



Restoration ecology in **Namibia**

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Most people visit Namibia to experience wide open spaces, profuse wildlife, spectacular scenery and perhaps to have a glimpse of African culture. Thanks to low population pressure in many parts of the country, at present, Namibia can offer all of this in profusion.

Yet, in Namibia, more and more people demand services such as water, electricity and goods, hurrying along the development of infrastructure and industry. Several of these recently proposed development projects may encroach on core wilderness areas and have resulted in fierce debates between environmentalists and the pro-development lobby.

*Why being proactive
will pay off in the
long term*

Pending the final word of the decision-makers, if development projects go ahead in environmentally sensitive areas, what can be done to avoid or minimise the scars of human impact?

Given these threats and human pressures on many natural areas, restoration ecology receives increasing attention globally at present. Without venturing into detail, ecological restoration is a variant of the term rehabilitation, which simply means making the land useful again after disturbance. Rehabilitation could mean creating a pasture where there was once a wetland, or a forest plantation where existed indigenous forest. Ecological restoration, in turn, aims at stimulating the natural sequence of recovery after disturbance, often by simple means of intervention. Ideally this should eventually result in a stable, self-sustaining ecosystem similar, if not identical, to what was there before.

In Namibia's arid to semi-arid environment only such an approach could eventually provide positive rehabilitation results. Focusing on the southern Namib, an area at present experiencing ever-increasing pressure by developers, the Namibian National Biodiversity Programme has recently launched a new project – "Restoration ecology in the southern Namib Desert".

The southern Namib was selected as a pilot area because of its nearly pristine wilderness character, its status as one of the few areas of international conservation in an arid region, and the looming, potentially very destructive impacts of prospecting,

mining and infrastructure developments. With such gloomy prospects for this fascinating piece of earth and considering its immense tourism potential, if development cannot be stopped, minimising the impact by ecological restoration is an imperative.

The new project's aims are twofold: to understand the natural processes of southern Namib ecosystems and to develop practical means to enhance the natural process of recovery in this arid area. These are very ambitious objectives, given how little is presently known about natural processes controlling vegetation and wildlife dynamics in the southern Namib. However, the project will probably not have all the answers within the present two-year trial period, but rather aims at developing a focused research and monitoring framework, with perhaps the initiation of a few projects actively addressing some of the many questions.

Along with the twofold approach goes a twofold strategy to obtain funds for projects within the restoration ecology framework. While funds for basic research are likely to become available through international research initiatives, it is anticipated that applied research dovetailed to the needs of individual developers will be supported through monitoring programmes, for example, as part of environmental management plans for development projects.

However, there will also be generic tasks which would potentially benefit all developers in the area. Examples range from the establishment of a nursery in the southern

