

The production of this pamphlet was made possible by a generous financial contribution of the Ramsar Small Grants Fund. This Fund is administered by the Ramsar Bureau, whose aim it is to promote an understanding and awareness of our fragile wetland habitats, thus contributing to their conservation.

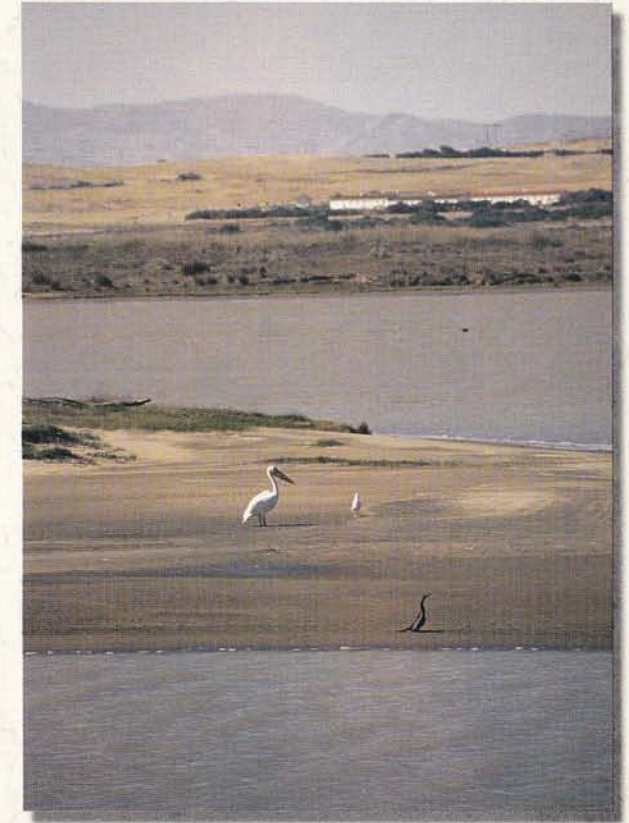
The conservation authorities responsible for the management of the Orange River Mouth are the Ministry of Environment & Tourism (Namibia) and Northern Cape Nature Conservation Service (South Africa). Contact details follow below:

Ministry of Environment & Tourism
Private Bag 13306
Windhoek
Namibia
Tel. (061) 263131
Fax (061) 259101
e-mail: metreper@iafrica.com.na

Northern Cape Nature Conservation Service
Private Bag X6102
Kimberley 8300
South Africa
Tel. (053) 8322143
Fax (053) 8313530
e-mail: abraham@natuur.ncape.gov.za



Orange River Mouth



**a wetland of international
importance**



Photos: D. Heinrich & H. Kolberg

Text by A. Abrahams, M.D. Anderson & H. Kolberg
Layout & design by Dirk Heinrich Photo Library

Orange River Mouth

... rich in fauna, flora and history ...

Where the mighty Orange River pumps its turbid waters into the Atlantic Ocean one finds the Orange River Mouth, one of only a few perennial wetlands on the arid west coast of southern Africa. Shared by Namibia and South Africa, it is the first transfrontier Ramsar wetland in southern Africa.



The Orange River Mouth is home to a fascinating diversity of animal and plant life. Thousands of waterbirds of approximately 60 species

utilize the shallow sheltered waters, islands and beach for roosting, breeding and feeding purposes. The wetland regularly supports thirteen South African and Namibian Red Data waterbird species, more than 1% of the world population of Hartlaub's Gull and Damara Tern and 1% of the southern African population of several species, including Curlew Sandpiper and Caspian Tern.

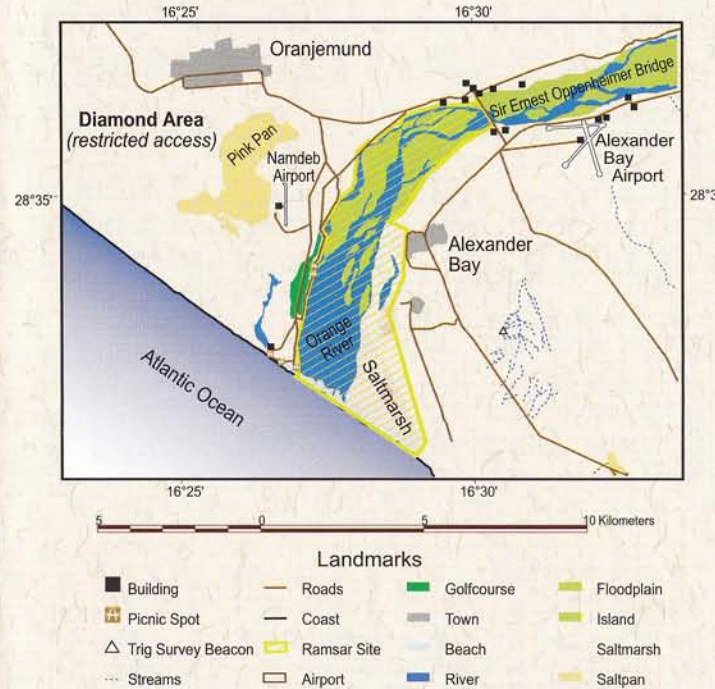
Key waterbird habitats include the western portion of the saltmarsh (for waders) and the mouth area (for terns and cormorants). The surrounding semi-desert environments are important for Karoo Eremomela, Grey-backed Cisticola, Barlow's Lark and many others. Raptors, such as African Fish Eagle, Osprey, Peregrine Falcon and Black-breasted Snake-Eagle are regularly observed.



Desert-dwelling gemsbok (and wild Ostriches) are a common sight on the fertile floodplain during the dry summer months, whilst the occurrence of the Cape clawless otter this far west, amazes many a visitor. The unique freshwater fish assemblage of the Orange River Mouth include three endemic species, the largemouth yellowfish, rock catfish and Namaqua barb.



Orange River Mouth



Covering 2000 ha, the **Ramsar wetland** (see box) is adjacent to the twin mining towns of Alexander Bay and Oranjemund. The mining history of the area dates back to 1928 when the first diamonds were discovered on the southern bank of the river. However, long before the discovery of diamonds, the ford at Arriesdrift was known to many early traders and missionaries and used by them in their forays into the hinterland. The fossil deposits at Arriesdrift give us an intriguing insight into the area's prehistory.

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.

... an undiscovered tourist destination ...

The Orange River Mouth, apart from being an important tourism asset (in view of the rich bird life, history, and it being the endpoint of a river that traverses almost the entire subcontinent), also serves as a gateway to tourist destinations in southern Namibia and Namaqualand. Plans for a massive Transfrontier Conservation Area incorporating all protected areas from Iona National Park in Angola to the Richtersveld National Park in South Africa are currently being negotiated. This would further enhance the tourism potential of the area.

... and yet threatened by anthropogenic developments

Despite its rich natural and cultural resources, and its tourism potential, the Orange River Mouth is under threat. Compared to the 1980s (when waterbird numbers regularly exceeded 20 000 individuals) significantly fewer waterbirds have been recorded during the early to mid-1990s, with the total rarely exceeding 10 000 individuals these days. This recent decline in waterbird numbers (especially the Cape Cormorant) can be attributed to the degradation of the once extensive saltmarsh, a change in the structure of the wetland (the islands and braided channel system) and human disturbance.

The Montreux Record is a register of sites administered by the Ramsar Bureau, that have suffered considerable changes in ecological character, or where changes in ecological character are expected to occur because of technological developments, pollution or other human interference

Due to the degradation of vital wetland habitats and a subsequent decline in waterbird numbers, the South African portion of the wetland was placed on the **Montreux Record** (see box) in September 1995. As such, a series of conservation and management planning exercises is currently underway at the Orange River Mouth, the aims of which are to aid the proclamation of a statutory transfrontier conservation area and to restore the wetland (which still meets several Ramsar criteria) to its former glory.