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The conservation authority responsible for the management of Sandwich Harbour is the Ministry of Environment and Tourism. Contact details follow below:



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Sandwich Harbour



**a wetland of international
importance**

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Sandwich Harbour

... a unique coastal wetland ...

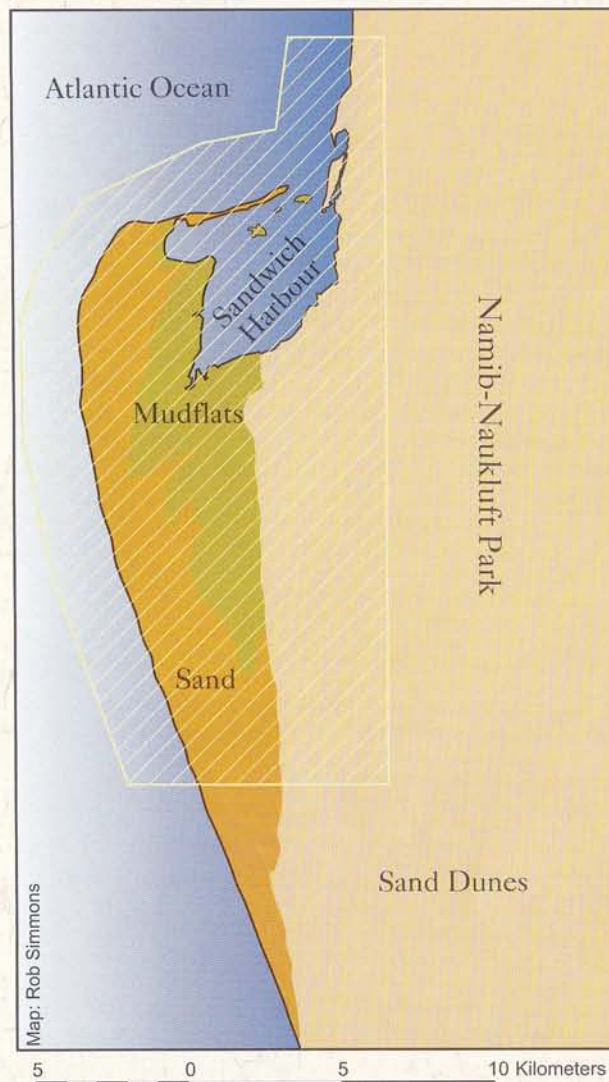


Wedged between the Namib Sand Sea and the Atlantic Ocean lies one of southern Africa's richest and unique wetlands. Portable water seeps slowly from a giant aquifer beneath the dunes and sustains fresh-water vegetation at the base of the dunes. South of this

freshwater wetland is a large bay and expansive mudflats. This is Sandwich Harbour, a centre of concentration for migratory shorebirds, waders and flamingos.

Archaeological investigations show that Sandwich Harbour became important to people in the 4th century AD. Local hunter-gatherer communities used the bay to obtain their source of protein in the form of fish and shellfish, and possibly seals and cetaceans as well. Shell middens and other artefacts found there indicate that it was occupied for a couple of thousand years. Sandwich Harbour was extremely valuable to early seafarers because it provided a natural deep-water anchorage with, most importantly, a supply of fresh water.

A number of theories abound as to the origin of the name, Sandwich Harbour. It was known to fifteenth and sixteenth century sailors as Port d' Ilheo, or Ponta dos Ilheos. The first documented record of the name Sandwich Harbour appears on a chart published in 1791 by Alexander Dalrymple. It is inferred that Sandwich Harbour was first mapped by whalers from the famous whaling house of Samuel Enderby & Sons, and named after the Enderby whale ship Sandwich. Guano mining, sealing and fishing at Sandwich Harbour were the major commercial enterprises on the Namibian coast by the latter part of the nineteenth century. Contact with local pastoral communities was limited to the barter for slaughter animals and the hire of casual labour. Sandwich Harbour became a conservation area in August 1941, when it was incorporated into "Game Reserve No. 3", which later became the Namib-Naukluft Park. Sandwich Harbour is comprised of a northern, freshwater wetland and the southern mudflats, covering about 50 square kilometres in total. The site is virtually cut off from inland Namibia



Map: Rob Simmons

by the Namib Dune Sea and can only be reached by travelling south along the beach for some 55 kilometres from Walvis Bay. The sands of its shoreline are constantly shifting and this makes the negotiation of a trip there rather treacherous.

... a dying wetland? ...

Due to natural processes the northern freshwater wetland has diminished in size from one kilometre across 20 years

ago to its present size of less than 200 metres across. This has led to a decrease in species diversity, which in turn has led to the premature conclusion that Sandwich Harbour is dying. The 20 square kilometres of mudflats at the southern end of Sandwich Harbour, too, are highly dynamic in nature due to the ocean currents and the wind.

Because of the enormous numbers of birds that visit Sandwich Harbour, it is one of the most important wetlands in southern Africa and was listed as a Ramsar wetland (see box) in 1995. It regularly supports over 145,000 birds in summer and 53,000 in winter. Traditionally, the northern wetlands hold the highest species diversity, while the southern mudflats hold by far the largest numbers of birds. Dominated by terns, sandpipers, flamingos and cormorants, shorebirds occur here at densities exceeding 10,000 birds per square kilometre, amongst the highest recorded in the world. Forty percent of the world population of Chestnutbanded Plover occur here. Sandwich Harbour is listed as an Important Bird Area because it holds significant numbers of globally near-threatened species (Lesser Flamingo, African Black Oystercatcher and Damara Tern) and as many as 14 of the species using these wetlands exceed 1% of their biogeographical population.

Bottlenosed and Heavisides dolphins and Cape fur seals also frequent the lagoon and 36 species of fish have been found. Oryx and brown hyaena are occasionally observed at the wetland.

... threatened by misuse...

Today, Sandwich Harbour is a favourite destination for day visits by tourists. Tourists are advised to make use of reputable tour companies as the unmonitored use of the area has led to destruction of habitat and disturbance of wildlife. Much harm, too, is done by people who insist on flying low over the area, violating the 1000m height restriction set for light aircraft and disturbing the feeding birds. Pilots are asked to fly over the sea around Sandwich.

The Convention on Wetlands, previously known as the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat (or the Ramsar Convention, after the Iranian City where the text was adopted in 1971) is an intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for international co-operation for the conservation of wetland habitats.