

FORGOTTEN WILDERNESS

By Clive Walker

Nine million hectares of wilderness in the far north of South West Africa/Namibia; nine million hectares of pristine wild country the likes of which exist nowhere outside of Botswana's Okavango Delta.

War, degradation, politics, the greed of a few and the ignorance of the majority have made up the scenario of this land. Damaraland and Kaokoland are the two political regions that comprise the Kaokoveld and if this desert wilderness is lost to mankind, it will be his own fault.

Dr Anton Rupert said in a statement published in *AFRICAN WILDLIFE* in 1976, 'As President of the South African Nature Foundation, I am glad to be able to tell you that the Prime Minister of South Africa has just informed me of one of the most important events in the history of nature conservation.

"A contiguous nature conservation area covering 72 000 square kilometres is being planned for the northern part of South West Africa. This allays many fears which scientists of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources and the World Wildlife Fund have had, as regards the future of this important habitat. This conservation area will include the existing Etosha Game Reserve as well as the Skeleton Coast Park and will be more than three times the size of the Kruger National Park and indeed one of the largest in the world."

The sad fact remains that nine years later most of the black rhino in this region have been poached, the elephant have fared little better, the ravages of a five year drought have left their mark and we are no closer to realising what the Prime Minister promised would take place so many years ago.

Although much of the area is totally unsuitable for human settlement, those that do traditionally live there are not entirely to blame for poaching. The wildlife has taught us that left alone and unharmed, it can survive the worst of droughts. It is those who were ordained responsible, who in the seventies was the then Department of Bantu Affairs, who are to blame.

In a 1978 issue of *AFRICAN WILDLIFE* magazine I asked 'Who is doing the killing now?' "Until a year ago (1977) Kaokoveld was closed to all, bar government officials. No member of the public could go in without a permit and permits were rarely if ever given. Persistent rumours of poaching in the area came to a head in July 1977 when a press investigation revealed that officials in high places had been hunting elephant as well as the rare black-faced impala. A former Commissioner General was one of those involved.

"During the controversy a Windhoek reporter was sentenced to a jail term for refusing to disclose his sources of information (his conviction was set aside on appeal). Meanwhile a senior nature conservation official from the Department of Bantu Affairs, claimed that he was transferred out of the territory after querying the shooting of elephant. A Windhoek newspaper was about to publish a 16 000 word 'calm, cool, factual story of game dying' when the Defence Force froze further newspaper reports, and set up an inquiry into some of the allegations.

"The Administrator General of

South West Africa/Namibia, Mr Justice M.T. Steyn, promised to take drastic action to protect the territory's wildlife, and he mentioned the Kaokoveld as a possible future reserve. He organised a meeting with nature conservation authorities to discuss the future of wildlife — but the Kaokoveld continues to be the target of illegal hunters and unless action is taken soon, there may be little left worth saving."

In the same year the private sector which had the same fears as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) and the World Wildlife Fund, and which was interested in the Kaokoveld wildlife's survival, decided to do something and later various non-government organisations from Namibia, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States of America came together to stop the killing and to push for official protection.

Negotiations to have a 1 000 000 hectare area in this region proclaimed as a desert park broke down earlier this year between the first and second tier governments leaving continued fears for the future survival of the desert-dwelling creatures especially the rhino, elephant and giraffe.

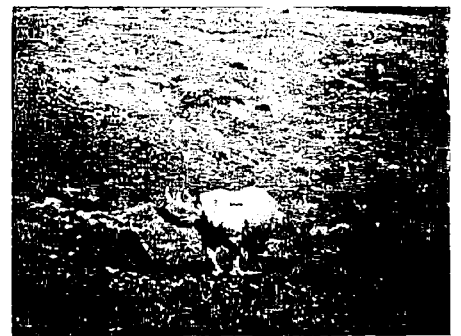
The problem is complicated as the Damara authorities control the land and the Department of Agriculture and Nature Conservation in Windhoek controls the wildlife. It is hoped that future negotiations will bring about the eventual protection of this region and what is now required is as close a cooperative effort as possible by all



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1. Sunset over a tributary of the Uniab River.
2. The gravel flats of northern Damaraland.
3. Botterboom (*Cyphostemma currorii*).
4. One of the 45 remaining black rhino of the Kaokoveld.



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concerned.

It has been said that all of Africa's rich heritage of animal life must rely for its survival on an uncertain element — man's compassion. This more than anything is now needed for the Kaokoveld.

The five year drought added to the stress of poaching which accounted for the loss of many elephant and brought the rhino to dangerously low numbers. Between 45 and 50 black rhino survive in the whole of Damara-land and Kaokoland with 68 desert-adapted elephant comprising two distinct groups with only seven mature bulls.

The drought now over, has seen the desert transformed into a garden of Eden with excellent rains bringing all the major rivers down in flood. Young elephant have been sighted and at least three black rhino calves have been born.

The R100 000 spent by the private sector since 1982 in support of the Department of Agriculture and Nature Conservation in Windhoek on anti-poaching, aerial surveys and extension work has paid dividends for no elephant or rhino have been poached in the last eighteen months.

However, to drop one's guard now would most certainly lead to renewed poaching which has prompted the Endangered Wildlife Trust in cooperation with the authorities to maintain a presence in the region until at least the end of 1984 with Mr Garth Owen-Smith and his staff of seven local inhabitants carrying out surveillance work.

What of the future? Peter Hitchins, a noted black rhino specialist feels the situation is bleak as do many others. Political differences are a major stumbling block in a land with a long history of political turmoil.

For how long can the private sector hold on before the responsible authorities can come to some agreement and truly claim to have the position under control? How can one walk away and write off the efforts of so many?

I believe that all of us must do our best to assist the Damaras and the S.W.A./Namibia Department of Agriculture and Nature Conservation, regardless of the cost. To lose those last remaining rhino and elephant will rob that wilderness of a vibrant asset and turn the desert stones to silence forever. 🐾

SUMMARY

The Endangered Wildlife Trust first became actively involved in a vast region in the north west of South West Africa/Namibia, home of the unique, desert-adapted and now famous elephant, rhino and giraffe, in 1978.

Various organisations came together to carry out research, aerial surveys, anti-poaching and extension work in this 9 million hectare region where the wildlife was being threatened with extinction because of poaching — at that time there was very little if any law enforcement.

The Endangered Wildlife Trust has since provided the salary, vehicle and assistance needed for a Senior Field Officer, Mr Garth Owen-Smith, who with a Damara assistant and six auxiliaries, has curtailed any poaching in the area over the last eighteen months, in support of the South West African Department of Agriculture and Nature Conservation (DANC). The Trust has also campaigned tirelessly for this region to be proclaimed a desert park and be taken over by the authorities.

However, negotiations to have the area proclaimed a desert park broke down earlier this year and the Trust feared that there would be inadequate protection and anti-poaching work. The Namibia Wildlife Trust which has carried out work in the area over the past two years in conjunction with the Endangered Wildlife Trust and other organisations in the United States, United Kingdom and South Africa, has withdrawn from the project.

After a series of talks held in both Windhoek and Xorixas recently with the Damara and DANC authorities, the director of the Endangered Wildlife Trust, and two members of the Trust's board, have established that the Trust's presence is still needed in the region.

The Trust has therefore assumed control until the end of December 1984 of anti-poaching and surveillance work by which time it is hoped, the DANC will be able to take over fully.

Lapalala Wilderness

It is quiet, wild and untouched. This is a piece of wilderness which is difficult to believe still exists. The quiet is filled with the distant sound of water running over rapids, and a hoopoe calls way back in the bush. It is the sort of place that makes the mad rush of cities seem pointless, if not totally futile.

Lapalala, a privately owned wilderness in the north-western part of the Transvaal, has its own special meaning.

It is an important area for conservation — home to a herd of the rare and threatened roan antelope, as well as gemsbok, wildebeest, zebra and kudu. It also harbours brown hyena and leopard, as well as an enormous variety of indigenous trees and shrubs, many of which are rarely seen elsewhere in the country.

Lapalala has four camps, all sited on the Palala and Blockland Rivers. Tambuti Camp has 8 beds, Marula has 6, Mukwa Camp has 2 beds and Umdoni has 4 beds. All blend in with the natural surrounds.

Lapalala Wilderness is a four-hour drive from Johannesburg via Vaalwater.

Educational Wildlife Expeditions.
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