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Editorial

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Conservation and land in Namibia: A palimpsestic reading of an underexplored nexus

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KEYWORDS conservation; conservation–land nexus; land; multidisciplinary; Namibia

INTRODUCTION

This special issue set out to capture the many and varied ways in which conservation relates to land in Namibia; accordingly, we opted for expanse over precision in our thematic framing. Not only did an expansive scope make sense thematically but it also closely aligns with the Namibian Journal of Environment's (NJE) own mandate - making the NJE a logical home for this epistemological pursuit.

NAMIBIA'S CONSERVATION–LAND NEXUS

While scholarship on conservation and land in Namibia, as separate research domains, is abundant and diverse, we believe that not enough scholarly attention has been dedicated to the nexus where conservation and land co-produce plurality. This includes research that considers both conservation and land in their broadest sense and considers conservation as an 'inscribing' force or land governance structure, rather than merely a land preservation concept and practice - including cases where conservation is mobilised in ways that reconfigure land use (Lindsey et al. 2013). A lot has been written about Namibia's communal conservancy-based approach to natural resource management (e.g., Naidoo et al. 2011; Humavindu & Stage 2015; Nuulimba & Taylor 2015; Riehl et al. 2015; Lendelvo et al. 2020; Heffernan 2022; Foyet 2024), but even there, scholarship has tended to

focus on conservation and socio-economic outcomes - with a few exceptions (e.g., Gargallo 2015; Bollig 2016; Odendaal & Werner 2020; Koot et al. 2023; Kadhikwa et al. 2026). These exceptions have typically occupied realms of political ecology. This has left abundant room for exploration in perhaps more abstract, nuanced and relational spaces (e.g., Dieckmann 2023). With long histories of land dispossession, as well as evolving land governance systems, land use dynamics and ambitions to rectify land injustices, Namibia presents an intriguing subject for inquiry. What role conservation has played or plays in these processes has been scantily documented - something that has become clear during our collective works (Becker 2022; Becker & Holmes 2026; Lenggenhager 2018; Lenggenhager et al. 2021; Moore & Lenggenhager 2025). That is why, when we published the call for this issue, we placed particular emphasis on these aspects.

As a contrast, it is worth casting our eyes beyond Namibia's borders. Research in and on South Africa, for example, has been grappling more comprehensively with the conservation–land nexus, with inquiries ranging from conservation's influence on land inequality (Lenggenhager & Ramutsindela 2021; Spierenburg 2020; Thakholi & Büscher 2024; Thakholi & Koot 2023), to how conservation intersects with land reform efforts (Ramutsindela 2003; Shwababa et al. 2025). These

references are merely illustrative though; the conservation–land nexus continues to generate a vast and expanding body of scholarship.

Our call attracted abstracts from across the breadth and depth of the conservation–land nexus. We ended up receiving 15 abstracts, of which 12 were accepted and culminated in the submission of a full manuscript. However, following peer-review and given our prescribed timeframe, our collection was ultimately reduced to six papers. Whether accepted or rejected, the submitted materials revealed the broad spectrum on which both conservation and land are or can be conceptualised, whether in isolation or in relational terms.

INSIDE A PALIMPSEST

Sullivan and Ganuses (this issue) follow three individual journeys in north-western Namibia, as they traverse landscapes through an ancestral lens, and situate this experience within conservation’s historical influence, which has rendered certain cultural heritage largely invisible. This storytelling is also entangled with the history of Etosha National Park, across its many iterations. The consequences of its establishment and consolidation have been well-documented from a human displacement perspective. Hundreds of people were infamously evicted and displaced with the Park’s commercialisation and physical enclosure (e.g., Dieckmann 2001, 2023; Koot & Hitchcock 2019; Odendaal 2024). In this issue, Wahedi and Koot visit one of the sites of this consequence - Tsintsabis. Tsintsabis is a farm-turned-settlement, which was acquired by the State as part of its group resettlement programme. Here, the authors investigate the contemporary challenges of a resettled San community, while also attempting to trace an enduring interrelatedness between culture, environment, land and people. Further east, in Nyae Nyae, Hitchcock and Kelly (this issue) take a closer look at a people who were largely spared the expropriation of their ancestral lands. Now, with Namibia’s post-independence conservation model on communal land, they are navigating dynamic and evolving governance systems, in an attempt to preserve a deeply anchored connection to their ancestral land. Similarly, David et al. (this issue) detail the potential for and the value of generationally derived tacit knowledge in governing contemporary Namibia’s

state forest reserves. To do this, the authors draw from their experiences engaging communities who live in and around three different state forest reserves in Namibia’s Kavango West, Otjozondjupa and Zambezi regions. As a concluding perspective, Naanda et al. (this issue) outline the potential of other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) in Namibia. OECMs were conceptualised through a Convention on Biological Diversity decision in 2018 and are territories outside of formal protected areas that are recognised as contributing positively to global conservation outcomes. Their implementation in Namibia at this stage is still in a pilot phase, which is prioritising private game reserves and privately led initiatives at large. Their wider implementation would signal a more systematic alignment with global conservation governance and targets, and another conservation-motivated addition to the palimpsest that is Namibian land.

As this special issue took shape, aligning its contents with the figure of a palimpsest became increasingly apt. Despite a relatively modest number of contributions, this collection takes us through varied writing and rewriting processes, where we consider land a parchment, on which conservation, in its many forms, has inscriptive agency. From historicising this dynamic to imagining its future, the included works demonstrate expertly to what extent the conservation–land nexus in Namibia has been layered, inscribed and obscured. Simultaneously, the contributed works have exposed the unfilled spaces left behind.

BIASES, GAPS AND POTENTIAL FOR MORE

The special issue inherited disciplinary biases that have perhaps, so far, also defined Namibia’s conservation–land nexus. Anthropology, for example, has played a significant role. Its methodological toolkit has undoubtedly equipped it well to tease apart some of the nuances that are often definitive of conservation and land’s interrelation. However, the existing corpus would certainly benefit from a greater diversity in disciplinarity. And while a few abstracts met this criterion, they ended up either falling outside of the scope of this special issue or their full submissions required more work. Where the latter applied, we offered everyone the opportunity to transfer their

submission to one of the NJE's general issues. We are therefore looking forward to more.

A thematic gap, which persists in this issue, is how freehold, and specifically private, farmland is evolving as a consequence of conservation-narrated development. While Naanda et al. (this issue) do expand on a developing dimension within this context, what rural Namibia's move towards a more wildlife-centric economy has meant for freehold agricultural land and its many facets is severely lacking intersectional inquiry.

With the identification of gaps and the acknowledgement of biases, it is also worth reflecting on our own position as editors. We were trained in different disciplines and intellectual environments (ecology, anthropology and history), which has equally resulted in biases and preferences in how we perceive and analyse the conservation–land nexus. These, of course, have also been informed by our personal journeys. As contrasting and varied as our backgrounds, experiences and values may be, we have found considerable alignment inside the conservation–land nexus. This alignment ultimately gave rise to the idea for a special issue call. We hope that this issue is not only insightful but can serve as a launchpad for further discussion and inquiry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to everyone who answered our call, whether as an author or reviewer. It is your collective effort that has brought this special issue to life. This same gratitude extends to all authors whose work is not represented in this issue. Your dedication, efforts and time have not gone unrecognised nor unappreciated. We would also like to thank Alice Jarvis for her contributions, as copyeditor, to this body of work. This publication would also not have been possible without the financial support of Ongava Research Centre. Additionally, we sincerely thank Eugene Chigbu and Ute Dieckmann for their feedback on an earlier draft of this editorial.

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How conservation may make cultural heritage invisible: Intersecting on-site oral histories with land claims for settler colonialism, conservation and tourism in north-west Namibia

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ABSTRACT Oral histories concerning people's past experiences in land areas claimed for settler colonialism, conservation and tourism are rather muted in Namibia. Their invisibility is perhaps because they illuminate complexities that the state, conservation NGOs and the private sector might wish to avoid. At the same time, oral histories speaking of past dwelling places and species use practices constitute rich cultural heritage dimensions that have become disembedded from lands historically reimagined for settler farming, conservation and tourism investment. In this article we draw on several years' research with Nami-Daman elders in north-west Namibia that builds on an on-site oral history research praxis. In this methodology, we have been led by specific individuals to places of their past, enabling iterative documentation of livelihood and mobility practices, ancestral graves, and genealogies. These journeys have focused on the Northern Namib/Skeleton Coast National Park, Palmwag Tourism Concession and connections between Sesfontein and Puros, in conjunction with archival and historical research about these land areas. In carrying out this research, we have been able to reconstruct something of the mesh of relations with places, animals, plants and ancestors that once constituted these areas as thriving, flourishing and multi-dimensional spaces infused with Indigenous cultural histories and meanings. We argue that careful oral history methodologies are essential for understanding these areas as cultural landscapes made invisible through their constructed contemporary visibility as wilderness areas oriented towards tourism profit-making. In keeping with Article 19 of Namibia's constitution, we thus emphasise the justice dimensions of recognising these histories and their displacements.

KEYWORDS conservation and tourism; eviction; memory politics; Namibia; on-site oral history; recognition justice; settler colonialism

"If they tell the truth, it is because they remember" (Foucault 2014[1980]: 38).

INTRODUCTORY VIGNETTE: 'OUR HEARTS WERE HAPPY HERE'

We, the authors, met in 1994 in the process of beginning field research for a PhD on *People, Plants and Practice* in the former 'Damaraland Homeland' (Sullivan 1998). This research was supported by the Desert Research Foundation of Namibia (DRFN), Save the Rhino Trust Namibia (SRT), the National Botanical Research Institute (NBRI), and a Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) research permit. It was during this time that we began to learn about local and Indigenous histories embedded in the broader landscape around the current Hoanib River settlements in north-west Namibia. This is an area known today for its spectacular landscapes and its populations of desert-adapted black rhino (*Diceros bicornis bicornis*) (Sullivan et al. 2021), elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) (Wenborn et al. 2024), and lion (*Panthera leo*) (Brassine 2024, Heydinger 2024, Muzuma 2024). The area is now prioritised for conservation and as a sought-after tourism destination catered for by luxury eco-lodges linked with locally-run conservancies (Lendelvo et al. 2024). Through on-site oral history research over the last ten years, however, we have come to learn that the landscapes described as 'wilderness' in tourism brochures advertising the area are full of the traces of former dwelling places and the graves of known ancestors.¹ People alive today are amongst those who lived at these places. They remember their experiences of these places and their mobilities through the landscape in times past.

We started recording oral histories with Khoekhoegowab-speaking Damara/#Nūkhoe and !Ubu individuals in 1999.² We worked mostly with people living in Sesfontein³ and Kowareb; on redistributed former Afrikaans settler farms near the Aba-!Huab River that in the early 1970s were incorporated into the 'Damaraland Homeland' (Sullivan 1996); and in settlements along the !Uḡāb river. The first of these interviews, on 15 April 1999,

was with Suro's grandmother, Philippine !Hairo !Nowaxas,⁴ who opened her narrative by saying, 'I was born at Sixori in Hurubes'. At this point in time we did not know where the place Sixori was located, or the dimensions of the land area known as Hurubes. !Hairo spoke of how they lived there in circular stone houses (see Figure 1) with a shrubby *Petalidium* plant (!ḡ-na) used to protect them as they were sleeping. !Hairo continued by saying:

we moved around and moved around. My father [!Khaillgoe !Nowaxab] was really from this place [!Nani!aus] and my mother [!Hūri Juligen !Awises] was from Hurubes, really she's from Hurubes; she's !Kha-a Damara.

She also began to list various places saying,

this is Sixori, this is Tsaugugam, this is Oronguari, this is the home of Xoms, here is the field [!garob]. I move to and sleep at the places where the rain falls, because the food is there.

We have now studied multiple maps from the period of German colonial rule of Namibia that started formally in 1884, until the present time. None of these named places and land areas appear on any printed map we have seen of the area.⁵ It is as if these personal histories and place-located experiences simply do not exist in formal representations of the territory, thereby constituting an 'imaginative geography' (Said 1978) that erases people's pasts. These places, however, are known and spoken about locally. They linger in the memories of now elderly people dwelling in settlements to which they became constrained after being removed from this dry and mountainous corner of west Namibia.

After several false starts we eventually found the place Sixori that in 1999 started this thread of research. Sixori is named after the *xoris* (*Salvadora persica*) bushes that grow around a permanent spring of clear, sweet water and whose fruit

¹ For example, <https://gondwana-collection.com/accommodation/palmwag-lodge>

² Khoekhoegowab includes four click consonants, as follows: ! = the 'tutting' sound made by bringing the tongue softly down from behind front teeth (dental click); ǀ = the clucking sound familiar in urging on a horse (lateral click); ! = a popping sound like mimicking the pulling of a cork from a wine bottle (palatal click); † = a sharp, explosive click made as the tongue is flattened and then pulled back from the palate (alveolar-palatal click).

³ There are multiple names for Sesfontein – meaning 'six fountains' – even though in fact there are more than six large springs in this area. The names include !Nani!aus ('six springs') which is the most commonly used name for Khoekhoegowab-speakers in the area. An older name is †Gabiḡgao meaning 'confused heart', and referring to the confusion arising when seeing the multiple springs of the area. The otjiHerero name is Ohamuheke, and the old German name was Zeßfontein.

⁴ Note that those mentioned in our research would like their names to be included.

⁵ Although the Kunene Regional Ecological Assessment (KREA) of 2008 led by Jeff Muntifering provides some exceptions (Muntifering et al. 2008).



Figure 1 The incised landscape south-west of Sesfontein, positioned now in Sesfontein Conservancy and the Palmwag Tourism Concession. Sixori, as marked, is just within the Palmwag Concession. The stone circle huts that |Hairo slept in as a child are shown in the bottom left image, with Ruben Sanib walking towards the spring in the centre image. Composite image by Sian Sullivan and Mike Hannis, incorporating aerial photographs from the Directorate of Survey and Mapping, Windhoek.

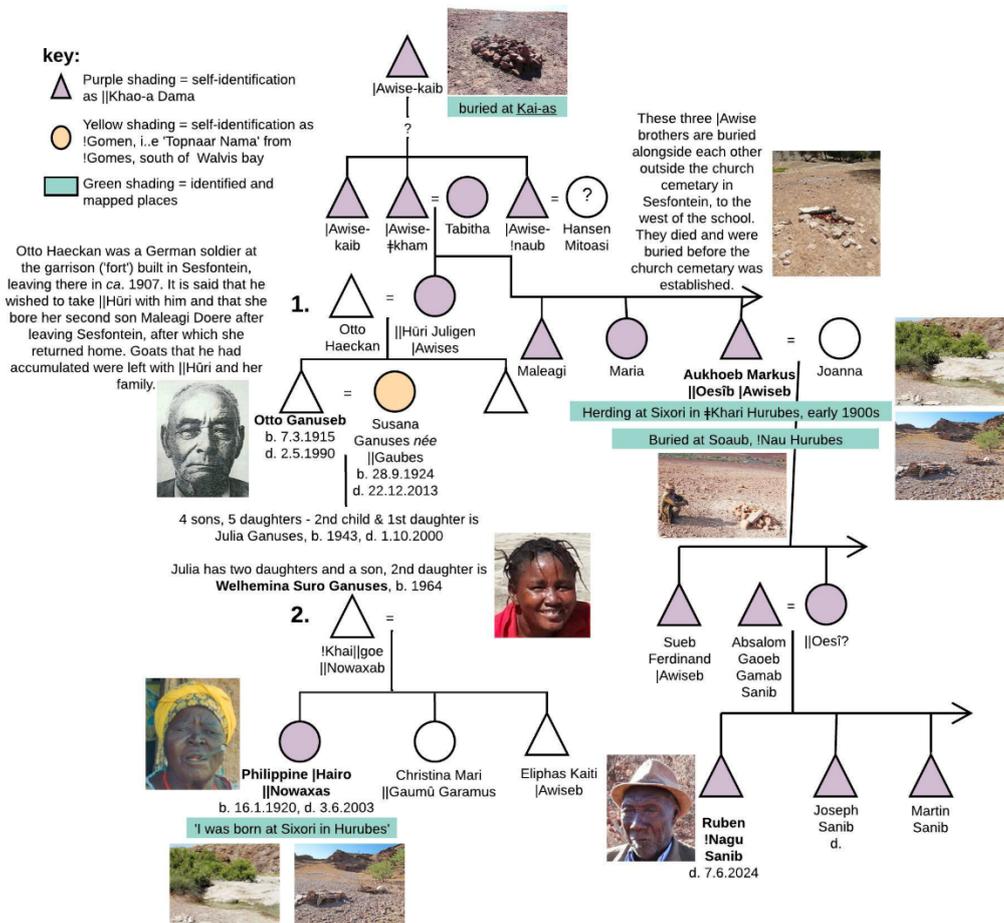


Figure 2 Genealogy of the |Awise and ||Nowaxa families, connecting Sixori with other places in the north-west landscape, such as Kai-as, Soaub and Sesfontein/!Nani | aus.

provide a filling dry season food. This spring is located in the deeply incised landscape to the south-west of Sesfontein. As we walked to the spring, we passed the stone circle huts that !Hairo told us they had slept in (Figure 1). Finding Sixori on a brutally hot day in March 2015 required triangulating the orientation skills of the late Ruben !Nagu Sanib, who remembered Sixori from past visits, and Filemon !Nuab, a younger man and well-known rhino tracker, who knew from recent patrols in the area the location of the spring, but had not known its name 'Sixori'.

As we sat in the shade of a rocky overhang close to the spring, Ruben Sanib told us of harvesting honey from a hive in the vicinity of Sixori, the year being around 1940 (Sullivan & Ganuses 2021: 40–41). He was with Aukhoeb !Awisib (also called !Oesib after his daughter !Oemi), Seibetomab and Am-!nasib (also known as Kano). Aukhoeb was the brother of !Hairo's mother (!Hūri Juligen !Awises), and was living at Sixori when !Hūri visited him and gave birth to !Hairo, Suro's grandmother, in 1920. The honey cave was west of Sixori and Sanib and companions travelled there to pull (*sam*) the honey out. They then came to Sixori to make *sāun* beer (!*khari*) with that honey, using *Stipagrostis* grass seeds extracted from harvester ant nests (*†goberun oms*). From Sixori they walked back to Sesfontein through the pass called †Au-daos. The genealogy shared in Figure 2 includes some of this detail, illustrating the strong connections with Sixori shared by both Aukhoeb !Awisib and !Hairo !Nowaxas, as well as wider connections through the landscape such as with the former settlements of Kai-as and Soaub.

Through our on-site oral history research, we have returned with elderly people to the traces of dwelling structures as well as graves at many of these remembered places. This process stimulates memories for those who once lived there. At times returning to these places has been emotional. People are reminded of friends and relatives who have now passed on. And they remember assumed futures altered by broader historical processes not of their choosing, as detailed in the Section below on 'Chronology of clearances'.

At the permanent clear waters of Kai-as spring in November 2014, Ruben Sanib and Sophia Opi !Awises recalled how people from different areas gathered at this place to play their healing dances called *arus* and praise songs called !*gais*. These were times when young men and women would meet each other, and when different foods gathered in different areas were shared. As Ruben Sanib said,

when the !Ukun and !Khao-a peoples met in the rain time, for example at Kai-as, the !Ukun would bring !*nara* melons [from the coast] and share with the others. The !*nara* has fat inside. We would mix the !*nara* and the *sāui* and *bosūi* together—it was delicious food!⁶

Sanib and Sophia conveyed urgently that 'our hearts were happy here'.

USING ON-SITE ORAL HISTORY FOR UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY CONSERVATION LANDS

Finding and returning to former places of settlement such as Sixori, Kai-as and Soaub evokes memories of practices, people and events from the past. This research methodology opens a window into how people lived in and moved through this dryland landscape in former times. Multiple oral history interviews have been carried out since 1999, with our recent research focusing on recorded oral accounts gathered during a series of multi-day journeys between 2014 and 2019 (Table 1). Follow-up triangulation work with different individuals has also been carried out to clarify and confirm details. These journeys were mostly undertaken with Khoekhoegowab-speaking Damara/#Nūkhoe and !Ubu elders specifically recognised as holding significant knowledge about the wider landscape, but who are currently constrained to residing in the settlements of Sesfontein and Kowareb. They of course also have wider connections with others, frequently mentioning those they inhabited past places with, as well as working with us to relocate graves of known ancestors.

The map of land-lineage relationships in Figure 3 should clarify the ethnonyms listed in Table 1. Note that these land and lineage relationships were not

⁶ Ruben !Nagu Sanib, !Awagu-dao-am, 18.2.2015. !*Nara* are melon fruits from the near-endemic cucurbit *Acanthosicyos horridus* which were collected from the Northern Namib in times past (Sullivan & Ganuses 2024). *Sāui* and *bosūi* are the seeds of *Stipagrostis* spp. grasses and *Monsonia umbellata* respectively, both collected from harvester ant nests (*†goberun oms*) (Sullivan 1999).

static positionings, as suggested by Rosengarten (2023: 41) who writes of ‘a tight relationship for Khoi-speaking, Damara-identifying people today between the concept of clan (!haos) and specific

land areas (!hūs) in northwestern Namibia’. Instead, these were lands of substantial mobility, aggregations and dispersals, and social interactions. Thus:

I sit here at !Hubu spring and I am

Table 1 Journeys forming the basis for on-site oral histories in the broader landscape with elderly Khoekhoegowab-speaking inhabitants of Sesfontein and Anabeb Conservancies.

Date	Name	Ethnonym	Focal Places
27–28.10.2014; 20–23.11.2014	Ruben !Nagu Sanib, Sophia Opi !Awises	Khao-a Dama, Ubun	Kowareb, Mbakondja, Top Barab, Kai-as
17–19.2.2015	Ruben !Nagu Sanib	Khao-a Dama	Kowareb, Kai-as, Hûnkab, Sesfontein
21–22.2.2015	Ruben !Nagu Sanib	Khao-a Dama	West of Tšabididi, †Khari Soso, Aogu gams, Bukuba-†noahes, Huom
7–10.3.2015	Ruben !Nagu Sanib	Khao-a Dama	Sixori, Urubao/ Guru-Tšaub, Sanibe- gams
7–9.11.2015	Ruben !Nagu Sanib, Sophia Opi !Awises	Khao-a Dama, Ubun	Kowareb, Khao-as, Soaub (Desert Rhino Camp area)
13–14.11.2015	Christophine Daumû Tauros, Michael !Gâmigu Ganaseb	!Narenin Hoanidaman / Ubun	Sesfontein, Puros, Hoanib
20–26.11.2015	Franz !Haen Hoëb, Noag Mûgagara Ganaseb	Ubun	Sesfontein, Hoanib, Mõwe Bay, Northern Namib, Kai-as
5–9.5.2019	Franz !Haen Hoëb	Ubun	Sesfontein, !Uniab mouth, Hûnkab, Mudorib, Oeb, Hoanib
12–15.5.2019	Ruben !Nagu Sanib	Khao-a Dama	Sesfontein, Gomaxora, !Nobarab, Khao-as, Saub
17–20.5.2019	Julia !Nâuna Tauros	Puros Dama	Sesfontein to Puros, with multiple locations visited and recorded
22–24.5.2019	Hoanib Cultural Group, Sesfontein (n = 18, + 7 facilitators)	Multiple	Kai-as

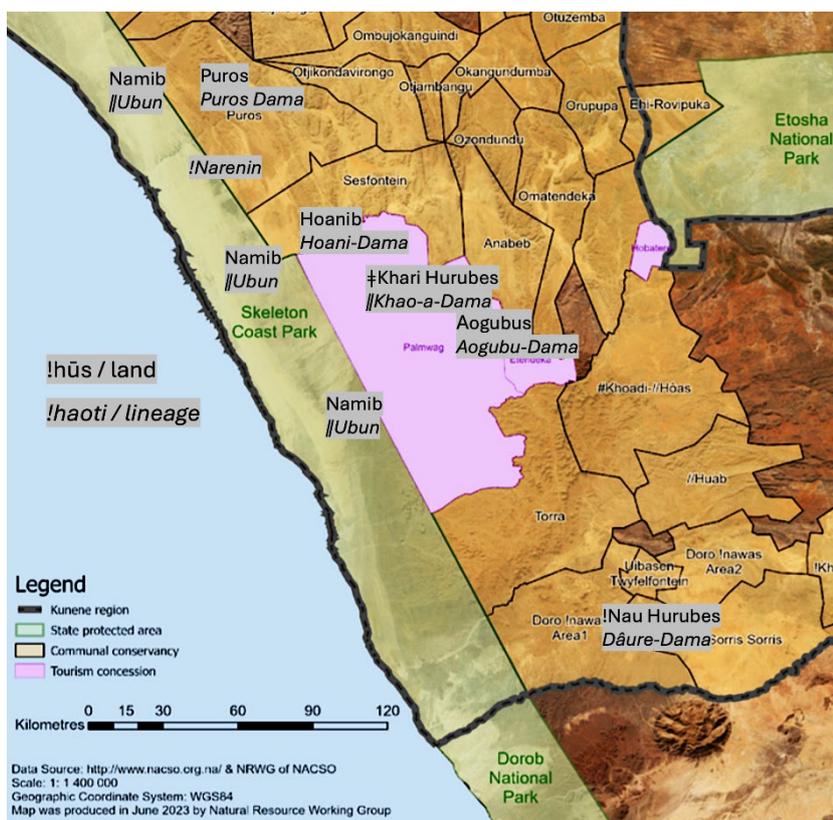


Figure 3 Reconstructed land-lineage groupings for Khoekhoegowab-speaking Damara/†Nûkhoen and ||Ubun in north-west Namibia. Oral history makes clear that there was much mobility and reciprocity between these lineages and land areas, as well as by other ethnicities, including Nama and ovaHimba/ovaHerero.

reminded of all the places where the old people [*kai khoen*] lived. People lived a lot in this land, and we met with Daure-dama people and we exchanged things with them. !Kha-a Dama met with the people from the ocean [Hurib] side [!Ubun] and at Kai-as, and we collected [*ôau*] food [*xaira*]: *bosû, sâub, danib* [honey]. And we danced !*gaib* and *arub* and we sing *he he, hue hue, urr urr!*, and suck [*xoma*] the sicknesses from each other. ... It is how we lived in this land.⁷

Our research intention has been to relocate places mentioned in prior interviews as where an array of now elderly people used to live. Our method of ‘on-site oral history’ has been led by the elders with whom we have worked. It constitutes what anthropologist Anna Tsing (2014: 13) describes as ‘historical retracing’: ‘walking the tracks of the past even in the present’, drawing out ‘the erasure of earlier histories in assessments of the present’ so as to fill ‘the present with the traces of earlier interactions and events’ (also Sullivan 2017: 219). On-site oral history thereby has the power to draw into the open occluded and alternative knowledges, practices and experiences that continue to ‘haunt’ the present despite their diminution through various historical processes (see, for example, Basso 1996, Bell 1993[1983], Brody 2002[1981], Davenport et al. 2005, de Certeau 2010: 24, Dieckmann 2023, Dieckmann 2024, Slim & Thompson 1993, Tsing 2005: 81). As Moore and Lenggenhager (2025: xvii) similarly write for the Orange River area in southern Namibia,

This relationship with their ancestral lands began beyond the living memory of any individual person today or of previously-known generations, and it continues up to the present day, despite the actions of colonial, apartheid and capitalist settlers and/or ‘conservationists’.

All interviews from field research were carried out by both authors. Interview transcriptions in Khoekhoegowab and translations from Khoekhoegowab to English were led by Ganuses. Informed consent for the use of this material was

confirmed by all of our research participants, who are enthusiastic about their knowledge and past experiences being shared. We worked on interpretations of this material together, as well as iteratively with our research collaborators. Sullivan carried out the literature review, archival research and the drafting of this article, with Ganuses checking our work. All our on-site oral history journeys were guided by Filemon !Nuab, a ‘Rhino Ranger’ based in Sesfontein whose knowledge of the north-west Namibian landscape is renowned. Field research benefitted from oversight and permissions by the Nami-Daman Traditional Authority and the Sesfontein Conservancy, combined with a research collaboration with the National Museum of Namibia, and research permits from the former MET⁸ and the Namibian Commission for Research, Science and Technology (NCRST).⁹

Additionally, our process has been one of a consistent letting go of preconceptions of the extensive and diverse landscapes of north-west Namibia. In *Maps and Dreams*, anthropologist Hugh Brody (2002[1981]: xxvi) writes of ‘how much prejudice and misconception I had to shed’ in his work with diverse inhabitants of the Canadian sub-Arctic. In research with Apache people in North America’s south-west, Keith Basso (1996: 39) speaks of how ‘[t]he problem we face is a semiotic one, a barrier to constructing appropriate sense and significance [...] in a culturally constituted world of objects and events with which most of us are unfamiliar’. In this sense, a significant amount of ‘unlearning’ is required to be open to learning of past experiences and knowledges of those who, as we will see, have been marginalised and somewhat silenced.

Our mapped dataset of named springs, former dwelling places, graves and landscape features recorded through this research, combined with stories, memories, genealogies and images can be viewed online at <https://www.futurepasts.net/cultural-landscapes-mapping>. This dataset, which is continually being updated, formed the basis for reporting to the Nami-Daman Traditional Authority (TA) (Sullivan et al. 2019), and in 2019

⁷ Ruben !Nagu Sanib, !Hubu spring, 14.5.2019; also Sullivan (2024: 353). For similar wide-ranging interactions amongst Khoekhoegowab-speaking Haillom of the Etosha area, see Dieckmann (2023, 2024).

⁸ MET research permits 2023/2015; 2190/2016; 2311/2017, plus a one-day special permit in 2019, and a short preparatory day-journey through the Hoanib into the Skeleton Coast National Park with Gobabeb Namib Research Institute staff on 7.4.2014.

⁹ NCRST permit AN202101038.

was mobilised as part of this TA's submission to Namibia's Ancestral Land Commission Report of 2020.¹⁰

We proceed now to document some of the clearances that took place in these specific land areas of north-west Namibia, drawing attention to intersections between settler colonialism, conservation expansionism, private sector tourism investments and contemporary Community-Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM). We then document three on-site oral history journeys so as to share some of the complexities of people's memories of how they once lived in and moved through the Northern Namib – now the Skeleton Coast National Park; Hurubes – now the Palmwag Tourism Concession; and Puros – now the Puros Conservancy. We also take a particular look at graves of known ancestors, thereby illustrating the embeddedness of human lives in these areas, and the desire to remain connected with ancestors buried in lands we visited. We close with a brief conclusion emphasising the justice dimensions of recognising these histories and their displacements.

CHRONOLOGY OF CLEARANCES

In thinking through past connections people had with places and landscapes of north-west Namibia, it is important to situate these connections within strategies of displacement stretching back to the onset of colonial rule in the late 1800s. People were repeatedly cleared from lands they considered home, usually to serve the aims of a ruling white elite who sought to gain land and resources. In this section we trace some of these clearances, highlighting how today they serve as a created 'imaginative geography' (Said 1978) intersecting settler colonialism, ideas of 'pristine wilderness' (as critiqued by various authors, including Adams & McShane 1997, Cronon 1995, Nelson 2003), and private sector tourism investment. As Said (1978: 59) perceptively writes, such categories are 'not so much a way of receiving new information as it is a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things'. Much of the detail and experiences of these pasts in the specific area of north-west Namibia we focus on are mostly absent from contemporary understandings of this landscape, meaning that the area's value for

conservation and tourism overshadows people's pasts. This is the case even though it seems clear that those living here in the past displayed acute sensitivities and understandings of 'sustainability' in relation to the now conserved ecologies with which they lived and through which they sustained themselves, as we convey further in the section on 'three journeys' below.

We are thus dealing here with the implications of epistemic and recognition justice. As Martin et al. (2013: 122) write for contexts of global environmental justice and biodiversity conservation, 'environmental justice analysis will need to provide a "difference-friendly" conception of justice', so that environmental justice moves beyond a focus on the distributive and procedural dimensions of justice to engage also 'with the dimension of "recognition"'. In this sense, a focus on distribution and procedural justice alone may mask recognition of cultural difference, historical memories and Indigenous knowledge (Maffi 2001). Therefore, 'a globalised environmental justice analysis applied to biodiversity conservation needs to address the structural causes that suppress some groups and allow others to dominate' (Martin et al. 2013: 124). In addition, a lack of acknowledgement of people's histories and knowledges may also undermine recognition of people's identities.

In connection with these implications, we start our 'chronology of clearances' with the outbreak of rinderpest in north-west Namibia in 1897, which itself led to significant displacement.

1897–1898: Rinderpest pandemic, an Indigenous uprising and subsequent displacement

Rinderpest became prominent in 'Deutsch Südwestafrika' (German South West Africa) in 1897 (Kalb 2022: 90–97), causing the death of significant numbers of cattle and other cloven-hooved animals (Miescher 2012: 22). It seems that '50% of the country's cattle herd perished within the first six months of the panzootic and over the next year up to 90% mortality was reported among Herero herds in the central highlands' (Rohde & Hoffman 2012: 278). The pandemic precipitated heightened colonial control, intensified Indigenous resistance to the relatively new German colonial regime, prompted militarised colonial response, and

¹⁰ Available at <https://the-eis.com/elibrary/search/34417>

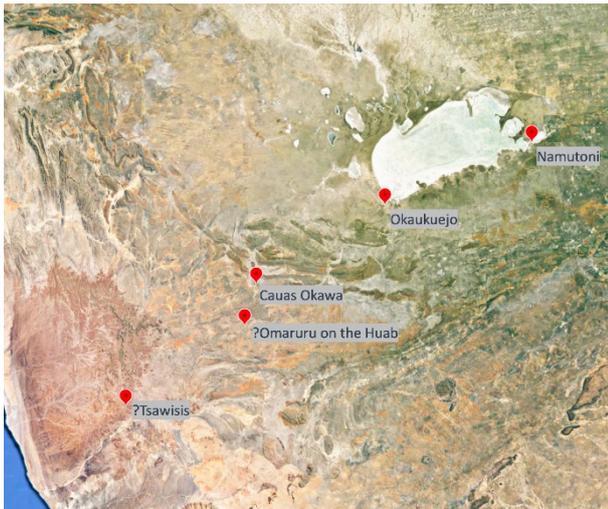


Figure 4 The most westerly veterinary stations in the ‘cordon’ (red markers) established between November 1896 and February 1897. The question marks signify that the two most westerly place locations are not completely exact. Map prepared by Sian Sullivan, using Google Maps: Map data © 2024 Google, INEGI Imagery © 2024 NASA, TerraMetrics.

ultimately caused systematic appropriation of land and livestock (Sullivan et al. 2024: 51–58).

Following a conference on the rinderpest crisis convened in late August 1896 by the British Cape Colony at Vryburg (British Bechuanaland, now Botswana), a ‘defense line’ or *Absperrline* was established in German South West Africa to control movement of livestock between northern ‘native’ areas and southern and central European settlement areas (Miescher 2012: 3, 19–20). This cordon consisted of a chain of military outposts, some of which became permanent after the pandemic ran its course, with lasting effects for Indigenous inhabitants. The ‘northern district’ centred on Outjo, where a military station had been established by Governor Leutwein in 1895, and was officially charged with controlling the spread of rinderpest and trade in livestock (Rizzo 2012: 66). The four most north-western stations were located from west to east at Tsawisis, Omaruru on the ǀHuab River, Cauas-Okawa, and Okaukuejo (the largest station), from which it ran along the southern margin of Etosha Pan towards the next station at Namutoni (Figure 4). A roughly 30 km neutral zone or ‘no go’ area was proclaimed north of this cordon, ‘defined by the specific water holes that were banned from use’ (Miescher 2012: 26).

At this time, the north-west was populated by Indigenous Swartbooi Nama (ǀKhaulgôan) focused around Otjitambi and Fransfontein, !Gomen Topnaar Nama in and around Sesfontein, Damara/#Nūkhoe lineages (!haoti) throughout the landscape, and ǀUkun connected with the Northern Namib. OvaHerero were also present mostly in the northern Kaokoveld and the central parts of Namibia to which they had migrated from around the second half of the 18th century (Lau 1994[1987]: 31), with rather severe consequences for Indigenous Nama, Damara/#Nūkhoe and San living in these areas. In the north-west, conflict combined with complex alliances characterised relationships between these different groupings of people (Bollig 1997, 1998). Outpost guards were ‘instructed to maintain the “neutral zone” along the cordon, keeping it free of humans and animals’ (Deputy Governor von Lindequist, quoted in Miescher 2012: 25). As documented below, the clearance of livestock north of the cordon echoes today in projections of these lands as a ‘wildlife corridor’ rather than a livestock-herding and inhabited area (Bollig 2020: 206–217, Sullivan 2024: 358–367).

The establishment of these militarised veterinary posts thus began the process of separating indigenous herds north of this line from the herds of emerging settler farmers to the south of the veterinary cordon. This situation lingers today in the increasingly controversial ‘red line’ or fenced veterinary cordon stretching east to west across Namibia, which continues to divide the country between north and south. Indeed, rinderpest was in some ways a gift to the consolidating German colonial government (Drechsler 1980[1966]: 98). The decimation of indigenous herds, coupled with some disintegration of pastoralist societal organisation, opened the door for state appropriation of territory and livestock, facilitated by militarised state power (Henrichsen 2011). Prompting a full-blown militarised campaign by the German colonial administration were a number of attacks in north-west Namibia, ultimately by an anti-colonial alliance of Swartbooi/ǀKhaulgôan, !Gomen Topnaar, Damara/#Nūkhoe and followers of the ovaHerero leader Kambatta based around Omburo (south of the District Command town of Outjo). These attacks took place in Aub, Ehobib, Tsaub, Anabis, Gaus, Klein-Tsaub, Khaugas and Haudamab, building up to major military



Figure 5 Locations and order of the main skirmishes and battles in 1897-1898, indicating the wide-ranging terrain in which resistance and militarised suppression took place. Map prepared by Sian Sullivan, using Google Earth: Map data © Landsat / Copernicus Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO, 2021.

Kammandiester Tzjuckenis 2164 22 APR 1898 v. 26 - 27		2165	
1. Dani Swartbooi	26. Jacobus Buijs	42. Hannes Klaasen	66. Hannes Louwrik *
2. Jopann Swartbooi	27. Jans + Wessie	43. Jacobus Klaasen	67. Jakob Louwrik
3. Jost Swartbooi ++	28. Jelt Davids *	44. Jopas Klaasen	68. Hendrik Louw
4. Jantze Swartbooi ++	29. Jingo Richter ++	45. Jost Klaasen	69. Jans Louw
5. Grijp Swartbooi	30. Janset	46. Jost Klaasen	70. Jans Louw
6. Wippen Swartbooi	31. Janset	47. Jost Engellou	71. Jans Louw
7. Janset Swartbooi ++	32. Janset	48. Janset	72. Jans Louw
8. Janset Swartbooi *	33. Janset	49. Janset	73. Jans Louw
9. Janset Swartbooi *	34. Janset	50. Janset	74. Jans Louw
10. Janset Swartbooi *	35. Janset	51. Janset	75. Jans Louw
11. Janset Swartbooi *	36. Janset	52. Janset	76. Jans Louw
12. Janset Swartbooi *	37. Janset	53. Janset	77. Jans Louw
13. Janset Swartbooi *	38. Janset	54. Janset	78. Jans Louw
14. Janset Swartbooi *	39. Janset	55. Janset	79. Jans Louw
15. Janset Swartbooi *	40. Janset	56. Janset	80. Jans Louw
16. Janset Swartbooi *	41. Janset	57. Janset	81. Jans Louw
17. Janset Swartbooi *	42. Janset	58. Janset	82. Jans Louw
18. Janset Swartbooi *	43. Janset	59. Janset	83. Jans Louw
19. Janset Swartbooi *	44. Janset	60. Janset	84. Jans Louw
20. Janset Swartbooi *	45. Janset	61. Janset	85. Jans Louw
21. Janset Swartbooi *	46. Janset	62. Janset	86. Jans Louw
22. Janset Swartbooi *	47. Janset	63. Janset	87. Jans Louw
23. Janset Swartbooi *	48. Janset	64. Janset	88. Jans Louw
24. Janset Swartbooi *	49. Janset	65. Janset	89. Jans Louw
25. Janset Swartbooi *	50. Janset	90. Janset	90. Jans Louw

Figure 6 NAN ZBU 440D-IV-f v2 'List of names of the captured Zwartbooi-Hottentots and those not yet captured, as well as those not involved in the war', (undated), vol. 2: 264–272.

Key: + means especially involved in the campaign; ++ means involved in the campaign, according to Lazarus Swartbooi.

suppression at Grootberg (Kai|uis) on 26 February 1898 (Figure 5). At this time, ovaHerero leaders Manasse Tjiseseta of Omaruru and Samuel

Maharero of Okahandja enthusiastically supported the German military with dozens of ovaHerero fighters.¹¹

¹¹ NAN ZBU 440D-IV-f v1 'Kaptain Manasse of Omaruru communicates that he is ready to help', Manasse Tjiseseta (Omaruru) to v. Lindequist (Windhoek), 26.12.1897, vol. 1: 94–95; NAN ZBU 440D-IV-f v1 'No danger from Manasse of Omaruru, who wants to support the German government with 200 men; six Hereros were sent to Franzfontein with Lt. Bensen', v. Lindequist (Omaruru) to Imperial Chancellor (Berlin), 10.12.1897, vol. 1: 23; NAN ZBU 440D-IV-f v1 'previous measures', Duft (Windhoek) to Lt. Reiß (Windhoek), 26.2.1898, vol. 1: 212. All NAN ZBU 440D-IV-f documents were transcribed from German Kurrent script by historian Dr Wolfram Hartmann, translated by Sullivan using the DeepL translator app., with the translations checked by Hartmann.

Men were killed on both sides of this war. Its outcome was the deportation to Windhoek of hundreds of Swartbooi men, women and children as forced labour from as young as ten years.¹² The first two pages of a long list (nine pages) of those deported (Figure 6), and the photograph of Swartbooi removed to Windhoek (Figure 7), provide some evidence for these removals. Indicating the true aims of this war, in 1895 Governor Leutwein had already articulated an aim ‘to expropriate the Zwartboois entirely in favour of the Kaoko-Land- und Minengesellschaft’, the company then charged with allocating land to settlers in north-west Namibia (quoted in Drechsler 1980[1966]: 91). Alongside the Swartbooi deportations, insurgent ovaHerero were placed in heavy chains and deployed as forced labour on railways from the coast.¹³ Jan I Uixamab, Captain at the time of Sesfontein, was ordered to ‘pay 1 000 head of small cattle to the German government as punishment for having made war without any reason and for the great expenses incurred by the German Government’; and

to recognise the German Emperor and his representative, the Imperial Governor in Windhoek, as your lord and master and to be faithful and obedient to him at all times and never again to make war against the German Government.¹⁴

These circumstances rather contradict a statement made by Miyamoto (2022: 18) that ‘[t]hough



Figure 7 Captured Swartbooi Nama in Windhoek in 1899. Photo by August Engelbert Wulff, 1899, out of copyright. Source: Ubersee-Museum Bremen, P00092, <https://nat.museum-digital.de/object/1101015>.

Namibia was under German colonial control from 1884, its north-western regions began to feel the impact of colonial control only under the subsequent South African governance’.

Settler colonialism

The events outlined above paved the way for a vision of settler colonialism. By 1901, 39 settler farmers (including 11 German, eight ‘Transvaalers’, seven ‘Capelanders’ and seven Englishmen) were reported for Outjo District (Kruger n.d.: 15, 37 in Dieckmann 2007a: 162), with settler farming consolidated here under the South African administration following World War 1 (Miescher 2006, 2012). Repeated attempts were made to keep land north of white settled areas clear of Indigenous dwelling places and livestock. ‘Game Reserve No. 2’ was also established in 1907, stretching from Etosha Pan to the coast and the Kunene River in the north-west: although it is important to note that people remained living throughout this game reserve area (Sullivan et al. 2024: 58–61). The intention was to protect species such as elephant which had been severely depleted in the 1800s through commercial hunting for ivory by incoming hunters and traders (Bollig & Olwage 2016).

Increasingly, the ‘buffer zone’ between ‘native’ areas and the settler colony was patrolled and policed, resulting in people being demanded to move from areas where they were living. The 1930 Annual Report of the South West Africa Administration (SWAA) thus emphasises the establishment of a ‘buffer zone between the natives in the Kaokoveld and the occupied parts of the Territory’, ostensibly to control the transmission of lung sickness (bovine pleuropneumonia) from the former to the latter (SWAA 1930: 72, Fuller 1993: 74). As Ruben Sanib recalled from around the late 1930s and early 1940s:

The government said this is now the wildlife area and you cannot move in here. We had to move to the other side of the mountains – to Tšabididi [Figure 8, the area also known today as Mbakondja]. Government police from Kamanjab and

¹² NAN ZBU 440D-IV-f v2 ‘Please be allowed to take a Zwartbooi boy [or girl] into service’, Pastor Siebe (Windhoek) to Imperial Government (Windhoek), 5.5.1898, vol. 2: 181.

¹³ NAN ZBU 440D-IV-f v2 ‘To railway construction command Swakopmund: delivery of 27 captured Hereros for chain work’, v. Lindequist (Omaruru) to Railway Construction Command (Swakopmund), 16.4.1898, vol. 2: 135–136.

¹⁴ NAN ZBU 440D-IV-f v2 ‘Conditions of Submission’, v. Lindequist (Outjo) to Capn. Jan I Uixamab (Sesfontein), 9.4.1898, vol. 2: 132–133.

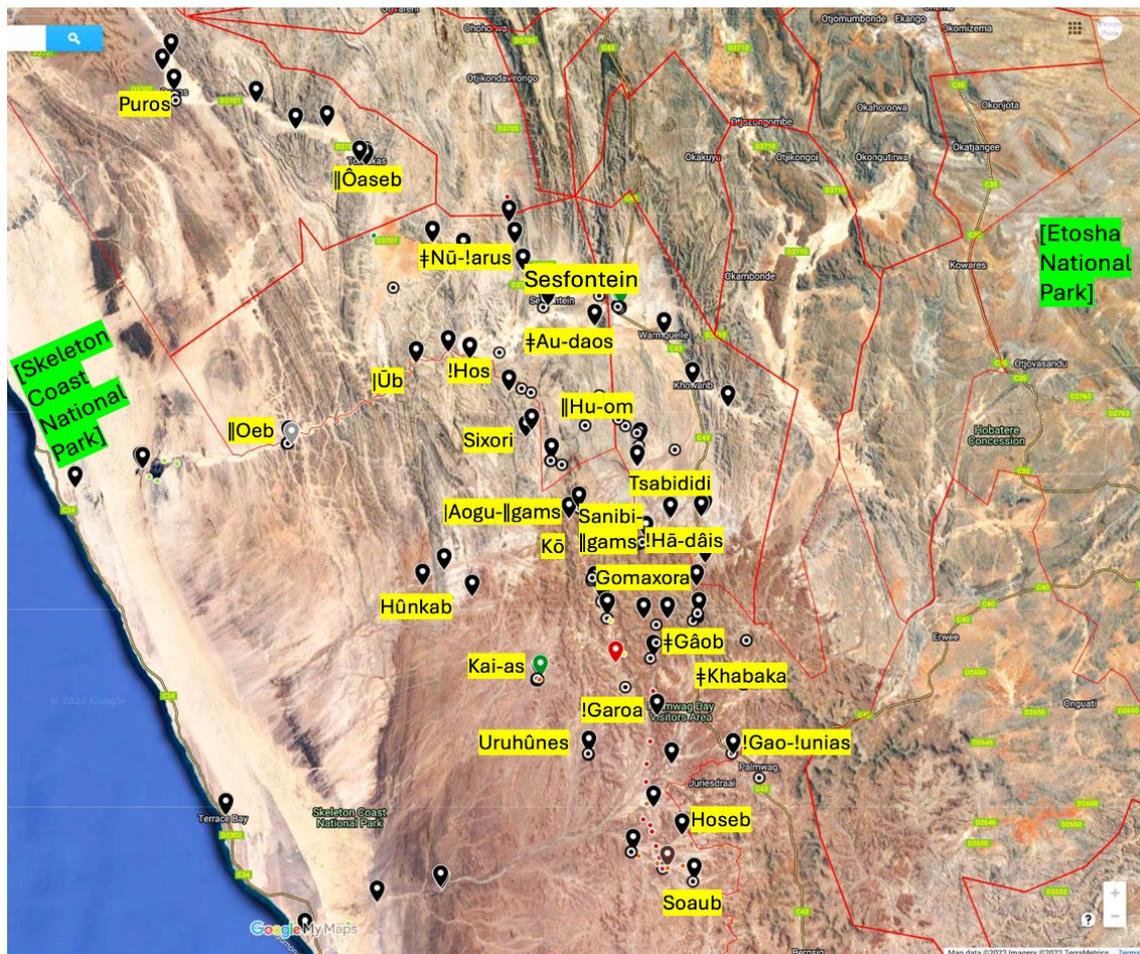


Figure 8 Some key former dwelling places positioned within and near to the Palmwag Tourism Concession, in between the Skeleton Coast National Park and Etosha National Park. The black place-markers indicate former (and some current) living places; the red dots crossing the !Uniab River in the lower part of the map mark the cutline at the western edge of the 1950s commercial farming area; the red boundary lines mark the borders of communal-area conservancies; and the fainter red line marks the current veterinary fence. Prepared by Sian Sullivan (2024: 351), including Google Maps data © TerraMetrics 2022.

Fransfontein told the people to move from here [Hurubes].¹⁵

There are also reports of cattle being shot in the course of this policing, as documented further below.¹⁶ Prior to these times, however, people regularly moved from south to the north of today’s Palmwag Tourism Concession, through places and springs now within the concession area (Sullivan 2024: 351–357). Figure 8 shows some of the key and well-known places that people would move to and through with their livestock, and for accessing other key resources.

In the 1950s under South African rule, the Police Zone – where commercial farming by white settler

farmers was permitted – was expanded in a north-westerly direction (Kambatuku 1996). As shown in Figure 9, surveyed farms were extended into the areas that are now the Palmwag and Etendeka tourism concessions (Figures 3 and 12), a consequence of the veterinary cordon being relocated north-westwards in 1955. This 1950s north-westerly expansion of commercial farmland acted to prevent local land-users from living in, accessing and utilising the newly surveyed lease- and free-hold farming area (Sullivan 2024: 347).

Damara/#Nūkhoen were moved both northwards to Sesfontein and other settlements in the vicinity of the Hoanib River, and southwards towards Okombahe/!Â#gommies on the !U#gāb River.¹⁷ The

¹⁵ Ruben Sanib, #Khabaka, 20.11.2014.

¹⁶ Andreas !Kharuxab, Kowareb, 1999.

¹⁷ NAN SWAA 2513 Inspection of the Kaokoveld by Agricultural Officer. 6.2.1952.

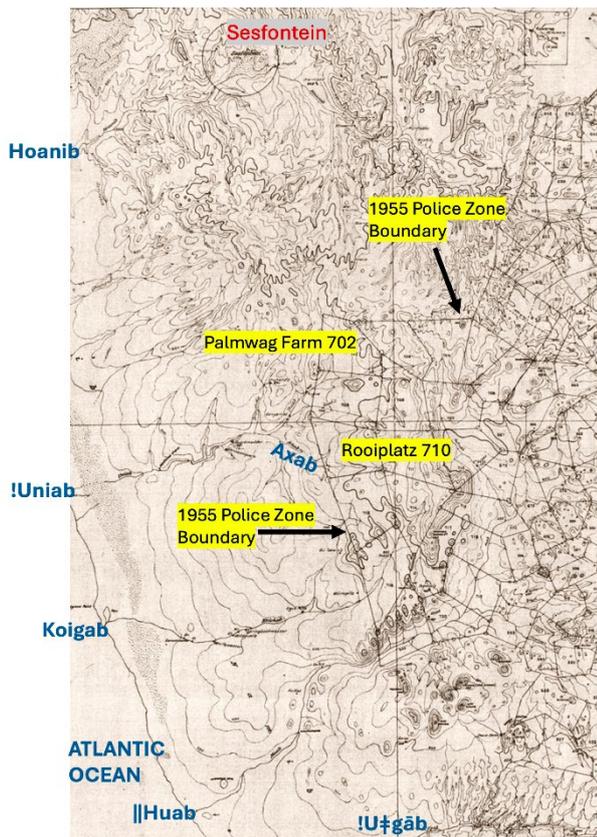


Figure 9 The expansion of settler farms into the north-west in the 1950s. The land beyond the ‘Police Zone’ boundary was intended to be cleared of people and livestock. Palmwag Farm 702 is now the site of Palmwag Lodge run by the Gondwana Collection, whilst Rooiplatz 710 is the site of Desert Rhino Camp run by Wilderness Safaris.

late Ben Fuller (1993: 69), who carried out PhD research in Sesfontein and Otjimbingwe/Âtsas, noted that in the 1950s there was an ‘influx [to Sesfontein] of outlying residents’ termed ‘Namidaman’, under the leadership of Simon !Hawaxab. It should also be noted that the circular area of the Sesfontein ‘reserve’ (Figure 9) did not reflect the broader area utilised and known by inhabitants of this area. Indeed, in the SWAA Annual Report of 1939 it was acknowledged that the ‘Zesfontein reserve’ was ‘much too small’, and ‘a number of the Zesfontein Natives are now living on Crown land’, i.e. beyond the reserve enclave (SWAA 1939: 172).

The distress caused by the 1950s and earlier evictions from this wider area of so-called ‘Crown land’ was articulated to a United Nations Special Committee for South West Africa meeting in

Sesfontein in May 1962, in which the loss of land and grazing was high on the agenda of resident concerns (Sullivan 2024: 356–357). Present at this meeting were Simon Hawahab [!Hawaxab] ‘Headman of the Topnaar Nama residents’ (36 to 40 persons), Elias Amxab (!Anubaeb) ‘Headman of the Damaras’ (200 to 300 living in the Reserve), and ‘Herero Headman’ Urimunge Kasaona, as well as around 100 additional residents. The Kasaona family from Etanga in north Kaokoveld, together with allied ovaHimba families (Karutjaiva, Uararavi, Kasupi and Uatokuya), had approached Sesfontein Headman Levi !Nâbeb !Uixamab prior to his death in 1918, requesting living places at #Guwitas (Otjindakui), Ganamub and Puros: pleading that they were fleeing the war of Chief Vita Thom (Oorlog/‘Oloxa’) in north-east Kaokoveld.¹⁸ At the UN meeting, it was stated that,

the people of Sessfontein used to be able to graze their livestock south of the Hoanib River. However, European farmers had taken the land [...], and were occupying most of the grazing veld which had been formerly used by the people of Sessfontein. Moreover, the farmers did not want the people of Sessfontein to travel through the land now occupied by the Europeans.¹⁹

In other words, settler colonialism impacted people’s access to dwelling places, as well as their pastoralist mobilities to springs and grazing throughout this landscape. New mining investments also began to prevail in the Northern Namib for diamonds and semi-precious stones, creating restrictions on accessing the coast, thereby preventing people from harvesting the significant staple food *!nara* (Sullivan & Ganuses 2022: 128–129, Sullivan & Ganuses 2024: 325). These increasing restrictions damaged people’s livelihood autonomy, whilst simultaneously creating a labour pool of inhabitants of the north-west. Oral histories thus describe how many individuals began working around this time as labourers for the new settler farms, as well as for the newly established mines in the coastal areas. As Kössler (2015: 14) writes, settler colonialism has created significant inequalities and continues to ‘affect public memory and the image of the nation and its past’.

¹⁸ August Kasaona interview at #Guwitas/Otjindakui, 11.11.2015; also Ruben Sanib and Sophia !Awises, Mai Go Ha, 27.10.2014.

¹⁹ NAN.A/5212/Add.1 20.9.1962, Meeting with Headmen and residents of Sessfontein Native Reserve, 10.5.1962, United Nations Special Committee for South West Africa: 13–16.



Figure 10 Map of Etosha Game Park in 1962 (blue contour) and Game Reserve No. 2 in 1958 (green contour) (for which Government Notice 20 of 1966 retains the 1958 boundary); with the ‘red line’ in 1955 (red) and main roads (brown lines). The southern boundary of Game Reserve No. 2 (in green) overlaps with the veterinary control boundary (in red). © Ute Dieckmann; data: Ordinance 18 of 1958; Government Notice 177 of 1962; Atlas of Namibia Team 2022, used with permission.

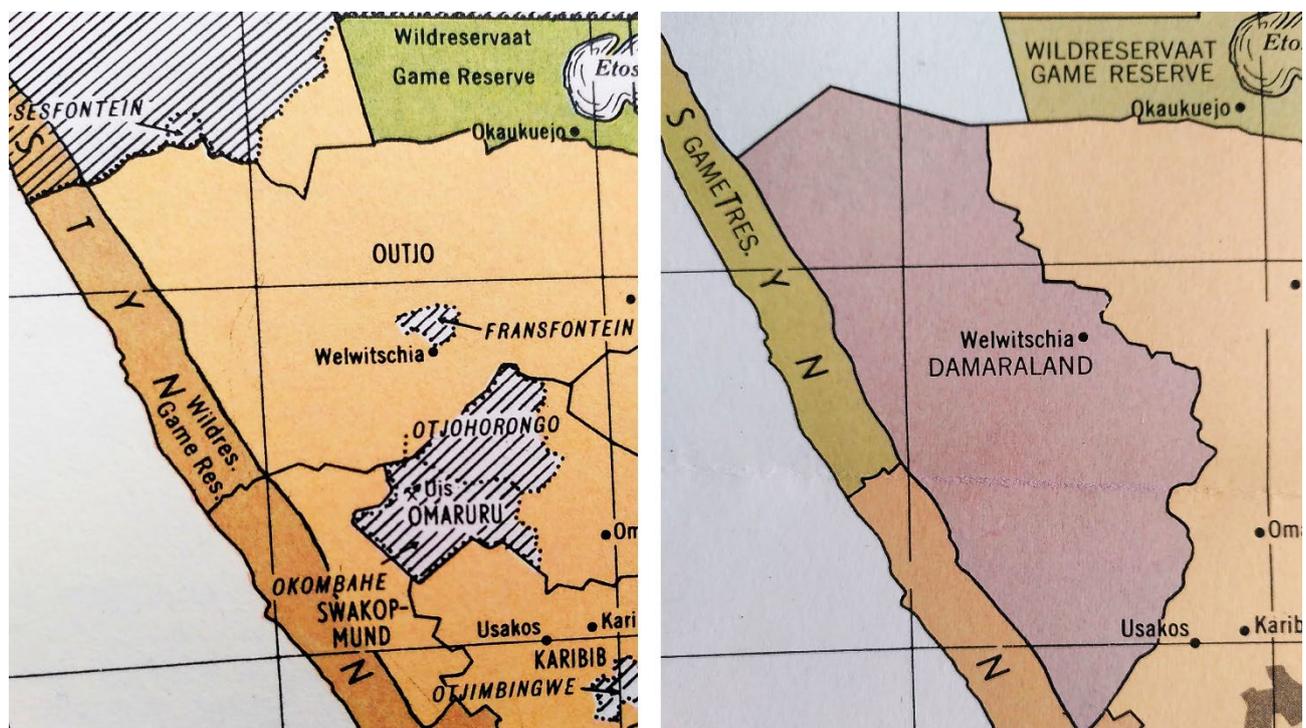


Figure 11 The map on the left shows the existing ‘native reserves’ in west Namibia, namely Sesfontein, Fransfontein, Otjohorong and Okombahe, that were to be joined into a single ‘homeland’ called ‘Damaraland’ as shown in the map on the right. Source: adapted from Figures 9 and 27 of the Odendaal Report (1964), out of copyright.

Conservation expansionism

Alongside the expanded settler farming territory into the north-west, and the repeated clearances of people north of the new ‘Police Zone’ boundary, Etosha Game Park was extended westwards to the coast in 1962 (Dieckmann et al. 2024: 87–91). This expanded conservation area, set within a south-westwards expansion of ‘Game Reserve No. 2’ in 1958, thereby absorbed space north of the new Police Zone boundary, incurring further restrictions on people’s mobilities through this area (Figure 10).

Arguably, the south-westwards extension of Game Reserve No. 2 in 1958, and the later Etosha Game Park extension to the west in 1962, did not have much additional effect on the people of Hurubes from the Hoanib to the !Uḡâb rivers, because they had already been iteratively cleared from the landscape. It instead consolidated their severance from resources and living sites in this area (Sullivan 2024: 359). It should be noted, however, that conservation expansionism in the 1950s also resulted in evictions of Haillom from Etosha Game Park (Dieckmann 2007b, Peters et al. 2009), and Damara/#Nūkhoen from Daan Viljoen Game Reserve near Windhoek who were relocated to Okombahe and Sorris-Sorris on the !Uḡâb River (Sullivan & Ganuses 2020: 307–308). In the 1960s, the expanded Etosha Game Park also affected ovaHerero to the north-east of today’s Palmwag Tourism Concession. As Fanwell Ndjiva related to Arthur Hoole,

In 1967 we moved from Ombombo to the area by Sesfontein and Warmquelle. The South African governor came to Warmquelle and told the headman that our cattle are not healthy and that we cannot move across the Hoanib River [...]. Langman Muzuma stayed at Otjondeka and could not move his cattle. Over a certain line he could not go below it in the area between Otjivero and Warmquelle he couldn’t go south of that (Hoole & Sullivan 2024: 380).

‘Homelands’ and conservation crisis

The extended Etosha Game Park was very short-lived, however, due to the 1964 publication of the *Commission of Enquiry into South West African Affairs* (the ‘Odendaal Report’). For the north-west, the Commission proposed reconnecting the fragmented

‘Native Reserves’ of Sesfontein, Fransfontein, Okombahe and Otjohorong to form the ‘Damaraland Homeland’ (Figure 11). An expanded ‘Kaokoland Homeland’ was created north of Damaraland, with the latter losing a large stretch of land north-east of its original boundary; meaning, for example, that the settlement of Warmquelle known as |Aexa|aus and inhabited by many Nama and #Nūkhoen individuals and families, became part of the Kaokoland Homeland, causing evictions of Khoekhoegowab-speaking people living there (Sullivan 2003). The Odendaal Report, to some extent, reflected prior mobilities and uses of land between these reserve areas (Figure 8) that had been disrupted due to the 1950s settler farming area and the extended Etosha Game Park in 1962 (Figure 10). The expanded ‘homeland’ of ‘Damaraland’ created in the early 1970s, ushered in a ‘communalisation’ of the settler farming area in the north-west (Sullivan 1996). It also appears that white settler farmers in this area may have benefitted significantly from the sale of their farms (Kambatuku 1996, Sullivan 2024: 348).

Although the expanded Etosha Game Park of 1962 had only existed for a short period of time, and with little personnel or infrastructure on the ground, the homeland areas precipitated a huge crisis for conservationists. As de la Bat, biologist and conservation leader in the former South West Africa, writes:

After Odendaal Etosha resembled a plucked fowl. 17 972 square kilometres had to be *sacrificed* to the land needs of Owambo, Kaokoland and Damaraland. (de la Bat 1982: 20, emphasis added).

As Melber (2005: 105) writes, however, a statement like this also ‘denies recognition of the particular sacrifices’ of those who had lived in these areas and experienced repeated removals through the layers of history unfolding here. A rush to remove valued wildlife from ‘Damaraland’ to what became Etosha National Park (ENP) followed, relating especially to black rhino (Joubert 1984, Sullivan et al. 2021: 12–14); even though it appears that these animals are currently better protected in the communal lands of north-west Namibia than in either national parks or freehold farming areas, where both black and white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*) are often illegally hunted (MEFT 2024, Schneider et al. 2025).

In addition, the repeated displacements experienced by Damara/#Nūkhoe and !Ubu inhabitants of this land area seem to have fed into a particular downplaying of their histories and knowledge of the landscape. Etosha ecologist Ken Tinley (1971: 14), for example, advocated for the complete removal of Khoekhoegowab-speakers inhabiting the Hoanib river valley settlements to the Fransfontein Reserve, making no mention of the large numbers of Damara/#Nūkhoen inhabiting these areas and claiming that the ‘Strandlopers’ (!Ubus) were ‘extinct’. Conservationist Garth Owen-Smith (1972: 32, emphasis added) similarly rather diminishes the presence and histories of

Khoekhoegowab-speaking peoples of the area in inaccurately stating that,

It appears likely that in the distant past, both the Bushman and the more negroid Damara were widespread in the Kaokoveld, but within the last twenty years, the ‘Strandloper’ Bushman has passed from the scene, and only a few Damara remain, in the dusty Hoanib river valley between Warmquelle and Sesfontein.

Here again we see an ‘imaginative geography’ leaning towards conservation urgency that diminishes people’s presence and knowledges of these lands.

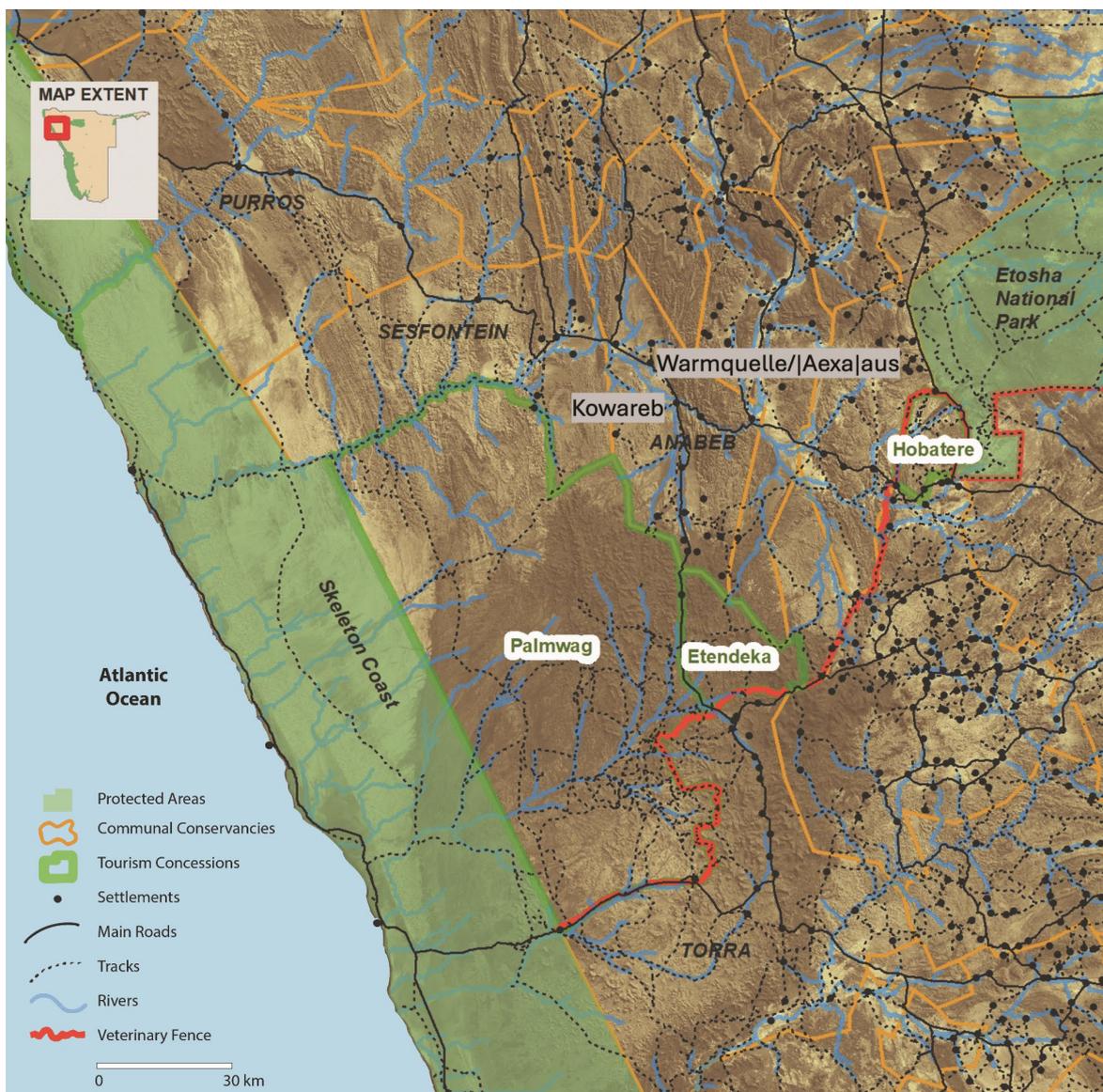


Figure 12 Communal area conservancies (with orange boundaries) both north and south of the present location of the ‘red line’ (veterinary cordon fence), in between the Skeleton Coast National Park and Etosha National Park. The dotted lines represent tracks through the area, the black dots are current settlements, and the blue lines are ephemeral rivers. Map prepared by Jeff Muntifering.

Simultaneously, a huge area stretching from the !Uṡgāb to the Hoanib Rivers became a trophy hunting concession (Sullivan 2024: 365–367); an initiative that Justus !Garoëb (2002: 5), then leader of the ‘Damaraland Homeland’, vehemently disapproved of.²⁰ Following drought in the late 1970s and early 1980s, this trophy hunting concession became the Palmwag and Etendeka tourism concessions, around 600 000 ha in total. At this time the idea was that the concessionaire should benefit from tourism proceeds from these areas whilst local and Indigenous inhabitants could still access concession lands for food gathering and other practices. !Garoëb (2002: 9) confirms this perspective in stating that:

Such Concession Area can only be exclusive in relation to the specific purpose for which it was granted/leased. Concessionaire can therefore not prevent

the right of entry by others, such as indigenous peoples of the area who for whatever cultural or religious reasons or for collecting wood, wild food, herbs etc. may want to enter such Concession area without any permission to do so.

Post-Independence CBNRM and private sector tourism

The circumstances chronicled above clearly led to repeated removals of people from land areas they were familiar with, combined with a strong diminishing of people’s knowledge base, autonomy and food security connected with these lands. They have additionally generated a perception of these particular landscapes of north-west Namibia as valuable for conservation and tourism. Following independence in Namibia in 1990, the conservation emphasis has thus been

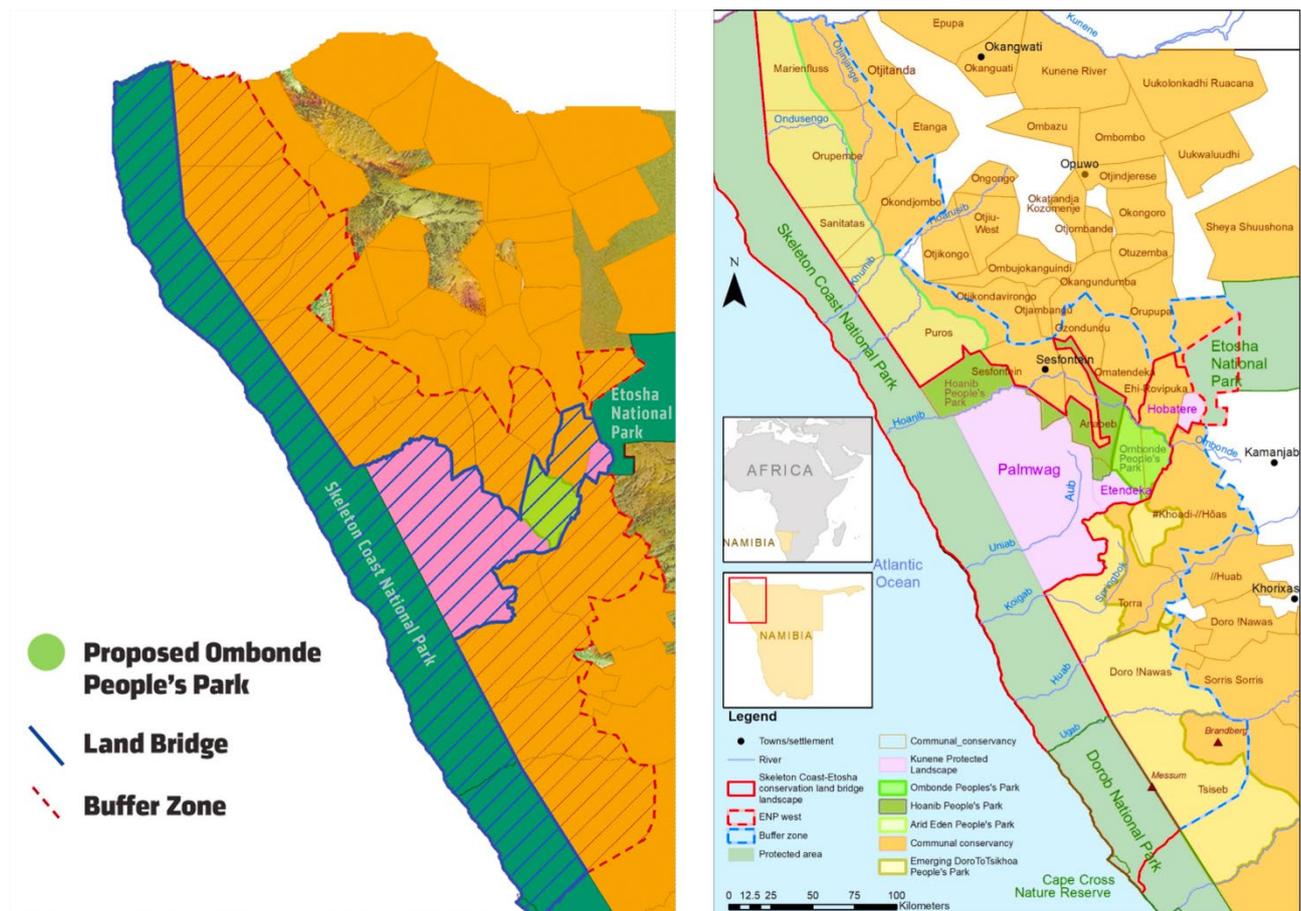


Figure 13 Left: ‘building a land bridge’. The pink areas are the Palmwag, Etendeka and Hobatere Tourism Concessions; the orange areas are the surrounding communal-area conservancies. Public domain image downloaded from <https://www.worldwildlife.org/magazine/issues/summer-2023/articles/moving-forward#popup1>; Right: map including the ‘Kunene Protected Landscape’ (Palmwag, Etendeka and Hobatere tourism concessions) with new and emerging ‘People’s Parks’ (MEFT 2025: 13).

²⁰ Gaob Justus !Garoëb, Anker, 7.3.2022.

towards opening landscapes beyond the ‘red line’ to private sector invested tourism and trophy-hunting facilities (Denker 2022, Lapeyre 2011, Schnegg & Kiaka 2018, Sullivan 2006, Sullivan 2023). This process has been connected with a proliferation of conservancies established following independence through new legislation, particularly the Nature Conservation Amendment Act, 5 of 1996, known as the ‘conservancy amendment’. There are now 86 communal area conservancies established in Namibia, with the highest number by region (38) located in Kunene Region (Figure 12). Tourism dividends to locally-run conservancies established as part of Namibia’s Community-Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) programme are an essential aspect of tourism-related investments. At the same time, it remains somewhat unclear to what extent local communities and conservancy members benefit from these dividends compared with profit made by the private sector (Koot 2019, Kalvelage et al. 2020, Sullivan 2023).

The loss of the short-lived expanded Etosha Game Park that connected Etosha to the Skeleton Coast has additionally led to a recurrent aim to create a wildlife or conservation corridor that reconnects Etosha and the Skeleton Coast National Parks (Figure 13). This aim has culminated in a well-funded initiative to create a conservation ‘land-bridge’ between these two National Parks (LLF, WWF & IRDNC 2024). This ‘land-bridge’ would connect the Palmwag, Etendeka and Hobatere Tourism Concessions via the Ombonde People’s Park/Landscape, with a far-reaching ‘buffer zone’ around the land-bridge area (Figure 13). Indeed, a statement on the Legacy Landscapes website confirms that this initiative will reinvent the German colonial proclamation of ‘Game Reserve No. 2’, through which people continued to live, asserting that,

The Skeleton Coast-Etosha Conservation Bridge will enable us to restore a conservation landscape envisaged over a century ago when Game Reserve No. 2 was proclaimed in 1907.²¹

The Palmwag, Etendeka and Hobatere tourism concessions are now being referred to as the Kunene Protected Landscape, with new ‘People’s

Parks’ also named (MEFT 2025: 11–14). These include: a Hoanib People’s Park west of Sefontein and also incorporating a large part of Anabeb Conservancy; an Arid Eden People’s Park stretching from Puros Conservancy to the Kunene River; the Ombonde People’s Park east of the Etendeka Tourism Concession; and an emerging DoroToTsikhoa People’s Park south of the ‘Red Line’ (Figure 13). Further tourism facilities are also being promoted ostensibly to benefit local communities (see, for example, Denker 2022), although these facilities may also impact people’s livelihood practices and pastoralist mobilities (Lendelvo et al. 2024; Miyamoto 2022; Olwage 2024).

THREE JOURNEYS

As stated before, we seek to convey how people once lived in and moved through landscapes now envisioned as essential for conservation and associated tourism income. We have shared details of our on-site oral history research in several publications (Sullivan & Ganuses 2021, 2022, 2024, Sullivan 2022, 2024). Here, we provide an overview of three specific journeys carried out in 2019 with Franz !Haen !Hoëb (!!Ubun), Ruben !Nagu Sanib (!!Khao-a Dama) and Julia !Nâuna Tauros (Puros Dama). These individuals were all in their 80s when we undertook these journeys. Each journey was between 200–400 km, and was undertaken in a 4x4 vehicle, with walking to specific sites as a key part of the journeys which were also filmed through collaboration with film-maker Oliver Halsey.²² Links to the films, which provide more detail than we can convey here, are shared below. Our aim now is to draw out some of the more-or-less hidden historical complexities relevant for those who lived in the Northern Namib desert, now the Skeleton Coast National Park; the area known as Hurubes, now within the Palmwag Tourism Concession; and Puros, now the Puros Conservancy.

One dimension we would like to highlight here relates to the acute sensitivities related by multiple participants in our research regarding the sustainable utilisation of varied foods found throughout these landscapes. Hunting, for example, was guided by strict rules and rituals designed to ensure the presence of animals into the

²¹ <https://legacylandscapes.org/map/skeleton-coast-etosha/>

²² <https://www.youtube.com/@oliverhalsey1810>

future. These rules included no hunting of females with young, and limiting each hunter to only one animal: if a hunter took more than this he would be prohibited from hunting for two months and would have to leave his bow and arrow in his hut.²³ The importance of supporting future sustainabilities have tended to be present for a wide variety of harvesting practices. For example, when gathering grass and *Monsonia* spp. (*bosûi*) seeds from harvester ant nests, normal practice is to leave enough seed within the nest so that the ants can survive and continue to store seeds in future seasons (Sullivan 1999: 12). These points are significant in terms of the pragmatic and appreciative aspects of people’s approach to the lands in which they lived and from which they have been removed, thereby denying them access to the diverse foods they utilised that supported a more varied diet in the past.

First journey: Skeleton Coast and Hoanib River – Franz |Haen |Hoëb

Franz was born into a ||Ubu family at Auses, a large and brackish spring now within the Skeleton Coast National Park (SCNP). He remembers living in areas of the Northern Namib that are now part of the SCNP, as well as moving from the coast to areas inland and between east and west of the Hoanib River (Sullivan & Ganuses 2022, Sullivan & Ganuses 2024). The sites we visited with Franz on this particular journey are shown in Figure 14.

Franz recalled harvesting *Inara* melons (from the near-endemic cucurbit plant *Acanthosicyos horridus*) with his parents and grandparents, in the Hoanib and !Uniab rivers, as well as at other sites such as Samanab, north of the !Uniab (Figure 15). As mentioned in the ‘chronology of clearances’ above, people were discouraged from travelling westwards



Figure 14 Places visited with Franz |Haen |Hoëb in May 2019.

²³ Franz |Haen |Hoëb and Noag Múgagara Ganaseb, Hoanib Camp/||Oeb, 22.11.2015.

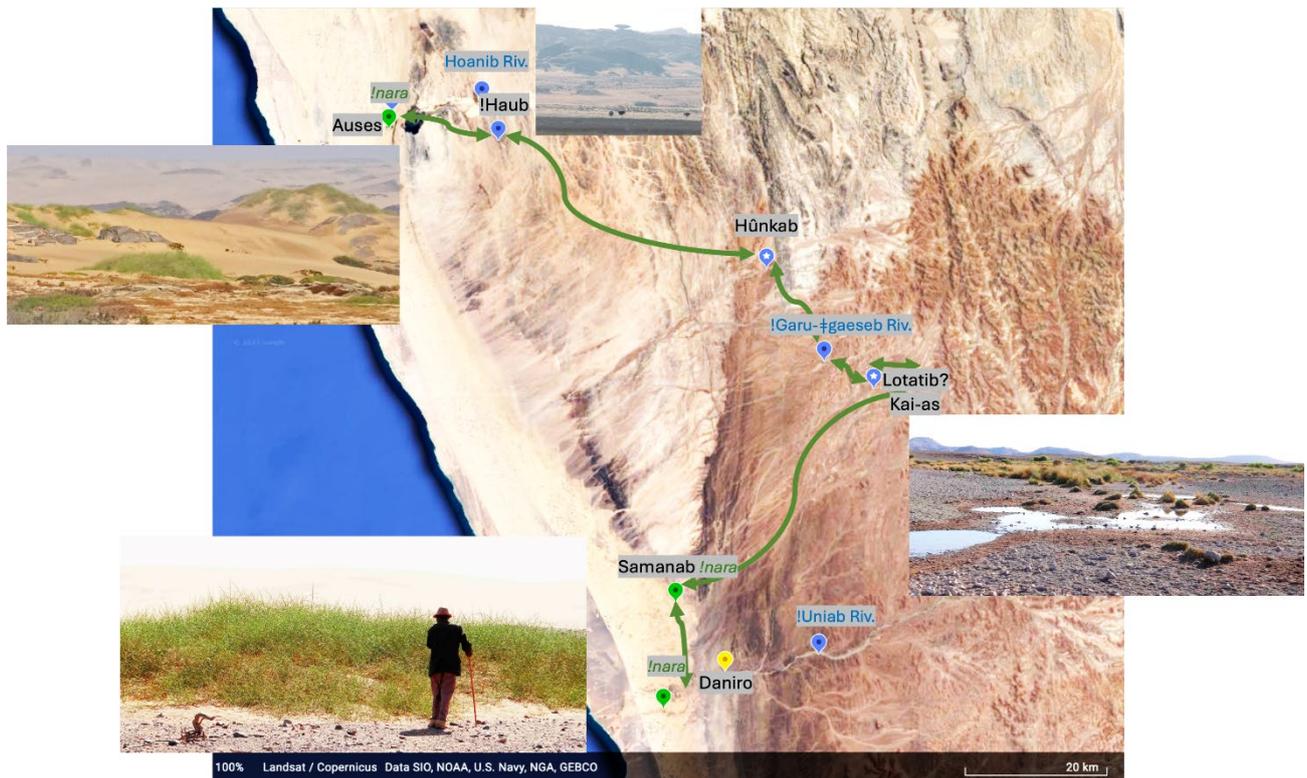


Figure 15 Above: reconstructed mobilities by !Uubun (and others) to harvest !nara (*Acanthosicyos horridus*) melons from plants in the !Uniab and Hoanib rivers, now in the Skeleton Coast National Park, via inland dwelling places and springs. Below: key plant foods and their localities in the western part of the Hoanib river valley, including !nara melons in the west, the fruits of *xoris* (*Salvadora persica*) in many locations throughout the Hoanib, and grass seeds called #ares (*Setaria verticillata*) closer to Sesfontein. Based on site visits and multiple conversations with especially Franz !Haen !Hoëb and Noag Mûgagara Ganaseb. Photos: © Sian Sullivan.



Figure 16 Franz |Haen ||Hoëb stands at the grave of his maternal grandfather #Hieb. The footsteps from a recent sports run across the desert are visible on either side of Franz. Photo: screenshot from the film *Lands That History Forgot: 1st Journey, Skeleton Coast & Hoanib River* <https://vimeo.com/947316591>, 2024.

from Sesfontein from the 1950s onwards, when mines began to be opened along the Skeleton Coast, making this a restricted area. In 1971, this part of the coast was gazetted as the SCNP, creating further restrictions on people's mobilities and food gathering practices. This meant that people could no longer access important foods in this western area, with implications for both autonomy and food security.

Travelling into the far west of the Palmwag Tourism Concession and the Skeleton Coast National Park with Franz and others, has enabled us to document some of the prior mobilities of people through these challenging desert landscapes. These mobilities enabled people to access different foods across this large area. As Franz relates:

Near !Uniab River, there is a place called Samanab. So, from Samanab they came to Kai-as, and from Kai-as they came to Lotati [in the Obob River?], and from Lotati to !Garu#gaeseb [river], and from !Garu#gaeseb to Herero, and from Herero to #Nâbina-#oahe, and from #Nâbina-#oahe to !Auros to !Gui|narab, and from !Gui|narab to Hûnkab. This is the route that they were walking. And from Hûnkab they go to Hoanib, to Auses, and they were collecting there the !naras, and when the !naras were finished, they came to ||Khams [Amspoort] in the Hoanib, and then back to the !Uniab, via !Haub where a large rock is balanced on the mountain.²⁴

In Figure 15, the top image shows routes that people took between !nara melons at the !Uniab river mouth and the area of Auses in the Hoanib

river, via inland springs such as Kai-as and Hûnkab. The bottom image shows the locations of key plant foods in the western part of the Hoanib river valley, including !nara melons in the west, the fruits of *xoris* (*S. persica*) along the Hoanib, and grass seeds called *tares* (*Setaria verticillata*) closer to Sesfontein. These foods could be gathered in large quantities and stored, meaning that they formed staple foods for people living in these areas.

As well as mobilities through the landscape and recall of key foods once part of people's livelihoods, the return to graves of known ancestors has played a major part in our on-site oral history journeys. With Franz we thus returned to the grave of his maternal grand-father #Hieb in the lower !Uniab river (Sullivan & Ganuses 2022: 133–134, Sullivan & Ganuses 2024: 333). This grave is located exactly as mentioned in numerous prior interactions and interviews, close to the !Uniab River in the present-day SCNP (Figure 16). Franz had been brought to this grave by #Hieb's younger brother Sorerob, in the course of harvesting !nara in the !Uniab, prior to their displacement from this area. #Hieb's grave is next to the former dwelling site called Daniro (the place of honey, *danib*), where #Hieb and others first encountered German men travelling down the !Uniab; described to Franz as being the first occasion when ||Ukun had seen white men and encountered food in tins. This encounter was perhaps connected with an 1896 journey by Captain Ludwig von Estorff in which 'Bushmen' harvesting !nara in the !Uniab mouth are described (Jacobson & Noli 1987: 174). When we relocated this grave spoken of in previous interviews, there were footsteps all around it (as can be seen in Figure 16), which we later learned were from a running event of around 40 people

²⁴ Franz |Haen ||Hoëb, Hûnkab, 8.5.2019.

across the Skeleton Coast National Park, held in April 2019. It would mean a lot to descendants of #H̄ieb living in the Sesfontein area today for this grave to be marked and protected from human and animal disturbance into the future.

Second journey: Palmwag Tourism Concession / Hurubes – Ruben !Nagu Sanib

Ruben !Nagu Sanib previously lived in a land area he knew as #Khari (small) Hurubes, now forming the northern mountainous part of the Palmwag Tourism Concession (Figures 3 and 12). His ancestors moved through this area from a mountain they knew as ||Khao-as, positioned at the confluence of the !Uniab and Aub (#Ḡâob) rivers, in the southern part of the concession. It is from this mountain that ||Khao-a Dama now based in Sesfontein derive their lineage identity, even though they can no longer access the area of ||Khao-as mountain. When we first visited this mountain with both Ruben and Sophia !Opi !Awises they began to sing an *arus* healing song about this mountain and its history of association with the !Awise family, illustrating the significance of this now inaccessible mountain (Figure 17).²⁵

Ruben spent some time at ||Khao-as celebrating his ancestors through the practice of *tsē-khom*, which involves talking to one's ancestors in the daytime:

You ||Khao-a Dama, come and eat this food at night. I give this food to you. You who are moving down from ||Khao-as, I share with you. Answer me, answer me, you people who danced the |*gais* all through the night [|*gaini*]. We must go well in the vehicle – it must not be stabbed by a thorn. Did you hear me !Awise kaib, !Awise !nau, and you !Awise in the middle? [Ruben's direct ancestors]. You who moved down from ||Khao-as [to Sesfontein]. I share with you, to share with us. Let's make the things easier. Yes, yes you hear me! You hear me.

This is my grand-father's mountain; the mountain of ||Khao-a Daman. From this mountain called ||Khao-a the brothers called !Awise-kaib [old], !Awise-laegu-mab [in the middle] and !Awise-!nau [big] moved from here; they moved from here. ||Oesib [Aukhoeb], Christjan, Khaini, #Ḡâbab are the children of those men, and they moved



Figure 17 Sophia !Opi !Awise (L) and Ruben !Nagu Sanib (R) stand with the table mountain of ||Khao-as both behind them and to their left, positioned where the #Ḡâob (Aub) and !Uniab rivers meet. Composite image by Sian Sullivan and Mike Hannis, incorporating aerial photographs from the Directorate of Survey and Mapping, Windhoek.

²⁵ This song can be heard here: <https://soundcloud.com/futurepasts/ss-khao-as-arus-selection>.

down with them from ||Khao-as and from those springs where they were living. And they came to Uruhûnes [Urunendis], and from Uruhûnes they came to Kai-as, and they went up to !Ui-!narab, and they went up to !Hubu, and they came to !Nobarab, and to Nara, !Hago, Kō, Nabuamûe, and to Xom-di-!lgâus – where I was born. And in Xom-di-!lgâus area are !Auros, Tsaugu-!lgams, !Harugo, Kowas, Urubao, Sixori, ||Hu-om. We are living in those places with those men like that. My father died in !Nani-!aus [Sesfontein] and my grand-fathers brought me here. And they said, this is ||Khao-as – our father’s mountain.²⁶

Over the years we have visited many places throughout the Palmwag Concession and beyond with Ruben (Table 1), with our 2019 journey focusing on several key sites (Figure 18). We started this journey at the place Gomaxora – ‘where the cattle dig’ – now within the Palmwag Tourism Concession, but clearly a former settlement where reportedly both ovaHerero/ovaHimba and Damara/!Nūkhoe resided. Here, a dramatic experience of eviction took place prior to the death of a Nama headman of Sesfontein called Nathaniel Husa !Uixamab, who died after being mauled by a lion at the place †Au-daos in 1941 (Sullivan & Ganuses 2021: 170–173). As Ruben relates,

We were living at !Gui-gomabi-!gaus [west of Gomaxora]. While there we were ordered to move the cattle from this land to !Nani-!aus [Sesfontein] area. Some people were living here with their cattle, and my grandfather was at !Gui-gomabi-!gaus with his cattle. When the authorities took the cattle to Gomaxora to be shot, the men in my family took their bull and killed him at the spring near here [so that the authorities could not shoot the bull]. When the bull was killed, they named the place !Gui-gomabi-!gaus [the cave of that one bull]. [...] The government [*#hanub*] first said take the cattle [*goman*] out, but you can stay here with goats [*birin*] only. But some of the cattle remained in the area and the government came and shot those cattle. This land was †Nūkhoe land. But Herero wanted to move here. They were told to move out and †Nūkhoe were then also told to move out with their cattle and goats.²⁷

Ruben also took us to a series of graves of family members. For example, a known ancestor of his !Awise ||Khao-a Dama family is buried at the former settlement of Kai-as. A more recent ancestor, namely Aukhoeb, who had herded livestock at Sixori south-west of Sesfontein where



Figure 18 The route taken with Ruben in May 2019 from Gomaxora to Aukhoeb’s grave at Soaub.

²⁶ Ruben !Nagu Sanib, ||Khao-as, 13.5.2019.

²⁷ Ruben !Nagu Sanib, in between Gomaxora and !Gui-gomabi-!gaus, 13.5.2019 (also Sullivan 2024: 354).



Figure 19 Ruben !Nagu Sanib sits at the grave of his grand-father Markus Aukhoeb |Awiseb at the former living place Soaub in the Palmwag Concession. Photo: © Sian Sullivan, 15.5.2019.

Aukhoeb's sister !Hūri |Awises gave birth to Suro's grandmother, is buried at Soaub in !Nau ('fat') Hurubes (Soaub is positioned at the bottom of Figure 18). When we first located Aukhoeb's grave in 2015 it had been very badly damaged by wildlife, to the extent that Aukhoeb's bones were visible. People were cleared from the settlement of Soaub in the mid-1950s, when it became the settler farm known as Rooiplatz (Figure 9). Today this farm is where Desert Rhino Camp is located, a high-end lodge run by Wilderness Safaris²⁸ focusing on exclusive black rhino tourism (Muntifering et al. 2017). As we sat at Aukhoeb's grave (Figure 19) Ruben related that:

This is my grandfather Aukhoeb's grave. Aukhoeb was visiting from the other side [Sixori area] with his wife [#Gaidâis, also called Sabuemi]. !Abudoeb, †Kharub, Gaoeb, Sâtagob, Dawarib, !Âsûb, !Hetub and !Naberob were the people who were living here. And he visited with his wife. As I told you, people were visiting each other in the different places. And when he visited here with his wife, he died here, and we buried him here. And his wife went back to !Nani-!aus [Sesfontein]. And the government told the people living in this area they must leave. And they moved from this land to Sesfontein area.²⁹

Third journey: Julia Tauros returns to her birthplace, Puros on the Hoaruseb River

Julia !Nâuna Tauros grew up in the Puros area on the Hoaruseb River where her family had lived for several generations, leading to this Damara lineage now living in Sesfontein becoming known as 'Puros Dama', the name 'Puros' being a Khoekhoegowab name. Puros Dama were additionally connected with Damara/#Nūkhoen known as !Narenin, who lived in and moved through the dryland landscape north-west of Sesfontein, harvesting !nara at springs such as Gantias and Sarusa, and in the Hoaruseb river. It appears that !Narenin had lived in these landscapes for generations. Whilst Damara/#Nūkhoen did collect honey (*danib*) in the Puros area, they did not only visit the area in order to gather honey (Jacobsohn 1995: 98). The so-called 'Puros Dama' had lived in this area from at least the 1800s, with !Narenin being present here for longer: !Narenin were encountered as already inhabiting this area when Julia's ancestors moved northwards, fleeing conflict near the !Oetgâ/Erongo mountains in central Namibia. Julia was received exceptionally warmly at Puros by those who knew of her and were related to her, perhaps contradicting detail of a curse connected with male children born to an ovaHimba man who had taken Damara/#Nūkhoe women as partners (Jacobsohn 1995: 95–97).

Although Julia had not been back to Puros since the 1960s her memory of names for the mountains and

²⁸ See <https://www.wildernessdestinations.com/africa/namibia/damaraland/desert-rhino-camp>

²⁹ Ruben !Nagu Sanib, Soaub, 15.5.2019.

other places in the area was astonishing, as indicated in the map of places we visited (Figure 20). Indicating the importance of these places to Julia, she recounted how:

Even there where I am in Sesfontein I am thinking about the mountains on the way to Puros. I write in my mind the mountains and the places where we were living, even if I am there in Sesfontein, I also have in my mind the mountains and places of Puros.³⁰

As Julia recalled the first decades of her life in Puros, she related that:

When it's raining at Puros, at the plain there, #Nurusôa [*Trianthema triquetra*, with edible seeds] grows, and the soft grass #habo [*Stipagrostis hirtigluma*, a source of edible sâui seeds] stands tall like this. At Puros |garib [*Cynodon dactylon*] and |harun sedges [*Cyperus marginatus*] come out in the river and the cattle eat those sedges.

There was no hunger. The cows get the calves, and they praise Puros where the cows don't finish the milk:

'Hoaruseb Tumida,³¹ bitter meat of the people'.

We eat those foods like they are grown in a garden. We eat #ares [grass seeds of *S. verticillata*] and !unis [*Hyphaene petersiana* palm] fruits that have been knocked down by elephant [#hoan]. [...] And my grandfather [Guseb Mbomboro] took us from Puros to !Gao-!unias [in Hoaruseb River], and from !Gao-!unias to here at !Ôaxab – those are the places where my grandfather was living with us [...] and it was good.³²

In a long interview on Kurubisa plains, west of the Hoaruseb River and amidst a spectacular surrounding of mountains all around her

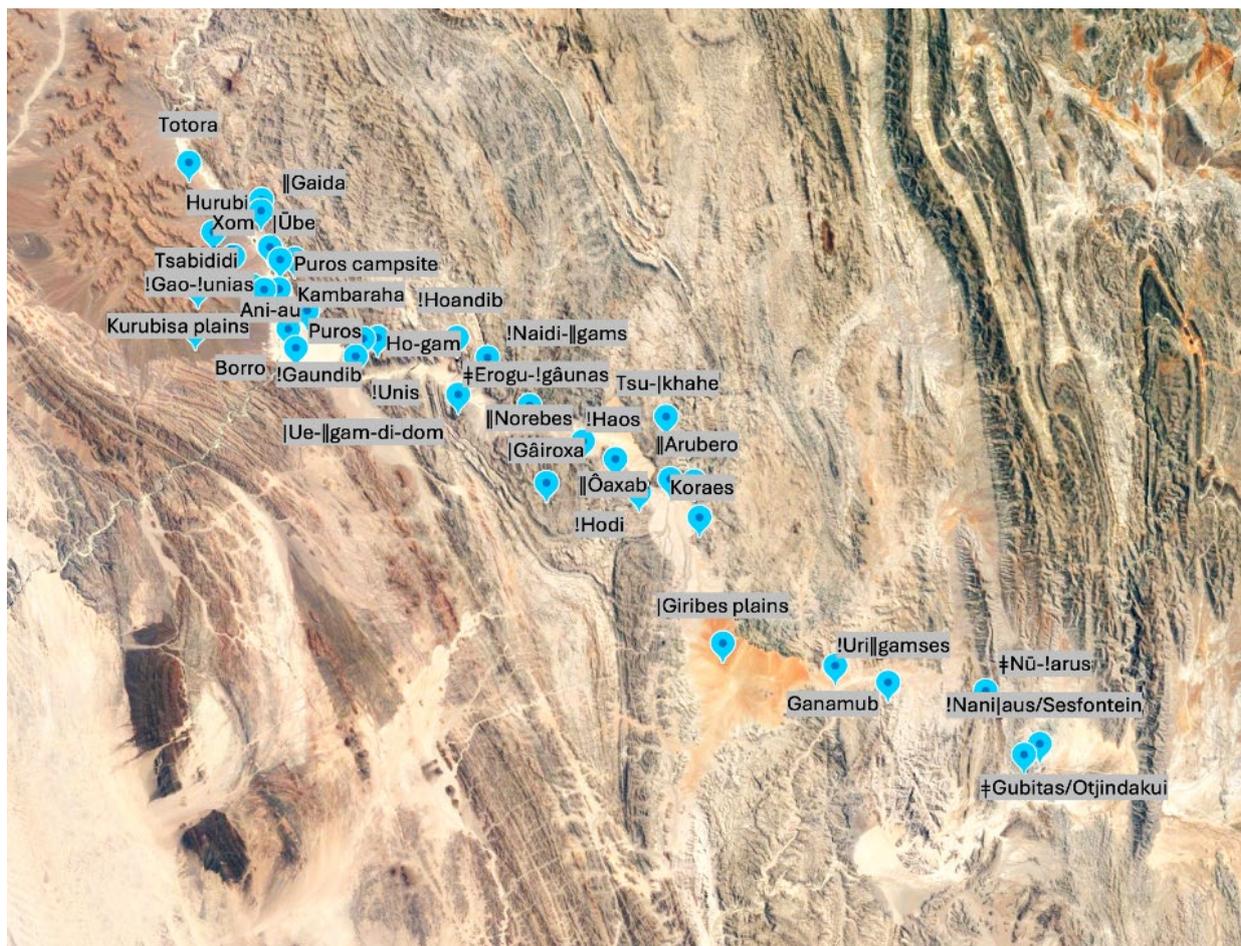


Figure 20 Places visited with Julia !Nâuna Tauros in May 2019.

³⁰ Julia !Nâuna Tauros, !Ôaxab, 17.5.2019.

³¹ Tumida is the water underground that bubbles up at places in the river-bed.

³² Julia !Nâuna Tauros, !Ôaxab, 17.5.2019.



Figure 21 Julia stands on Kurubisa plains, west of the Hoaruseb River, amidst the mountains familiar to her from the first decades of her life. Photo: © Sian Sullivan, 19.5.2019.

(Figure 21), Julia spoke of her familiarity with these mountains:

Now that one standing in the middle is Tsabididi. It is my ancestors’ [Aboxan] mountain which doesn’t have an end. Those big mountains are our beautiful mountains with red rocks, from which red honey comes that smells nice like *sâi* [perfume], which is why we like this honey. And when we come here I feel happy to come to the place where I was born and grew up, at the good smelling honey place. [...]

We stayed there and harvested honey, and cut the wooden bowls there. This was with Uncle !Gâu-o, Uncle †Gere, Bau, !Hâ-ai and †Khainí. We also collected ostrich eggs [!ami !ubina] and we cooked them in the pot and ate them. And we cut †gaub [wooden bowls] to bring with us for harvesting *xoris* [berries of *S. persica*].

That big mountain facing !Gao-!unias spring is the big temple Totora. The big temple. The big mountain behind the spring, looking black [†nuum] is !Uri-!norob. My father and I climbed on that mountain [Totora], looking for honey. There is honey on that mountain and it’s difficult to harvest, but he taught me how to pull [sam] the honey out from between those gaps in the mountains.

The big river Hoaruseb looks small from there, and the trees in the river look like a rope tied together. If you climb on that mountain all the other mountains look small. It’s long and big – it’s not a joke! That’s the way we harvested the honey.³³

We were also able to visit graves of Julia’s maternal ancestors, which she and her mother Elizabet Ge !Abasen had been telling us about since the 1990s. The two graves we visited at the red rocks of



Figure 22 The graves of two female ancestors of Puros-Dama Julia !Nâuna Tauros, at !O-anib, near Puros: !Gôahe on the left and Ma!hana !Oe-amses on the right. Photos: © Sian Sullivan, 18.5.2019.

³³ Julia !Nâuna Tauros, Kurubisa plains, 19.5.2019.

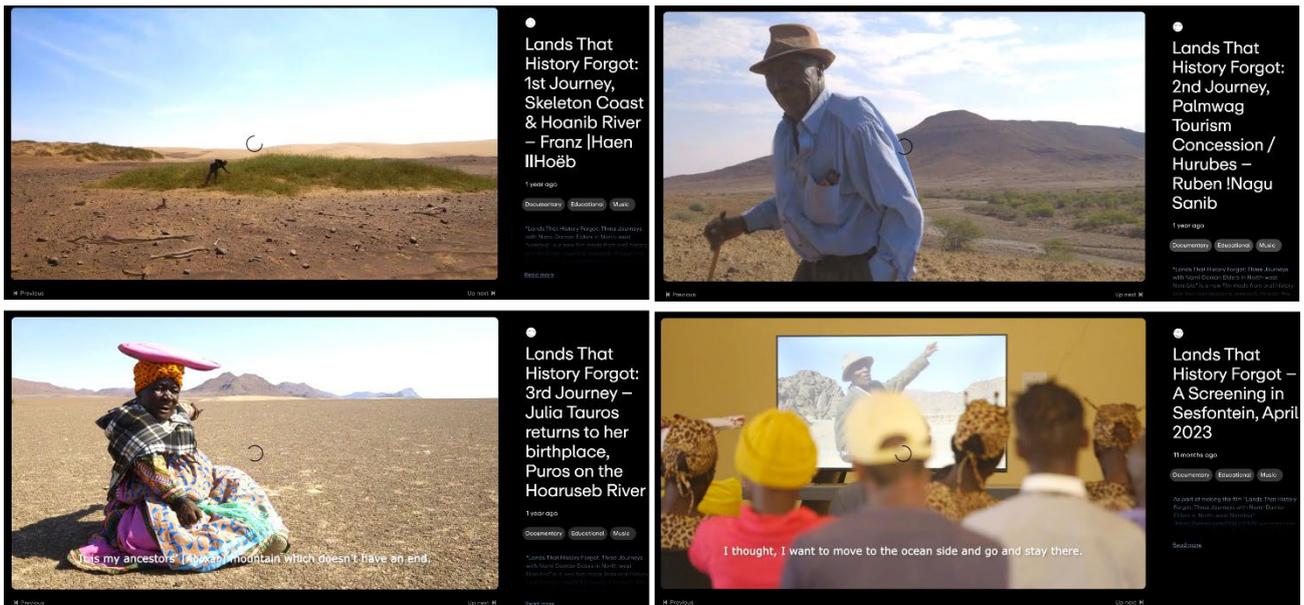


Figure 23 Screenshots of the three journeys films and a short film of a screening in Sesfontein in 2023: 1st journey with Franz at <https://vimeo.com/947316591>; 2nd journey with Ruben at <https://vimeo.com/947727077>; 3rd journey with Julia at <https://vimeo.com/948318666>; and screening film at <https://vimeo.com/990504595>.

!O-anib are of her aunt !Gôahe, daughter of Julia’s great aunt !Hanre !Oe-amses and Guseb Mbomboro; and her great-grandmother Ma!hana !Oe-amses, who fled from the !Oe†gâ/Erongo mountains during conflict in the 1800s (Figure 22). Julia additionally recalled a number of other graves of family members in the Puros area where Damara/#Nûkhoe people had lived for generations, illustrating cultural connections across large distances and between the Sesfontein and Puros conservancies.

All of these three journeys can be watched and explored in greater depth at the links shared in Figure 23. As we were making the films we also shared it through several screenings with the Sesfontein community, including the Nami-Daman Traditional Authority, the Sesfontein Conservancy and the Hoanib Cultural Group. These screenings helped make sure the details in the film are accurate and appropriately conveyed. The fourth short film linked here is of one of these screenings in 2023, and includes feedback from Franz, Ruben and Julia about what the films mean to them.

Graves of known ancestors

On top of the rather orchestrated collapse of Indigenous subsistence economies that relied on access to and through this large tract of land, a further dimension of loss is keenly felt by elderly

residents now constrained to live in the Hoanib valley area. This loss is of their inability to access the graves of members of their families buried here, as indicated in the three journeys shared above. Figure 24 shows the mapped locations of some of the graves known to be present in and near to the Palmwag Tourism Concession, demonstrating the intimate knowledge of these landscapes for elders who once lived here. Indeed, elders who often have been unable for some decades to return to places where they once lived, have unerringly led us to graves of their family members. These experiences demonstrate the significance of these graves and the landscapes in which they are situated for those family members who remember their ancestors, the circumstances of their death, and their former dwelling places. Many of these graves are of named family members, remembered by those alive today (as documented above).

Graves constitute signifiers of cultural heritage whilst also being the resting places of known ancestors and loved ones. How might such graves be acknowledged, recognised and protected in lands directed towards biodiversity conservation effort and tourism investments? We follow here South African anthropologist Lesley Green (2020: 127) in proposing that ‘reclaiming practices of care for soil, and connection with ancestors buried in soils, does not have to be translated into a territorialist [even ecofascist] narrative of “blood

disrupts people's spirited and autonomous understanding of who they are, where they come from, and how they prefer to live. In addition, the detail of peoples' pasts that run through the Namibian Government's *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Claims of Ancestral Land Rights and Restitution* (2020) have barely become part of Namibian policy regarding land restitution.

Harley (1988: 289) additionally states that there are 'numerous cases where indigenous place-names of minority groups are suppressed on topographical maps in favour of the standard toponymy of the controlling group'. This situation brings us back to our argument for detailed and on-site oral histories so as to draw out the complexities of such landscapes often now seen in rather abstract terms as spaces for tourism profit derived from the scenic drama of these landscapes and their value for conservation. The fine-tuned complexities of people's pasts, combined with the ecological sensitivities that permitted them to flourish in lands from which they have been repeatedly removed, sits in stark contrast to the rapid increase of the tourism footprint that now determines these lands. In intersecting on-site oral histories with contemporary land claims for conservation and tourism in north-west Namibia, we are thus making a justice argument for greater recognition of people's pasts and presences in these lands (Martin et al. 2013). In doing so, we are responding to what might be perceived as a possible overconfidence in the recognition justice and distributive dimensions of Namibia's wildlife and tourism economy.

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Hailom engagement with land and the environment: Livelihood challenges at Tsintsabis resettlement farm, Namibia

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ABSTRACT Land is a complex issue. Ascribed economic, utilitarian, social and cultural values often conflict, challenging people's livelihoods and their connection with land. In this paper, we explore contemporary land dynamics at the Tsintsabis resettlement farm, Oshikoto Region, Namibia, and how these dynamics shape the engagement of Hailom people with their environment. Many Hailom suffered a history of land dispossession, including their eviction from the Etosha National Park. Since Namibian Independence (1990), most struggle to sustain themselves, mainly relying on social grants and food aid. In the subsequent national resettlement scheme, group resettlement farms were established with the aim for self-sufficiency through small-scale agriculture. Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork and sensorial mapping, we use Ingold's 'dwelling perspective' to analyse Hailom changed relationships with their interwoven natural and social environment. This perspective emphasises that humans and their environment are interconnected and interdependent. However, we argue that droughts, a lack of land rights, and illegal land deals challenge the ability of Hailom to sustain themselves in this resettlement scheme that is largely based on agriculture.

KEYWORDS agriculture; dwelling; environment; Hailom; land; livelihoods; Namibia; resettlement

INTRODUCTION

In addition to land's economic and utilitarian value, serving as a crucial resource for people's livelihoods, it also holds important social and cultural value (Koot & Büscher 2019, Pascual et al. 2023). All of these ascribed values to land play various roles in the lives of Hailom at the Tsintsabis

resettlement farm, Namibia. The Hailom of north-central Namibia—usually considered part of the larger, southern African, indigenous¹ 'Bushmen' or 'San' group²—have suffered a long history of dispossession and oppression that is closely connected with the loss of their ancestral lands in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including their eviction from the Etosha National Park (Dieckmann

¹ The term 'indigenous' has no universally accepted definition because it is impossible to constitute an inclusive or comprehensive definition for the diversity of the peoples it tries to describe (Daes 1996). Explaining the discussions around the concept is beyond the scope of this paper. We use the term because it often informs government and development policy decision-making, influencing the lives of peoples who are recognised as indigenous, including Hailom. For broader debates about indigeneity see special issues in *Anthropology Today* 2000 16 (4) and 2004 20 (2), *Social Anthropology* 2006 14 (1) and *Current Anthropology* 2004 45 (2) and 2006 47 (1). Namibia signed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples from 2007 and several other international agreements that affirm its values (IWGIA, n.d.). Despite this, the government denies special Indigenous status to any group in the country (Sapignoli & Hitchcock 2013).

² Both terms 'Bushmen' and 'San' have derogatory and patronising elements (Gordon & Douglas 2000). Nonetheless, they "signify important identity markers of belonging to the larger regional group that shares cultural similarities and experiences of marginalization" (Koot et al. 2023). When applicable, we use their own language group names such as !Xung or Hailom.

2007). Their traditional livelihood as semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers was thereby constrained. Despite Namibian Independence in 1990, many Haillom still struggle to sustain themselves, mainly relying on social grants and food aid.

We focus on Haillom because of their historical connection with land in this area. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they lived a semi-nomadic lifestyle based on seasonal mobility. They did this in the area between present-day Outjo, Etosha National Park, Grootfontein, Tsumeb, Otavi, Otjiwarongo and former Owamboland (Dieckmann 2007). Although today Haillom live quite scattered, historically they are strongly connected to the Etosha National Park and its surroundings (Suzman 2004, Vogelsang 2005, Dieckmann 2007, Odendaal & Hebinck 2021). Long before Namibia became a German colony in 1884, Haillom dwelt in this area (Suzman 2004, Vogelsang 2005, Odendaal & Hebinck 2021). In 1907, German colonial authorities established ‘Game Reserve No 2’, a wildlife reserve that would later develop into Etosha National Park (Dieckmann 2021, Odendaal & Hebinck 2021). At first, Haillom were allowed to stay in the park. However, in 1954—while Namibia was a South African mandate—they were forcibly removed to accommodate the wish of tourists for ‘pristine’ wilderness and the desires of key officials to realise Etosha’s full tourist potential (Suzman 2004, Barnard 2019). Thereafter, a small number of Haillom remained to work for the park (Dieckmann 2007, Hitchcock 2015). Most were, however, pushed into (low) wage labour at white commercial farms or had to resettle to ‘Ovamboland’, at that time a Bantustan³ (Gordon & Douglas 2000, Suzman 2004, Hitchcock 2015, Barnard 2019, Koot & Hitchcock 2019, Odendaal 2024).

Following Namibia’s independence in 1990, resettlement became a key strategy in the broader land reform programme aimed at addressing extreme land inequality and rural poverty, particularly among historically marginalised groups (Koot & ||Khumûb 2024). Many Haillom

were consequently resettled from white commercial farms to ‘group resettlement farms’ bought by the Namibian government as compensation for the loss of their land (Agricultural (Commercial) Land Reform Act, 1995). Group resettlement farms aim to redress historical land dispossession by promoting self-sufficiency through agriculture, to reduce pressure on communal areas, and to integrate resettled people into the national economy. Despite policies such as the Agricultural (Commercial) Land Reform Act of 1995 and the National Resettlement Policy of 2001, the resettlement programme has hardly benefitted Haillom due to poor implementation, inadequate infrastructure, weak institutional support, and unresolved social complexities, including at the Tsintsabis resettlement farm (Harring & Odendaal 2007, Koot & ||Khumûb 2024). Furthermore, ethnic discrimination and tensions also still play an influential role in post-apartheid Namibia (e.g. Taylor 2008). Based on ethnographic fieldwork, including sensorial mapping, by Wahedi and a longitudinal ethnographic engagement by Koot, we interrogated contemporary land dynamics in Tsintsabis, and how these dynamics shape Haillom livelihoods and their engagement with their interwoven natural and social environment.

The paper contributes to the existing literature an analysis of the ‘dwelling perspective’ (Ingold 2000) in the context of contemporary land and resettlement dynamics in Namibia. More specifically, it advances the concept of ‘lodging’ that builds on dwelling (Koot & van Beek 2017).⁴ The two interconnected concepts both refer to the ways people connect with their environment (see below). In particular the more political concept of lodging—that focuses on relations of power and domination—has been used in the context of Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) in Namibia (Koot et al. 2016, Koot & van Beek 2017), but never in an empirical context about land reform and resettlement.

In this paper, we elaborate on the meaning of dwelling and lodging and on the methodology. Next, we describe our results which show evolving

³ Bantustans or homelands were allocated land established by the apartheid government that different black ethnic groups were forcibly moved into (Evans 2014). These settlement areas were subject to minimal state planning and provision while self-governance was highly promoted, which led to inequalities on multiple levels (e.g., social, economic, political) that still exist until this day.

⁴ Lodging should not be mixed up with ‘sojourning’, in the sense that lodging refers to long-term changes in the environment, while sojourners are people who physically move to another place (i.e. environment) for a demarcated time, e.g. for labour or study (Cook-Martin 2024).

processes of dwelling and lodging among the Haillom of Tsintsabis. Lastly, we analyse these findings and iterate our main argument, namely that Haillom hardly stand a chance of achieving a sustainable livelihood based on the current resettlement model which is based on agriculture.

Dwelling and lodging

We analyse the land dynamics in Tsintsabis largely through the dwelling perspective as introduced by Tim Ingold (2000). In the dwelling perspective, there is an ongoing engagement with the land—or, rather, with the total environment, including everything that happens on the land—and the human and non-human beings that ‘dwell’ there. This perspective allows us to interrogate the complex relationship between people and how they relate to their interwoven natural and social environments. When defining the perspective, Ingold (2000 p. 153) writes that it

treats the immersion of the organism-person in an environment or lifeworld as an inescapable condition of existence. From this perspective, the world continually comes into being around the inhabitant, and its manifold constituents take on significance through their incorporation into a regular pattern of life activity.

Dwelling thus acknowledges how humans constantly (re)structure their environment and themselves through interaction with their surroundings while simultaneously being (re)shaped by the everchanging world and its inhabitants. Dwelling is the “active, practical and perceptual engagement” of humans and other organisms with their environment while being intrinsically enmeshed in the world around them (Ingold 2000 p. 42). Here, ‘environment’ means “that which surrounds” (Ingold 1992 p. 40), encompassing everything around a living being.

We focus on the political aspect of the dwelling perspective to analyse contemporary land dynamics at the Tsintsabis resettlement farm by using the concept of ‘lodging’ (Ingold 2005, Koot et al. 2016 p. 498). Lodging highlights a condition in which people have to adapt to changes or new circumstances in their environment that are mostly “beyond their control and did not happen as a result of their interaction with [their]

environment”. Of course, this applies to all people in varying degrees. But since Haillom in Tsintsabis are essentially forced to live in an environment that is largely controlled by outside forces (e.g. changing circumstances under colonialism, the resettlement policy under land reform or climate change), lodging is highly applicable here, and this case may serve as an example of other peoples’ experiences of lodging elsewhere. As a result of their current marginalised and mostly landless status, and the ongoing process of land grabbing specifically (see below), Haillom in Tsintsabis continue to adapt to a changing environment that is mostly disadvantaging them. Although they have always adapted to new circumstances, contemporary changes in land dynamics mean they need to further adjust their way of life largely to external factors, becoming ‘lodgers’ in a continually changing ecological and political situation.

METHODS

Case Study

Tsintsabis is located in the Oshikoto Region and Guinas Constituency, about 65 kilometres north of Tsumeb. As explained to Koot over the years, a possible meaning of the word ‘Tsintsabis’ is ‘sneeze a lot’, likely due to some people experiencing serious grass allergies. From 1993 until 2012 the number of inhabitants had grown from a population of 841 to between 3 000 and 4 000 people, largely because of in-migration (GRN 2010, Dieckmann et al. 2013). Currently, no updated numbers on Tsintsabis’ population exist. A government official estimated in an interview with Wahedi in 2024 that around 600 households reside there which comes down to—when using the government’s average of five persons per household—around 3 000 inhabitants. However, we have frequently come across much bigger households. Tsintsabis differs to some extent from other resettlement farms in the sense that it did not solely serve as a commercial farm before it became a group resettlement farm. Instead, the area was also a police station under German and South African rule, later turning into a South African Defence Force (SADF) military base during the Namibian War of Independence (Koot & ||Khumûb 2024).

Most group resettlement farms in Namibia are focused on small-scale farming for self-sufficiency,

but in Tsintsabis—as well as many other resettlement farms—not much agricultural activity is happening. Haillom in Tsintsabis generally rely on social grants (e.g. old-age, disability, and child grants) and food aid from the government (Dieckmann et al. 2013, Koot & Hitchcock 2019, Hashange 2023). Furthermore, there is a lack of other income-generating activities and several development initiatives that were introduced did not make a lasting change. Finally, the resettlement farm gave way to more land issues such as illegal land deals and the privatisation of land formerly used as common land, increasing pressure on many Haillom to survive (Koot & Hitchcock 2019, Sankwasa 2023).

Haillom have no ownership or rights over the resettlement farm, which remains state property (Constitution of the Republic of Namibia 1990). Although leasehold agreements—part of the Namibian government’s resettlement policy strategy—could bring some tenure security in Tsintsabis, the government has not yet put them in place (Odendaal 2024). Haillom in Tsintsabis consequently cannot claim ownership over any land.

On 31 July 2020, a part of the Tsintsabis resettlement farm was officially declared a settlement (Simasiku 2020, NBC 2020). The Regional Council Office for the Guinas Constituency began searching for a new location after the establishment of a new constituency caused the old office to fall outside of Guinas.⁵ Since there is a tarred road running straight through Tsintsabis, it was considered the best option for a new office. The status of resettlement farm, however, does not allow for certain construction activities. For a Regional Council Office and the accompanying facilities to be established, Tsintsabis has therefore partially been declared a settlement. The greater part of Tsintsabis remains a resettlement farm. It is yet unclear what these developments will mean for the Haillom and other inhabitants (Koot & IlKhumûb 2024).

Ethnographic fieldwork and interviews

Wahedi’s fieldwork is at the heart of the empirical findings of this paper. For a period of seven months

(November 2023–June 2024) she conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Tsintsabis, immersed herself into everyday life and held interviews with Haillom in Tsintsabis, government officials and persons involved in the local school and clinic. Most interviews were conducted in English. The interviews held in Afrikaans—a language Wahedi learned several years before going to Namibia—were conducted and translated by her without the use of an interpreter or translator. Interviews in Khoekhoegowab were done with the help of an interviewee’s close relative who served as translator during the interview. Koot has lived, worked, and conducted research in Tsintsabis since 1999, with multiple return visits. This includes working there as a development fieldworker between 2002 and 2007. He also conducted more research about land and conservation in Southern Africa, including among other San groups.

Sensorial mapping

Due to the central focus on land in the paper, Wahedi also used ‘sensorial mapping’. Sensorial mapping is one way to acknowledge the politics of spatial demarcations and provide the opportunity for open debates about land. The method creates insights into perceptions of spaces, places, boundaries, and borders and how people relate to these (Rekacewicz, pers. com., 2023 & 2025). It is an important method for this paper, because the relation with land is subjective, something that is often not acknowledged in conventional maps (Pickles 2003, Crampton 2009, Wood & Fels 2009, Kitchin et al. 2013).

Wahedi asked participants individually to draw maps of Tsintsabis on a blank A4-paper with colouring pencils to see what kind of feelings and sensations Haillom associate with Tsintsabis and the on-going land dynamics taking place there. After a participant drew a map, it was followed up with an interview. There is no fixed outcome because the maps take shape based on the artistic expression of an individual or a group. The resulting visual maps show spaces or territories not only through visualised objects but also, in the subsequent interviews or informal talks during the drawing, through the feelings and sensations one can experience when moving around in these spaces or territories (Rekacewicz, pers. com., 2023

⁵ Namibia is not only divided into regions but also into electoral constituencies, political units with local councillors representing voters living in that constituency (Republic of Namibia 1990).

& 2025). The maps are visualisations explaining partly how Haillom dwell in the world.

DWELLING AND LODGING PRACTICES

Although we focused predominantly on land, this strongly relates to other important issues that kept coming up (e.g. water, ownership, relations with other people, flora and fauna or the government). We are aware that these terms may have different meanings for different people. Especially land is a crucial term and in relation to the environment, it means something different than ‘environment’ as used in the dwelling perspective. Land is often treated as a two-dimensional economic resource with a variety of legal tenure systems, while the environment refers to an all-encompassing surrounding. Indigenous groups like the Haillom, after many years of colonisation, oppression and marginalisation, have now often internalised hybrid values and meanings, including those of their (former) oppressors (Koot & Büscher 2019). Furthermore, a concept like ownership can also be interpreted in multiple ways, since historically Khoi-San groups in southern Africa have often been described as egalitarian, living in a culture in which those who have more are expected to share with those who have less (Sahlins 1972). However, today when people say they do (not) own something, for instance a piece of land, it is often framed as owning in a Western-based, legal manner. This aligns well with Gluckman’s (1969) idea of a ‘bundle of rights’, in which land tenure is not considered an indivisible right of ownership but a collection of distinct, separable rights held by different actors. These include, among others, the right to use (e.g. cultivation or residence), to exclude others, to sell, to inherit or to derive income from the land. Such highly fragmented tenure arrangements imply that one person might farm a plot while another holds the legal title, and a third controls water access. Colonial, state, or market interventions have reshaped rights, often marginalising customary users who lose control.

Erfes as safe havens amid land insecurity

Land in Tsintsabis—and on group resettlement farms in general—is officially vested in the government. The idea behind the land reform programme is that people on resettlement farms lease the land from the government but as mentioned above, leasehold agreements have not

yet been arranged (Odendaal 2024). When it comes to land, Haillom in Tsintsabis generally differentiate between an ‘erf’ and a plot. In Southern Africa, erf—adopted from the Afrikaans word ‘piece of land’—refers to

every piece of land registered as an erf, lot, plot or stand in a deeds registry, and includes every defined portion, not intended to be a public place, of a piece of land laid out as a township, whether or not it has been formally recognized, approved or proclaimed as such (Deeds Registries Act, 1937 p. cclxxii).

Haillom in Tsintsabis, however, use the word erf for the relatively small piece of land they reside on that automatically comes with a house. Although important for people, they are not subject to illegal land deals. The ten hectares of land allocated by the government to engage in self-sufficient, small-scale farming—for example crop cultivation or livestock farming—are referred to as plots and are generally situated away from the houses (Koot & IlKhumûb 2024). The first erfes in Tsintsabis were allocated together with a plot but new generations, especially current younger generations, are generally not granted an erf, let alone a plot. Yet, even if someone is allocated a plot, productivity tends to be low, although Tsintsabis inhabitants generally want to cultivate them. We were told that the plots are too far away from the houses, which makes it challenging to be productive. In addition to the distance, a lack of close water sources, tools and equipment pose major hindrances. Therefore, food provision and income generation through agriculture is very limited.

Moreover, illegal trade of plots is a big issue in Tsintsabis. Since the land is government property, people cannot legally sell or lease their allocated land to others. If Haillom do not use the land, they need to return it to the government for redistribution. A government official explained:

[...] the Ministry of the Land Division [Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Land Reform] is responsible for the whole farm, the [re]settlement farm. Anything happens in the farm, it has to go through the Land Division under the Ministry of Agriculture. [...] If you cannot manage the plot, you are given the condition that you should surrender it back so that it can be

given to another person. You cannot sell it, you can only surrender it back to the ministry so that the ministry can allocate it to another beneficiary (Interview, 15-04-2024).

The issue of illegal land deals was officially recognised by the government and inhabitants of Tsintsabis were urged to refrain from engaging in this (Terblanché 2023). However, illegal land deals continue and several people told Wahedi that their plots were sold by others without their knowledge. For example, a young woman said: “Some are selling people’s plots and their lands without letting the owner know (Interview, 24-year-old female, 08-04-2024)”. An important issue in this is ethnicity and in some cases illiteracy:

[Hailom] were told that [the headman and another tribe] are just going to rent for a certain period but the next thing they know they sold the plot. There is evidence, they signed. Just because they do not know how to read and write, that is how they were robbed (Interview, 31-year-old male, 03-04-2024)

Illegal land deals have made it difficult to reclaim land for inhabitants of Tsintsabis. People who bought it feel entitled to the land and the government does not return it to the rightful owners. As a result, many of the interviewees feel they are losing land again. Initially, Hailom hardly had any resources to farm the land so instead the land was still used communally, to gather wild foods and firewood. Since many plots were traded illegally, there is hardly any space for them to still dwell on land in that way. Creating an informally shared land where they could decide for themselves how to dwell was their way of adapting as lodgers in an environment shaped by government regulations, but now their circumstances continue to change severely due to illegal land trade. This change makes Hailom dwell less and lodge even more. Not only have they lost land again, but it has also led them to prefer staying at their erf. They feel as if they cannot go anywhere without trespassing other lands in and around Tsintsabis and therefore they developed a fear of prosecution when they go anywhere. Finally, most people already did not have resources to own livestock before, but without a plot they find it even more difficult to consider

holding livestock a serious livelihood option. This also causes problems within the living area of Tsintsabis because cattle often roam the streets and sometimes enter people’s erfs, destroying their plants or crops.

So today, Hailom generally prefer to dwell in or around their houses. They see their erfs as a safe haven where they have the freedom to do as they please. Instead of merely lodging in an environment dictated by government expectations, environmental pressures, and lack of resources, erfs allow Hailom to decide for themselves how to dwell; it is a place they still have some control over. One of people’s favourite ways to pass time around the house is cleaning their erf. They take pride in having clean and well-maintained erfs, as exemplified by the following interview excerpts:

I like to stay in a clean place. I do not like to stay in dirty places. [...] I do not want to stay in dirty places. Then I do not feel nice. [...] I have to clean it so that it can look nice. And I like plants. I have to plant something like this (Interview, 35-year-old woman, 11-04-2024).

What I like a lot in the first place; I am a hardworking man so I love making a garden. That is one thing I like a lot. I like to not stay around dirt, so my ground must be clean. That is what I like. I love flowers, I like it a lot to have flowers in my garden (Interview, 59-year-old male, 23-04-2024).

Cleaning one’s erf can be seen as a way for Hailom people to exercise some control and sustain a relationship with their immediate surroundings. One Hailom inhabitant told Wahedi, when asked why his garden looked so lovely with many blooming flowers: “So that my heart can also feel beautiful because my garden looks beautiful” (Pers. com., 24 April 2024).

Those who live near a water source tend to plant limes or mangos at their erf. There was a time when the government offered free water through a tap. An elderly woman mentioned having fruit trees during that time but after she had to start paying for water herself, all the trees died. Therefore, for most interviewees the rainy season is the only time to cultivate crops or other plants. However, during Wahedi’s fieldwork, many did not bother to plant

because the rain came late and was unpredictable. Another limiting factor for planting is the very sandy soil.

Despite these limitations, some inhabitants of Tsintsabis still manage to grow fruit trees and crops successfully, such as guava, maize, beans, butternut, and various fruits. Hailom in Tsintsabis who plant take pride in this. It is their way to show that even though they are lodgers in an environment shaped largely by forces beyond their influence such as lack of water or poor soil quality, they have some impact, resilience and the ability to engage in self-sustaining activities.

Hailom in Tsintsabis know the names of numerous plants and trees in and around Tsintsabis and many enjoy going out to the fields or bushes to gather wild foods such as mushrooms, Makalani nuts, marula fruits or nuts, and a variety of berries. However, the designation of private plots in Tsintsabis and farms surrounding Tsintsabis is one of the reasons why people fear trouble when they move away from their own erf. Some have called Tsintsabis a ‘corridor’ because they feel they are only allowed to dwell in this small, narrow, empty space where access to land becomes increasingly limited. Once they set foot on any land outside of this corridor, they run the risk of being prosecuted for trespassing. The lack of ‘legal space’ discourages Hailom from engaging in activities such as gathering wild foods and firewood. This does not mean they do not engage in these activities anymore at all. Although people in Tsintsabis generally disapprove of hunting cattle owned by others, a few sometimes secretly catch a cow at another farm to satisfy their hunger (including by selling parts of the meat), but not without fear. One woman explained one could be killed for gathering or hunting on someone else’s property.

With few exceptions, Hailom do not own cattle or goats but some have chickens as a small economic leverage: “I just bought [chickens] for my girl since I am unemployed. If she will need something, I sell [the male cocks] and then I will just buy for her what she need[s] (Interview, 25-year-old female, 04-04-2024)”. Using an animal to fall back on during economically difficult times reveals how Hailom’s dwelling is interconnected with changing environments. Today, markets and domestic animals are essential to survive in Tsintsabis.

Although Hailom are generally grateful for the small quantity of land they can live on, they are highly aware of their status as a landless people. The fact that Tsintsabis remains government-owned is a constant reminder about lost freedoms and a lack of rights. Most consider this unjust based on their long history in the area and the loss of their ancestral land.

Water scarcity and livelihood challenges

Drought and the resulting water scarcity is difficult to ignore in Tsintsabis. It hardly rained during Wahedi’s fieldwork, even though she arrived at the beginning of the rainy season of 2024 (which runs from November to April). The first rains only fell in the week of 18 December and in March people gave up on the rain, removing dead crops such as maize. She heard many complaints, including: “The sun is killing us,” “The heat is killing us” or “I am evaporating” (Pers. com., 15 November 2023; 16 November 2023; 2 April 2024 respectively). 2023 was indeed an extremely hot and dry year in southern Africa, and the drought was internationally declared a humanitarian and environmental crisis for which the Namibian government declared a state of emergency (Joint Research Centre 2024, FAO 2024, Goreses 2024, WFP 2024). This affects how people dwell in Tsintsabis and their sense of agency over the activities they can undertake. When Wahedi asked a woman about the consequences, she was told that instead of combining maize porridge with leafy greens, butternut or beans, they only eat a smaller portion of maize porridge once a day. Furthermore, bush fruits have become smaller and not as sweet as they used to. It is evident that Hailom are living in an environment that is also shaped by environmental changes that create immense pressures, making them lodgers due to their decreasing options to relate to the land. They hope for the best when planting crops or gathering fruits, but uncertainty prevails.

Hope was also visible on the sensorial maps. A few people included the Ovambo River, filled with water, next to Tsintsabis in their drawings. Usually the Ovambo is dry, only flowing after heavy rainfall. Wahedi asked her interlocutors when they last saw the river flowing and answers varied. Some told her it was 2010, others 2015 or 2016, again others told her 2019 or 2020, and some claimed to have seen the river flow last year (i.e.

2023).⁶ Regardless of the year they mentioned, people have fond memories of the river. They not only perceive it as a source of food and water but also as a source of recreation. In Figure 1 a middle-aged woman has drawn a person and fish swimming in the river.

The only affordable source of water are boreholes where water must be manually pumped, most of them provided by the faith-based non-profit organisation Living Water International and some by the Namibian government. This water is used for everyday consumption, including drinking, cooking, washing dishes, bathing, laundry, watering plants and trees, and so on. These boreholes are vital because other sources of water



Figure 1 Excerpt of a sensorial map drawn by a middle-aged woman which shows the Ovambo River with a person and fish swimming in the river.

⁶ In 2025 the river flowed again.

⁷ We prefer not to name this group, because it is not our intention to contribute to potential ethnic tensions.

are unaffordable or unsanitary. Even though Tsintsabis inhabitants gratefully use them every day, several factors contribute to dissatisfaction. First, the boreholes are relatively far from most people's homes, making it an exhausting task to fetch water. Second, the quality of the water is a concern: most of it tastes salty or sour and some people mentioned becoming sick, while others saw worms in the water: "Water is not even purified, sometimes you get sick because the water comes straight from the borehole with germs and all that (Interview, 25-year-old male, 02-04-2024)". Third, people are often forced to wait long at the boreholes and fourth, the boreholes often break and have to be fixed by people themselves. Their dependence on badly maintained boreholes underscores the position of Hailom as lodgers whose agency is limited due to external forces, compelling them into a precarious position without the guarantee of clean water, a basic need for survival.

Belonging and purpose despite inter-ethnic tensions

Most interviewees in Tsintsabis indicated they prefer the company of other Hailom because they share the same culture and language. Some share friendships or romantic relationships with members of other ethnic groups. Yet, dwelling with other Hailom provides a sense of belonging and safety based on a shared cultural identity in an environment heavily shaped by others. Despite also having positive experiences in inter-ethnic relations, they generally feel further oppressed by a group that is more dominant in Tsintsabis, again making them more lodgers than dwellers.

Tsintsabis currently houses people from various ethnic groups and many Hailom blame non-Hailom groups for the misfortunes in Tsintsabis. One group is particularly present and Hailom in Tsintsabis are not fond of them.⁷ Hailom blame this group for high unemployment rates among themselves and accuse the others of nepotism. On multiple occasions, Hailom claimed that they were only considered for jobs during election times to win their votes. The other ethnic group is also partially blamed for the lack of land for younger Hailom generations.

A major concern among Haillom is the number of shebeens (informal shops where many people purchase alcoholic drinks too) in Tsintsabis and its negative effects, which they largely attribute to the other ethnic group (see also Koot & †Khumûb, 2024). Interviewees consider shebeens to be facilitators of nuisance and school dropouts and, except for one, all shebeen owners in Tsintsabis belong to this other group. Drinking at shebeens is a common habit in Tsintsabis among all generations and ethnic groups. Some visitors of shebeens explained they drink because of an absence of purpose and this way they adapt to the unpromising environment of Tsintsabis: many Haillom perceive their predicament as hopeless, which again emphasises their status as lodgers in an environment shaped by land insecurity, economic and environmental constraints, and detrimental government regulations and support. Nonetheless, shebeens also function as important social places. Some people told Wahedi that shebeens offer a purpose, a reason to dress up, go out, and socialise with others.

So, despite articulations of hopelessness, many interviewees also pointed out various examples of activities and happenings that give them purpose. Some find purpose, for example, by attending workshops or doing jobs. This is their way to adapt as lodgers to the changing, foreign environment. Through workshops and jobs, Haillom hope to become more self-sufficient. A popular job is working at farms in the vicinity. Wahedi once asked a young woman how much she was paid after receiving her money at the end of a month full of farmwork. She eventually received N\$1 200, including working overtime.⁸ Some young men who were spending their time drunk at one of the shebeens told Wahedi they were very happy with the money they received whenever they were able to do a farm job. Wahedi asked them whether they find the pay enough but they were seemingly surprised by the question, emphasising they are very satisfied with the wage and find it enough to provide themselves with the wants and needs in their life whenever they have the opportunity to work.

Finally, most Haillom remain hopeful for the future and are actively working on fulfilling their life

desires, something that was often revealed on the sensorial maps. Almost all participants included their desires for Tsintsabis in their maps on their own initiative. They created maps in accordance with an idealised image of their surroundings. Some of these images were shaped by a combination of nostalgia and hopes for the future. For example, people would include the Treesleeper campsite intended for tourists although it is currently largely defunct (Koot et al. 2020). Others drew a building designated as a community hall and referred to it as ‘the community centre’ despite an inhabitant having claimed it as her home. Another image included a building that, according to the drawer, was called the ‘bakery’. This used to be a thriving development project, but operations had come to a halt around 2003. All these places have in common that they represent a desire for a thriving community, benefitting their members. Finally, soccer was often mentioned as a favourite activity, for various reasons. It is often perceived as a career opportunity, a prevention for or remedy against alcohol and drug abuse, a healthy activity, a way to build community, and a fun activity to keep oneself busy in a proper manner. A young man who explained that he would love to become a professional soccer player drew his favourite type of soccer field: green and with all the necessary lines as displayed on TV (see Figure 2). This contrasts with the soccer field in Tsintsabis which was sandy and lacked markings.

The new settlement status, explained above, also brought hope to many inhabitants, who consider it a chance to regain some control over their life. They expect many changes, for example, to receive more attention from the government and with that more support to improve their living conditions. Moreover, many whom Wahedi spoke to think that various services such as a postal office and banks will now move to Tsintsabis. This would relieve many inhabitants from costly trips to Tsumeb, while people also expect big shops to come to Tsintsabis that they hope will provide jobs for the largely unemployed Haillom, especially the youth. Additionally, Haillom perceive the settlement status as proof that Tsintsabis is ‘developing’, mirroring conventional, depoliticised development ideologies based on infrastructure and the growth of services (Ferguson 1990, Li 2007). The newly

⁸ In 2025 this is about 60 Euro.

built regional office, along with other buildings and services around it, are seen as markers of progress. This is also shown on the sensorial maps, where most interviewees focused on what they consider the ‘central’ part of Tsintsabis. Regardless of where people lived, their starting point when drawing was the tarred road that runs straight through Tsintsabis, followed by the police station, craft centre, regional office, Oshana bar, school, and clinic (see Figure 3). Many interviewees believe these places show that they are not stuck in time and are moving forward, just like other ‘developed’ places in and outside of Namibia. In Namibia, the bush is often associated with an inferior lifestyle, in contrast to ‘modernisation’ and/or ‘development’ that are associated with infrastructure and economic progress. It is symbolic in this regard that the school in Tsintsabis used the slogan ‘backwards never’, shown with a tree representing the bush, for many years, indicating how development and modernisation seem to dominate general ideas of progress. Changing circumstances can thus also instigate hope and future dreams, and although it implies a much stronger role for external forces, it is important to acknowledge that these forces also hold a certain attractiveness.

However, there is currently still a lot of uncertainty surrounding the declaration of Tsintsabis as a settlement. It is unclear to what extent Haillom have rights over the land they inhabit and whether they will be allowed to stay in Tsintsabis in the future, underscoring their position as lodgers in an

environment shaped by forces largely beyond their control. Additionally, people fear that the settlement will raise living costs and that some basic needs (e.g. water, housing) will not be free anymore: for instance, commercial operators like parastatal NamWater need to construct a sewage system. Therefore, many Haillom think a large number of people must move since most inhabitants of Tsintsabis do not have a sufficient income to sustain themselves in the environment of a settlement.

CONCLUSION

The land dynamics we describe here are the most important regarding Haillom’s relation with the environment in Tsintsabis based on their recurrence in conversations, interviews, observations and sensorial maps. The continuing ‘dispossession’ of land means an intensifying rupture with the former livelihood practices of Haillom and with their connection to the land. Many became landless and others continue to lose rights to land and access to resources. Because a lot of land tenure takes place in the informal and illegal spheres, while there are also formal rights that local and national authorities do not follow up upon, there is currently no clear right of ownership. Instead, in line with the idea of a bundle of rights, there is a collection of distinct, separable rights held by different actors (Gluckman 1969). This severely compromises Haillom’s quality of life and challenges their ability to sustain themselves. Over the last 35 years or so, the implementation of a resettlement programme in Tsintsabis has hardly

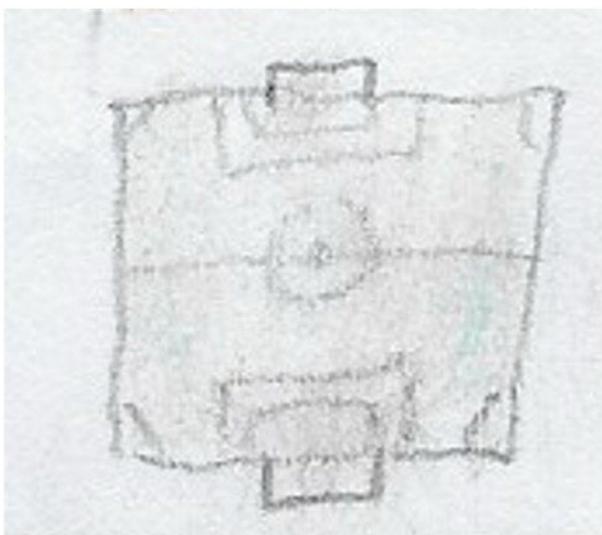


Figure 2 Excerpt of a sensorial map drawn by a young man which shows the soccer field with all the necessary lines as displayed on TV.

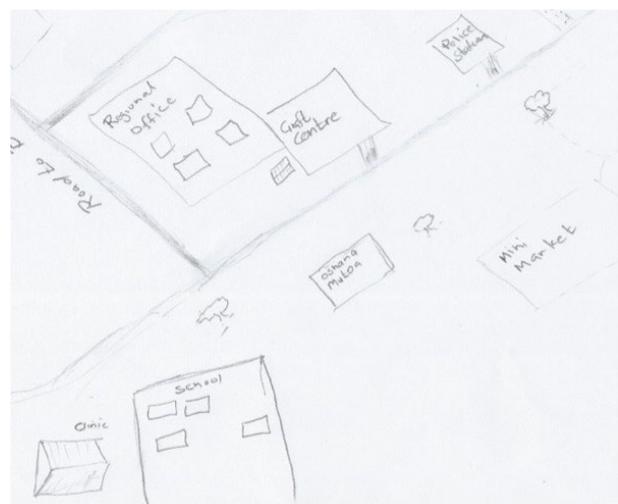


Figure 3 Sensorial map of Tsintsabis solely showing the ‘central’ part of Tsintsabis, including the tarred road, police station, craft centre, regional office, Oshana bar, school and clinic.

supported Haillom to overcome past injustices. In fact, the weak implementation of the resettlement scheme even exacerbated their current predicament, leading to more land issues that challenge their lives (e.g. illegal land trade). Haillom in Tsintsabis face numerous challenges that prevent them from successfully engaging in agricultural activities, including the distance to plots and a lack of accessible water. These constraints and more are not merely perceived by Haillom in Tsintsabis but have also been mentioned about other group resettlement farms in Namibia (Harring & Odendaal 2007, Gargallo 2010, Werner & Odendaal 2010, e.g. Dieckmann et al. 2013, Hitchcock 2015, Koot & ||Khumûb 2024, Odendaal 2024). The main issues are a lack of water sources, insufficient capital, little to no infrastructure, ineffective policies and policy implementation, and inadequate government support.

Thus, Haillom in Tsintsabis can hardly live a decent life based on self-sufficient agriculture. Ethnic tensions simultaneously worsen the problems as they continue to feel dominated by others (see also Koot 2023) and external forces. To be clear: this does not mean that Haillom are without agency, but it shows that ongoing changes in their environment generally further limit it. Haillom are especially disempowered regarding changes about land access, employment, or environmental pressures (e.g. droughts, changing rain patterns). Although well-intended, resettlement fails to offer secure land tenure and gives way to more problems, perpetuating the vulnerability and marginalisation of Haillom. They are pushed into a relatively passive lifestyle as lodgers, increasingly depending on aid and charity from outsiders to survive. Since independence, circumstances have changed rapidly and this may have intensified their status as lodgers instead of dwellers. Without disregarding the hope and future dreams that some developments also bring, the general tendency shows a precarious situation in which Haillom increasingly lose control over their environment. Similar to Haillom, many other indigenous groups are victims of historical as well as ongoing land appropriation and displacement (UNDESA 2021). Having no (access to) land consequently undermines the sovereignty of these groups. Haillom in Tsintsabis have experienced historical injustices that continue to disadvantage them today while changing circumstances intensify these

injustices further. We thus argue that Haillom hardly stand a chance of achieving a sustainable livelihood based on the current resettlement model based on agriculture.

Our research has shown the importance of including the Haillom's perceptions and ideas in addressing land injustices. Their own aspirations for the future are important in this regard, and an important suggestion for future research. Koot is currently involved in research specifically focused on such aspirations.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Both authors do not have a potential financial, personal and/or professional conflict of interest. The second author used to live and work at the Tsintsabis resettlement farm between 2002 and 2007, but he currently does not have other ties with the farm apart from social ones. Furthermore, he is an adviser for the Tsintsabis Trust, a community-based organisation that is responsible for the Treesleeper Camp in Tsintsabis. However, neither Treesleeper nor the Tsintsabis Trust are foci in this paper (albeit Treesleeper is mentioned briefly).

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Customary land rights, communal land and development: The case of the Jul'hoansi and the Nyae Nyae Conservancy

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ABSTRACT One of the greatest concerns of San in Namibia revolves around land rights. The Nyae Nyae Conservancy in Tsumkwe District East of Otjozondjupa Region was the first communal conservancy of its kind in Namibia, established in 1998. In Nyae Nyae today, there are some 36 communities in an area just under 9 000 km² in extent. These communities largely consist of Jul'hoansi San. Key efforts of the Nyae Nyae Conservancy have focused on wildlife conservation, community development and land management, while also working on an ancestral land claim for the Nyae Nyae area. In this article, we draw from our anthropological and legal work to lay out some of the major challenges facing the Jul'hoansi of Nyae Nyae and elaborate on how they intersect with land matters. A major challenge to the Nyae Nyae Jul'hoansi began in April 2009 with the incursions of Herero pastoralists who brought their cattle herds into Nyae Nyae. The Nyae Nyae Conservancy and the Jul'hoansi Traditional Authority have sought the assistance of lawyers who have helped formulate an ancestral land claim which they aim to file with the Namibian High Court. By expanding on Jul'hoansi customary land rights, as well as current regulatory frameworks, we put challenges like this into a broader perspective.

KEYWORDS community; conservancy; customary land rights; Jul'hoansi; land; Namibia; Nyae Nyae

BACKGROUND

Namibia is well known internationally for its innovative conservancy-based community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) and wildlife conservation programmes (Jones 2010). Conservancies in Namibia are wildlife management institutions that were established in line with the Nature Conservation Amendment Act (5 of 1996). These institutions are local-level common property resource management bodies in communal areas which have defined memberships, constitutions, a representative committee, specified boundaries and land use plans that are developed in

communication with the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT).

This article aims to explain the dynamics behind what is arguably one of the most successful conservation and development programmes in Namibia: the Nyae Nyae Conservancy. The Nyae Nyae Conservancy (or just Nyae Nyae) was the first communal conservancy established in Namibia in 1998 and its membership is made up largely of Jul'hoansi San; a group of indigenous former hunter-gatherers who reside both in north-eastern Namibia and north-western Botswana. They thus represent a transboundary group and, in the past,

had the right to travel back and forth between the two countries. Importantly, the Nyae Nyae Conservancy constitutes part of the Jul'hoansi San's ancestral land area. The Jul'hoansi of Nyae Nyae have long had clearly defined genealogical ties to resource areas, or *n!oresi*. Unlike other Bushman (San) people of Namibia, the majority of whom were deprived of land and dispersed as labourers on both white and black farms or in towns, the Jul'hoansi were fortunate to have maintained a substantial fragment of their former ancestral range.

Located in Tsumkwe District in Otjozondjupa Region in north-eastern Namibia (see Figure 1), the area where the Jul'hoansi reside can be classified as tree-bush savanna (Yellen & Lee 1976; Hays et al. 2014). Soils are sandy, with pockets of black cotton soil and outcrops of calcrete. In the past, the Jul'hoansi San in Nyae Nyae were mobile, moving from one residential location to another between five and 15 times a year (Lee 2016, 2018; Hitchcock 2018). Rainfall varies between 250 and 600 mm per annum, with an average of 400 mm at Tsumkwe and 560 mm at Grootfontein. Spatial and temporal variation in rainfall is substantial. Droughts are not infrequent in the Nyae Nyae area, occurring approximately two years in every five.

Geomorphological features in the northern Kalahari include undulating savannas and

grassland areas, vegetated linear sand dunes and fossil river valleys. There are also important physiographic features known locally as pans: low-lying playa-like areas that have clay bottoms where water accumulates after rains. These pans were important to the adaptations of both animal and human populations, serving as places where water, minerals and nutrients could be obtained and could serve as places that could be utilised for hunting and resource collection purposes.

In the Nyae Nyae region, there are 16 pans that were permanent, holding water throughout the year (Marshall 1976:64). In some cases, the pans are used for specialised purposes, such as ambush hunting of animals that came to them to drink and consume mineral-rich earth. In a sense, pans can be seen as 'islands' or 'oases' that are crucial to the subsistence and land use systems of the populations that utilise them. Nyae Nyae also has a community forest whose boundaries are similar to those of the conservancy itself.

Despite mainly residing in an area that is relatively rich in natural resources, the Jul'hoansi of Nyae Nyae are among the poorest people in the country (Biesele & Hitchcock 2013). Today, the Jul'hoansi number some 2 800 people and have managed their resources on a conservancy and individual community basis since the conservancy's inception. The Nyae Nyae Conservancy is the only place in

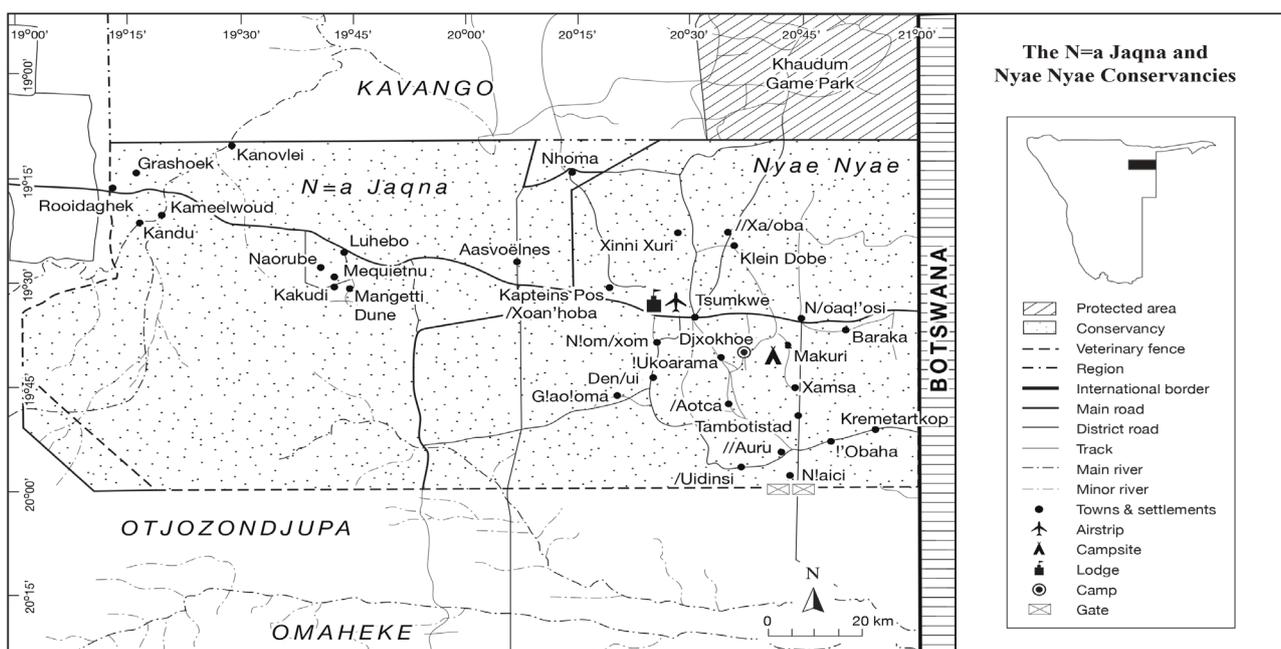


Figure 1 The location of Nyae Nyae Conservancy and N!a Jaqna Conservancy in North-eastern Namibia.

Namibia where an indigenous hunter-gatherer community has the right to hunt a specified number of wild animals for subsistence (Biesele & Hitchcock 2013).

Today, some of the income for community members comes from the exploitation, processing and sale of high value plants such as Devil's Claw (*Harpagophytum procumbens*) (Cole 2018). Another source of income, especially for Jul'hoan women, has been the manufacturing and sale of crafts such as ostrich eggshell bead necklaces and bracelets. Most of the Nyae Nyae communities have developed irrigated gardens which have helped supply some of their nutritional needs. From an economic standpoint, Nyae Nyae has been one of the more successful communal conservancies in Namibia.

While their position within Namibia's CBNRM constellation is unique and despite the relative success of the Nyae Nyae Conservancy, the Jul'hoansi of Nyae Nyae still face an array of challenges. With this article, we will illuminate the various issues that the Jul'hoansi have had to contend with since the establishment of the Nyae Nyae Conservancy. We do this by drawing on a series of individual and group interviews that took place in all 36 of the Nyae Nyae communities from 2009 to 2024.

CHALLENGES FACING THE PEOPLE OF NYAE NYAE

In many ways, the areas where the Jul'hoansi reside today are being subjected to a land rush by other groups, private companies and the state who are seeking to utilise them for purposes of grazing, resource extraction, hunting and tourism. In the face of these threats, the Nyae Nyae San are seeking to assert the politics of belonging through purposeful construction of their self-identity, documentation of their long-standing ties to the land, and public discussions and demonstrations of the innovative ways that they use and manage resources. In some cases, they are using legal strategies in their efforts to address land and resource issues.

JUL'HOANSI AND LAND ISSUES

An important action taken by the Jul'hoansi in 1990–1991 and continuing to recent years was the mapping of their traditional *n!oresi* (Vermeyleen et al. 2012; Biesele & Hitchcock 2013; Begbie-Clench 2016). According to the Jul'hoansi a *n!ore* is an area over which local people have rights of access and resource use. A *n!ore* is sometimes given a name, often related to people who lived there in the past or events that occurred in those places. Virtually all of the *n!oresi* contain natural resources upon which people depend, including water, wild plant foods and medicinal plants, trees for shade, fuel wood, and construction, and materials such as stone used in the manufacture of tools and other goods. Sizes and shapes of the *n!oresi* vary, but often they are round or elliptical in shape.

N!ore sizes vary substantially, averaging approximately 200 to 400 km² in the Nyae Nyae region (see Figure 2). The boundaries between the *n!oresi* are generally not marked, but in the past most local people were familiar with these areas and knew where their own *n!oresi* ended and where the *n!oresi* of others began. Rights to the *n!oresi* are inherited from both sets of parents (that is, bilaterally). In some cases, Jul'hoansi could gain access to an empty *n!ore* through moving in and living there, in other words, through occupation. The advantage of having the *n!ore* system among the Jul'hoansi is that it spreads people out across space, thus reducing density-dependent difficulties and facilitating management at the local level.

The management of the *n!oresi* among Jul'hoansi is done collectively, often with the involvement of *n!ore kxaosi* (land managers) (Biesele & Hitchcock 2013). These individuals usually consist of some of the older people in the group who have an understanding of the history of land use and occupancy of the areas where they live. It is these individuals who are consulted by local community members or outsiders when they want to visit a *n!ore*. The *n!ore kxaosi* are well known to the local group members as well as to other Jul'hoansi and usually to members of other groups. It is usually these individuals from whom outsiders seek permission to enter a *n!ore* and use its resources. These days, however, people more often tend to approach the Jul'hoan Traditional Authority, Tsamkxao #Oma, to ask for land, who generally

refers them to the Nyae Nyae Conservancy and the Nyae Nyae Community Forest management committees and the Otjozondjupa Regional Land Board. This is mainly because of the Communal Land Reform Act (5 of 2002) which provides guidance on the registration of customary land rights and rights of households in communal area.

The *kxal'ho* (literally, 'sand surface') represents all of the land inhabited in the past and present by the Jul'hoansi and all of its water, bush foods, game, grazing, wood, minerals, and other natural resources as well as places of historic and cultural significance (see Marshall 1976; Biesele & Hitchcock 2013). It is estimated that the Jul'hoan

ancestral territory was between 70 000 and 80 000 km² in size at one time. Today, the Jul'hoan area in Namibia is the equivalent of the size of the Nyae Nyae Conservancy, or, as noted previously, an area of about 9 000 km². What this means, in effect, is that the Jul'hoansi have a more restricted area in which to operate, and that density-dependent factors play a more significant role. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that Jul'hoan family size is growing substantially, according to numerous observers. Factors contributing to this change are the sedentarisation of the Jul'hoansi in Nyae Nyae (Draper & Howell 2006), as well as government programmes that provide N\$250 per month per child to Namibian families.

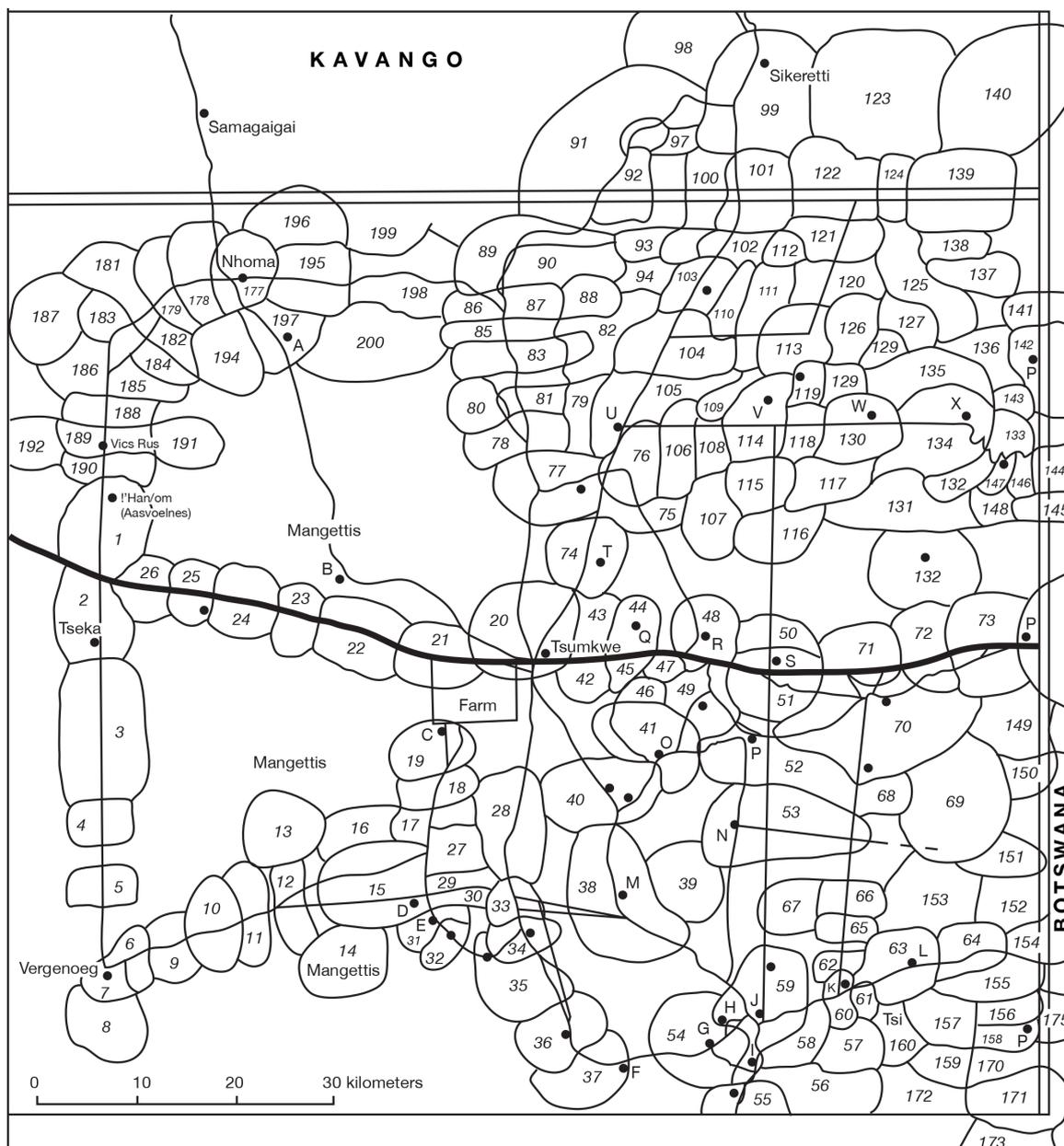


Figure 2 Map of *n'loresi* (historically honoured resource areas) in north-eastern Namibia.

Wiessner (2014) points out that in the 1990s and early 2000s “Land rights were largely maintained by social boundary maintenance, with *hxaro* (*xaro*, *haro*) partnerships giving others temporary access.” *Hxaro* is a reciprocal, delayed Jul’hoan exchange system involving goods distribution (often ostrich eggshell bead bracelets and necklaces) which link people together as partners over extensive areas. These exchanges have been reduced over time, but people retain the knowledge of their *hxaro* partners, and these links are important to mobility options available to people in Nyae Nyae.

COMMUNAL LAND AND CUSTOMARY LAND RIGHTS

In the 1980s, some of the Jul’hoansi who were living at Tsumkwe opted to move out of the government-established settlement and return to their *n!oresi* (ancestral areas) so that they could resume independent living (Marshall & Ritchie 1984; Marshall 2003). Over time, the number of Jul’hoan communities in the region expanded, reaching 36 in 2025. This process was facilitated by the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation of Namibia, a non-government organisation based both in Windhoek and in Tsumkwe.

The issue of how to handle customary land rights on communal land has been a major source of debate and concern for the people and government of Namibia since independence on 21 March 1990, and during the Conference on Land Reform and the Land Question held in June–July 1991 (Republic of Namibia 1991) and the Second Conference on Land Reform in Namibia held in October 2018 (MLR 2018; Melber 2018; Republic of Namibia 2018; Werner 2018). Under government legislation at present, all communal land in the country is state land.

Much has been written about land tenure and reform in the communal areas of Namibia, which make up approximately 36.1% of the country’s land area of 826 680 km² (Odendaal & Werner 2020; Odendaal 2024). The breakdown of land tenure categories in Namibia is shown in Table 1. When land reform discussions were initiated in Namibia, concerns were raised immediately about the potential impacts on the poor. Some of the first people to speak out about the impacts of land reform were members of rural minority groups, including the Jul’hoansi San who attended the First Land Reform Conference in 1991 (Biesele & Hitchcock 2013). As noted previously, the Jul’hoansi San of the Nyae Nyae region represent one of the few African indigenous peoples who have been able to retain a relatively significant portion of their ancestral land. They have been able to do this through careful management of their natural resources and the land where they live, and through extensive participation in government policy debates and initiatives. Some of the land management activities include the establishment of settlements some distance from one another, the limits on exploitation of wildlife and plant resources as they became increasingly scarce and the replanting of high value plants. Some of the efforts to retain the land have been done in conjunction with anthropologists and lawyers.

The Jul’hoansi historically were egalitarian and their politics were based on consensus (Marshall 1976). Leaders were individuals who had substantial knowledge of their areas (*n!ore kxausi*). Leadership qualities that were reinforced at the community level consisted of self-effacing behaviour, openness to others, willingness to share goods and services, and the possession of historical and social knowledge. Some individuals who were influential at the local level included successful

Table 1 Land tenure zoning in Namibia.

Land tenure category	Size (km ²)	Percentage of the country
Communal land	298 200	36.1
Commercial land (freehold)	356 700	43.1
Conservation area (parks and game reserves, etc.)	116 000	14.0
Other government and parastatal uses	32 400	3.9
Urban usage	7 200	0.9
Other uses	16 180	2.0
Total	826 680	100.0

Note: Data obtained from the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT), and the Government of the Republic of Namibia; See also Republic of Namibia (2017), NSA (2018).

hunters or orators, while others were individuals who had notable abilities to resolve conflicts between individuals or groups. A term that some Jul'hoansi used for 'leader' was //kaiha (Hitchcock & Biesele 2013; Hays & Hitchcock 2020).

The Jul'hoansi were among the first San group in Namibia to get a Traditional Authority (TA) status (a government-recognised leadership position), from the Namibian government (Republic of Namibia 2000). The Traditional Authority has a land allocation role in line with the Communal Land Reform Act (5 of 2002). Tsamkxao #Oma was appointed in 1998 as the Traditional Authority for the Jul'hoan people. Tsamkxao was well known in Namibia for his three-minute-long presentation on the Jul'hoan *n!ore* system at the National Conference on Land Reform and the Land Question in Windhoek in July of 1991 which received a standing ovation. Today, the Jul'hoan Traditional Authority (JUTA) plays an important role in the management of the Nyae Nyae region.

COMMUNAL LAND AND CONSERVANCIES

In late April 2009, a group of Herero pastoralists invaded Nyae Nyae Conservancy with over a thousand head of cattle. Following this invasion, the government intervened and confiscated these cattle a month or so later. In response, the pastoralists sued the government, were awarded a financial settlement, and proceeded to purchase more cattle, while still remaining in Tsumkwe (Hays 2009; Begbie-Clench 2016; Hitchcock 2018).

Despite numerous efforts by the JUTA and the Conservancy's management committee to seek redress, the situation remains unresolved, while the number of cattle within Tsumkwe Municipality has continued to grow. This expansion in livestock numbers is not only due to the accumulation of cattle by the initial group of invaders, but also due to local Jul'hoansi obtaining cattle through initiatives run by the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation of Namibia, as well as through self-purchase. The lack of legal repercussions following the invasion has contributed to a wider sense of impunity. Through the continued rise in cattle numbers, many of the Jul'hoansi *n!oresi* are facing increased competition for grazing.

In February 2018, Chief Tsamkxao #Oma issued letters to some of the original invading pastoralists, demanding they report to the Traditional Authority's office within 30 days to justify their continued occupation of the Nyae Nyae Conservancy with their livestock. Despite personal delivery by the secretary, Kallie Kallie N!ani, the pastoralists failed to respond. Consequently, the JUTA sought an interdict from Namibia's High Court in 2018 to prevent some of the identified livestock owners from engaging in the illegal grazing of animals, and evicted their livestock.

The Nyae Nyae Conservancy continues to focus on maintaining wildlife and plant resources in the area, and the land use plan allows for only a small number of cattle, in order to allow space for wildlife to thrive and move freely. Conservancy members agreed upon this land use plan with the government, understanding that their land rights are protected under Namibian law. This land use prioritisation is rooted in the historical dependence of Jul'hoansi on wildlife - something many Jul'hoansi community members would also like to pass on to future generations.

However, since the incursions of the Herero pastoralists, a reduction in usable plant and wildlife species has been observed. This has seriously affected subsistence hunting and the gathering of useful plants and other resources that people rely on. For instance, there has been a marked decline in traded plants, especially around Tsumkwe (Hitchcock 2015; Cole 2018).

The Nyae Nyae community has rights to the wildlife and plant resources according to Namibian law. Wildlife is covered under the Nature Conservation Amendment Act (5 of 1996), and plants are covered under the Forest Act (12 of 2001) and legislation dealing with community forests. According to the Nyae Nyae Conservancy and the JUTA these rights are being violated. It is for this reason that the Jul'hoansi have sought to file an Ancestral Land Claim (Odendaal 2024), which is still in progress. There are, however, both Jul'hoansi and Herero efforts to make claims to Nyae Nyae.

In 2018, there was a formal application from the Jul'hoansi seeking land rights in Nyae Nyae. However, the application was struck off the roll due to procedural errors (Odendaal 2024).

Devastated by this outcome, the applicants lodged an appeal, but it was not placed on the Supreme Court Roll and was later withdrawn after waiting for almost two years after unanswered letters to the Registrar. A renewed application was made in 2025, which is being brought to the High Court.

LIVELIHOODS AND BELONGING IN NYAE NYAE

One of the primary sources of income for the Nyae Nyae Conservancy is tourism. Tourists who enter Tsumkwe are supposed to stop at the Conservancy headquarters and pay a fee, though in practice this does not always occur. Some communities have their own tourism camps where they encourage tourists to stay, two examples being Makuri and //Ao//oba. There is growing competition among various Nyae Nyae communities for tourists to come there, which is causing some social tensions. According to the Nyae Nyae Conservancy and the Namibian Association of Community-Based Tourism Organisations, the Nyae Nyae Conservancy made around N\$7 million in 2023 and 2024.

Mining activities have had relatively minimal impacts in Nyae Nyae, at least from an environmental standpoint. Some two dozen Jul'hoansi were employed by Mt. Burgess Mining in the early part of the new millennium and the money they received helped not only families but also communities (Wiessner 2014). However, they do feel that if an economically significant mineral is discovered, they will be required to move out of the area where the mine will be, thus further reducing their land and resource access. Table 2 presents data on infrastructure, rangelands, and agriculture to help assess the status of Nyae Nyae communities (NNDFN 2017, 2018).

A constraint in the area south of the Nyae Nyae Conservancy is the presence of plants poisonous to cattle, notably *Dichapetalum cymosum* or *gifblaar* which may have contributed to the decision of Herero farmers to cross the Veterinary Cordon Fence and occupy some of the communities in Nyae Nyae. As of July 2025, there were 36 communities in the Nyae Nyae Conservancy area, all of which have water points that are protected from elephants and other wild animals. There are approximately 80 gardens in the Nyae Nyae communities, all of which are fenced, and the

majority of which have piped water (Jennifer Hays, Willem Odendaal, personal communications, January 2025). The communities themselves consist of a number of residential compounds, some of which are fenced, and in several cases agricultural fields which are on the peripheries of the communities.

Jul'hoansi say that they belong to this land and often refer to their land as their 'mother.' They also emphasise that they have emotional and spiritual attachments to their lands and to places and resources on their lands. Both Jul'hoansi and Herero have been excluded from the territories that they once occupied, and they have suffered at the hands of other groups. Both the Jul'hoansi and Herero are using political strategies to argue for their rights to land and resources. Both groups are attempting to avoid conflict and are seeking non-violent ways to resolve their problems. Around fires at night, the Jul'hoansi speak respectfully if cautiously about their interactions with the Herero.

According to Wiessner (2014), four per cent of conversations around the fire during the day address land rights. In individual interviews and group discussions Jul'hoansi acknowledge the presence and the social, economic and political significance of the Herero. Some Jul'hoansi argue that they and the Herero are 'one people, bound by their histories.' Others, however, emphasise how different the Jul'hoansi and Herero are and how in many ways they are competing for some of the same land, water and grazing.

Many Jul'hoansi see themselves as tied to all the people of Namibia not just as citizens of the country but as 'ones who belong.' They feel that they are residents of the places where they reside (even if they have moved from other locations). They believe strongly that they deserve to be consulted freely and openly about the plans that government, private companies, non-government organisations and individuals have for their areas. One of the arguments that some Jul'hoansi have made is that they live 'sustainable' lives, and that they work hard to ensure that the resources of their areas are not over-exploited.

The Jul'hoansi say that they belong not just to nature but to society. They insist that they not be associated with the colonial trope of "Naturvölker".

At the same time, the Jul’hoansi understand the limitations of the concept of ‘indigeneity’ and have argued that they are citizens of Namibia and therefore have rights equal to other citizens. They want to take full advantage of the benefits of modernity and development, while at the same time protecting and promoting their languages and cultures and passing their cultural heritage, traditions, and values along to their children. The Jul’hoansi also want to have both their collective and individual rights recognised.

Some Jul’hoansi also stress that the *kxalho*, which they see as ‘the landscape of home’, is under threat, and they want to ensure that they are able to regain access to lands and resources that have been lost in the past. Filing legal cases and seeking answers from regional and central government authorities, show the degree to which the Jul’hoansi and their neighbours want to defend their areas from outsiders and to reinforce their control over their land and resources. The San want to establish what they see as their customary rights to communal

Table 2 Nyae Nyae Village water facilities, gardens, livestock, rangelands, and practicing of conservation agriculture.

District	Village	Pump	Protected	Water tank capacity (l)	Garden	Livestock	Rangeland	Conservation agriculture
North	#omlolo	Submersible	Yes	10 000	Yes	Cattle	Yes	Yes
North	/Xaloba	Submersible	Yes	5 000	Yes/f	goats	No	No
North	Octagai	Submersible	Yes	5 000	Yes	Cattle	No	No
North	#abacea	Diesel lister	No	5 000	No	No	No	No
North	Gloaguru	Submersible	Yes	15 000	Yes	Cattle	No	No
North	De#ua	Submersible	Yes	15 000	Yes/f	Cattle	Yes	No
North	Mooiplaas	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Central	Makuri	Submersible	Yes	15 000	Yes	Cattle/goats	Yes	Yes
Central	Djoekwe	Submersible	Yes	10 000	No	Cattle	Yes	No
Central	!Aola	Submersible	Yes	10 000	Yes	Cattle	Yes	Draught animal
Central	N#animh	Submersible	Yes	10 000	Yes	No	No	Yes
Central	Nloaghosi	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Central	Baraka	Submersible	Yes	10 000	No	Cattle (?)	No	No
Central	Ben se Kamp	Lister diesel	Yes	15 000	Yes	Cattle/goats	No	No
Central	Mountain pos	Submersible	Yes	10 000	Yes	Cattle	Yes	No
Central	Dou pos	Submersible	Yes	15 000	Yes/f	Cattle/goats	Yes	No
Central	UUKoroma	Submersible	Yes	10 000	Yes/f	Cattle	Yes	No
West	Duin pos	Submersible	Yes	10 000	Yes	No	No	Yes
West	Kaptein pos	Submersible	Yes	10000	Yes	Cattle	Yes	No
West	Apel pos	Submersible	Yes	25 000	Yes	Cattle	No	No
West	Routs pos	Lister diesel	Yes	5 000	Yes/f	No	No	No
West	N!omxom	Submersible	Yes	5 000	No	No	No	No
West	Denui	Submersible	Yes	10 000	No	No	No	No
West	Eagle pos	Submersible	Yes	12 500	Yes	Cattle/goats	Yes	Yes
West	Gaogoma	Submersible	Yes	15 000	Yes	Cattle/goats	Yes	Yes
West	Namtjoha	Submersible	Yes	10 000	Yes	Cattle	Yes	No
South	//Auru	Submersible	Yes	12 500	Yes	No	No	No
South	N#ama pan	Submersible	Yes	10 000 (?)	Yes?	Goats/cattle (?)	No	No
South	Magamis	Submersible	Yes	7 500	Yes/f	Cattle	No	No
South	N!aici	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
South	/Aocha	Submersible	Yes	5 000 (?)	Yes	Cattle/goats	Yes	No
South	Aha mountains	Submersible	Yes	7 500	Yes	No	No	No
South	Lobaha	Submersible	Yes	10 000	Yes	Cattle	Yes	No
South	Nama	Submersible	Yes	7 500	Yes	No	No	No
South	#Abace south	Submersible	Yes	5 000	Yes	Cattle	No	No
South	Paradize	Submersible	-	-	-	-	-	-
South	//Ari-G//aona	No water yet	-	-	-	-	-	-

Note: Data obtained from the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation (NNDNFN) in Windhoek, Namibia (December 2018); f = non-functional gardens.

land, land which they feel belongs to them and has since, as they put it, 'time immemorial'. Some of them also argue that the communal land should be designated as commercial, and that their land rights be defined legally which will allow them to 'own' the land and to be able to pass the land on to their descendants.

CONCLUSIONS

We have described several issues that affect the people of Nyae Nyae and conservancies in general in Namibia. The subsistence and land rights of one ethnic group in Namibia should not be held up against the rights of another ethnic group that has also been historically marginalised. A solution should be found that preserves the rights of all groups of people. This means that fully maintaining the rights of the Jul'hoansi while also seeking a solution for the Herero and other farmers in Nyae Nyae is crucial. Most Jul'hoansi feel that they have the same rights as the Herero and that both should be respected.

It is crucially important to look at the way that the Jul'hoan San are actively negotiating their circumstances, especially with respect to land and resources. Jul'hoansi have had a significant measure of success negotiating their rights. They have done this in part through taking part in regional, national and international meetings and discussions and presenting their case and describing in detailed terms their land and resource management systems. They can enforce their rights through various laws, such as the Nature Conservation Amendment Act (5 of 1996), the Communal Land Reform Act (5 of 2002), and the Traditional Authorities Act (25 of 2000). However, the Jul'hoansi need to become more aware of their constitutional and statutory rights. Knowledge alone is not enough, the rights should be enforceable too, and for that, they need strong institutions, but also government institutions that respect and understand the law.

A delegation of Jul'hoansi has attended the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) meetings in New York and meetings held by the Marginalized Communities Division of the Government of Namibia. They have held local meetings in which matters of land rights and land management are discussed in detail. A key concept

mentioned at these meetings revolves around *n!ore* rights.

In some ways the development work that has taken place in Nyae Nyae has been innovative and a model example of what development programmes should be. At the same time, there have been some difficulties, not least, ensuring a viable local economy for the Jul'hoansi (Biesele & Hitchcock 2013; Odendaal 2024).

The establishment of the Nyae Nyae Conservancy and the preservation of some of the land and natural resource base of the Jul'hoansi is a remarkable example of how development and applied anthropology can help promote local level development. Indigenous people in Namibia and around the world can learn a great deal from what has transpired in the Nyae Nyae region of Namibia.

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Assessing the role of tacit knowledge in the management of state forest reserves in Namibia

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ABSTRACT Tacit knowledge is embedded in lived experience, cultural practice and social relations, and has long shaped forest use and stewardship in Namibia - yet it remains marginal in formal forest governance. This perspective paper examines the role and relevance of tacit knowledge in the management of Namibia's state forest reserves, drawing on guided stakeholder discussions conducted within and around the Kanovlei, Hamoye and Zambezi State Forests as part of the Safeguarding Namibia Protected Area Network (NAM GEF-8) project. We argue that tacit knowledge, expressed through customary land-use practices, spiritual values, gendered resource use and intergenerational knowledge transfer, continues to and should underpin sustainable forest management and community well-being. We highlight how adaptive management frameworks, supportive regulatory instruments and environmental and social safeguards provide opportunities to better integrate tacit knowledge into state-led forest governance. Particular attention is given to the gendered dimensions of tacit knowledge, recognising women's central role in transmitting ecological knowledge and sustaining cultural landscapes, alongside men's contributions to timber use, grazing and boundary enforcement. We contend that forest conservation efforts that overlook tacit knowledge risk undermining both ecological sustainability and cultural heritage. Integrating tacit knowledge into formal management systems is therefore not only an ethical imperative but a practical strategy for strengthening co-management, improving governance outcomes, and sustaining Namibia's state forest reserves as living socio-ecological systems.

KEYWORDS adaptative management; community conservation; forest management; gender; Namibia; tacit knowledge

BACKGROUND

Understanding the relevance of knowledge in our daily lives, how we acquire it and apply it is increasingly necessary in today's dynamic world, shaped by constantly evolving cultures, beliefs and technologies. Tacit knowledge is a type of knowledge that an individual gains from personal

experience, abilities, values and often intuition, that is difficult to express in words or other forms of 'formal communication' (Polanyi 1958, 1966; Dampney et al. 2007). As Polanyi (1958) articulates, "knowledge is deeply personal, relational, and culturally situated, gained and transmitted through lived experiences rather than formal instruction." According to Namibia's Access to

Biological and Genetic Resources and Associated Traditional Knowledge Act (2 of 2017), traditional knowledge includes “know-how, skills and practices that are developed, sustained and passed on from generation to generation within a community, often forming part of its cultural or spiritual identity.”

Tacit or traditional knowledge, although long marginalised by more mainstreamed knowledge systems (Adolph 2005), is now gaining renewed attention for its practical and sustainable value in natural resource management, including forests, as well as climate change mitigation and adaptation (Phuthego & Chanda 2004; Reniko et al. 2018; Baaweh et al. 2022). Tacit knowledge in a natural resource management context, has been developed over time through the longstanding mutualistic relationship between human communities and their environments (Cheveau et al. 2008; Eneji et al. 2012; Darboe et al. 2023). This mutualism has, in turn, led to the creation of cultural landscapes and traditions, including sacred forests and various forms of ethno-forestry. These traditions are also reflected in a variety of practices regarding livelihood traditions, the use and management of animals, plants and other resources.

Across many African countries, practices based on totemisation and spiritual significance at large have been among the most commonly used forms of tacit knowledge for conserving different aspects of the environment (e.g., Rusinga & Maposa 2010; Muiyira et al. 2025). In Kenya, for example, the Teso community enforces strict regulations permitting only the collection of materials of mature plants for medicinal use (Ayaa & Waswa 2016). Likewise, only secondary roots, rather than the main taproot, can be dug up, to minimise damage and ensure the continued survival and availability of medicinal plants. Specific patches of grassland and forest, often situated near settlements, have also been traditionally set aside as sacred lands and exclude livelihood-based activities such as farming, livestock grazing or even settlement. These areas have been regulated by Teso customary laws, and many of these practices continue to persist today.

In Namibia, similar examples can be cited. Amongst the indigenous Himba people of north-western Namibia, the mopane tree (*Colophospermum*

mopane) is often the most readily available and preserved plant resource. Himba communities make extensive use of nearly every part of the tree for a wide range of purposes, from construction to pain relief, demonstrating their deep knowledge and efficient use of the plant. Beyond its practical uses, the mopane is deeply woven into the Himba cultural and spiritual identity, serving as a medium for religious communication. Against this background, it can be argued that the tacit knowledge and cultural significance of the mopane contribute to its conservation (Bainbridge 2012).

Namibia preserves its forests and woodlands through integration into its protected area network, which includes community and state forests. Today, there are over 40 registered community forests and three state forests in the country (Figure 1). Under Namibia’s Forest Act (12 of 2001), community forests and state forests are managed in different ways. In a community forest, the land is still owned by the state, but local communities are entrusted with day-to-day management through a legally recognised Community Forest Management Committee (CFMC), which operates according to approved rules and management plans. In contrast, a state forest is owned and managed directly by the government through the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT), with decisions about access, use and management made mainly by state officials under a more centralised system. Various policies and legislation, including the Forest Act, have been enacted by the government to regulate and ensure communities practice sustainable harvesting and effective natural resources management within these forests. While relevant policies and legislation are in place, harmonising these with local realities and practices to create an enabling environment for knowledge-sharing and co-management remains a shortcoming. This article offers a perspective on how tacit knowledge participates in forest management practices in Namibia and its potential in a more integrated approach. Our perspectives are enriched by information from discussions held as part of the Safeguarding Namibia Protected Area Network (NAM GEF-8) project. The project was led by the MEFT and looked to document aspects of knowledge retention, indigenous practices and forest management approaches within communities residing within and adjacent

to state forests (such as the community forests and conservancies bordering state forests).

We used guided discussions to engage a wide range of stakeholders, ensuring conversations remained grounded in local realities and aligned with the project’s objectives. Engagements were inclusive and gender-sensitive, involving traditional authorities as land custodians, local authorities representing government at the grassroots level and relevant line ministries. Discussions focused on three main groups: residents living within state forest areas, neighbouring communities bordering the forests (including community forests and conservancies) and relevant local authorities. Based on these engagements, we evaluate tacit knowledge’s importance to the sustainable management of Namibia’s state forest reserves. Moreover, our insights make a strong case for integrating tacit knowledge into formal management systems, which can strengthen forest governance, support co-management with communities and improve ecological outcomes.

SUSTAINABLE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND RETENTION OF TACIT KNOWLEDGE IN STATE FOREST RESERVES

The concept of natural resource management should extend beyond the conservation of natural resources to also encompass the preservation of knowledge, particularly the transfer and retention of tacit or traditional knowledge within local communities. Consultations with communities residing in and around the three state forest reserves clearly highlighted the enduring benefits of tacit knowledge. Long before the Zambezi State Forest was gazetted in 2021, traditional authorities and community members had been leading forest preservation efforts, working closely with relevant line ministries. A particularly interesting example is found in the Ncumcara Community Forest area, which borders the Hamoye State Forest. There, the community uses the road as a boundary-making instrument in forest preservation. It acts as a borderline demarcating areas reserved for cultivation and residential use on one side; while

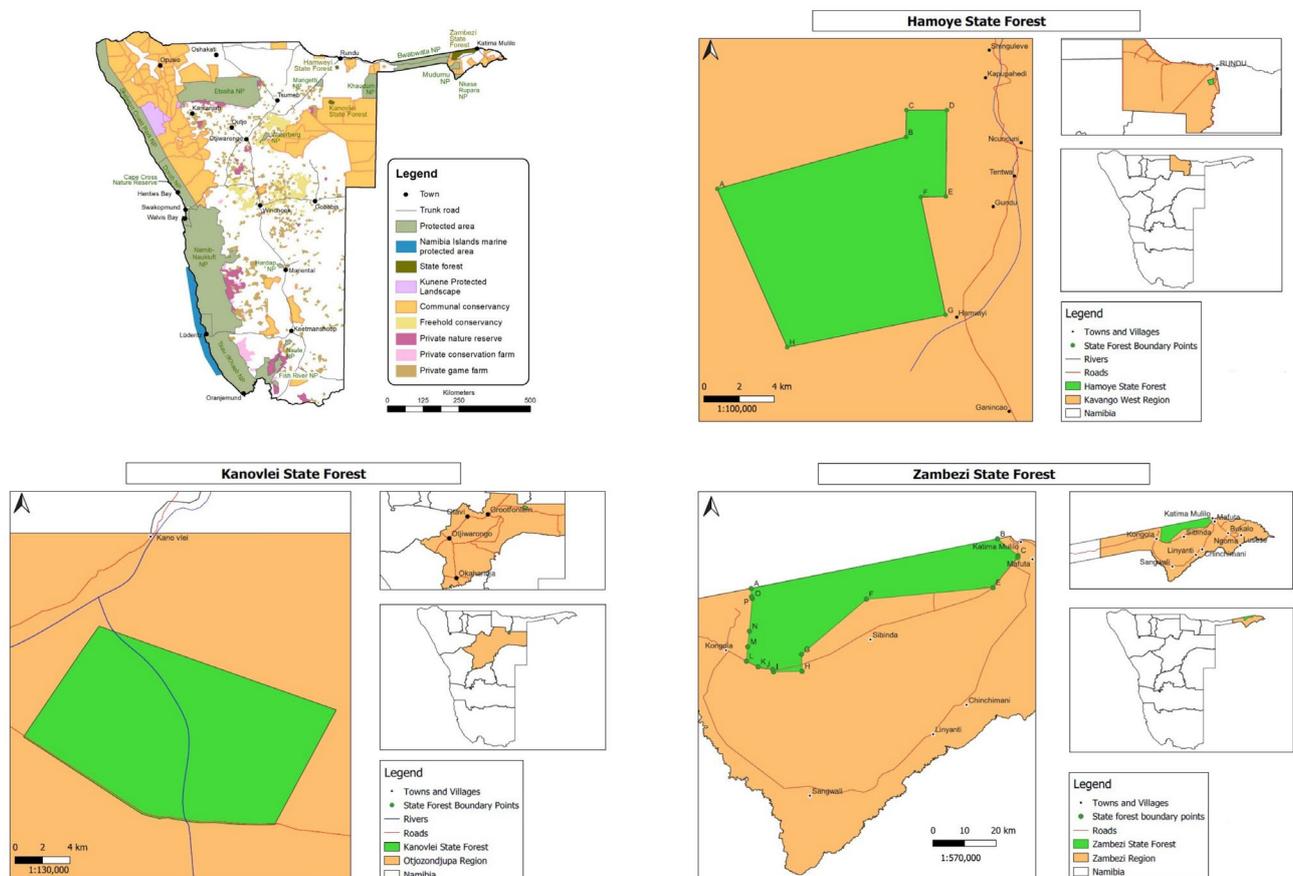


Figure 1 State Forest Reserves and complementary conservation efforts in Namibia: Protected area network of Namibia (top left), Hamoye State Forest in the Kavango West Region (top right), Kanovlei State Forest in the Otjozondjupa Region (bottom left), and Zambezi State Forest in the Zambezi Region (bottom right). Maps were sourced from Namibia’s Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT).

the areas on the other side are reserved for grazing only and in some instances collection of timber and other forest products that are used in the Ncumcara craft shop and the local vocational centre. This arrangement is widely respected by community members and enforced by the traditional authority and local institutions (such as community forests and conservancies). It demonstrates how local social structures and tacit knowledge, even in the absence of formal laws or policies, can contribute to effective natural resource management. There is a communal understanding of the interrelatedness between the need to balance livelihoods and sustainability. This reinforces the need for an integrated approach to forest resource governance; one that allows tacit knowledge to play a central role in ensuring community well-being and ecological sustainability.

Inherently, tacit knowledge is largely intangible and difficult to codify; it is experiential and embedded in personal and communal practices, making it resistant to easy conversion into explicit, transferable knowledge. Attempts to document or systematise it have therefore often led to inconsistencies and the dilution of original meanings and values (Adolph 2005). However, advances in technology and adaptive policy frameworks could provide viable platforms for capturing and preserving this knowledge without compromising its authenticity. Oral histories, participatory mapping and case studies are some of the approaches that could help create systems for documenting and preserving tacit knowledge.

For many communities, forests are more than consumable resources; they constitute cultural landscapes through which traditions, knowledge, and values are transmitted across generations. One example from the three State Forests studied is the cultural initiation of young girls by their mothers or elderly women during wild fruit harvesting seasons. These rites of passage, conducted within the forest, are crucial moments for transferring knowledge about customs, gender roles and ecological stewardship. Some community members shared how certain tree species and animal behaviours have traditionally been used for weather forecasting and for determining the timing of various forest activities, such as wild fruit collection, managing veld fires and hunting. These practices reflect a deep understanding of

sustainability by communities and contribute to effective forest resource management (Garibaldi & Turner 2004; Katjirua et al. 2024). This underscores the need for practical, context-sensitive approaches that honour the epistemologies of local communities. Our engagements revealed that tacit knowledge remains indispensable in the sustainable management of state forest reserves in Namibia. Integrating this knowledge into formal systems offers a pathway to improved forest governance, community co-management, ecological preservation and knowledge continuity.

ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT AS A CATALYST FOR SUSTAINABLE KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

The release of Namibia's National Research, Science and Technology Policy and the subsequent establishment of key institutions such as the National Council for Research, Science and Technology (NCRST) have laid a foundation for adaptive management in the post-Independence era. As early as 1999, Namibia began aligning its national development with a knowledge-based economy (Hooli & Jauhiainen 2018). These efforts have complemented other major frameworks such as the Decentralisation Policy Act (33 of 2000) and the National Policy on Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM), which promote area-based management, local research and community-centred natural resource governance (MET 2013).

The introduction of Vision 2030 in 2004 marked a pivotal commitment to partnership, innovation and inclusive development (Republic of Namibia 2004). While this and subsequent strategic instruments such as the National Development Plans (NDPs) and the Harambee Prosperity Plan may not explicitly reference tacit knowledge, they provide the strategic scaffolding for incorporating local knowledge systems into forest management practices. The ethos of craftsmanship, implementation and inclusive governance within these frameworks supports the recognition of local knowledge as a critical asset.

Namibia's Access to Biological and Genetic Resources and Associated Traditional Knowledge Act, in alignment with the Forest Act, provides a legal framework that protects tacit knowledge -

written, experience-based practices held by local communities while promoting sustainable resource use. The Act ensures prior informed consent, mandates benefit-sharing mechanisms and recognises communities as custodians of biodiversity. These provisions not only safeguard traditional knowledge but also create pathways to improve rural livelihoods through capacity-building and equitable access to forest-derived benefits. Together, these policies support the integration of tacit knowledge into formal forest management, particularly in state forest reserves.

However, ongoing monitoring, evaluation and policy coherence are essential for adaptive management to contribute meaningfully to sustainable state forest management and tacit knowledge preservation. Adaptive management is not a one-time event but a continuous process of learning, adjusting and responding to environmental and socio-cultural dynamics. This approach not only serves ecosystem conservation but also ensures a just approach that respects local identities and the relational knowledge communities hold with the forest. Tacit knowledge embedded within communities can enrich adaptive management practices if there is a structured, consistent and inclusive coordination mechanism among stakeholders, including government agencies, traditional authorities and civil society (David 2021). Legislation like the Forest Act must be harmonised with local realities and practices to create an enabling environment for knowledge-sharing and co-management.

Community development practices across the Global South are increasingly shifting toward bottom-up approaches (Hooli et al. 2016). This shift is evident within the three Namibian state forest reserves, where traditional leaders play vital roles. These leaders, as custodians of communal land under the Communal Land Reform Act (5 of 2002), are responsible for land allocation and conflict resolution, often through Land Boards. Their influence is particularly strong in the Zambezi and Hamoye State Forests, where cultural orthodoxy and traditional protocols are widely observed. In contrast, the Kanovlei State Forest presents a unique challenge. Home to fewer than 50 residents and lacking formal leadership structures, this small and arguably more marginalised community amongst the three case studies, as a result, has

limited influence over forest management decisions. Further compounding their vulnerability is the absence of basic services such as water, healthcare and transportation, which deepens their isolation. Subsequently, the community is often compelled to conform to externally imposed decisions with minimal consultation or input. Many community members feel that their capacity to sustain traditional knowledge and practices is being increasingly undermined and that they are being excluded from decision-making processes.

Despite these challenges, the government's approach to gazettement these three state forests with restricted but sustainable use presents a forward-thinking model. Compared to some community forests, which face issues like illegal fencing and internal disputes, the state forest model, if well-coordinated and adaptive, could offer long-term ecological and cultural benefits. It can enable community participation while preserving the forest's integrity and the tacit knowledge tied to it. Such co-management strategies, rooted in adaptive governance, are essential for ensuring that forest ecosystems and the knowledge they harbour are protected for generations to come. Collaborative planning for a more inclusive and effective conservation approach, aimed at achieving the Global Biodiversity Framework Target 3 (30×30), has reinforced national commitments not only to biodiversity protection but also to the safeguarding of community rights and cultural heritage. Within this framework, Environmental and Social Safeguards (ESS) have emerged as essential instruments to ensure that conservation efforts do not marginalise local communities (NACSO 2024).

These safeguards signify a shift away from exclusionary, top-down conservation models toward more inclusive, participatory approaches. They emphasise that effective conservation must also protect social systems and cultural norms, especially in areas where communities depend heavily on natural ecosystems for their livelihoods and identity. While conventional conservation models often prioritise ecological outcomes, the integration of ESS demonstrates a broader commitment to just, culturally respectful and community-empowered conservation in Namibia and beyond.

GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF TACIT KNOWLEDGE IN FOREST RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Tacit knowledge in forestry is not uniformly held within communities; it is deeply gendered, shaped by the distinct roles, responsibilities, and lived experiences of men, women and youth. Women, in particular, hold a central role in transmitting intergenerational knowledge through their daily interactions with forest resources. Their responsibilities—such as collecting wild fruits, firewood, medicinal plants and other non-timber forest products—make them key custodians of knowledge on species diversity, seasonal availability and sustainable harvesting practices (Howard 2003; Mogotsi et al. 2018).

Despite this, women’s contributions to forest resource management are often undervalued or overlooked in formal governance systems. Decision-making structures such as traditional authorities, forest management committees and land boards are predominantly male-dominated, which can limit women’s influence on forest policies and benefit-sharing arrangements. Studies within Namibia’s CBNRM programme show that while women actively participate in a wide range of conservancy activities, their voices are still less recognised in governance structures, even though they derive significant benefits, such as access to game meat and household food security from these initiatives (Lendelvo et al. 2012). This exclusion risks the erosion of gender-specific tacit knowledge that is vital for sustainable practices, including seed selection, small-scale agroforestry and wild fruit preservation.

Men, on the other hand, often retain tacit knowledge related to timber use, wildlife management and grazing practices. Their ecological knowledge tends to be linked to mobility, resource enforcement and the negotiation of land-use boundaries - functions that complement but differ from women’s contributions. Together, these gendered spheres of knowledge provide a holistic foundation for forest management, yet their unequal recognition poses challenges to inclusive governance.

A gender-sensitive approach to tacit knowledge retention, therefore, requires intentional

mechanisms to elevate women’s voices, ensure equitable participation in decision-making and safeguard the knowledge they steward. Policies such as Namibia’s Access and Benefit Sharing Act provide an entry point for ensuring that benefits derived from forest resources are equitably distributed across genders. Furthermore, creating participatory spaces where women and men contribute equally, such as joint community forest committees, inclusive mapping exercises and oral history documentation, would foster more comprehensive and resilient management systems (Angula et al. 2021).

Without a gendered lens, there is a risk of knowledge fragmentation: women’s ecological practices may disappear when younger generations migrate to urban centres, as elders pass on, while men’s traditional practices may diminish under formalised forestry regulations. Once this knowledge fades, it cannot simply be “reintroduced” through policy or training. As Angula et al. (2021) argue in the context of climate adaptation, integrating gender responsiveness into resource governance strengthens both equity and resilience. Gender equity is therefore not only a matter of social justice but also a prerequisite for sustaining the tacit knowledge base that underpins Namibia’s forest reserves. Recognising and integrating these gendered dimensions can enhance community ownership, improve forest governance and safeguard the cultural landscapes tied to Namibia’s forests.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has highlighted the vital role of tacit knowledge in the sustainable management of Namibia’s state forest reserves – drawing from engagements from within and around the Kanovlei, Hamoye and Zambezi reserves. Tacit knowledge is rooted in lived experience, oral tradition and cultural practice and it continues to shape the day-to-day decision-making processes of forest-dependent communities. It is a central element in activities such as wild fruit collection, medicinal plant use, initiation rituals and broader ecological stewardship. Despite its significance, tacit knowledge remains poorly documented and often overlooked in formal forest governance structures.

Our work underscores that effective forest management and sustainability cannot be achieved through technical or ecological approaches alone. Integrating local knowledge systems is not only an ethical necessity but also practically beneficial for fostering resilience, promoting inclusive development and ensuring long-term conservation success.

Namibia has made commendable progress toward adaptive management through policies such as Vision 2030, the Decentralization Policy, the Forest Act and the establishment of institutions like the NCRST. However, more explicit recognition and integration of tacit knowledge into these frameworks are needed. Moreover, the importance of ESS in protecting community rights and fostering inclusive conservation warrants emphasis on the pursuit of global conservation targets. This inclusive lens must continue to guide conservation interventions, especially in state forest reserves where cultural identity and ecosystem health are deeply intertwined.

Equally important is the need to address and recognise the gendered dimensions of tacit knowledge. Women and men bring distinct, complementary expertise to forest management, yet women's contributions often remain undervalued within governance structures. Women are critical custodians of intergenerational knowledge through practices such as fruit harvesting, medicinal plant use and initiation rituals, while men contribute knowledge linked to grazing, timber use and land boundary negotiations. Sustainable forest governance, therefore, requires deliberate strategies to strengthen women's participation, safeguard gender-specific knowledge and ensure equitable benefit-sharing. Gender-responsive policies and co-management structures are not just matters of equity but also essential for maintaining the resilience of local knowledge systems. Integrating these gendered perspectives into forest management frameworks will enhance governance outcomes, sustain ecological health and preserve Namibia's diverse cultural landscapes for generations to come. Namibia's forests are living libraries. Protecting them without protecting the knowledge they contain is a loss we cannot afford.

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The potential of other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) in Namibia

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ABSTRACT As a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity, Namibia is committed to global efforts aimed at preserving biodiversity and promoting sustainable development. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KM-GBF), sets global biodiversity goals and targets for 2021-2030, addressing urgent biodiversity challenges, and guides international conservation and sustainable use efforts. Target 3 of KM-GBF aims to ensure that by 2030, at least 30% of terrestrial, inland/fresh waters, marine, and coastal areas are effectively conserved and managed (including areas crucial for biodiversity and ecosystem services). It emphasises recognising indigenous and traditional territories, integrating these areas into broader landscapes and seascapes, and ensuring sustainable use aligns with conservation outcomes while respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities. Despite having over 30% of its terrestrial area under some form of protection (when considering national parks, state forests, communal conservancies and community forests), several biomes and vegetation types in Namibia remain underrepresented. An 'other effective area-based conservation measure' (OECM) is a geographically defined area, distinct from a protected area, managed to achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for in-situ conservation of biodiversity. OECMs offer opportunities to recognise lands that deliver conservation outcomes, even when their primary use is not strictly for conservation. Recognising OECMs in Namibia, including freehold land that is currently not officially recognised to contribute to conservation efforts, could significantly enhance land conservation, leading to improved outcomes and helping achieve KM-GBF Target 3 in terms of representation and quality of management of terrestrial habitats.

KEYWORDS conservation; KM-GBF; Namibia; OECM; protected areas; Target 3; 30x30

OECMS AND THEIR IMPORTANCE IN GLOBAL CONSERVATION STRATEGIES

Other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) are defined as geographically defined areas that are not designated as protected areas but contribute significantly to biodiversity conservation. Recognised under the Kunming-Montreal Global

Biodiversity Framework (KM-GBF), OECMs play a critical role in complementing conventional protected areas, by incorporating diverse governance systems, including those led by Indigenous peoples, local communities and private landholders (CBD 2018). By integrating conservation objectives with sustainable land use, OECMs can contribute towards the global goal of

protecting 30% of the planet's land and waters by 2030 (30x30 target) while promoting ecological connectivity and resilience (IUCN 2021).

Conventional protected areas, such as national parks and game reserves, are legally designated and managed primarily for conservation (UNEP-WCMC 2026). These areas often impose strict restrictions on land use to preserve ecosystems and wildlife. In contrast, OECMs may include communal land, private reserves and sacred natural sites where conservation outcomes are achieved without formal protected area status. OECMs enable conservation in landscapes where human activities, such as sustainable agriculture, forestry and pastoralism, coexist with biodiversity protection, offering a more flexible and inclusive approach to conservation (Borrini-Feyerabend et al. 2013).

Relevance of OECMs to Namibia's conservation needs and priorities

Namibia's conservation strategy, as outlined in the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, emphasises ecosystem-based conservation, sustainable land management and community-driven natural resource stewardship (MET 2014). OECMs are central to these priorities because they recognise and strengthen conservation efforts of non-state landowners and land users, including Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs), who might already be protecting, managing and restoring ecological, biological and habitat integrity.

By integrating OECMs into Namibia's existing and future policy frameworks, the country can enhance biodiversity conservation, secure ecosystem services and support climate resilience while maintaining sustainable livelihoods for local communities (Roe et al. 2019).

Enabling OECMs in Namibia should be a highly prioritised action to accelerate meeting Target 3 (30x30) under the National Action Plan roadmap for Target 3 (NAP-T3; Republic of Namibia 2024). OECMs can, for example, enhance connectivity by linking Namibia's existing protected areas with community-managed landscapes, private conservation areas and sustainable use zones. This connectivity would facilitate wildlife movement,

preserve ecological corridors and strengthen landscape resilience against climate change. Given Namibia's arid environment and the increasing fragmentation of ecosystems, OECMs offer a mechanism to integrate conservation with productive land use, ensuring genetic exchange among species and sustaining key ecosystem services.

Moreover, OECMs could help Namibia reinforce the ecological integrity of its diverse, unique, rich landscapes while fostering inclusive governance models that empower IPLCs and recognise private landholders. OECMs complement formal protected areas by recognising and strengthening conservation initiatives that are already delivering significant biodiversity benefits, thus expanding conservation coverage without requiring full legal designation. As emphasised in the NAP-T3 (Republic of Namibia 2024), scaling up OECMs as part of the 30x30 target could ensure Namibia's biodiversity is protected within a connected and climate-resilient conservation network.

OECMs have been successfully implemented in terrestrial landscapes, fishery/freshwater and marine ecosystems across the globe. Below are just a few brief examples:

- The Kawawana - Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCA) in Senegal: Kawawana, a community-managed conserved area in the Casamance region of Senegal, is recognised as an OECM due to its effective conservation governance by local fishers and farmers. Through customary laws and sustainable resource use, the community has revitalised degraded wetlands, leading to increased fish stocks and biodiversity recovery (Govan 2017).
- Tarcoles Community Marine Area in Costa Rica: This is a locally managed fishery in the Gulf of Nicoya, Costa Rica, where artisanal fishers implement sustainable practices that have enhanced fish populations and protected critical mangrove ecosystems. This initiative demonstrates how OECMs can contribute to freshwater and coastal ecosystem conservation while supporting local livelihoods (FAO 2019).
- Great Bear Sea of Canada: The Great Bear Sea on the Pacific coast of Canada includes Indigenous-led conservation initiatives that function as OECMs. Managed collaboratively by First Nations, this marine area protects biodiversity

while allowing sustainable fishing and ecotourism, ensuring both ecosystem health and economic resilience (Living Oceans Society 2021).

- Sacred Forests of Benin: These community-managed forests serve as critical biodiversity refuges and are protected under traditional governance systems. They safeguard species such as the endangered Dahomey Gap endemic flora while maintaining their cultural and spiritual significance (Vodouhê et al. 2010).
- Indigenous Reserves in Colombia: These reserves (Resguardos) managed by Indigenous communities have demonstrated effective conservation outcomes, contributing to carbon storage, habitat protection and sustainable land use while securing Indigenous land rights (Armenteras et al. 2021).
- Community Fisheries in Cambodia: The Tonle Sap Community Fisheries initiative enables local fishers to manage freshwater ecosystems sustainably. This approach has improved fish stocks, protected wetlands and enhanced local food security (Ratner et al. 2017).

As of January 2026, there are already over 7 000 terrestrial & inland water OECMs registered on the World Database on OECMs (UNEP-WCMC 2026).

Ecological basis of OECMs: how they maintain biodiversity, ecosystems, and ecosystem services

OECMs can contribute to biodiversity conservation by maintaining ecological functions and ecosystem services. These areas support habitat connectivity, genetic diversity and climate resilience by preserving ecosystems that would otherwise be fragmented or degraded. OECMs also provide ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, water purification and soil stabilisation, benefiting both wildlife and human communities (IUCN 2021). In Namibia, where key biodiversity areas lie outside formal protected areas, OECMs could create or enhance conservation corridors to enable wildlife movement, without compromising land use versatility.

OECMs are guided by three fundamental ecological and social principles:

1. Connectivity: They enhance landscape-scale conservation by linking fragmented habitats, ensuring species migration, genetic exchange and climate adaptation (Hilty et al. 2020).

2. Ecological Integrity: OECMs prioritise the maintenance of natural processes, species interactions and ecosystem resilience, which are essential for long-term biodiversity conservation (Dudley et al. 2018).
3. Sustainable Human Practices: Many OECMs integrate conservation with sustainable livelihoods, including agroforestry, community fisheries and eco-cultural tourism, reinforcing the balance between human well-being and biodiversity protection (CBD 2018).

How can OECMs help Namibia achieve Target 3, and why does it matter?

KM-GBF Target 3 aims to conserve at least 30% of terrestrial, inland water and marine areas by 2030 through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems. Namibia appears to be ahead of the curve in terrestrial conservation, with State Protected Areas (including State Forests) covering 16.7% of the country, and communal conservancies alongside community forests (with some overlap between the two) contributing an additional 26.1%, bringing the total to 42.8%. However, meeting Target 3 of the KM-GBF is not only based on numerical coverage, but also ecological representation.

A gap analysis undertaken as part of the work to develop Namibia's framework for achieving NAP-T3 revealed that of Namibia's six recognised biomes, national parks adequately represent only three (Succulent Karoo, Namib Desert, and Lakes and Salt Pans), each exceeding 30% coverage (MEFT 2024). The remaining biomes—Nama Karoo, Acacia Savanna, and Broad-leafed Savanna—are significantly underrepresented, with less than 10% coverage (Table 1). When communal conservancies and community forests (collectively referred to here as registered conservation areas) are included, representation improves across all but one biome: the Nama Karoo, which remains critically underrepresented.

By breaking down biomes more finely to recognise different vegetation types, 40 distinct ecosystems emerge (refer to map in Republic of Namibia 2024). The representation analysis reveals that 23 ecosystems—approximately 59%—have little to no coverage by national protected areas (0–10%), while seven ecosystems (18%) fall within the 10–

Table 1 The relative areas of six biomes protected in Namibia by national parks and state forests, and the areas that are protected by including other registered conservation areas (communal conservancies and community forests) (MEFT 2024).

Biome	National	Protected by national parks and state forests		Protected by national parks, state forests and registered conservation areas	
	Area (km ²)	Area (km ²)	%	Area (km ²)	%
Succulent Karoo	20 010	18 092	90.4	18 092	90.4
Nama Karoo	200 835	10 218	5.1	46 051	22.9
Namib Desert	99 930	75 537	75.6	93 305	93.4
Lakes and Salt Pans	5 384	5 213	96.8	5 307	98.4
Acacia Savanna	336 171	15 129	4.5	103 746	30.9
Broad-leafed Savanna	160 948	12 734	7.9	106 995	66.5

30% coverage range. Only nine ecosystems (23%) exceed 30% coverage, aligning with the minimum threshold for adequate protection under Target 3. If registered conservation areas are included, the outlook improves significantly: with only six ecosystems (19%) remaining underprotected, four (12.5%) falling within the 10–30% range, and 22 ecosystems (nearly 69%) surpassing the 30% threshold (Figure 1). All but one (the Acacia-Savanna Cuvelai Drainage) of the ecosystems that remain underrepresented fall primarily within the freehold farmland area of Namibia.

As part of the currently running Spatial Biodiversity Assessment, Prioritisation, and Planning Project, contributing to Namibia’s efforts to identify and register Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs), a more detailed classification map of ecosystems in Namibia is evolving, and the analysis of representation will need to be repeated once this map is finalised. Furthermore, once identified, KBAs will also require an analysis of protection status, and a concerted effort to ensure that these areas are well protected.

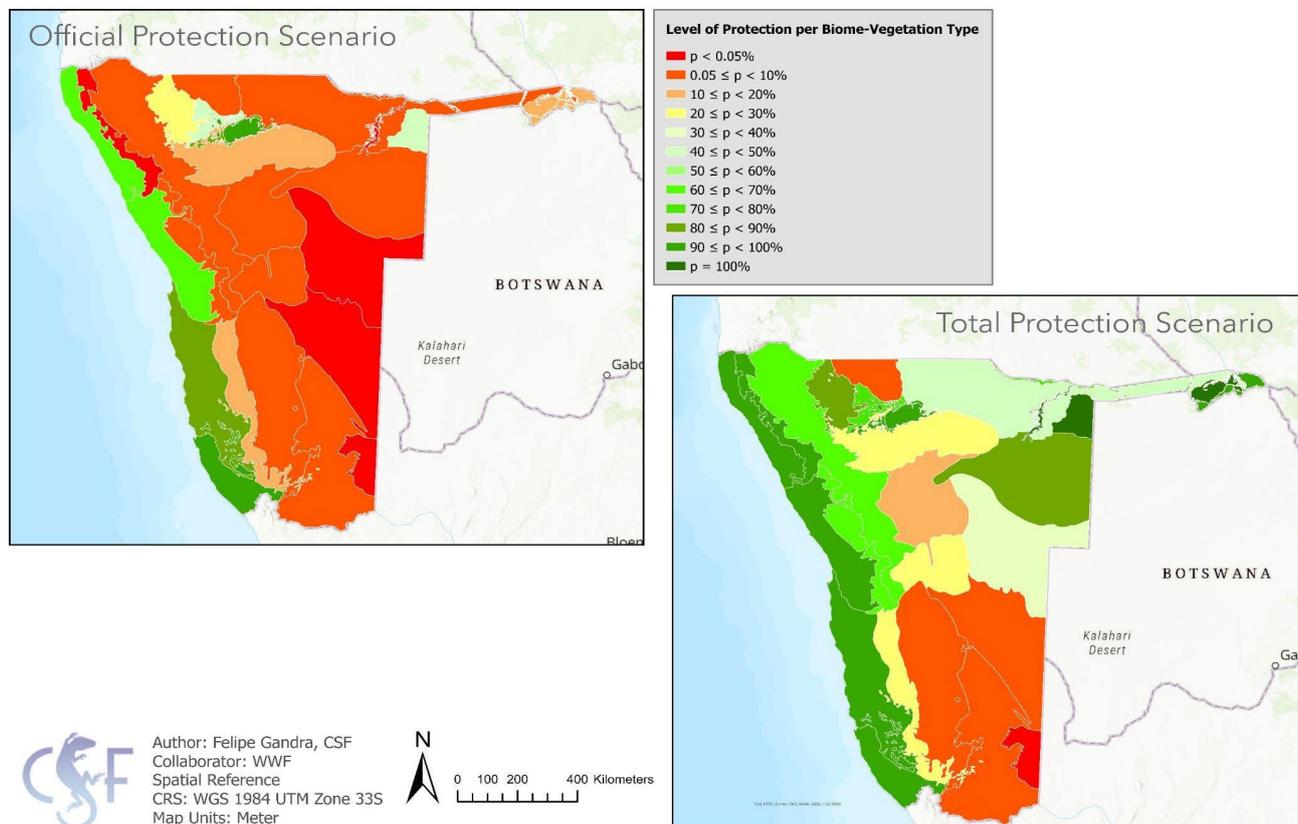


Figure 1 The level of protection (p) per biome-vegetation type when including only state-protected areas (national parks and state forests; left), and when also including registered conservation areas (communal conservancies, community forests and freehold conservancies; right).

Many freehold, especially privately owned, farms in Namibia actively support wildlife, with several adopting fully wildlife-based land uses (e.g., wildlife tourism), and some larger properties, or collection of properties, managed as private game reserves. These areas present strong potential for recognition as OECMs. Formal registration as OECMs would allow them to contribute to national conservation statistics, thereby enhancing ecosystem representation and helping Namibia progress toward its biodiversity targets under the KM-GBF.

Given that registration as an OECM is entirely voluntary, achieving national conservation targets in certain areas will depend on the willingness of private landowners to pursue this designation. While there are currently no direct incentives for landowners, formal recognition of their conservation efforts could serve as a meaningful motivator. To encourage broader participation, it will be essential to raise awareness and generate enthusiasm around the opportunity, while ensuring the registration process remains straightforward. At the same time, sufficient reporting must be built into the system to verify that genuine conservation outcomes are being achieved.

Namibia is renowned for its rich biodiversity, with an impressive array of flora and fauna, including a high number of endemic species and some species with very restricted ranges. This biological richness not only represents global conservation value but also underpins Namibia's nature-based tourism sector, as well as the livelihoods of many local communities. By safeguarding a representative portion of every ecosystem, we will help ensure the survival of more species. But the importance of protection goes beyond biodiversity alone. Ecosystems provide critical services—like air and water purification, pollination and climate regulation—that support human well-being and economic stability.

Ecological representation and connectivity across landscapes are essential for allowing species to migrate, maintain genetic diversity and adapt to environmental changes. In Namibia, the locations and boundaries of most national parks are primarily a result of historical political factors rather than conservation objectives, and thus were

not designed to encompass entire ecosystems. Consequently, they are vulnerable to human-induced edge effects (Lindeque & Lindeque 2020). Without compatible, conservation-oriented land uses in adjacent areas, these parks face significant challenges in effectively protecting the full spectrum of habitats and species they host.

While expanding the coverage of protected and conserved areas is a critical step toward achieving Target 3, it is the effectiveness of management and the delivery of tangible conservation outcomes that must remain at the heart of Namibia's efforts. Reaching numerical targets alone will not safeguard biodiversity unless the areas designated, whether national parks, state forests, communal conservancies or OECMs, are well-managed, adequately monitored and effectively enforced. As Namibia explores the potential of OECMs to contribute to its conservation goals, equal, if not greater, attention must be given to ensuring that these areas are delivering real, measurable benefits for ecosystems and species. Ultimately, quality must take precedence over quantity if the country is to achieve lasting and meaningful conservation success.

POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATIONAL FRAMEWORKS AND STRATEGIES: THE BASIS TO STRENGTHEN GOVERNANCE AND ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR OECMS IN NAMIBIA

Namibia benefits from a progressive environmental policy and legal framework that lays the foundation for advancing area-based conservation beyond traditional protected areas. Instruments such as the Nature Conservation Ordinance No. 4 of 1975 and the Environmental Management Act No. 7 of 2007 have long underpinned biodiversity conservation in the country. Meanwhile, the more recent Protected Areas and Wildlife Management Bill (PAWMB), which is currently being finalised, introduces important elements relevant to the recognition of OECMs. The Bill includes provisions for *the declaration of sites or landscapes of special conservation or scientific importance* and outlines a formal process that could be followed for their designation and registration. These provisions offer a promising legal avenue for integrating OECMs into Namibia's long-term conservation strategy.

Canada has been a global frontrunner in embedding OECMs within its national conservation framework (Environment and Climate Change Canada 2021). Through a detailed federal recognition process (Canadian Parks Council 2018), Canada has identified and reported OECMs that include military lands, Indigenous-managed areas, and fisheries closures, applying rigorous criteria developed in collaboration with Indigenous and local stakeholders. Similarly, South Africa offers a regional example of integrating non-traditional conservation areas through its Biodiversity Stewardship Programme (South African Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment 2023), where legally binding agreements with private and communal landowners enable the formal recognition of sites contributing to biodiversity objectives, even if they are not protected areas under national law. Namibia can draw on these experiences to develop a recognition system that balances national legal structures with practical biodiversity outcomes across diverse governance types.

Although OECMs are not explicitly recognised in Namibia's current legislation, there is no legal impediment to their recognition. In fact, Namibia's constitution provides an enabling framework. Article 95(1) directs the state to actively promote and maintain ecosystems, essential ecological processes and biodiversity. While broadly phrased, this constitutional directive could certainly allow OECMs to be part of Namibia's environmental protection efforts. Besides, Namibia being a Party to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) could easily invoke CBD Decision 14/8, which defines OECMs, and Target 3 of the KM-GBF, which calls for protecting at least 30% of terrestrial, inland waters, and coastal and marine areas by 2030, including through the means of OECMs.

The national and legal instruments, and more refined recent international instruments legitimise any national efforts and allow Namibia to implement their provisions. By law, once Namibia adopts and ratifies international instruments, they become legally binding. However, due to this dualist system, specific instruments must be incorporated into national law by an Act of Parliament, for these to become enforceable in Namibia's domestic legal system. Thus, while the

recognition of OECMs can be immediately implemented, it is crucial that the other laws be considered, to strengthen OECMs as a management approach for effective conservation and protection.

Namibia may consider adapting the registration processes outlined in current legislation and the PAWMB, particularly those used for private reserves, as a model for OECM registration and recognition. This process must be rigorous, consistent and benchmarked on international best practices; ensuring that any site recognised as an OECM meets all relevant criteria, including long-term biodiversity conservation in-situ, effective governance and sustained management. Exceptions to the registration process should only be permitted when explicitly outlined in supplementary regulations and supported by robust justification.

To effectively operationalise these provisions, Namibia must consider drafting specific regulations for the operationalisation of the OECM registration framework, ensuring that these are closely aligned with lessons learned from OECM pilot sites across communal and freehold conservancies, private properties, marine sites, rivers and state lands, as applicable. These OECM pilots are being prioritised for implementation in private nature reserves or private sector-led areas, to provide a robust testing ground for verifying OECM in practice. The development of regulations could be informed by these practical Namibian experiences to ensure they are contextually relevant, equitable and implementable across the country's diverse landscapes.

Institutionally, the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism is best positioned to test and lead OECM implementation and coordination, complemented by other state entities such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Land Reform, as well as by non-state entities including the World Wildlife Fund Namibia, Namibia Association of CBNRM Support Organisations, Namibia Nature Foundation and academic partners. Drawing parallels to South Africa's stewardship councils or Canada's provincial conservation agencies, Namibia has established a multi-stakeholder NAP-T3 OECM Technical Working Group that includes representatives from

government, civil society, conservancy networks and the private sector to guide OECM verification, registry development, implementation and reporting.

In conclusion, Namibia's policy and legal landscape is well-equipped to support the formal registration and recognition of OECMs. A national OECM registration and recognition framework has been drafted and is awaiting ministerial approval; once adopted, this framework will be aligned with the PAWMD and its forthcoming regulations. When combined with constitutional support, CBD obligations, and regional inspiration from other African countries, Namibia has the opportunity to create a robust, inclusive and internationally aligned framework that scales up conservation impacts while respecting governance diversity and cultural values.

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