



desert revival

NamibRand Nature Reserve is one of the largest private conservation areas in Africa – six times larger than Kenya’s Amboseli and similar in size to the Masai Mara National Reserve. This vast expanse of sand and rock is bordered by the Nubib Mountains on its eastern flank and the Namib Desert to the west. **Tim Jackson** explores the origins of this conservation haven. ▶

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM JACKSON



ABOVE Gemsbok are a common sight at NamibRand. Following good rainfall, they feast on the lush grazing; during dry periods, the red dunes are denuded of their grass cover.

PREVIOUS PAGE NamibRand Nature Reserve is a unique landscape of sand, mountains and gravel plains sandwiched between the Nubib Mountains and Namib Desert.

NamibRand is a relatively new reserve. It owes its existence to the pioneering spirit of the Namibian businessman Albi Brückner who, in the 1950s, bought into an engineering company in Windhoek. Those early days often saw him travelling south out of Namibia's capital, and on Thursdays – the day everyone came to town to collect their post – he could usually be found at the Maltahöhe Hotel, trying to sell products such as pumps and generators to the locals, and listening to their economic problems. There was lots to discuss. For the landowners trying to eke out an existence on the edge of the Namib Desert, mostly as sheep farmers, finances were certainly an issue. And while the following decades, especially the 1970s, were good years, the drought-stricken 1980s saw a collapse of the

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karakul industry. Many farmers ran into severe financial difficulties and were forced to put their farms up for sale.

At a local auction, Brückner made the winning bid for the farm Gorassis, an acquisition he managed to conceal from his family for two weeks. When the news finally emerged at the lunch table, the reaction was bad. His daughter Christine summed up the feelings of many of the household by exclaiming, 'That place is just a *sandgat* [sand hole]!' Sandgat Farming Ventures was formed in 1984, and Brückner embarked upon a roller-coaster ride as he tried to establish the true worth of his new investment. 'I bought that farm for the price of a second-hand car,' he would boast.

Running costs proved another issue altogether. His first venture was livestock farming, with indigenous stock such as



Damara sheep and Nguni cattle. The main problem was land – there simply wasn't enough of it to maintain his animals in such an arid landscape. Neighbouring farms, similarly beleaguered, were going into liquidation, and Brückner purchased them to increase his rangeland. But even with good management and the added economy of scale, things just weren't working out. In 1991, he called a meeting at the farm Wolwedans – one of his acquisitions – to decide which way to turn. Amongst those who attended were Chris Brown from the then Department of Nature Conservation (Brown is now Executive Director of the Namibia Nature Foundation – NNF) and David Peddie (the current Programme Coordinator of the Sindisa Foundation, a UK initiative that supports wildlife and ecosystem conservation and environmental education in southern Africa). Their advice? To use the area for tourism and nature conservation.

Conservation was already a priority for Brückner – he'd been involved with the Gobabeb Training and Research Centre and the setting up of the Desert Research Foundation and was the first chairman of the NNF. He needed little persuasion to forgo his farming ways, and in 1993 the NamibRand Nature Reserve was born as a wildlife sanctuary bordering the Namib-Naukluft National Park. Its first wardens were Mark and Charlie Paxton, recruited from the Department of Nature Conservation. They set to work taking down internal fences, rehabilitating



DAVID ROGERS

Dancing with wolves

Wolwedans is the oldest and arguably the most exclusive tourist camp



on NamibRand. Its name, which was inherited from the farm that once occupied the site, pays tribute to the spotted hyaena, often called *wolf* in Afrikaans, that frequents the area. The concession was granted in 1994 to Brückner's son Stephan, who was studying in Germany at the time. The younger Brückner agreed to help his father for just one year, but fell in love with the area and today manages NamibRand Safaris.

The Dune Camp opened in the heart of the reserve in 1997, followed by The Dunes Lodge, the exclusive Private Camp and, most recently, Boulders Camp (above). Wolwedans has blossomed, although the concession 'was not designed only for profit', according to Stephan. 'Its main objective is to make an important contribution to the local economy, to provide opportunities for those who would otherwise have had none, and to help conserve one of the most beautiful landscapes in the world.'

For further information about Wolwedans, go to www.wolwedans.com

Since the reserve's inception, illegal hunting has come to a halt in the area. Animals such as the springbok have benefited enormously, their numbers swelling from less than a 1 000 in the 1980s to more than 11 000 today.



old roads and levelling derelict kraals to prepare the area for conservation. The existing wildlife was shuffled around too. Out went the exotic blesbok population, in came giraffes and, more recently, cheetahs. Red hartebeest and Burchell's zebra numbers were bolstered as well, swelling the reserve's already healthy populations of Hartmann's mountain zebra, gemsbok (oryx), springbok, kudu and leopard.

Between 1988 and 2000 Brückner continued to buy up farms in the area, some of which he sold on to other like-minded individuals, providing a fresh injection of capital into the project.

Today NamibRand consists of 13 farms that have been rehabilitated to create a single contiguous conservation area. In 2001, all the landowners signed an agreement that set aside their properties for conservation. Although they still held the title deeds, they relinquished their individual management rights and instead serve as directors on the reserve's managing board, with Brückner acting as custodian and chairman.

Wildlife trophy hunting was the main generator of income until 1995, when Eric Hesemans approached the board with a request to establish a hot-air balloon charter at NamibRand. Two years later, Wolwedans was granted the first tourism licence. The hunting soon fell to pressure from tourism operators, five of whom currently run concessions on the reserve. Now, the management aims to protect and conserve the unique ecology and wildlife of the south-western Namib Desert, and NamibRand has become a self-sustaining, not-for-profit organisation that derives its income from park fees paid by visitors.

While the bulk of the finances is channelled into maintenance, some has been used to establish the NamibRand Conservation Foundation to help fund special projects. Among these is an initiative to investigate the area's history and archaeology. Historically, the NamibRand land played an important role in the seasonal migration of wildlife to and from the desert – a process its owners are pushing to restore.

Archaeologically, it's the Gorassis Basin in the south that is of interest. This region was once an important corridor between the coast and the Nubib Mountains, with both water and good hunting. Two groups of people used it: the first some 5 000 to 6 000 years ago,



Return ticket

Cheetahs were common in the NamibRand area until some 30 years ago, when their numbers were reduced by retaliatory livestock farmers. Now these feline predators have been reintroduced to the region, thanks to the efforts of the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF) and N/a'an ku sê Lodge and Wildlife Sanctuary.

CCF released five male cheetahs into the reserve in 2008; they were followed in early 2009 by two females. The males, which are living in a coalition, are seen regularly. The females, after being held for some time in a large enclosure as an enticement to the males to remain close to their release site, have also been set free. (Unfortunately, one of the females succumbed to a spotted hyaena shortly after release; the other is doing well.) January 2009 also saw the release of a wild female and her three sub-adult cubs. The cubs have now left their mother's care and are fending for themselves, and she has been sighted with the CCF males. They have been fitted with tracking devices and monitoring is ongoing.

Springbok, along with young gemsbok, top the menu for cheetahs. During the past two decades, springbok numbers at NamibRand have swelled from less than 1 000 to 11 000-plus. The big cats' prey base is thus well catered for.

N/a'an ku sê has also welcomed several cheetahs. A male set free there in March this year is doing well and has moved to the Namib-Naukluft Park. A female released at the same time was less fortunate, although the cause of her death is a mystery. In 2008 N/a'an ku sê rangers successfully released a further two females and a male. While they moved south of the reserve, they remain on two neighbouring farms – fortunately for them, these form part of the Pro-Namib Conservancy. You can catch up with the cheetahs' adventures on the CCF blog at www.cheetah.org, and read more about the CCF and its work in Namibia in the August 2009 issue of *Africa Geographic*.

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the second about 600 years ago. Signs of the earlier visitors include the 'Hard Rock Café', a granitic outcrop on the Wolwedans concession that was used as a rock shelter. Archaeologists John and Jill Kinahan have unearthed stone tools, beads for trading and even a human skeleton at the site. Nearby, on the ►

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Fencing matters

The issue of fencing has come full circle at NamibRand. Originally, fences divided the area into separate farms. In the late 1980s and '90s, wildlife poachers erected barriers to drive animals into 'killing zones'. The government of Namibia reacted by installing a fence along the eastern border of the Namib-Naukluft National Park to keep the animals in. While it served its purpose at the time, it did cut off the east-west movement of animals, particularly gemsbok, which migrate eastwards in drier years to seek better grazing on the escarpment. Unable to get through, many animals died against the restraints.

The establishment of NamibRand has led to considerable pressure to remove fencing so that wildlife can reach the greenest spots, and more than 2 000 kilometres of boundary and internal fences have been taken down. Today Action for a Fence Free Namib Desert campaigns to remove these barriers wherever possible to recreate the ancient animal pathways, and Nils Odendaal, current CEO of NamibRand, is trying to persuade local landowners to participate in the Greater Sossusvlei-Namib Management Complex, an initiative that focuses on joint resource management to the benefit of both wildlife and the environment.

slopes of the valley, they have also documented a series of unusual stone hunting blinds which hunters once used to channel animals and hide behind before ambushing their prey as it passed through the corridor. Plans are afoot to protect the basin.

Another benefactor of NamibRand's conservation initiatives is the resident vulture population, most of which comprises lappet-faced vultures. NamibRand, with its newly developed vulture restaurant, has become a haven for these raptors, and they are breeding in ever-increasing numbers. The reserve's current wardens, Mike and Ann Scott, are keen to see the vulture programme go from strength to strength, and work closely with raptor expert Peter Bridgeford and the conservation organisation Vultures Namibia.

The foundation also supports the NamibRand Desert Research and Awareness Centre as well as the Namib Desert Environmental Education Trust (NaDEET). The latter, a small NGO located on the reserve, aims to empower and educate Namibian schoolchildren for a sustainable future (www.nadeet.org). The research Centre also supports local and international researchers, particularly those focusing on wildlife management issues. The Environment and Research Warden Danica Shaw reports that visiting zoologists, anthropologists and botanists have conducted studies on topics as diverse as the mystifying fairy circles (some are up to six metres in diameter) that dot the reserve, termites, Grant's golden moles, ground squirrels, wedge-snouted lizards, elephant shrews and other desert-dwellers. ■

Fast facts

- NamibRand Nature Reserve is situated in the Pro-Namib, an area of ecological transition between the Namib Desert and Nubib Mountains.
- The reserve covers 172 200 hectares and shares a 90-kilometre border with the Namib-Naukluft National Park.
- Established in 1993, the reserve comprises 13 former livestock farms that have been rehabilitated into a single conservation unit.
- NamibRand receives an annual rainfall of only 70 millimetres, with high variation between years.
- In 2009 strategic areas in the fences that separate NamibRand from Wilderness Safaris' 50 000-hectare Kulala Nature Reserve to the north were opened to allow the natural movement of animals such as gemsbok and springbok across a larger conservation landscape.
- To its south, NamibRand borders two conservation-orientated farms, adding an additional 70 000 hectares for wildlife. This area is cooperatively run as the Pro-Namib Conservancy.
- NamibRand encompasses a broad spectrum of habitats: sand and gravel plains, stretches of woodland savanna, mountain ranges and vegetated dune belts.
- More than 15 per cent of NamibRand is set aside for wilderness.
- The reserve favours low-impact tourism through a series of concessions with no more than one bed per 1 000 hectares.

For more information about the reserve and where to stay, visit www.namibrand.org



OPPOSITE Visitors to NamibRand can see two species of zebra: both the plains zebra (pictured) and the Hartmann's mountain zebra.

BELOW NamibRand is known for its sheer diversity of landscapes, from orange dunes and gravel plains to woodland savanna and ancient mountain ranges.

