

# The Namibian Offshore Islands – a Historical Overview

By Imke Cordes

Strung along the Namibian coast between Walvis Bay and the Orange River are twelve small islands, remote from normal shipping routes and unknown to many people. Barren, sunbaked rocks, devoid of vegetation, they are the breeding grounds of hundreds of thousands of seabirds.

The islands are Hollamsbird, Mercury, Ichaboe, Seal, Penguin, Halifax, Long, Possession, Albatross, Pomona, Plumpudding and Sinclair. After initial occupation by Britain, the islands were administered by South Africa and only returned to Namibia with the reintegration of Walvis Bay in February 1994.

The islands, previously known only to sealing vessels, became the centre of attraction in the 1840s when large amounts of guano – accumulated bird droppings used as a valuable nitrogenous fertilizer – were reported. Ichaboe Island, where the guano lay thickest, was the main target during the ensuing guano boom.

Captain Benjamin Morrell Jr, an American sealing captain, left for the southwestern coast of Africa on the schooner Antarctic and landed on Ichaboe Island in October 1828. A single sentence from his memoirs published in 1832 led to the guano rush between 1843 and 1845 that plunged the desolate bird islands into international limelight: "The surface of this island is covered with birds' manure to the depth of twenty-five feet."

The reaction to that sentence by an alert businessman from Liverpool, Andrew Livingston, was to have dramatic consequences. He sent three small chartered sailing ships with sealed orders to search for Ichaboe Island. None of the islands were on a map then, and only a few sealers and whalers knew the southwest African coast. Only one of the vessels found the island and took on a three-quarters' load of guano. Then a gale storm forced her to sea and she sailed home with the first Ichaboe guano.

Efforts to maintain secrecy about the venture and the position of the island failed. The year 1844 marked the start of a boom which disrupted world trade and threw mercantile shipping into turmoil. Every available vessel was chartered

to bring cargoes of the profitable manure into English ports.

The peak of this feverish activity was reached in December/January 1845, when no less than 450 ships lay at anchor off Ichaboe Island, and an estimated 6 000 men worked on the island. The guano was said to lie up to forty feet thick on Ichaboe, and in total about 300 000 tons of guano were shipped from Ichaboe to Britain. By the end of May 1845 Ichaboe, and most of the other islands, had been

reduced almost to bare rock and the guano boom was over. A resource that had taken hundreds or thousands of years to build up, and which could have been the basis of a long-term industry, had been destroyed in a matter of 18 months.

During this time Ichaboe was a no man's land, unclaimed by Britain in spite of the Union Jack that flew there.

A few years later, in the late 1840s, a few Cape Town-based entrepreneurs discovered fresh deposits of guano that had accumulated on Ichaboe, and the trade went on. Among those who were now "sharing" Ichaboe were Robert August Granger, a Cape Town shipowner, Captain Tompkins, Captain John Spence and the brothers Aaron and Elias de Pass.

It was soon realised that, in order to harvest an annual crop of guano, it was necessary to control exploitation and protect the birds during their stay on the island. A few men were left on each island to guard it, and the first

wooden hut on Ichaboe was erected around 1850. The protection of breeding seabirds from human disturbance was the first conservation effort along the Namib coast. However, the islands did not then fall under the jurisdiction of the Cape Colony or any other governing power, and "illegal" claims of rival parties led to disputes and considerable interference among the bird flocks. A first effort to take possession of the islands in the name of Her Britannic Majesty Queen Victoria in 1861 was not approved.

Permanent annexation of the islands only took place in 1866, when they were declared a dependency of the Cape Colony. In 1869 licenses were issued to interested firms to



"A room with a view". A penguin cave on Sylvia Hill.

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*Penguins in a protected cove at Sylvia Hill. In the early part of the 20 th century up to 700 000 penguin eggs were removed annually from breeding localities.*

lease the islands for long periods for the exploitation of guano. The southwest African islands subsequently passed into the hands of the firm of De Pass, Spence & Co. This control extended to all the islands, then collectively known as the Government Guano Islands. Landing on them was prohibited, and the enforcement of this regulation necessitated the maintenance of a permanent staff to prevent unauthorised interference. Huts or houses were erected on all islands, except Albatross, to accommodate the so-called headman and a small staff. During the guano season, more men were dispatched to collect the guano and prepare it for shipment to Cape Town.

Britain had never formally annexed any part of the then Southwest Africa beyond Walvis Bay and the islands, despite several requests by Germany that the British protect German missionaries in the interior. The Cape government had been content to regard Southwest Africa as a “commercial dependency”.

On August 7, 1884, Germany declared that it had taken possession of the coast and all guano islands within gunshot of the mainland. A diplomatic battle between Germany and England followed, as Britain was determined not to give up the islands without a struggle. After more than a year, Britain retained all the guano islands and the area around Walvis Bay, while the rest of the country that is now known as Namibia, and Shark Island, which was then linked to the mainland by a causeway, went to Germany.

As the guano trade continued under the control of the Cape government, a policy of sustainable use was maintained: a limited amount was removed annually, and scraping only took place during the “guano season” between April and September, when the birds were not breeding and away from the islands.

Guano prices remained high until the 1950s, when artificial fertilisers were first produced at competitive prices. The

government collected guano until 1976 when its collection was again leased to private enterprises by public tender. Although these concessions concerned three islands, namely Mercury, Ichaboe and Possession, guano in the 1980s and early 1990s was only taken from Ichaboe, which produced about 1 200 tons annually. In 1987 the islands, then administered by the Cape Provincial Administration of South Africa, were declared nature reserves. The Directorate of Nature Conservation employed an island biologist, who was stationed at Walvis Bay, to monitor the seabird populations and recommend management policies for guano scraping and the conservation of the birds. Since 1991, when guano was scraped off Ichaboe for the last time, the guano trade has come to a standstill.

In February 1994, Ichaboe and the other offshore islands were returned to the Namibian government together with Walvis Bay. Since then the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources manages the islands. A seabird biologist, based at Lüderitz, has since been appointed. The islands in 1994 lost their status as nature reserves. However, access to the islands is controlled strictly, and research on the islands is aimed at the conservation of the seabirds.

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