

THE NAMIB DESERT BIOLOGICAL STATION

R. F. Lawrence

THE Transvaal Museum has for some time been interested in the creation of a Station in or near the Namib desert for enabling biologists and other scientists to study desert conditions. During the last 25 years this Museum, more than any other institution in South Africa, has conducted numerous expeditions to the semi-arid western coastal region ranging from Southern Namaqualand to Angola in the North; as a result, the semi-desert regions of South and South West Africa are very well known, especially in such groups as mammals, birds, reptiles and the Tenebrionid beetles, all of which have been intensively studied by various members of the Transvaal Museum staff.

The real desert, however, represented by the strip of coastal sand-dunes extending from the mouth of the Orange river to beyond Walfish Bay, is not so well known faunistically or botanically. This was forcibly impressed upon the members of a small expedition to the Namib in May of this year sponsored by Mr Bernard Carp of Cape Town and by the Transvaal Museum. In all the groups collected among the sand-dunes, Lepismatidae (primitive wingless insects), Tenebrionid beetles, Arachnids and even lizards, a number of new and very distinctive forms came to light. In one group alone, the false-scorpions among the Arachnida, seven species were collected and of these five proved to be new to science, one representing a new genus.

It seems probable that in passing westwards from the central to the coastal areas of Southern Africa, speciation is proceeding at an increasing rate and reaches its apotheosis under the peculiar conditions of the Namib sand-dunes, which are indeed geographically and ecologically isolated from the rest of South West Africa.

To study the many fascinating problems, which the desert presents, it is necessary to have permanent protective building struc-

tures; the high temperatures and fierce winds of the Namib make it impossible to work with any success under canvas.

It is therefore a matter of congratulation to the three bodies which have primarily interested themselves in desert exploration, the Transvaal Museum, State Museum of Windhoek, and the South West African Administration, that plans for a permanent desert station are already in hand, and that the building of the station may be commenced, and perhaps even completed, in 1960. The Administration of South West Africa has obviously viewed the scientific aims of the sponsors with sympathy, since it has already granted a building site near Gobabeb on the banks of the Kuiseb River below Walfish Bay.

When the station is built it will be the first in Africa, South of the equator, to concern itself solely with the study of desert conditions. It is to be hoped and expected that scientists of many disciplines besides the biological ones will come from other parts of the world to work in it.

NATAL MUSEUM,
LOOP STREET,
PIETERMARITZBURG.

Africa Institute in Moscow

A comprehensive study of the history of the African continent is being carried out at the recently created Africa Institute in Moscow. Particular attention will be given to the Middle Ages, a period when a number of independent states possessing their own individual cultures existed in Africa, as well as to developments in the 19th century.

The Institute in Moscow intends to collaborate in its researches with African scholars and scientific bodies in other countries. A group of philologists is now compiling dictionaries and grammars of certain African languages. (UNESCO.)