

## Rewilding the Rhinoceros

On 29 April 2013, a sixteen-kilogram parcel was delivered to Michael E. Nacol at his home in Georgetown, Texas. The cargo manifest described the contents as ‘hard dried skins and bony souvenirs of a hunt’.<sup>1</sup> It was shipped by Willem F. Mans of KumKum Game Ranch in southern Namibia. Nacol had travelled to KumKum in 2012 for his second big hunting trip in Namibia, having hunted farther north in 2004. Reflecting on his first impression, he said, ‘I thought it was very sharp and rocky as hell’.<sup>2</sup> Nacol has been a long-time active member of the Dallas Safari Club and Safari Club International, and he would learn about hunting opportunities at their conventions and charity auctions. He and a friend purchased a one week hunt on KumKum from a Dallas Safari Club auction, and they went particularly in hopes of shooting leopard.

Originally from South Africa, Willem Mans arrived in the region at the same time as Steen Severin, and he purchased the 15,656-hectare KumKum Farm in December 1987 for the bargain price of ZAR 290,000.<sup>3</sup> Mans increased his land assets over the following years, purchasing Norechab for only ZAR 115,000 in 1996 and a 3,000-hectare portion of Arus Farm in 2004 for NAD 100,000.<sup>4</sup> Mans was not very interested in farming but rather in hunting, and on a large scale. Building on the abundance of natural wildlife in the area, he built game fencing and imported additional game from central and northern Namibia, stocking the farm heavily to ensure that his foreign hunters left with their trophies and he with their US dollars. In addition to the daily hunters’ rate of USD 300 per day, Mans charged for each animal bagged: from USD 500 for a caracal or ostrich to USD 900 for a kudu, USD 950 for a Hartmann’s zebra, USD 1,800 for an eland and USD 8,000 for a twelve-day leopard hunt.<sup>5</sup> These prices were tempting to nearby landowners, who at times permitted Willem Mans to escort hunters across their farm borders for a cut, making it possible for Mans to advertise hunting grounds of 100,000 hectares, which was much larger than

1 Bill of Lading no. MAEU559718413; Container no. MSKU5054010.

2 Michael E. Nacol, interview with Bernard C. Moore (telephone, 5 January 2023).

3 WDO File T4309/1987: Deed of Transfer: KumKum no. 105, consolidated no. 413.

4 WDO File T4842/1996: Deed of Transfer: Norechab no. 129. WDO File T5116/2004: Deed of Transfer: Remainder of Farm Arus no. 111 – 25 August 2004. KumKum, Eselruh and the Arus portion were combined in 2004, making the total area of KumKum 18,597 hectares.

5 IAWB: KumKum Game Ranch, ‘Pricelist 2009’ (11 November 2009). [https://web.archive.org/web/2009111012449/http://www.kumkum.com.na/pricelist\\_pg.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/2009111012449/http://www.kumkum.com.na/pricelist_pg.htm)



FIGURE 70 Black rhino on Sandfontein, after feeding on lucerne  
PHOTO COURTESY OF BIRGIT KÖTTING, USED WITH PERMISSION

his actual property holdings.<sup>6</sup> Together with his American bluetick coonhound and a team of Nama workers, Mans targeted the American hunting market, bringing in high-value clients from Idaho, Montana, California, North Carolina and Texas.<sup>7</sup>

Michael Nacol and his hunting partner stayed in the small chalets beside the farmhouse, where they would dine on their hunting while Mans ‘chain-smoked more cigarettes than I’ve ever seen in my life’, Nacol reflected.<sup>8</sup> On KumKum, he shot a gemsbok and a few springbok. Some of the meat was eaten each night, though most of it was sold by Mans to nearby farmers for workers’ rations and to shops in Karasburg. Nacol recalled that Mans ‘dried some of it into jerky [biltong], using all these Biblical spices, like coriander. It was nice’. Most of Nacol’s time was spent with Mans and his workers tracking a leopard, which he successfully shot, and for which Mans received USD 8,000. On Nacol’s last day of hunting, Mans took them to ‘a nearby conservation area’, where they

6 IAWB: KumKum Game Ranch, ‘Hunting Information’ (11 November 2009). [https://web.archive.org/web/2009111012420/http://www.kumkum.com.na/huntinginfo\\_pg.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/2009111012420/http://www.kumkum.com.na/huntinginfo_pg.htm)

7 IAWB: KumKum Game Ranch, ‘Photo Gallery 2008’ (5 October 2008). [https://web.archive.org/web/2008100513249/http://www.kumkum.com.na/photo\\_gallerypg.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/2008100513249/http://www.kumkum.com.na/photo_gallerypg.htm)

8 Michael E. Nacol, interview with Bernard C. Moore (telephone, 5 January 2023).

had ‘an arrangement’ with the owner: Willem Agenbach of Sandfontein. Nacol bagged an ostrich from their herd, which presumably was included in his parcel of skins shipped a few months later. He recalled that ‘they had this herd of rhinoceros on the property. You couldn’t hunt them, though. That place was really beautiful, for sure’.

Up to 2012 – and even beyond – trophy-hunting was a prominent feature of the farms to the east of Sandfontein (and, as chapter 9 showed, on Sandfontein itself). KumKum’s hunting operations allowed Willem Mans to retire comfortably in South Africa. Throughout these years, the biggest difference between Willem Mans’s KumKum operations and Gilbertson/Agenbach’s Sandfontein operations – apart from window-dressing – was that the latter had a charismatic herd of black rhinoceros. This chapter considers the history, political economy and ecology of black rhino on Sandfontein and how the allure of rhinos shaped ‘conservation’ initiatives near the Orange River.

• • •

In November 2021, we left Henry Pretorius’s farm, Eendoorn, with spare keys to the gate to farm road #227, which runs south to Pelgrimsrust Farm and the Orange River farms of Kambreek and Pelladrift. We were surprised that we needed keys in the first place, because locking gates on public roads is illegal by Namibian law. However, Pretorius noted, as long as all the owners beyond the gate had keys, it was permitted; concerning those farms in question, Pete Morkel owned them all. We did not really know anything about Morkel at the time and our goal was not to speak with him but rather to find our way along the jeep tracks to Oude Meester and Gerrit Luttig’s old irrigation fields on Pelladrift. Henry Pretorius looked at our 4 × 4 vehicle and shook his head. ‘That plastic thing won’t be able to handle those mountain roads,’ he said. ‘Maybe Pete will let you use his stronger bakkie’.

After unlocking the gate near the abandoned farmhouse on Keimas, we drove for a few more kilometres of 4 × 4 track until we reached the large, modernist, two storey house on Pelgrimsrust that belonged to Pete Morkel. Built of concrete and glass, it was more brutalist than boer. We parked the car and a sunburnt man greeted us in Afrikaans and invited us inside for some coffee and a chat. Morkel was friendly and talkative, and he clearly appreciated having an audience after living for quite a while out of regular reach of a cell phone signal. Although we were familiar with the situation on Sandfontein, it quickly became clear to us that Pete Morkel was a nodal point around which the entire conservation plans for the Orange River area revolved – plans much bigger than Sandfontein.



FIGURE 71 Pete Morkel, photographed after successfully translocating three black rhino from Port Lympe Zoo in Kent, England, to Mkomazi National Park in Tanzania, 2012  
PHOTO: GETTY



Peter van der Byl Morkel was born in 1960, in Umtali (today Mutare), Zimbabwe.<sup>9</sup> The Morkel family goes back to the early 1700s, when Philip Morkel – an artillerist on a Dutch East India Company warship en route to Holland – decided to stay in Cape Town.<sup>10</sup> The Morkels became a large slave-owning family on their farms Onverwacht and Voorburg, near Cape Town.<sup>11</sup> Part of the Morkel family emigrated to Zimbabwe during the early 1900s. Pete Morkel was sent by his father to complete his secondary schooling in South Africa, and then managed to graduate in veterinary studies from the University of Pretoria, utilising his ‘virtually non-existent’ Afrikaans. In 1984, Morkel was called up for compulsory military service, and volunteered to go to Rundu, in Kavango. He described life in the guerrilla war zone as ‘two wonderful years for us there in northern Namibia; they were probably the best two years of my life’. He met his wife, Estelle, who was working as a radiologist at Rundu Hospital.

In June 1986, Morkel was hired as a veterinarian for the SWA Division of Nature Conservation as part of their game capture team. At the time, they were relocating lechwe from Caprivi to other parks and private farmlands in Central Namibia, and from 1989 to 1991 he worked on relocating black rhino between Damara-land, Etosha National Park and White-owned farms. In 1991, Morkel ‘went private’, leaving his post in the Namibian government (he was by then a naturalised Namibian citizen) to work on a contract basis for farms, lodges and private and public game reserves in the Northern Cape, and eventually in East Africa.

In 2002, Morkel took a job with the Frankfurt Zoological Society as director of their ‘rhino project’ in Ngorongoro Crater, in Tanzania. This work involved relocating rhino throughout this section of Tanzania, but also into Kenya. Morkel was already connected to the East African conservation networks through his years as a private wildlife veterinarian. During the 1990s, he worked with a number of British and British/Kenyan businessmen and directors of non-profit organisations to relocate eastern black rhino from Addo National Park in South Africa to Mkomazi Game Reserve in Tanzania.<sup>12</sup> Morkel was also long involved with NGOs – like the South African organisation, Back To Africa – which relocated rhinoceros from zoos in Europe to reintroduce them to African national parks and to ‘rewild’ the species into landscapes that had purportedly

9 Unless otherwise noted, biographical material for Pete Morkel comes from two biographies, written by his brother. See M. Morkel, *Wildlife Conservation and Pete Morkel* (self published, December 2016); M. Morkel, *Diamonds on the Soles of His Feet* (self published, 2019).

10 P.W. Morkel, *The Morkels: Family History and Family Tree* (self published, 1961), ch. 1.

11 E. Rhoda, ‘The Origin of the Rhoda Family of the Strand’ (March 2001).

12 See T. FitzJohn, ‘25 Years of Mkomazi’, *The Horn* (2014), pp. 22–23. Mkomazi has been described by Brockington as the epitome of ‘fortress conservation’.



FIGURE 72 Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, presents Pete Morkel with the Prince William Award at the Tusk Conservation award ceremony, November 2018  
PHOTO: GETTY

supported rhinoceros in the past. It is fair to say that Pete Morkel is one of the best-known veterinarians of black rhinoceros and specialists for their translocation living today. In 2018 he was given the Prince William Award for African Conservation by the English royal himself.<sup>13</sup>

Given all this, what was Pete Morkel doing on this isolated, mountainous farm in southern Namibia? After Morkel left government service in 1991, he remained a prominent face in nature conservation and rhinoceros affairs in Namibia, and in 1993 helped to design Namibia's Black Rhino Custodian-ship Programme (BRCP), which has been led since 2006 by control warden Birgit Kötting. During the Namibian liberation war, there was a widespread recognition that charismatic fauna – especially in northern Namibia – were under threat from poaching. There is evidence that elephant and rhinoceros numbers declined during the late 1970s and early 1980s, often at the hands of White South African Defence Forces soldiers and officials, though specific figures are hard to come by.<sup>14</sup> The real perceptions of poaching were further amplified by the large-scale operations of the SWA Administration's game-capture team, which Morkel would eventually join.

To understand the purpose of the game-capture programme, we need to look back at nature conservation in earlier years. When the 1964 Odendaal Commission recommended reducing the size of Etosha National Park in order to add necessary grazing to the Damaraland homeland,<sup>15</sup> conservationist organisations protested, declaring that 'non-Europeans are not preservers of wild animals; thousands of animals could perish'.<sup>16</sup> In the months before the implementation of the plan, the SWA Administration approved the formation of a game-capture team, purchasing sophisticated equipment and hiring additional staff. The team went into the homelands, particularly Damaraland and Kaokoland, emptying the areas of eland, tsessebe, roan antelope and, crucially, black rhinoceros. The Administration purchased additional farmland in Naukluft and Waterberg areas to hold the captured animals before they could be sold to private farms and national parks in South

13 See 'Winner of the Prince William Award For Conservation in Africa 2018', *Tusk Conservation Awards*. <https://www.tuskawards.com/pete-morkel-2018/>

14 M. Bollig, *Shaping the African Savannah: From Capitalist Frontier to Arid Eden in Namibia* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 196–233.

15 NAN AP 4/1/13: Report of the Commission of Enquiry into South West African Affairs, 1962–1963 (1964), pp. 89–93.

16 BAB PA.24 VI.B.5: H.G. zu Castell-Rüdenhausen, 'How the Recommendations of the Commission of Enquiry into SWA Affairs would Affect Game and Game Reserves' – n.d., most likely mid-1964.

Africa and abroad, as the captured species were too many to be supported by Etosha National Park alone.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the 1980s, the SWA Division of Nature Conservation continued to capture and sell black rhino to private farms and South African national parks, particularly Augrabies.<sup>18</sup> The reality of poaching in north-western Namibia was complemented by the reality of large-scale emptying of the homelands' game by the government, spreading the black rhino population away from communal areas into national parks and private lands.

The inauguration of the Black Rhino Custodianship Programme continued this trend in the post-independence years, albeit in a more democratic way. There was still an interest in decentralising the critically endangered black rhino population by involving freehold landowners in the process. This was viewed as a way to protect against poaching and to spread potential economic costs and benefits. As per nature conservation legislation, all black rhinoceros were officially the property of the Namibian government, so each farmer-applicant needed to apply to the Ministry of Environment and Tourism and sign a Memorandum of Understanding.<sup>19</sup> In the early days, only private freehold landowners were involved, and in 1993, the first two custodians received the first BRCP herds, totalling eleven animals.<sup>20</sup>

After thirty years, there are almost thirty freehold landowners in the BRCP, looking after about one third of the state's black rhino population across more than one million hectares of farmland.<sup>21</sup> It is the responsibility of the landowner to build a steel-reinforced boma (kraal) for the herd of rhinos; veld-to-veld transfer has rarely been practised, and it is often necessary to gradually introduce the rhino to the local vegetation, while supplementing their diet with lucerne. The Namibian government pays for most veterinary expenses and transport costs. In general, those costs that the government cannot afford are supplemented with funds donated by the World Wildlife Fund, the Save

17 NAN ADG 2/4: Direkteur, Natuurbewaring en Toerisme 'Memorandum: Toedeling van die Regeringsfunksies ten opsigte van Natuurbewaring en Toerisme aan die Gesagowerhede op die Eerste en Tweede Regeringsvlakke' – 15 February 1980.

18 NLN TXX 0742: Department of Agriculture and Nature Conservation: Annual Report, 1985.

19 See S. Sullivan et al. 'Historicising Black Rhino in Namibia: Colonial-Era Hunting, Conservation Custodianship and Plural Values', *Future Pasts Working Papers* no. 13 (December 2021), p. 16. Because white rhinoceros can be privately owned – and are less critically endangered – they were not part of the custodianship programme.

20 B. Kötting, 'Namibia's Black Rhino Custodianship Programme', *Conservation Frontlines*, 2, 2 (2020).

21 Birgit Kötting, interview with Bernard C. Moore (telephone, 20 January 2023).





FIGURE 73 Black rhino on Sandfontein, suffering from drought and lack of vegetation. They would recover after additional lucerne was provided. Note the overturned melkbos to the right of the animals.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BIRGIT KÖTTING, USED WITH PERMISSION

the Rhino Trust and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, which heavily subsidise the BRCP.<sup>22</sup>

Pete Morkel was hired in 2009 by Birgit Köttling and the BRCP to facilitate the transfer of a small herd of black rhino from Etosha National Park to Sandfontein.<sup>23</sup> Köttling reflected that this was the first such scheme that far south: ‘the landscape at Sandfontein is a bit volatile, and it’s not really an ideal locale for black rhino’.<sup>24</sup> The far south of Namibia is on the fringes of what the black rhino’s natural habitat would have been, even in the most generous assessments of prior rainfall and vegetation growth. The ideal range is really from Windhoek north-west to Omaruru, and then farther into Kunene region. ‘In the early 1990s, the government had transferred a breeding pair of black rhino to Naute Dam Park [near Keetmanshoop], but the browse was insufficient, leading to the rhino eating too much unusual plants in the riverbeds, and the animals died’, said Köttling. ‘So, for a number of years, we had a policy that no

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Pete Morkel, interview with Bernard C. Moore and Luregn Lenggenhager (Pelgrimsrust farm, Karasburg District, 10 November 2021).

<sup>24</sup> Birgit Köttling, interview with Bernard C. Moore (telephone, 20 January 2023).

black rhino would be transferred south of Windhoek, and Sandfontein got in right after we changed that’.

Kötting remarked that the rhino intended for Sandfontein were first kept in a kraal and fed on lucerne for a while before being transported to the south. They then were kraaled for three additional months on the property, gradually being introduced to local vegetation along with lucerne fodder.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, black rhino prefer to bush browse rather than graze on grassy plains – which predominate on Sandfontein – so only about one fifth of Gilbertson’s property holdings can actually be used for the BRCP. It is either too grassy or too bare and mountainous. Much of the bush is melkbos (*Euphorbia gregaria*) – poisonous for most mammals but edible for rhino – which is acceptable as a supplement to lucerne or other browse, but it is insufficient for the entirety of the black rhino’s diet. The rhino can eat the latex-filled stalks, but they prefer eating the root system, which means they dig up the plants. In this way the melkbos cover on Sandfontein was reduced dramatically.<sup>26</sup> The south of Namibia suffered a long drought between 2013 and 2020, which resulted in the health of the black rhino on Sandfontein deteriorating significantly (see Figure 73). However, because the herd was accustomed to lucerne, their diet could be supplemented for some time, keeping them from starving until vegetation began to regrow in 2020 (see Figure 70).<sup>27</sup>

So, given that Sandfontein and southern Namibia are not ideal black rhino habitat, and given the expenses and effort involved in maintaining the growing number of black rhino on Sandfontein (which Kötting said had risen to about fifteen or sixteen), why would Sean Gilbertson and his business partners go to the trouble of partnering with the BRCP to have the animals translocated to their properties? Birgit Kötting divides rhino custodians into two types. There are the conservationists, plain and simple; they value the species and want to spend money to protect them. Then, you have businessmen, who run tourism or hunting operations and find that having black rhino draws guests to their lodges. Although the rhino itself cannot be hunted, there is an allure to hunting other species with black rhino nearby.<sup>28</sup> Michael Nacol certainly thought this when he hunted ostrich on Sandfontein in 2012. When the rhinos were first brought to Sandfontein in 2009, it is likely that Sean Gilbertson was the first type of custodian: he was a wealthy person with an interest in conservation who wanted to play a part in protecting a species. Given Agenbach’s interest in

---

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Kötting, ‘Namibia’s Black Rhino Custodianship Programme’.

28 Birgit Kötting, interview with Bernard C. Moore (telephone, 20 January 2023).

hunting, it is likely that he was the second type, looking to use rhino as a pull factor to bring in additional safari hunting tourists to shoot other animals on Sandfontein.

There is, however, a third type, whereby custodianship of the government's black rhino are perhaps a smokescreen to secure land tenure; after all, farmers do not own these species. The black rhino is really the last vestige of the old 'royal game' or 'state custodianship' model of conservation, of the MacKenzie Orthodoxy (see chapter 1). Virtually all other game in Namibia can be owned by the landowners themselves, even white rhinoceros. When Pete Morkel met Gilbertson in 2009, he was impressed with the lodge and what the Sandfontein company had built there. 'You know, Sean Gilbertson is a miner, not a conservationist', Morkel said. 'He appreciates conservation, but that's not why he bought all that land. He originally bought the farms because he wanted a big property for himself.'<sup>29</sup> Morkel emphasised that black rhino are not actually very useful for tourism: they are reclusive, rarely move in groups and can become aggressive easily. He implied that while the existence of black rhino on a property might be a draw for tourists or hunters, their behaviour made it difficult to easily integrate them into activities. 'I don't have much evidence for this, but I always suspected that a lot of black rhino custodians went into the programme as a way to protect against land expropriation', Morkel said. 'If they're guarding the government's rhinos from poachers, then they're probably less likely to have their lands taken by the new government.'<sup>30</sup> Indeed, although custodians are required to hire anti-poaching security – broadly defined – most of the benefits of the BRCP accrue to them. However, if Morkel's suspicion is correct – that the BRCP is a hedge against possible land expropriation – then that may be the largest benefit of all.<sup>31</sup>

...

Morkel stayed at Sandfontein for a little while after he delivered the black rhino, in part to monitor their behaviour and health and likely also to have a well-deserved holiday. While travelling through the area, he found that there were a few properties for sale to the east of Sean's holdings. By 2009, the

29 Pete Morkel, interview with Bernard C. Moore (telephone, 19 October 2022).

30 Ibid.

31 This echoes Yuka Suzuki's account of White property owners in post-independence Zimbabwe shoring up their land tenure by converting livestock farms into game or hunting reserves. Y. Suzuki, *The Nature of Whiteness: Race, Animals, and Nation in Zimbabwe* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2017). See also M. Spierenburg & S. Brooks, 'Private Game Farming and its Social Consequences in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Contestations over Wildlife, Property and Agrarian Futures', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 32, no. 2 (2014), pp. 151-172.



FIGURE 74 Willem F. Mans's old farm sign still stands on the road to KumKum, long after its proprietor departed

PHOTO: B.C. MOORE, OCTOBER 2022

irrigation farmer Gerrit Luttig was getting quite old – he was well into his seventies – and was spending more time at his son Pieter's farm near Ariamsvlei. He had owned Kambreek and Pelgrimsrust farms since 1971, but the family was now looking to sell. Pete Morkel had a vision to expand his rhino conservation



operations into Namibia, perhaps mimicking some of the private conservation operations in East Africa. He met Gerrit Luttig and negotiated the sale of the two farms in April 2010 for a price of just over NAD 1 million.<sup>32</sup>

‘Gerrit Luttig was as crooked as a dog’s leg’, said Morkel, ‘but by the time he died, he had accumulated quite a lot of property and retired a very wealthy man’. Morkel intended to transform Luttig’s properties into a conservation area:

I would have liked to have done something like this in my native Zimbabwe, but southern Namibia is as far from communities as possible, so we could attempt something at a large scale. Plus, without *karakul* these lands aren’t so profitable. I would have felt horribly guilty attempting something like this with prime farmland like Erindi [central Namibia, near Okahandja].<sup>33</sup>

Gilbertson and Agenbach were trying to run Sandfontein as a conservation operation – albeit each having a very different definition of this – and their operations were marketed simply as contemporary choices of how to use the land. Morkel’s beliefs and strategies, however, were not the same. He believed that he had *historical* justification for his choices.

When we met Morkel in November 2021, on learning that we were historians he asked if we had read H.J. Wikar’s travelogues. We were initially surprised that Morkel had an old copy of this obscure eighteenth-century primary source. ‘Wikar described this land as it should be’, Morkel said, ‘filled with game species in the mountains, hippos at the Orange River’.<sup>34</sup> Livestock farming and settlement, reasoned Morkel, was the cause of the decline in wildlife, especially black rhinoceros. ‘I’ve got these ancient rhino rubbing rocks on Pelgrimsrust, so I know that there must have been a lot of rhinoceros here in the past. I want to rewild these lands to the way Wikar saw them’.<sup>35</sup>

Since we too had read Wikar, we asked Morkel what he thought of the fact that most of Wikar’s travelogue is not really about the wildlife along the Orange River at all, but rather the river-folk communities and people he met along the way, with whom he traded, hunted, ate and drank. Morkel dismissed those facts as not applicable today at all. For Morkel, ‘rewilding’ appears to entail using the

32 WDO File T4912/2010: Kambreek and Pelgrimsrust, Deed of Transfer – 5 October 2010.

33 Pete Morkel, interview with Bernard C. Moore (telephone, 19 October 2022).

34 Pete Morkel, interview with Bernard C. Moore and Luregn Lenggenhager (Pelgrimsrust farm, Karasburg District, 10 November 2021).

35 Pete Morkel, interview with Bernard C. Moore (telephone, 19 October 2022).

lands only for establishing herds of specific species (like black rhino), housing those veterinarians and staff who see to those species, and allowing paying guests to experience the wilderness as Wikar allegedly once experienced it.<sup>36</sup> Based on Morkel's reading of Wikar, it would appear that those who use the land in other ways – hunting, commercial farming, subsistence herding – have no place in his rewilded lands.

Once Morkel purchased Kambreek and Pelgrimsrust – both of which border KumKum – he immediately had problems with Willem Mans and his hunters. 'Willem Mans was a complete miser', said Morkel, 'he barely ever paid his staff, and he instructed them to beg for tips from the trophy hunters. We've got one guy working for us now, Gabriël, who used to work for Mans, and he said that was the tip of the iceberg of Mans' strategies to make profits'. Morkel caught Mans and his workers routinely crossing over the farm boundaries illegally to hunt on Pelgrimsrust, Kambreek and even Pelladrift. For a price, Mans might have received permission. 'Mans could have bought these farms for cheap, but he was a miser and chose to do things illegally. But he made a tremendous amount of money, and he succeeded in southern Namibia where few had been able to before.'<sup>37</sup>

In 2011, not long after Morkel purchased his properties, he brought an internationally renowned expert in conservation to visit his farms and nearby Sandfontein, the Kenyan Ian Craig.<sup>38</sup> As the following chapter explains in more detail, Ian Craig was one of the pioneers of private wildlife conservation in East Africa, founding the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy out of his family's old cattle ranch in the Laikipia Highlands near Mount Kenya. He is also the founder of the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT), a private non-governmental entity in Kenya that links private conservation businesses with community conservancies to expand nature conservation tourism and wildlife utilisation schemes. He would, in 2016, be awarded the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II for his 'services to conservation and security to communities in Kenya'.<sup>39</sup> Pete Morkel got to know Ian Craig through their membership of the IUCN's African Rhino Specialist Group, and while Morkel was based at Ngorongoro in Tanzania, the two worked together to relocate rhinoceros throughout East Africa.<sup>40</sup> 'We worked in parallel careers', reflected Ian Craig. 'He invited me

36 In chapter 12, we cover in detail the political ecology of rewilding.

37 Ibid.

38 Sean T. Gilbertson to Bernard C. Moore (7 January 2023), letter in the authors' possession.

39 Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, 'Ian Craig Awarded Order of the British Empire' (10 June 2016).

40 Pete Morkel, interview with Bernard C. Moore (telephone, 19 October 2022).

and my wife to Namibia for a visit, as Pete had recently sold his land in South Africa, and had set himself up near the Orange River.<sup>41</sup> Craig understood that the visit was not just a holiday with old friends, but rather the start of a business relationship.

Morkel toured Kambreek and Pelgrimsrust with Craig, introducing him to the mountainous landscape of southern Namibia and the Orange River cutting through it. He brought Craig to Sean Gilbertson on Sandfontein and Homrivier to see what an ongoing 'conservation' operation in Namibia looked like. Then, he introduced Ian Craig to Willem Mans, in the hope that they could negotiate a purchase of KumKum, which would bring Morkel's lands closer Sandfontein.<sup>42</sup> Willem Mans wanted to sell KumKum at the maximum price possible. 'It's true that Mans was selling KumKum as a going concern, which needed to be taken into account, but he calculated the price of every piece of game in the sale price, down to the dassie!'<sup>43</sup> Mans had already sold Norechab a few years earlier, to Gilbertson, and he wanted to sell KumKum for USD 1 million. He got very near that price from Ian Craig: the property was sold for NAD 7.8 million.<sup>44</sup>

Morkel and Craig also met Pieter Luttig, son of the elderly Gerrit, to try and purchase Pelladrift Farm, right along the Orange River, which was owned by the company Pelladrift (Edms) Bpk. Luttig arranged to have the company sold to Craig and Morkel once his father had passed away, and the two obtained their directorships on 23 January 2012, the day Gerrit Luttig died.<sup>45</sup> When we asked Pieter Luttig what Morkel's interest in the mountainous and inaccessible farm was, he laughed and told us that they 'wanted to put rhinos on it'.<sup>46</sup>

Morkel had paid for his two properties from his own account. However, he and Ian Craig were clear that the latter – a Kenyan citizen – had paid for KumKum and Pelladrift. Nevertheless, it was the Namibian citizen Pete Morkel who signed the Land Reform affidavit stating that Pelladrift's shareholding was at least 51 per cent Namibian. By the end of 2012, the Pelladrift company owned

---

41 Ian Craig, interview with Bernard C. Moore (telephone, 18 October 2022).

42 Ibid.

43 Pete Morkel, interview with Bernard C. Moore (telephone, 19 October 2022).

44 WDO File T6534/2012: Kumkum no. 472, Deed of Transfer – 29 November 2012.

45 BIPA File 1973/5752: Contents of Register of Directors, Auditors and Officers (CM-29) – 18 May 2016. This record erroneously declares that Ian Craig was a Namibian citizen.

46 Pieter Luttig, interview with Bernard C. Moore and Luregn Lenggenhager (Tigerberg farm, Karasburg District, 10 November 2021). Because it was the sale of a company and the company's assets rather than the sale of property directly, the specific sale price for Pelladrift was not made public. We can reason that it was significantly less than the price for KumKum.

31,000 hectares; Morkel himself had 15,000 hectares of his own lands. Together with Gilbertson's properties, there was now the possibility that a 'conservation' project could be attempted at scale. The area under their combined ownership now reached nearly 150,000 hectares in total, and with land-use agreements with other farmers or additional sales this could be increased dramatically. The question arose as to what this large conservation project would look like. In 2013, Ian Craig brought in two young British disciples to survey KumKum and the other properties to conceptualise 'rewilding' in what they believed – erroneously – to be ideal rhinoceros territory.

• • •

In the twenty-first century, nature conservation is increasingly about narratives. Conservationists spend significant time crafting stories – true or not – about processes of land degradation or regeneration. These narratives are normally interchangeable and could be used, with minimal modification, to describe conservation schemes in the American West, Brazil, Kenya or even southern Namibia. They go like this: irresponsible land use, combined with global climate change, has 'degraded' a landscape and it is the responsibility of globetrotting 'conservationists' to regenerate or 'rewild' the landscape to the way it should be. There is rarely a deep political or economic critique, and



FIGURE 75 Northern gate to KumKum Farm, branded with the Oana Adventure tourism logo  
PHOTO: B.C. MOORE, 2021



these plans and these strategies are carried out in the language of morality and market forces. In this way, conservation narratives resemble Evangelical Christianity more than rangeland ecology; these actions are taken on faith, and this faith is universal.

When one reads the biographies of conservationists – established or emerging – they are eerily similar in structure to those of personalities within mining or finance, not just because they are narrating a CV of sorts, but in the way that the narrative is constructed. Conservationists ‘cut their teeth’ or ‘find their feet’ in a certain locale, often quite removed geographically from the regions and the projects where they are actually working today. In the same way that a young mining executive would name-drop working for Brian Gilbertson at Gencor or BHP, conservationists would be sure to mention having worked with the George Adamson Trust or The Nature Conservancy. Just as for the godfathers of the mining industry, there is a degree of ‘hero worship’ within nature conservation as well:

Hero worship in conservation is as old as wildlife conservation itself. The subjects of this worship are invariably white men and women who are lionised for taking to a life of selfless service of the wilderness and its residents. Though they serve in environments where native Africans have lived for centuries and have done little more than simply live among animals, they have continued to receive near universal adulation. To ensure that the world does not take a second look at what it deems to be their heroism and altruism, their misdeeds, failures and true personalities are conveniently ignored so to craft as attractive a narrative as possible.<sup>47</sup>

Kenyan authors Mbaria and Ogada apply the ‘hero worship’ phenomenon to well-known figures in East African conservation, like George Adamson, Richard Leakey and, to a lesser extent, Ian Craig himself.<sup>48</sup>

When Ian Craig bought KumKum, he realised that Willem Mans had created a ‘very carefully curated sort of hunting operation, with lots of fences and camps’. But Craig wanted an ‘open landscape’.<sup>49</sup> He also believed that Mans’s success in running trophy-hunting operations depended on overstocking the landscape with game. So, Ian Craig hired the twenty five year old Englishman, Edward ‘Red’ Barthorp, to travel to KumKum, survey the land and plan for

---

47 J. Mbaria and M. Ogada, *The Big Conservation Lie: The Untold Story of Wildlife Conservation in Kenya* (Auburn, Lens&Pens Publishing, 2017), p. 10.

48 Ibid, p. 71.

49 Ian Craig, interview with Bernard C. Moore (telephone, 18 October 2022).

future conservation projects.<sup>50</sup> Barthorp grew up in the idyllic Cotswolds in west England, attending the prestigious Cheltenham College and eventually completing a BA degree in Geography from the University of Newcastle. He had travelled to Kenya in 2011 and 2012, volunteering at Ol Pejeta Conservancy and the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT), where he got to know Ian Craig. Barthorp followed Craig's and Morkel's vision that KumKum, Pelladrift and other farms needed to be 'rewilded', which involved removing human infrastructure, especially fences. After his short stint at KumKum, Barthorp enrolled in a MSc programme at the Durrell Institute for Conservation and Ecology (DICE) at the University of Kent. There, he met the future face of KumKum, Andreia Pawel, who was completing a MSc in conservation biology (on a chimpanzee sanctuary in Sierra Leone).<sup>51</sup> Pawel made educational wildlife films for Tanzania People & Wildlife while Barthorp conducted his MSc research with Craig's NRT.

In late 2014 or early 2015, Pawel and Barthorp visited Ian Craig and his wife, Jane, at their villa on Lewa Downs in Kenya. Craig wanted to 'brainstorm an initiative' with his two young protégés, on how to transform the land that he had bought in Namibia with Pete Morkel.<sup>52</sup> According to Pawel, Craig (and Morkel) bought the land specifically because the properties made a 'prime habitat' for black rhino reintroduction, a view they based on the fact that the mountainous areas on the farm was 'covered in milkbush (*Euphorbia gregaria*), which is rhino cereal'.<sup>53</sup> As mentioned above, although black rhino do indeed consume melkbos, they eat it in limited quantities, and it is far from the mainstay of their diet.<sup>54</sup> Pete Morkel's former boss, Eugène Joubert, identified melkbos as only one of the possible bushes on which black rhino browse; they generally prefer *Acacia reficiens* or *Acacia mellifera*.<sup>55</sup> Pawel and Barthorp saw melkbos in the hills, and Morkel saw 'ancient rhino rubbing rocks', and all assumed therefore that large herds of black rhino had once thrived in this area. Although it is likely that rhino historically visited these lands, perhaps

50 See Ed Barthorp, *LinkedIn* page: [www.linkedin.com/in/ed-barthorp-0190965a](https://www.linkedin.com/in/ed-barthorp-0190965a) (Accessed 30 June 2023).

51 See Andreia Pawel, *LinkedIn* page: [www.linkedin.com/in/andrea-pawel-43927a2a](https://www.linkedin.com/in/andrea-pawel-43927a2a) (Accessed 30 June 2023).

52 'Andreia Pawel: Oana Namibia', *Conservation Careers* (9 December 2019). <https://www.conservation-careers.com/conservation-jobs-careers-advice/podcast/oana-namibia-podcast/> (Accessed 1 May 2024).

53 Ibid.

54 Birgit Kötting, interview with Bernard C. Moore (telephone, 20 January 2023).

55 E. Joubert, *On the Clover Trail: The Plight of the World's Rhinos* (Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 1996), p. 115.

during exceptionally wet seasons, the lack of much other native bush and the omnipresence of extremely steep mountainous inclines means that the land probably never supported a large quantity of rhinoceros.

Whereas Craig and Morkel initially purchased the properties for black rhino reintroductions, this was in many ways the moral justification for a broader 'rewilding' of the region at large. According to Andreia Pawel:

that [black rhinoceros] was the primary aim ... [but] it's actually grown far beyond a black rhino reintroduction project. There's so much scope here for other wildlife reintroductions. We want to totally re-wild the area. We're surrounded by commercial farmers, and at the moment there's the worst drought in 150 years in Namibia ... There's no choice. The government doesn't have the funds to buy up the land, and the livestock farmers are going to have to sell their land eventually ... So, what we're doing here is we're just creating a little model for conservation, and then the world will start knowing about it, the NGOs will come in, they'll support and buy land – or lease land – off the commercial farmers, and then we'll just create an amazing mosaic for wildlife.<sup>56</sup>

Pawel and Barthorp became the advance guard for Ian Craig's larger operations, which are explored in the next chapter. According to their understanding of rewilding, before one can 're-wild' KumKum and Pelladrift – and likely Morkel's properties – one must first 'de-human' them. This means removing human infrastructure like fences, hunting blinds, unnatural vegetation, etc.

The cheapest and most glamorous way to do this – perhaps Pawel and Barthorp reasoned – was to structure a 'gap-year' destination for volunteers from Europe and North America, to give back to nature in the same way that both of them had done in East Africa previously. In 2016, Barthorp and Pawel became minority foreign shareholders in Pelladrift (Edms) Bpk, and founded their own UK-based company, Namaqua Ltd, as a 50/50 joint operation. Presumably it was to be a means to solicit donations for conservation operations and take bookings for European clients to come to southern Namibia.<sup>57</sup> Ian Craig and his lawyer Peter Koep (who had formerly represented Xemplar mining, and Steen Severin in earlier years) eventually founded KumKum Adventure Tourism (Pty) Ltd, which conducted business as Oana Namibia. Its goal was to

56 'Andreia Pawel: Oana Namibia', *Conservation Careers* (9 December 2019).

57 They each became 4.5 per cent shareholders in Pelladrift. See BIPA File 1973/5752: Annual Return (CM-23) – 12 March 2018. UKCHA #09985394: 'Certificate of Incorporation of a Private Limited Company: Namaqua Limited' (2 February 2016).

‘engage and promote adventure tourism, conservation and all trading activities related thereto’.<sup>58</sup> The Pelladrift company held the lands, while Oana represented the business of KumKum.

From its earliest days, Pawel and Barthorp advertised Oana as a way for youths from the Global North to have fun while contributing to the heroic conservationist visions of its founders:

The renowned conservationist Ian Craig and the leading mega-fauna veterinary Pete Morkel recently secured 45,000 hectares of land for the sole purpose of conserving Namibia’s wildlife. Their vision is to re-wild the land, link up with neighbouring conservancies and one day turn the greater protected area into a National Park and a home for Namibia’s endangered wildlife. ... [We] lead 2–5 week adventure conservation expeditions in Southern Namibia for naturalists worldwide. We offer a range of expeditions tailored at gap-year students, university students, mature nature enthusiasts, and school field trips. Our school field trips are bespoke and focus on biology and conservation or building leadership skills. This is the perfect opportunity to get off the grid and explore true wilderness with a great bunch of people. We merge cutting edge conservation techniques with local knowledge to carry out effective research and solutions to re-wild some of Namibia’s most magnificent habitat and protect its endangered species. Go on ... Join us!<sup>59</sup>

Pawel and Barthorp claimed that Oana (KumKum) had been ‘taken over from farmers and biltong hunters’, and that it was necessary to rip up all the fencing to allow wildlife to migrate naturally. ‘It’s manual labour’, they wrote. ‘But it’s a fun project where you see the start to finish and come home feeling accomplished. You will truly be restoring habitat and ultimately feeding wildlife.’<sup>60</sup> In 2018, they successfully brought in school groups from England and Scotland, and Oana eventually developed the motto: ‘No More Livestock, No More Hunting. Purely Wild’.<sup>61</sup> Individuals would pay between USD 5,000 and USD 6,000

58 BIPA File 2018/2819: Annual Return (CM-23) – 29 July 2019.

59 IAWB: ‘Oana Flora and Fauna’ (23 June 2017). <https://web.archive.org/web/20170623041156/http://oana-ff.org/>

60 IAWB: ‘Oana Flora and Fauna: Management’ (11 February 2018). <https://web.archive.org/web/20180211220335/http://oana-ff.org/management>. Andreia Pawel estimates that they removed 52 kilometres of fencing from the properties. A. Pawel, Interview with Ben Goldsmith, Rewilding the World Podcast (23 January 2024).

61 IAWB: ‘Oana Flora and Fauna’ (24 November 2018). <https://web.archive.org/web/20181124154446/http://oana-ff.org/>



(plus airfare) to visit Oana for six weeks, to volunteer for a for-profit company, manually ripping up expensive farm infrastructure to 'rewild' the landscape.<sup>62</sup> If one did not wish to do a long expedition, the team set up the possibility for two week high school programmes 'suitable to IB/A-Level biology or geography coursework'. Or else one could drop in for a five day 'Wellness Retreat', described by Pawel and Barthorp as 'the ultimate detox',<sup>63</sup> hosted by Nicci Cloete, a White South African life coach and corporate yoga retreat specialist.<sup>64</sup>

Oana also solicited scholars and scientists to do research at KumKum, requesting that they pick from among topics prepared by the Oana staff. This involved MSc projects on horned adders or hyenas on KumKum, *Prosopis* management in the Orange River, or a PhD project on the 'biophysical baseline survey of the Oana Nature Reserve'.<sup>65</sup> Craig and his team provided no scholarships or research funding to the applicants, and required that accommodation, food, fuel and transport fees be paid to the company by the researcher. In addition, the data from the project was to be given to them. It appears that only one such project was completed – concerning leopards on KumKum – by a researcher from the Czech University of Life Sciences.<sup>66</sup>

Barthorp and Pawel were trying to straddle a blurry line between a research institute, a wildlife preservation zone and a tourism company. To an extent, they did all three – and to an extent, they did none of the above. When asked how the Oana team determined the baseline for 'rewilding', Pawel could only answer the question in the most general way: 'It's not to "re-wild" to a certain point, but rather to create resilient ecosystems'.<sup>67</sup> Her boss, Ian Craig, answered similarly: 'In the context of an overgrazed, abused and fenced Namibia, more space and more rain will bring it closer to what Namibia should be'.<sup>68</sup> Likewise, Pete Morkel could see only the 'non-human' elements of H.J. Wikar's 1779 account of his travels along the Orange River. The impression garnered from Oana's use of the term 'rewilding' is that it does not necessarily refer to precise ecological or historical baselines for how the land was used in the past. In this sense, rewilding is as much an ideological project as it is a scientific

62 'How We're Rewilding Oana', *Oana Namibia* (13 September 2019). See also, 'Wildlife Conservation Internship: Namibia', *Conservation Careers* <https://www.conservation-careers.com/job/6-8-week-internship-2/> (Accessed 1 May 2024).

63 Oana Namibia, Facebook post (26 November 2019).

64 Nicci Cloete, <https://metta365.com/> (Accessed 30 June 2023).

65 Oana Namibia, 'Research Projects, 2020: Call for Applications'.

66 K. Mikšlová, 'Among the Leopards of Southern Namibia' (12 February 2019). <https://www.ftz.czu.cz/en/r-10623-news-home/mezi-levharty-v-jizni-namibii-1.html>

67 Andreia Pawel, interview with Bernard C. Moore (telephone, 10 October 2022).

68 Ian Craig, interview with Bernard C. Moore (telephone, 18 October 2022).

one. 'Rewilding' appears rather as a moral judgement rooted in the present day about how land *should* be used. It can be an emotional, even a faith-based, statement. Pawel contended that the farmers *will* sell their farms; agriculture *will* fail; tourism and conservation are the *only* economically and ecologically viable option.<sup>69</sup>

One wonders, however, whether – in the case of Oana – taking 45,000 hectares of agricultural land out of production in order to jet British, European and North American 'volunteers' to the far south of Namibia to rip up fencing and do yoga on the sand is a sufficient replacement. One does not need to advocate for Willem Mans's level of industrial hunting or for Henry Pretorius's large-scale karakul pelt production to view Oana's option as a far from ecologically or economically sound alternative. Willem Basson III's small-scale agricultural pursuits along the Orange River have pitted him against those who seek to 'rewild' these lands on the basis that for the Oana and Sandfontein people there should be no livestock. Ironically, perhaps, Basson would also like to return to the times of Wikar, not for the wildlife but because it was before his peoples' ancestral lands were seized by colonial settlers and postcolonial companies. 'Rewilding' for Basson would be returning to when his people could greet and negotiate with Wikar on their own terms. These tensions in the meanings of 'rewilding' are explored further in chapter 12.

For those who control Oana and Sandfontein today, 'rewilding' is perfectly compatible with the legacies, or even maintenance, of colonial capitalist structures. This has been the case in East Africa as in Namibia. Andreia Pawel and Edward Barthorp were ultimately shaped by the heroic narratives of their conservation mentor Ian Craig, with whom they first began their careers and to whose vision they were allied. To understand the broader plans for KumKum, Pelladrift, Sandfontein and the other nearby farms owned by Sean Gilbertson and Ian Craig, we must turn to the latter's operations in Kenya, particularly his property Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, and his organisation, the NRT. This was where private nature conservation in Africa started in earnest, and our story must move there in order to conceptualise what is planned for this mountainous area along the Orange River.

---

69 Andreia Pawel, interview with Bernard C. Moore (telephone, 10 October 2022). See also Pawel's interview with *Conservation Careers*.