

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CONSERVATION AND ORIGIN OF THE CONCESSION AREAS IN THE FORMER DAMARALAND

By Garth Owen-Smith - IRDNC - November 2002

This historical summary has been compiled from Namibia Wildlife Trust, Endangered Wildlife Trust and IRDNC reports from 1982 to present, as well as personal communication (at the time) with many of the people then active in the area. It is as accurate as these documents and my memory permits, but there may be different versions of events, particularly those I did not personally take part in. I have included many names of those involved, as references for verification, but also because they deserve recognition for their conservation efforts at a time when the survival of the Kunene Region's wildlife hung in the balance.

Table of Contents

1. The Greater Etosha Game Park
2. The Damaraland trophy-hunting concession
3. The appointment of community game guards
4. Re-proclamations negotiations
5. Aftermath of the failed negotiations
6. The establishment of tourism concessions in Damaraland
7. Wildlife conservation in the concession areas
8. Livestock in the concession areas
9. Game harvesting in the concession areas
10. Tourism in the concession areas
11. Post-independence changes
12. Some Key Issues

1. The Greater Etosha Game Park

In response to excessive elephant hunting during the German colonial period, Game Reserve No.2, which included the area around the Etosha Pan and most of the Kaokoveld, was proclaimed in 1907. Although its status and boundaries were changed during the early South African administration, it remained the largest conservation area in the world, stretching from the Uchab to the Kunene Rivers and covering approximately 84 000 square kilometers.

In 1970, according to the recommendations of the Odendaal Commission of Inquiry into SWA Affairs, the western extension of the Etosha Game Park was de-proclaimed and most of it included in a newly established homeland for the Damara people. Game Reserve No.2 was also de-proclaimed and the "Kaokoveld Native Reserve" was renamed Kaokoland, a homeland for Herero and Himba people. Only a strip of desert coast, varying in width from 32 to 40 kms, was retained and became the present Skeleton Coast Park. Apart from the "Sesfontein Circle" (ten kilometers radius around Sesfontein village), the boundary between the then Kaokoland and Damaraland homelands was the middle of the Ombonde-Hoanib River. Although local administrative

authorities were developed for the two homelands, authority over nature conservation was retained in the hands of the Dept. of Bantu Administration and Development in Pretoria.

2. The Damaraland trophy-hunting concession

In 1978, the Dept. of B.A.D. granted a ten-year trophy hunting concession to Volker Grellman of ANVO Safaris in the still game-rich and largely unoccupied area to the south of the Hoanib River (formerly the western Etosha Game Park). Apart from common game, ANVOs annual quota included two trophy elephants north of the "Red line" veterinary cordon fence and problem elephants as they occurred anywhere in Damaraland. Between 1977 and 1981, a total of 18 bull elephants were shot, mainly south of the vet. fence (Grellman, pers. com.).

After the 1978 elections in South West Africa/Namibia, the previously established ethnic authorities were given "Second-Tier" government status with responsibility for designated political functions within their areas. However, authority over nature conservation and tourism would be retained by the country's nationally elected central government.

In 1981, responsibility for nature conservation in all the homelands of SWA was finally transferred from Pretoria (B.A.D.) to the Directorate of Nature Conservation in Windhoek and Chris Eyre was appointed as Senior Nat. Cons. officer for Damaraland, based in Khorixas. For nearly two years, his staff comprised just one field assistant, Lucas Mbomboro. In 1983, the DNC appointed the first black game rangers in Damaraland, including Nahor Howaseb and Augustinus Ochams and the following year, Duncan Gilchrist was appointed as a game ranger and based at Sesfontein and Arno van Niekerk as nature conservation officer responsible for Kaokoland.

While nature conservation had been under the control of BAD, it had been a common practice for government officials and many other influential persons to be granted permits to hunt in the homelands of SWA. However, in 1981, Chris Eyre was able to get the support of the Damara Representative Authority (DRA) to stop this much-abused policy. The following year, the issuing of all hunting permits was banned in both Damaraland and Kaokoland. Because large-scale commercial poaching of elephants and rhino was now taking place in the northwest, Eyre also obtained a temporary moratorium on ANVO shooting problem elephants in 1981 and stopped the trophy hunting of elephants in 1982.

Between 1980 and early 1982, the northwest was hit by a devastating drought, which decimated both the local people's livestock and the wild ungulates of the region. As a result, subsistence hunting by the indigenous residents - that previously had little impact on wildlife populations - now became an added threat to the survival of big game in the northwestern homelands. However, Eyre decided that, if he was going to prosecute the Damara and Herero residents of the region for illegal hunting, then sport

hunting by wealthy foreign clients could no longer be justified and, in 1983, he drastically reduced ANVO's overall trophy hunting quota.

In March-April 1982, when good rains finally broke the drought, the few surviving herds of mountain zebra, gemsbok and springbok, dispersed across the desert plains. With their natural prey now difficult to hunt, the larger predators - whose numbers had increased during the drought - started killing large numbers of the local people's livestock. In Sesfontein, an emaciated lion also entered a hut and ate a small child. By the end of the year, a total of 76 lions, 33 cheetah and 9 leopards were reported as having been killed in the region.

3. The appointment of community game guards

To assist the government in their efforts to control illegal hunting in the northwest, Blythe Loutit and Ina Britz, together with a group of concerned Namibian conservationists, formed the Namibia Wildlife Trust in early 1982. After the Damara Representative Authority had given its support for this initiative and Clive Walker, director of the Endangered Wildlife Trust in South Africa had promised financial support, I resigned my post as a senior nature conservator in Etosha to direct the NGO's field operations. The NWT's base camp was established at Wereldsend, in the basalt zone, where the largest populations of elephant, rhino and other big game still survived. The objectives of the Namibia Wildlife Trust were:

1. To create an awareness of the need for good conservation among all residents of Kaokoland and Damaraland.
2. To train suitable inhabitants of Kaokoland and Damaraland in conservation so that in the future they might play an active professional role in the conservation of the region.
3. To assist the local government conservation officers in controlling illegal hunting in the region.
4. To promote a better understanding of the ecology of this unique region.

Between 1982 and 1984, Peter Erb, Elias Hambo, Bennie Roman, Johan le Roux and Sakeus Kasaona, worked as my assistants, but we still did not have the man-power to cover the vast and rugged area where poaching was taking place. In 1983, in accordance with the NWT's stated objectives, discussions were held with the Herero headmen Keefas Muzuma, Joshua Kangombe, Goliat Kasaona and Vetamuna Tjambiru, that resulted in the appointment of the first six community game guards. Four of these men were resident in or near the concession area of Damaraland. In 1986, a further six CGGs were appointed here by traditional leaders Kangombe and Kasaona of Warmquelle, as well as Otto Ganuseb (Sesfontein) and Gabriel Taniseb (Khorarib).

As the goal of the community game guard initiative was to *stop* illegal hunting (rather than just catching poachers), mature men that were respected by their communities were chosen. As they were all farmers, living in key conservation areas, their primary function was to monitor the wildlife and local human activities, as well as carrying out conservation extension work within their communities. As the cggs were often required to give evidence against their

neighbors, or even family members, it was crucial that the investigating officers treated all accused with human dignity and that their traditional leaders were fully involved, including attending the subsequent court cases. The result was that, between 1982 and 1987, the combined efforts of the DNC, traditional leaders and NGOs led to the conviction of over 80 people for illegal hunting in the northwest. More importantly, the great majority of the people living in and around the concession area were now very positive towards conservation and virtually no illegal hunting was taking place.

4. Re-proclamation negotiations

In 1983, the Directorate of Nature Conservation (DNC) started negotiations with the Executive Committee of the DRA (under the chairmanship of Chief Justus Garoeb) and Volker Grellman of ANVO Safaris, with regard to the re-proclamation of the trophy hunting concession area in northern Damaraland. From information I received at the time, the initial discussions with the DRA went reasonably well and it was agreed that a second meeting would be held, at which an income sharing and joint management plan for the area would be worked out. As game numbers in the concession area were now extremely low and his quota had been drastically cut, Grellman also agreed to give up his concession if he was paid out for its remaining five years, as well as for his hunting camp at Palmwag.

The DNC did not have funds budgeted to buy out ANVO Safaris, but they approached the South African Nature Foundation to give them the R63 000 needed. This was agreed to by the SANF on condition that the DNC could guarantee that the area would be proclaimed. Confident that agreement with the Damara Representative Authority was now just a formality, ANVO was paid out with SANF funds in mid 1983. Based on the assurances given by the DNC, Dr. Anton Rupert then announced over South African television that the old (pre-1970) Etosha would soon be re-proclaimed. Senior DNC officials made a similar announcement over SWA Television. Although there was jubilation in conservation circles, as no formal agreement had yet been reached with the Damara Executive Committee, they were not at all happy with these premature announcements.

The DEC's concerns that they were not being regarded as important players in the game - although they were being asked to give up nearly a third of the land given to the Damara people by the Odendaal Commission - seemed to be confirmed at their follow-up meeting with the DNC. Apparently, DNC officials laid out their detailed plan of how the concession area would be managed and informed the DEC that they would be receiving 25% of the gate revenues. This was not acceptable to the DEC, who also reminded their central government colleagues that, at their previous meeting, it had been agreed that they would *jointly* plan the area's management and revenue sharing. The DEC was now convinced that the DNC was acting in bad faith and believed that they would not be equal partners in any plan to re-proclaim the concession area as a game reserve. They withdrew from the negotiations and although attempts were made to restart them, in early 1984, the DNC announced that the talks had broken down and that the "concession zone"

would thus not be proclaimed in the near future. It is significant that, although Chris Eyre played a major role in initiating the re-proclamation negotiations, his superiors did not allow him to participate in the discussions with the DEC.

5. Aftermath of the failed negotiations

The DNC was obviously embarrassed by the turn of events, especially as they were now being asked by the SANF to return the money used to pay out ANVO Safaries. Scapegoats were needed and soon found. At short notice, Chris Eyre was transferred to Keetmanshoop (the DNC's "Siberia") and the NWT's field staff were accused of "confusing the local people". In early 1984, its Board of Directors were told to close the project down and leave conservation in Damaraland and Kaokoland to the DNC. They bowed to this demand and, although the EWT supported for the project until the end of the year, they too were threatened that, if they continued to fund NGO activities in the northwest, they would be prohibited from working in parks in both SWA and SA. In December, all the NWT staff were given notice. However, even the DNC senior officials had to admit that the headmen-appointed community game guards were making a major contribution to conservation in the region and they undertook to continue supplying them with rations, purchased with funds provided by the E.W.T.

In spite of government attempts to remove me from the area, with continued support from the DRA, concerned conservationists and friends, I was able to remain at Wereldsend, from where I tried to monitor what was happening in the area. In Damaraland, Chris Eyre's replacement, Marcellus Loots, made an effort to maintain co-operation with the local traditional leaders and their game guards, but his new counterpart in Opuwo, Hilmar van Alphen, actively undermined the community-based approach. Poaching here increased (van Alphen was himself charged with illegal hunting) and the slowly recovering wildlife populations in Kaokoland were, once more, seriously threatened.

Concerned by the way that the EWT was being misled and their funds abused in Kaokoland, Margie Jacobsohn (then an archaeological researcher based in Purros) contacted the EWT's new director, Dr John Ledger, and arranged for him to visit the area and evaluate the situation. Based on what he saw and heard from the local traditional leaders, Ledger re-instated EWT financial support for NGO activities in the region in April 1987. In 1990, the community-based project was renamed Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC) - a Namibian NGO that was later registered as a Trust.

6. The establishment of tourism concessions in Damaraland

Although their negotiations with the DNC over the proclamation of the concession area had broken down, the DRA's executive committee (under Chief Garoeb and strongly supported by the MEC for education, Simpson Tjongarero and the MEC for agriculture, Johannes Hendriks), were still very committed to wildlife conservation. They also saw future tourism in the region as being an important vehicle for rural development and wished to see the erstwhile "hunting concession area" kept free of permanent human settlement

and developed as a tourist attraction. Although I declined a full-time post within the Damara "Second-Tier" Government to assist with this task (because it would restrict my activities to Damaraland), I was often consulted on issues involving conservation and tourism in the area.

In late 1985, the DRA's executive committee, together with agricultural officials, Johan Oosthuizen and Marthinus Boshoff, drew up plans to develop the area of Damaraland that had previously been part of Etosha, as well as the five, fenced-off farms in the homeland's northeastern corner, as tourist attractions under their authority. Although this initiative had the full support of the Second-Tier Authority's secretary, Jan Malan, it was blocked by the DNC, who insisted that, as tourism was a central government responsibility, only they were mandated to carry out such activities.

The impasse was resolved by the DRA deciding to lease out the area to tourism operators, which they were legally entitled to do. It was also decided to build a tourist lodge on the site of the old ANVO hunting camp at Palmwag, which was done by using materials and labor "borrowed" from other line ministries within the second-tier authority. The rustic Palmwag Lodge was completed and opened in July 1986.

As the old ANVO hunting concession was enormous (over 15 000 square kilometers), it was decided to divide it along the Palmwag-Sesfontein road and to offer the uninhabited desert between the Uchab River and the veterinary fence, as a third tourist concession. The area around Palmwag Lodge (between the Grootberg Range in the northeast, the Aub River in the west and the Achab River in the south) was kept as an "open area" for Palmwag guests and anyone else wishing to visit it.

In early 1986, I was asked to recommend suitable persons who might be interested in leasing Palmwag Lodge and the three newly created tourism concession areas. As only Louw Schoeman's Skeleton Coast Fly-in Safaris and Karl-Heiz Grutemeyer, who then ran occasional 4X4 safaris through the west of Damaraland, were taking clients into the northwest at the time, they were the obvious candidates. Grutemeyer accepted both Palmwag Lodge and the western concession area while Schoeman later leased the southern concession area. Nobody was interested in the eastern tourism concession area until early 1990, when it was leased to Denis Liebenberg, initially in partnership with Wilderness Safaris. The following year, the DEC also offered the "Five Farms" in the northeast of Damaraland (now Hobatere) as a trophy hunting concession to Jan Oelofse of Mount Etjo Game Ranch.

The Damara Representative Authority would benefit from Palmwag Lodge and the allocated tourism concessions by an annual lease fee and a small levy from persons going into the "open area", which was collected by the Lodge leasee on their behalf. To encourage persons visiting the area, to pay this levy, signs were erected at the main entry points quoting a 1928 law requiring persons driving off proclaimed roads on State Land to obtain a permit from the "Secretary for South West Africa". Contraventions only carried a maximum fine of 25 pounds, but it was felt that most visitors, when confronted with the

signboards, would pay the levy. The validity of this old law was never tested in court.

The trophy hunting concession granted to Jan Oelofse was on a 50/50 profit sharing basis. As the contract required the leasee to build accommodation and other facilities, maintain game waters and manage the concession, Oelofse claimed to have made no profit in the three years he operated there. After independence Hobatere was converted into a tourism concession that was granted to Andries Ferreira and Steve Braine. In 1992, Ferreira withdrew from the partnership.

7. Wildlife conservation in the concession areas

After the de-proclamation of the western extension of Etosha and the Kaokoveld in 1970, the illegal hunting became rife throughout the northwest. While conservation was under the authority of Bantu Administration and Development, little was done to stop the slaughter and the once magnificent wildlife of the Kaokoveld had been virtually wiped out. By the time the NWT started operations in 1982, gangs of commercial hunters had also moved into the ANVO hunting concession, where the largest populations of big game still survived. However, by the combined efforts of the local DNC officials (under Chris Eyre, Marcellus Loots and Rudi Loutit), the DRA, NGOs and the local traditional leaders and their community game guards, by 1987, poaching here had been brought under control and all game numbers were increasing.

Because of the skyrocketing price of its horn in Yemen and the Far East, black rhino remained the most endangered species in the region. From their spoor, DNC and NWT fieldworkers were quickly able to establish where they still occurred, but sightings were infrequent and the actual numbers that survived were unknown. Consequently, with a grant from the New York Zoological Society in 1986, Sakeus Kasaona and I, assisted by Duncan and Ruth Gilchrist, John Paterson and Des and Jen Bartlett, carried out the first rhino census by individual identification. During this project, we tested different ways of finding rhino and refined the tracking method now widely used for monitoring (Owen-Smith, 1987). The census records were handed over to Blythe Loutit of the Save the Rhino Trust who, with their team of trained local community trackers, under Simpson Uri-Gop, have maintained the regular monitoring of this endangered species up to the present time.

When a resident of Rehoboth shot five rhinos in Damaraland (two in the concession area) in 1989, SNCO Rudi Loutit and DNC veterinarian Pete Morckel, undertook the first ever de-horning of wild rhino in vulnerable areas south of the cordon fence. Ten rhino were also translocated to Waterberg Plateau Park. In the early nineties, another five "wandering" Damaraland rhinos were captured and moved to the Hardap Recreational Area and Etosha NP. In a census carried out in 1997/8, it was found that the black rhino in the northwest have more than doubled in number since 1982 (calculated from adult animals identified in 1986/7).

From 1980 to 1983, Philip (Slang) Viljoen carried out detailed research on the elephants of Damaraland and southeastern Kaokoland. He identified three sub-populations: Those living permanently in the west (the so-called desert elephants), those that migrated to and from the Etosha NP, and an intermediate group, which moved between the two areas. From a three-week air census in July 1982, it was established that a total of about 300 elephants still survived in the region, less than 70 of which lived in the west. During his research, Viljoen had also found over 120 carcasses, 85% of which showed clear signs of having been poached. Subsequently, NWT staff found a further 24 elephant carcasses, most of which had been shot. It was also significant that only one small elephant calf was observed in the concession area prior to 1984, undoubtedly due to the drought and constant harassment.

Thanks to outstanding law enforcement work by Chris Eyre and later, SNCO Tommie Hall, very few cases of elephant poaching were recorded after 1985 and their overall numbers in the region has steadily risen to over 600 - about 150 of which regularly use the concession areas.

By the end of 1982, only one small pride of lions survived in the western concession area, while a second group inhabited the Skeleton Coast Park, from where they periodically moved up the Hoanib River. At that time, there still appeared to be two prides in the eastern concession area and lions often came into Hobatere from the neighboring Etosha NP. In 1987, the last of the Skeleton Coast Park lions was killed by Herero stockowners from Sesfontein. The lions resident in the east survived until the mid-nineties, but today there are only occasional migrants from Etosha in this area. However, the western concession pride has now broken up dispersed between the Achab and Hoarusib rivers. The total number of lions resident in the northwest is now about fifty.

At the end of the early eighties drought, all other game numbers in the concession areas were so low that they were vulnerable to subsistence hunting by the now impoverished Herero and Damara inhabitants of the region. Hunting by government officials, the SADF and other non-residents was also rife and if poaching had not been stopped by the mid-eighties, very little wildlife would have survived in the region. Over the past two decades, however, the populations of all species have made remarkable recoveries and have now reached levels that, if not stabilized or reduced, will undoubtedly crash when the next severe drought occurs in the region.

8. Livestock in the concession areas

For the first ten years after its de-proclamation, most of the western Etosha Game Park (between the Ombonde-Hoanib river and the veterinary cordon) remained unsettled by local people. However, during the major drought of the early eighties, Herero from Sesfontein and Warmquelle sought grazing for their livestock as far south as the Aub and Barab Rivers in the Uniab catchment. When the drought broke in 1982, they returned with their few, surviving animals to the Hoanib River basin. As part of the NWT's conservation extension activities, I was able to get the local Herero traditional

leaders to support a plan to keep the area south of the Hoanib-Uniab watershed for the exclusive use of wildlife and tourism in the future.

In 1987, when drought again struck the northwest, the Warmquelle headmen, Joshua Kangombe and Goliat Kasaona, requested my attendance at a meeting to discuss the situation. Here they explained that, because there was no grazing available in the Hoanib basin, they would have to take them across the watershed into the Uniab river catchment. I sympathized with their predicament - particularly because livestock numbers had considerably increased by then - but as Palmwag had opened the previous year and tourists were starting to visit the region, I requested them to look for any other possible alternative grazing before moving across the watershed. This they agreed to do and no *Herero* livestock were taken into the western tourism concession area until after Namibia's independence.

A few months later, two Damara stockowners from Sesfontein moved their cattle across the watershed and down the main road to the Otjorute spring (about 20kms north of Palmwag). Rudi Loutit, the new Principle NCO for Damaraland, and Mr Simpson Tjongarero (MEC of the DRA) visited these farmers and gave them permission to stay until the first good rains fell. However, when the drought broke, this agreement was not enforced and these stockowners have remained south of the watershed.

During the same drought, Headman Josef Japuhwa of Omuramba in SE Kaokoland also requested permission from the DRA to take cattle into the Palmfontein area of the eastern tourist concession. As this concession had not then been allocated and no tourism was taking place in it, permission for emergency grazing was granted. These Herero stockowners have also remained in the area, which was included in the concession leased by Denis Liebenberg in 1990. However, when the lease was renewed in 1995, this area was excluded from his concession. Subsequently, many more cattle-owners from Omuramba, Otjikovares and Warmquelle have moved into the original eastern concession area.

In the mid-nineties, some Herero cattle owners also crossed the Hoanib/Uniab watershed and, during the 1999 drought, they moved right down the main road to Palmwag, where their cattle drank from the spring in front of the lodge. The situation caused some consternation to the leasee, Jockel Grutemeyer, but he could do nothing about it as there had never been anything more than a "gentleman's agreement" to keep this concession area livestock free. The fact that the local people had never received any benefits from Palmwag or the concession may also have played a role in the stockowners decision to take their cattle to the lodge. The matter was eventually resolved when Grutemeyer provided piping for water to be brought through the vet. fence, from a farm further to the east. After good rains had fallen, all the livestock was moved back to their previous grazing areas.

Although, during droughts, some cattle have been moved into both the Palmwag and Etendeka concessions, and livestock is now permanently resident at Otjorute spring, the neighboring Herero and Damara stockowners

have, by and large, respected the need for the prime tourism areas to be free of domestic animals. With the passing of the conservancy legislation, local communities now have the rights to control and benefit from tourism in their areas. As a result, both registered Ehirovipuka and emerging Omatendeka conservancies have decided to keep the ecologically critical area along the Ombonde river (in the old eastern concession) livestock-free for the development of tourism enterprises. People have also been prohibited from settling at Otjiyapa spring (also in the old eastern concession) because it is used by large numbers of wild animals in the dry season.

9. Game harvesting in the concession areas

In 1987, in recognition of the local community's vital support in bringing illegal hunting under control and keeping livestock out of the key wildlife and tourism concession areas, SNC Marcellus Loots and I proposed that a limited amount of common game species be harvested for their consumption. This was agreed to by both the DNC and DRA and a total of 120 springbok, gemsbok and zebra, were cropped by second-tier government officials and the meat distributed through the traditional leaders at Warmquelle and Sesfontein. A similar game harvest was carried out the following year, but this time the hunting was done by DNC officers under Tommie Hall.

Because of the major political changes taking place from 1989, no more game was harvested for local consumption until 1991, when just over 600 animals (of five species) were cropped by MET officers from Damaraland and Etosha and distributed to all the communities bordering the concession areas. As the cost of this operation to the government was so high, no game harvesting was done in the following year. However, in 1993, Chief Control Warden, Danie Grobelaar, approved the cropping of 900 animals (of six species), that would be carried out by the local hunters appointed by their traditional leaders. MET officers were stationed in all of the hunting camps to monitor the operation and IRDNC loaned money for ammunition and provided transport for the meat to the villages for distribution.

In 1995, a second community game harvesting operation was carried out but, with the passing of the communal area conservancy legislation in 1996, subsistence hunting under the control of traditional leaders was stopped. In its place, registered conservancies that had wildlife management plans approved by the MET, could apply for annual quotas for both trophy hunting and "own-use" game harvesting.

10. Tourism in the concession areas

Before 1978, entry into South West Africa's northern tribal areas (later homelands) was strictly controlled and only government officials and some scientists were allowed into them. The few people that did overcome the red tape and visit the country's mountainous north west, known then as the Kaokoveld, returned with tales of its spectacular scenery, traditionally dressed people and magnificent wildlife. But the area was also exceptionally rugged,

with only a few 4x4 tracks and, even in the seventies, had no facilities apart from those in Opuwo (a shop with basic supplies and a petrol station).

The new political dispensation after the 1978 elections opened up the ethnic homelands to private travel but, within two years, the armed liberation struggle had spread to Kaokoland. With the roads in the north and east potentially land-mined, only very limited tourist traffic went through the western desert areas, with just one operator (Mr. Magura of Bambatsi Guest Farm near Khorixas), going as far as the Marienfluss. In 1984, while traveling near the Kunene River, Magura's Landcruiser drove over an "explosive device". Although no one was injured, it stopped virtually all tourism north of Purros until the cease-fire in 1989.

Although the war of liberation did not directly affect Damaraland, when Palmwag Lodge opened in 1986, its guests were mostly Namibians who knew the area and a few German tourists who came on Grutemeyer's Desert Adventure Safari Tours. In 1987, partly to supplement my small salary, but also to promote tourism to Namibia's northwest, I started guiding mobile safaris, arranged by the EWT in Johannesburg and with logistic backup provided by DAS. On our one week-long trip, we passed through the eastern concession (still unallocated), via Sesfontein to Purros and returned to Palmwag through the western concession area. Our main clients were South Africans, but Italians and a few French, British and American tourists made up about 30% of the participants. I continued guiding these EWT Tours until 1991, taking approximately 250 foreign tourists into Damaraland's concession areas and southwest Kaokoland.

At the time of Namibia's independence, there were about six relatively small mobile safari operators visiting, or passing through the Damaraland concession areas. Many self drive tourists (in their own or hired 4x4 vehicles) were also staying at Palmwag Lodge and using the open area. Wealthy Namibians were also discovering the remarkable attractions and freedom offered by a holiday, or even just a long-weekend, in the country's "Great Northwest".

Although all of the concessionaires have run very profitable businesses since independence, only Denis Liebenberg has given any financial benefits to the local communities whose steadfast commitment to conservation has made a major contribution to the success of tourism in the region.

11. Post-independence changes

- With Namibia's independence in 1990, the ethnically-based second tier authorities were disbanded and the concessionaires were faced with the problem of where to pay their lease fees. This issue was not resolved until 1993, when the new Government of the Republic of Namibia decided that, as they were tourist concessions, they fell under the Ministry of Environment and Tourism. Palmwag Lodge, the western and eastern concessions and Hobatere were then renewed annually until 1995, when the leasees were given a five-year year concession with the option of a

further five-year renewal. The southern concession was not renewed after independence. The MET also changed the boundaries of the western and eastern concessions:

- The previous "open area" around Palmwag lodge fell away and both eastern and western concessions were extended to the Palmwag-Sesfontein road.
- The Etendeka (eastern) concession was reduced to only include the area from the Grootberg southwards to the Vet. Cordon Fence.
- The Palmwag (western) concession excluded the area north of the Uniab watershed and east of the lower Hoanib gorge, but was extended to the river's north bank (previously the middle of the river) in the gorge.

The communal area conservancy legislation, passed in 1996, recognized the tourism concession areas as leases that could not be included within the boundaries of a conservancy. However, at a meeting held in Palmwag in 1999, Maria Kapere, the then Director of the MET, advised the concessionaires to negotiate benefit-sharing contracts with their neighboring conservancies before the expiry of their leases. Khuadi !Hoas (gazetted) and Omatendeka (submitted application) conservancies have already started negotiating contracts with the Hobatere and Etendeka concessionaires respectively.

12. Some Key Issues

- From the above it will be clearly seen that the "Damaraland" concessions were not an initiative of the MET or its predecessor, the DNC. Although the original trophy hunting concession was granted by BAD in Pretoria, the present Palmwag (Grutemeyer/Wilderness), Etendeka (Liebenberg) and Hobatere (Braine) tourism concessions were established as a mechanism by which the Damara Representative Authority could support wildlife conservation and benefit from it through tourism activities. At independence, however, the right to renew the concessions and collect the lease fees was inherited by the Directorate of Tourism within the MET.
- As they were established as *tourism* concessions, the leasees only have the right to restrict other commercial tourism activities within them. Apart from the legally dubious 1928 law used around Palmwag, the leasees have no right to stop non-commercial traffic through them. (A recent legal opinion has confirmed this). The leasees have also never had the right to restrict local people or livestock movements within the concessions, as was demonstrated at Palmwag during the 1999 drought.
- The reason why there is no livestock permanently in the present Palmwag and Etendeka concession areas (apart from the few families along the main road at Otjorute) is because of an agreement made with the traditional leaders in Sesfontein, Warmquelle and Khovarib during the early eighties. Their voluntarily giving up these grazing areas, which they are legally entitled to use, has enabled these concessions to become the very valuable tourist attractions and national assets that they are today.

- In spite of the fact that the existing tourist lodges in and around the concession areas are generating many millions of dollars annually, to date, only the Etendeka concessionaire, Denise Liebenberg, has paid a small bed-night levy to his neighboring communities. This voluntary gesture on his part has given him an open line of communication to the local stockowners who, in the 1999 drought, request permission from him before bringing livestock into his concession.
- Because Hobatere is fully fenced, the concessionaire here has not faced livestock encroachment, excepting when it has been negotiated with him by communities to the south. However, both his southern and northern neighbors periodically experience considerable livestock losses from lions coming from this concession, the cost of which needs to be balanced if we wish to see a more tolerant attitude towards lions coming out of concession areas in the future. Veterinary restrictions prevent livestock from the north coming onto Hobatere.
- Although the anti-poaching campaign of the 1980s must be seen as a team effort between government (including the Second-tier DRA), traditional leaders and NGOs, it was unlikely to have achieved its remarkable success were it not for the support given by the overwhelming majority of local people. That their support for conservation has now been maintained for twenty years, in spite of their having received negligible direct economic benefits from the region's lucrative tourism industry, makes their commitment all the more noteworthy.
- Although the Damara Representative Authority (under Chief Justus Garoeb) can rightly claim to have played a major role in the conservation of wildlife in Damaraland, as well as having created the present tourist concession areas, this institution no longer exists. Consequently, although some of the traditional leaders in the present Damara Royal House were previously Damara Executive Committee members, their claim to benefit from the concession areas in the future should be treated with caution. Namibia's new constitution no longer recognizes land-rights based on ethnicity and the local Herero traditional authorities - who have steadfastly supported conservation and kept livestock out of the concession areas - could make equal claims to benefit economically from them.