

THE KAOKOVELD

southern
Africa's
last
wilderness

BY GARTH OWEN-SMITH

ONCE part of the largest conservation area in the world*, the Kaokoveld has often been called southern Africa's last wilderness. Its remoteness, spectacular mountain scenery and people, still wearing their traditional clothes and following age old practises, gave the region an aura of mystery and timelessness. It was fascinatingly out of step with the bustle and materialism of modern life. The fact that, until the 1970s, the South African Government prohibited entry into the area to all but a handful of civil servants and accredited scientists, only added to its romantic image.

Before its deproclamation as a game reserve by the Odendaal Commission in the sixties, the whole Kaokoveld supported a rich and varied spectrum of big game animals. These included desert-dwelling elephants, black rhino and giraffe. Lions periodically preyed on seals along the desolate shores of the Skeleton Coast. Even the flora of the region is remarkable, with many endemic species found only here and in the adjoining southwestern corner of Angola.

Much has changed in the Kaokoveld over the past two decades. The 1970s saw the first major infrastructural developments, with the building of all-weather roads, administrative offices, schools, hospitals and clinics. Numerous boreholes were drilled, changing the pastoralist's traditional herding practices and allowing livestock numbers to increase dramatically. In Khorixas and Opuwo, parastatal wholesalers provided regular supplies of western commercial goods, which enticed most of the Kaokoveld's residents into the market economy and wage-labour system.

At the same time, the increased number of civil servants and contractors in the region led to an escalation in illegal hunting and trading in ivory, rhino horn and the skins of leopard, cheetah and zebra.

With the opening of a western front in Namibia's liberation struggle, much of the northern Kaokoveld was militarised with a consequent proliferation of firearms. The people and wildlife of the region were dealt another devastating blow during the catastrophic drought between 1979 and 1981, which decimated the numbers of both livestock and game.

By the time the drought broke, the Kaokoveld's pastoralist traditional economy had been destroyed. In order to obtain cash to rebuild their herds and flocks, many men turned to commercial poaching. They used firearms supplied by either the South African Defence Force or by the traders who purchased the contraband wildlife products from them.

In 1981 the first government nature conservation officer for the region was stationed in

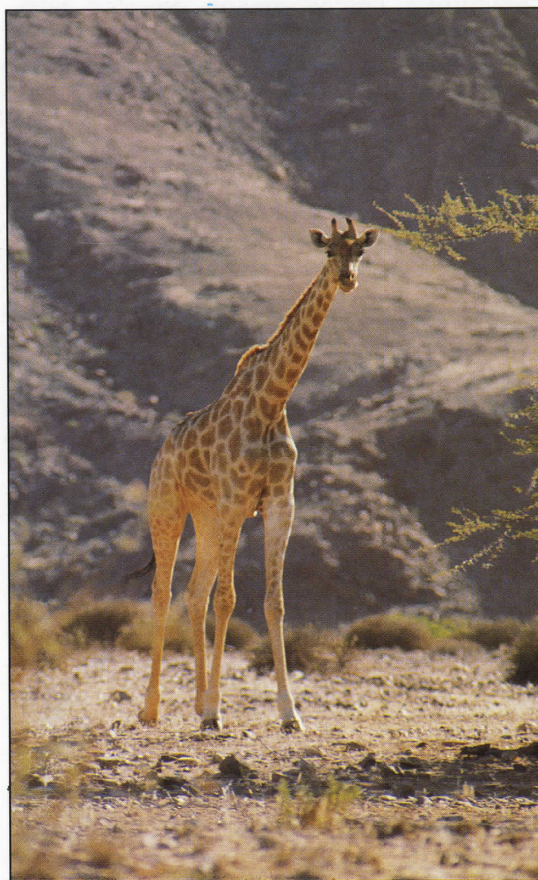
Khorixas. By then only small, remnant pockets of big game survived north of Sesfontein. Poaching gangs were making incursions southwards and westwards into the catchments of the Hoanib, Uniab, Huab and Ugab Rivers, the last strongholds of the Kaokoveld elephant and black rhino. To many, the region's wildlife seemed doomed.

COMMUNITY-BASED CONSERVATION

In 1982, Namibian non-governmental conservation organisations (NGOs) joined the government in the fight against illegal hunting in the Kaokoveld. The first step was to gain the local traditional leadership's support. The appointment of community game guards worked towards obtaining the active participation of the rural people in the conservation effort. With government conservators, NGO staff and the communities working together, poaching was soon brought under control. During the past decade the numbers of all wildlife species have steadily increased.

After a brief resurgence of rhino poaching in 1989, the government conservation authorities embarked on a pioneer dehorning programme in the central Kunene Region, then known as northern Damaraland. Black rhino from vulnerable areas were translocated to the Waterberg Plateau Park and Hardap Nature Reserve to form the nuclei of new populations. Since then, a combination of government anti-poaching patrols, regular rhino monitoring by teams of specially trained local people and grassroots community support for conservation has reduced rhino poaching to only occasional incidents.

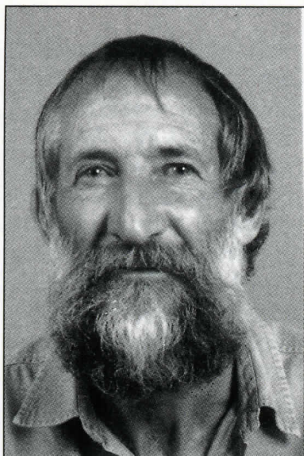
The name Kaokoveld was first coined by the Swedish explorer, Charles John Anderson, in the middle of the last century. It is derived from the Herero word "Kaoko", used to describe the mountainous north-west of Namibia. The term Kaokoveld was in general use until 1970 when, on the recommendations of the Odendaal Commission, the ethnic homelands of Kaokoland and Damaraland were created. The Kaokoveld now falls within the Kunene Region. It covers the area between the Ugab and Kunene Rivers, namely the Ruacana, Opuwo, Sesfontein and Khorixas Constituencies of the Kunene Region.



Giraffe occur in marginal areas including the dry tributaries of the Hoanib River. Riverbed trees such as "Anaboom" *Faidherbia albida* come into leaf during the dry season, providing succulent browse which enable giraffe to survive in areas with little or no open water.

Facing page: This black rhino in the Tsuxub River was one of many which formerly occurred in the Kunene Region. Decades of illegal hunting and human expansion have reduced numbers, but rhino populations are now increasing in the area due to conservation efforts by the communities, NGOs and government. (Photo Peter Tarr)

* Game Reserve No. 2, proclaimed by the German Colonial Administration in 1907.



GARTH OWEN-SMITH

The author: Garth Owen-Smith trained as a forester and was appointed Government Agricultural Supervisor for the Kaokoveld in 1968. In 1973 he joined the State Museum, Windhoek and co-produced a publication on the ethno-botany of former Kaokoland. After many years as a conservation official with the SWA Department of Nature Conservation, based in southern Namibia and Etosha, he returned to the Kaokoveld. Garth is the Director of IRDNC, and is based at Wêreldsend, west of Khorixas.

What causes the "Fairy Circles" of the Marienfluss Valley? Although many scientists have tried to explain the origin of these bare patches, their theories are speculative. The occurrence of the circles remains an unsolved mystery.

Recognising that wildlife conservation in the region needs the support of the whole population and in particular the youth, an environmental education centre was built in the area. The Wêreldsend (World's End) Environmental Education Centre, 140 km east of Khorixas, was officially opened by the then Minister of Environment and Tourism, Honourable Niko Bessinger, in 1990. Started as a joint venture by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, Namibian NGOs, Rössing Uranium and local communities, the Centre holds regular courses and workshops for teachers, students and other community members. It also supports and supplies relevant teaching aids to Earthcare Clubs in 14 local schools.

By 1993, the populations of springbok, oryx, kudu, Hartmann's zebra, giraffe and ostrich in the Sesfontein and Khorixas districts had reached levels that could support sustainable harvesting. A quota of more than 600 head of these six species was granted to the residents in areas where sufficient wildlife occurred. Unlike previous game cropping on communal land in southern Africa, the operation was organised by the traditional leaders of the two districts. They appointed teams of local men to do the actual hunting. Ministry of Environment and Tourism officers were stationed in each hunting camp to ensure that quotas were adhered to and that wounded animals were followed and killed. The traditional leaders were responsible for the distribution of the meat, while the skins were sold to cover the costs of the operation.

LOCAL BENEFITS FROM TOURISM

Community empowerment, coupled with limited consumptive use, has undoubtedly been the key to the local people's continued support for wildlife conservation in the Kaokoveld. In the long term, the people should actively participate in the now booming tourist industry in the region and derive more direct economic benefits from the industry. Employment in tourist lodges and camps and casual handouts for photographs

or services do not adequately compensate the communities, who must pay the costs of living with the wild animals the tourists come to see.

To address this problem, a pilot project was initiated in 1987 with the small Himba and Herero community at Purros, a strong spring in the lower Hoarusib River. Due to the poaching epidemic of the previous decade, large animals such as elephants had avoided the Hoarusib valley. Yet in 1986, the first elephant revisited the area. If elephant were to recolonise the Hoarusib Valley – prime wildlife habitat with spectacular desert scenery – the support of the local people living here would be crucial.

At a two day meeting with the residents, it was agreed that each client on Endangered Wildlife Trust Safaris staying overnight at Purros would pay a levy to the community for their role as caretakers of the area's wildlife. A committee of local lineage heads was chosen to receive the levy on behalf of the community and ensure that it was equitably distributed. The project was expanded in 1989 when the largest tour operator in the area, Skeleton Coast Fly-in Safaris, also undertook to pay a levy for each of their clients visiting Purros.

Six years later, the small desert-living community had earned in excess of N\$70 000 from tourist levies and craft sales. Equally important, about 10 elephants are now semi-permanently resident in the Hoarusib Valley. In the words of an old lineage head, previously hostile to the return of potentially dangerous wild animals to Purros: "We live well with the elephants. They are like our cattle because they bring us money from the tourists who come to see them."

Etendeka Wilderness Camp and Palmwag Lodge recently agreed to pay a bed-night levy to the Sesfontein, Warmquelle and Khowarib communities. Negotiations have also taken place with the developers presently rebuilding the old German fort at Sesfontein as a tourist camp. The combined income from bed-night levies, the wages of local people employed in these enterprises, as well as the sale of crafts and possibly fresh produce to tourists, will be a considerable boost to the economy of this arid region.

To promote the direct participation of residents of the Kaokoveld in tourism, a Namibian NGO, Save the Rhino Trust Fund, has provided financial support to locally developed rustic tourist camps in the Khowarib Schlucht, the Aba-Huab near Twyfelfontein and at the Ongongo waterfall. Another community-run campsite is also being developed at Purros.

The most ambitious local initiative in tourism is taking place at Poacher's Camp. Situated northwest of Bergsig, this scenically spectacular area supports elephants, black



Wynard du Plessis

rhino and a variety of other big game species. Here the Bergsig Community Development Committee is negotiating with a Namibian business entrepreneur to develop an up-market tourism lodge on a 50/50 partnership and profit sharing basis. The entrepreneur will put up the capital investment and market the enterprise while the local community will protect the wildlife and ensure that the area around the lodge remains free of livestock.

THE PROCLAMATION OPTION

Although the Kaokoveld's community-based conservation and tourism policies have contributed to the survival of its wildlife, much still needs to be done to protect the region's fragile natural environment. In addition, the relationship between safari operators, casual tourists and the local people needs to be improved.

From an environmental conservation perspective, one of the most urgent issues is uncontrolled tourist access and use of the area. An increasingly visible manifestation of this is the proliferation of off-road vehicle tracks, particularly in the desert area between the Hoanib and Kunene Rivers.

Other problems include burying litter instead of taking it out of the area, overuse of scarce firewood resources and camping at or near waterholes, thereby preventing some wild animals from drinking. Ignorance of safari operators or private tourists may have led to this situation. The only long-term solution to these problems is to give some form of conservation status to the more vulnerable parts of the region so that appropriate regulations for visitors can be drawn up and enforced.

After discussions between the Ministry and the Kaoko Council of Headmen and community leaders in the semi-desert area between the Hoanib and Kunene, support was given for the proclamation of this part of the Kaokoveld as long as the legitimate needs and aspirations of the people were recognised. To ensure this, a management committee comprising community representatives, Ministry officials and possibly representatives of local NGOs and tourism operators would be created.

A first task would be to draw up a code of conduct (behaviour guidelines) for non-residents visiting the area, thereby preventing a further breakdown of relations between tourists and the people. To balance the inevitable conflicts of interest between future conservation and tourism activities and the people's pastoralist economy, a significant portion of the gate and daily fees paid by tourists to the area would also go to the local community. Regrettably, a proposal in 1993 by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism to proclaim the northwestern Kaokoveld as

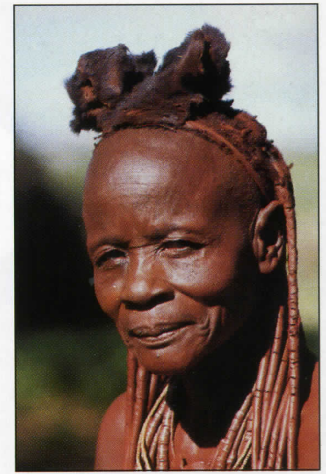
a contractual conservation area was not accepted by the Namibian Cabinet.

FUTURE ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

As livestock and game numbers increase, competition for grazing and water resources will inevitably occur, particularly in drought years. Integrated land-use planning with the full participation of the people is now urgently needed to prevent habitat degradation. This would also ensure that wildlife and its related income-generating enterprises achieve their considerable potential to contribute towards the social, economic and ecological development of the region.

The proposed hydroelectric scheme on the Kunene, currently in the final feasibility study stage, would flood the river valley for about 70 kilometres. A most popular tourist attraction in the Kaokoveld, the picturesque Epupa Falls, would disappear in this development. By altering the river's seasonal flow regime, silt load and water temperature, the dam would inevitably degrade the riparian and aquatic ecosystems downstream of the wall. Dams proposed on the Kaokoveld's ephemeral rivers would also have negative impacts on the water table and vegetation along their lower reaches. Government planners need to carefully weigh up the costs and benefits of these projects.

In spite of its turbulent history, the Kaokoveld has become one of Namibia's major tourist venues. As wildlife increases and repopulates areas from which it was exterminated, it is likely to attract even greater numbers of local and international visitors. Perhaps the greatest challenge of the future will be to ensure that the sheer volume of tourists coming into the region does not undermine the intrinsic values that made it so attractive in the first place.



Peter Tarr

The Himba are semi-nomadic pastoralists, inhabiting the remote regions of north-western Namibia and southern Angola. Faced with an uncertain future, the Himba struggle to maintain control over their traditional resources and lifestyle in the face of droughts, commercial trading and uncontrolled tourism.

The Epupa Falls on the Kunene River. A planned hydro-electric scheme near this site is a contentious issue both nationally and internationally. If it goes ahead, the dam will flood the falls and could alter the hydrology and biodiversity of the Kunene River system.



Bruno Nabe