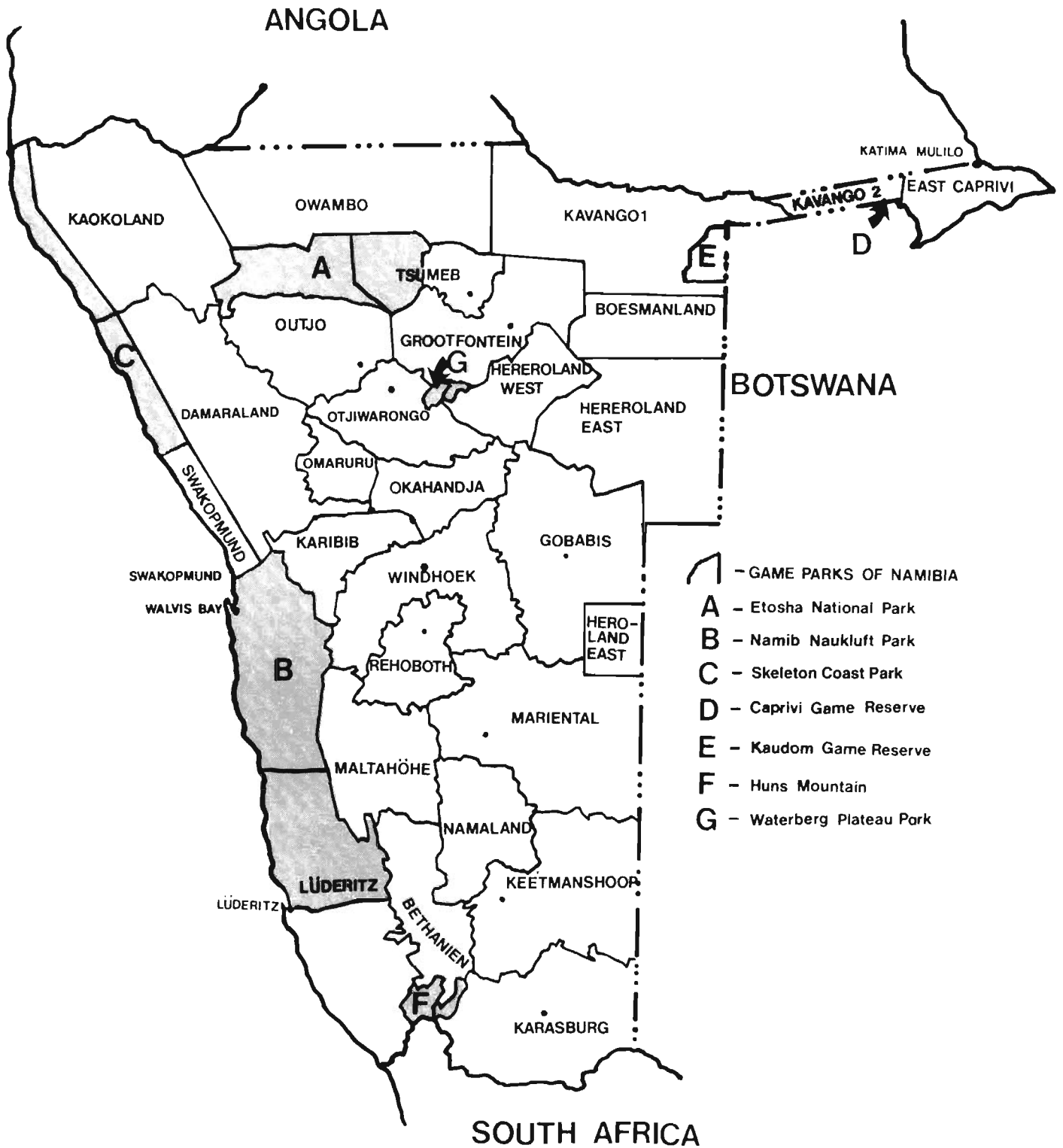


FIGURE 1: Map of Namibia showing the districts and conservation areas referred to in the text.

which are most ferocious and destructive creatures". Shaw (1840) (in Skead 1980) also saw wild dogs on the plains of the Ham River 65 km from Warmbad. This population was likely to have been entirely dependent on the large herds of migratory game which previously occurred in the area. The destruction of these herds and the introduction of formal agricultural practices in the early part of the century probably led to this population's demise.

Keetmanshoop-Namaland-Bethanien

There are no recent records of wild dogs from any of these areas. Shortridge (1934) mentions that "sporadic visits have been recorded from around Bersebad and Great Namaqualand". Wild dogs were known to the farming community of the southwestern Keetmanshoop district up until the late 1940's (G. Owen-Smith pers. comm.). Wild dogs have appeared occasionally in the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park in South Africa and it is possible that there are sporadic forays by these animals into Namibia.

Mariental-Rehoboth-Maltahöhe

There are no recent records of wild dogs from any of these districts. They were known, however, to occur in both the Rehoboth and Mariental districts as recently as the 1950's (Wohler QR). They were noted from both the Auob and Nossob River valleys in the late 1950's. Isolated occurrence of animals crossing onto farms from Botswana may still occur.

It is doubtful whether wild dogs were ever common in any of the districts mentioned above. Shortridge (1934) states that wild dogs were "of rather infrequent occurrence south of the Tropic of Capricorn".

Windhoek-Okahandja

There is no mention in Shortridge (1934) of wild dogs in either of these districts even though the species must have occurred here at the time of his visits to Namibia. Bergmann (QR) reported small numbers of animals in the Omitara area in 1937. Eichhoff (QR) recorded more than 100 cattle lost on her farm within a single year (1935-1936) and that wild dog packs ranged from three to 30 animals. There are reports that wild dogs occurred sporadically in these areas up until the 1950's. The most recent record is of four female dogs destroyed on the farm Springbokvlei near Nina in 1983.

Omaruru-Otjiwarongo

There are no recent records of wild dogs from the Omaruru district, but they undoubtedly occurred there in the past. Wild dogs are reported periodically in the Otjiwarongo district, in the area between the Waterberg and Hereroland West, as well as along the Hereroland border. Joubert and Mostert (1975) noted that wild dogs had been recorded sporadically from the Waterberg Plateau Park itself (the last confirmed sighting was in 1981 (Cooper QR)). Recent records include a group of 15 animals dug out of a warren and destroyed on the farm Ringklip in 1982 and Delfs (QR) reports annual sightings of 4-12 wild dogs on the farm Otjahewita. There are unconfirmed reports of a

small group of wild dogs seen north of Otjiwarongo in mid-1986.

Gobabis

Wild dogs have occurred sporadically throughout the district in recent years. Most records indicate that the animals enter from Botswana and Hereroland East. Riedel (QR) reported wild dogs as a problem on the farms in the northeast of the district up until about 1983. They have bred in the district in recent years; two adults with six young were caught on a farm near the Botswana border in 1981 (Delfs QR). These animals were kept and raised in captivity and are still alive

Karibib-Swakopmund and the Namib

There are no recent records of wild dogs from these areas; the last record was in 1955 near Karibib (Gladis QR). According to Kriess (QR) wild dogs were widely distributed and well known in the Namib from the 1930's to the late 1940's. At this time smallstock farming started on a formal basis in these areas. The traditional migration patterns of the game were affected by the construction of fences and this in turn affected the wild dog populations. They were actively hunted on the farms and in a relatively short time were almost eradicated from the district. Kriess (QR) saw wild dogs following migrating game in the pro-Namib and has recorded them from the Spitzkoppe, the Omaruru River and Welwitschia Vlake. He reported the last wild dogs seen in the area as being "about 15 years ago in Game Reserve 3", i.e. in 1969-70 in the present Namib-Naukluft Park. Köhler (1959) mentions that wild dogs occasionally entered the Damara Reserve from the Namib.

The situation described above, where wild dog populations were severely depleted in the late 1940's, seems to have occurred in many of the other livestock farming districts in Namibia. A number of questionnaire returns indicated that wild dogs were commonly seen in the late 1930's but sporadically in the 1950's (records from Gobabis, Otjiwarongo, Okahandja, Karibib, Omaruru, Rehoboth and Windhoek districts). Few sightings were reported in later years.

Outjo-Etosa National Park-Tsumeb

There are no recent records of wild dogs outside of Etosha National Park (ENP) in the Outjo district. Shortridge (1934) comments that although not abundant, wild dogs were well known from the Etosha Pan area. Today, wild dogs are seldom seen in the ENP and past records indicate a similar sporadic occurrence. Their status in the park is uncertain but it is doubtful whether any animals are resident. The most recent reports are of 14 animals seen in November 1985 in the northeast of the park, two dogs seen 9 km from Namutoni in the same month and four animals seen about 20 km north of Namutoni by tourists in February 1986.

A reintroduction attempt in the ENP in the late 1970's failed, probably because the animals were not fully adult when released and were inexperienced hunters.

Future reintroductions of wild dogs to the ENP should be considered.

Wild dogs are known from the Tsumeb district and are probably part of a population that moves through Owambo, Tsumeb and Etosha. Historically, they were regularly seen in the Tsumeb district (Burger QR) and there are also a number of recent records, e.g. in February 1986 six dogs were seen on the farm Naguseb bordering the ENP, four dogs were shot on the farm Operet in July 1986 and a "small pack" was seen south of the Mangetti farms in early 1987 (Voights pers. comm.).

Grootfontein

Shortridge (1934) states that wild dogs "are apparently most generally numerous in the Grootfontein district and the Caprivi". Although they are today no longer found throughout the district they are regularly encountered in the Maroelaboom farming area bordering Bushmanland and Hereroland. Their occurrence in these areas shows some seasonality, the animals being most commonly seen during the drier months. They are heavily persecuted on these farms and are shot on sight. In 1985, 50-60 wild dogs were estimated to have been killed on farms bordering Bushmanland. They have bred on some of the farms in recent years; a warren containing a number of pups was dug up on the farm Abendsruhe in 1981 (H.P. Smith pers. comm.). Wild dogs continue to range widely in this district. In October 1986 two animals were found along the Eastern National Water Carrier, one of which subsequently drowned. In August 1987, three male dogs were caught in traps on a farm 10 km south of Kombat. Because of severe injuries, two of the dogs were destroyed, and the remaining dog was released in Bushmanland.

Damaraland-Kaokoland

There are no recent records from either of these districts and the historical record is vague. Köhler (1959) notes that wild dogs occasionally occurred in the Damara Reserve area. He also recorded the issuing of rifles to "Headmen and Board members" for the "destruction of vermin". This would have had a negative effect on wild dogs population in Damaraland. Shortridge (1934) mentions that wild dogs were known from the Kaokoland area but no other historical information was found. Owen-Smith (1971) recorded them from a number of areas in the Kaokoveld, e.g. from the Ovahimba highlands between the Steilrandberge and the Zebra mountains, the southern dolomite hills and in the eastern sandveld. He also reported a pack of some 20 individuals that bred north of Warmquell in 1970.

Owambo

The historical record for Owambo is poor. Shortridge (1934) says only that the species was well known from the area but not abundant. Wild dogs must have occurred in fair numbers in the past and they were known from most of the territory until the 1970's.

Recent records include one of 17 animals in the army training area near Oshivelo in June 1986. There are several records of animals in the southeastern area near the Kavango-Tsumeb border.

Hereroland-West and -East

Wilhelm (in Shortridge 1934) states that "wild dogs occur everywhere in the Omaheke and the Kaukaveld in greater or lesser numbers". The Omaheke and the Kaukaveld cover most of what is today known as Hereroland and Bushmanland. No other historical information was found regarding Hereroland. The present day situation in Hereroland-West is poorly known. Wild dogs must move through the area (there are numerous records from the Otjiwarongo district) but whether any animals are resident in Hereroland-West is not known. It is highly unlikely that they are as the area is heavily populated with intensive livestock farming.

In Hereroland-East wild dogs are regularly seen in small packs of 2-10 animals, usually north of the Eiseb veterinary fence. There are several recent records of wild dogs in the south of the territory near the Gobabis district border. The most recent record is one of 12 animals seen in the south during an aerial census in 1985 (van der Merwe QR).

The population in the north of Hereroland-East is largely undisturbed, and as long as agricultural/human development remains at a low level they should be relatively safe from persecution. Conflict is likely to arise with the settlement of farmers at Gam, north of the Eiseb fence, although to date there have been no reports of stock losses due to wild dogs.

Populations are difficult to estimate due to the highly mobile nature of the animals. The population for the whole of Hereroland is possibly about 100-150 individuals.

Bushmanland

The historical record for Bushmanland is poor. Wilhelm (in Shortridge 1934) commented that wild dogs were known from the area but otherwise no other records were found. They are, however, regularly seen throughout the territory, being most common along the western boundary (especially the area around the Omuramba Omatako) and in the area centred around Tsumkwe in the east. The populations of the Kavango and Hereroland-East appear to move through Bushmanland at certain times of the year and probably form an open nomadic system in the three regions. Pack sizes observed in recent years range from two to 32 animals. The species breeds in the area. The population is estimated at about 150-200 individuals.

While this population is under no direct threat at present, a number of animals have been killed for no apparent reason by military personnel and the rate at which they are shot on bordering farms gives cause for concern.

Kavango

Wild dogs have occurred throughout the Kavango in

the past and still roam through much of the area today. Their numbers were probably largely unchanged until the massive increase in the human population in the last 10 years (the population of the Kavango has increased some 300% since the independence of Angola in 1975). Le Grange (1982) stated that up to 1980 wild dogs were often seen on the road between Rundu and Grootfontein and also along the road running parallel to the Kavango River. Because the majority of people are centred around the more fertile omaramba systems and the Kavango River, large areas of the Kavango remain uninhabited. There has been little conflict between man and wild dogs in the past, except on certain teaching and experimental farms. The wild dog population is probably relatively stable with some small decrease due to habitat loss and agricultural expansion. Population estimates for the Kavango are very difficult as large areas are seldom visited and hence no information exists. This is especially true of the southwest of the Kavango. In the east wild dogs are regularly seen in groups of 2-26 animals. There are records of wild dogs for all months of 1986 and most of 1987 in the Kaudom Game Reserve. Most observations are from the Kaudom and Mahango Game Reserves so it seems that these areas may in fact offer some degree of protection in the future. It is important to ascertain, however, whether these parks are sufficiently large to protect viable populations of wild dogs. Agricultural expansion and the westernization of agricultural practices offers a particular threat to wild dogs in the Kavango. The population is conservatively estimated at about 200 individuals.

West Caprivi

There are no historical records of wild dogs from the West Caprivi. The present situation is vague because of limited access to the area and the military situation. The paucity of records probably obscures the true picture. The area is a proclaimed game reserve and the wild dog population should be under no particular threat at present. Military personnel are generally positive towards the protection of wildlife along both the Kavango and Kwando Rivers. Wild dogs are seen sporadically throughout the area and immediately west of the Kwando River they are seen monthly (Grobler QR). In September 1986 a pack of 25 were seen in the military area just east of the Kavango River (Jones QR). The total population in this area probably numbers less than 100 individuals. This population is unlikely to be resident and would move in and out of Botswana and Angola. The major threat to this population is the deproclamation of the West Caprivi Game Reserve.

East Caprivi

Historical records for this area are poor. Other than Shortridge's (1934) comment that wild dogs "are most numerous in the Caprivi", there is little information available. They occur throughout the area at present, but are seen only irregularly and in small numbers. These numbers are likely to remain low or to decrease

even further because most of their prey has been shot out of large areas and livestock farming is expanding. The most recent records include a report of six wild dogs near Kwena in late May 1987 and of two at Sachinga in August 1987 (H. Kramer in litt.).

Wild dogs as problem animals in Namibia.

The status of the wild dog as a problem animal in Namibia has not changed since Lensing and Joubert (1977) wrote that "Cape hunting dog problems are localised and of very low intensity". If anything, the incidence of wild dog problems has diminished in recent years. Areas where they have caused problems in recent years are Tsumeb, Grootfontein, Otjiwarongo, Gobabis and the Kavango.

In the commercial farming areas wild dogs are generally ruthlessly hunted, even where they have caused no damage. The number of stock killed by wild dogs as a percentage of total stock losses to predators is very low — generally less than 1% (Veterinary Services Data Bank). Problems at present occur only on those farms on or near the borders of the communal areas of the north.

In the communal areas total stock losses to wild dogs are difficult to determine but they are believed to be low. This is certainly likely in the areas where traditional livestock farming is practised, because the small herds of cows are tended during the day and then stoked at night. All major problems with wild dogs in the communal areas have been where livestock are left unattended on experimental farms and at schools.

DISCUSSION

The long-term prospects for the survival of wild dogs in Namibia are poor. Persecution, habitat loss and lack of any conservation status have led to the present critical situation. Wild dogs have been viewed as vermin for a long time and as such they have been heavily and arbitrarily persecuted. Much of this persecution is based on the abhorrence many people have for their hunting method, rather than on the stock lost by farmers. Habitat loss, and hence prey depletion continues apace throughout Namibia as human demands take up more and more land. Already in their last strongholds in Hereroland, Bushmanland and Kavango, large areas presently used by wild dogs are now due for agricultural development, principally livestock farming. This will result in conflict and wild dogs will be eradicated from these areas. Wild dogs are nowhere adequately protected within any officially proclaimed conservation area. In Etosha National Park their status is uncertain and only in the Kavango are they afforded any degree of protection at present, in the Kaudom Game Reserve. The continued existence of wild dogs in the West Caprivi Game Reserve is threatened because of possible deproclamation of the reserve.

All the above factors have led to the wild dog becoming highly restricted and rare today, where 30 years ago

it was fairly common and widespread. Wild dogs continue to suffer under a multitude of pressures and could be regarded as the most endangered large mammal in Namibia today. If the situation with regard to their requirements for long-term survival are not met soon, wild dogs could be extinct in this country within the next 10-20 years.

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