



THE BARKING GECKO

Newsletter of the NamibRand Nature Reserve



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Settling in to the swing of things

It has been four months since our arrival at NamibRand Nature Reserve. Four months since we unpacked, since we made a home, since we found ourselves in awe of our new work, of the space we are in.

Finding our feet felt like a slightly longer process than we had hoped. We started off with some technical challenges, changing laptops and getting acquainted with the office, the processes and proceedings and of course the people.

The last four months have been a delight, we have settled, found our feet and are getting into the swing of things. We have been so grateful to everyone who has graciously and warmly accepted us, helped us, guided us and above all been at the end of a phone to be peppered with questions.

We have been anxiously awaiting our first real bout of winter, we have been ready, primed with gas heaters, spare gas bottles, stewing lamb and of course extra blankets. It has finally arrived! I am excited. It is icy, luckily though there is no wind this morning, making it bearable and enjoyable. It has come this week. - 4°C in Windhoek and very chilly on the Reserve. There has been no winter to speak of till this point and I have missed it. The changing of the seasons, the switch over from the hot and frazzled to the cold and collected. (In the Namib there are three things that are discussed all the time: The weather, the fences and vehicles, I endeavor to cover each point briefly)

Having covered the weather, I move onto fences! You will see, as you browse through this Barking Gecko, that there has been a lot of fence removal happening—see News from the South. The fence removal is due to Dina, officially being a part of NamibRand Nature Reserve. This is obviously, wonderful news, and increases the size of NamibRand a little.

In terms of vehicles, I can add that we had two wonderful cyclists visit us on the Reserve. They stayed with us at Keerweder and with Peter at Aandstêr. This couple have been travelling all over Africa by bike for three years. It was interesting chatting to them about the journey and their adventure, their philosophy of the journey being the adventure, rather than a destination and time limit being the goal. You can find them at “No Fixed Destination” on Facebook.

With that, remember to enjoy the conservation journey we are all on, each small step forward is move toward a change for the future.

Best wishes!

Lee Tindall



Keerweder at Sunset

“Nature is not a place to go. It is home!”

Gary Snyder

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News from the CEO

July 2016

On the 27th of May the NamibRand Nature Reserve Association held its 18th Annual General Meeting in the new classroom for the Wolwedans Desert Academy at the Wolwedans Village on the NamibRand Nature Reserve. At this occasion the members of the Association voted unanimously to include the farm Dina (Farm 155, Maltahöhe District) into the NamibRand Nature Reserve. This inclusion adds 12,548.75 ha to the land under conservation management and increases the size of NamibRand to 214,836.91ha. A big THANK YOU to Mr John Bernstein of the Pro-Namib Conservation Trust for making the purchase of this property a reality! Thank you also to the partners Dave Hidden, Johan Graaff, Graham and Lydia Ellis and Willem Oets who remain co-owners of Dina and have been the stalwart custodians of this conservation estate for the past two decades. Our staff have already started taking down the former border fences, which are now internal fences so as to provide more space for wildlife, contribution toward our vision of a Fence Free Namib!



On the 28th of June our 12th Annual Game Count took place. This year our new wardens Murray and Lee Tindal took charge in organising this event and the count was once again a resounding success! Thank you to all those who participated, without you we could not do this important job of monitoring our plains game. Early results indicate that the overall wildlife population is still on the decline due to the prolonged drought. The oryx population is estimated at 6,650 animals, while springbok numbers are estimated at 2,944 individuals. A detailed report on this will be available in the next month.

The Greater Sossusvlei-Namib Landscape Association (GSNL) also held its AGM on the 1st of July 2016. This was the last meeting under the sponsorship of the NAMPLACE project, which officially ended on the 30th of June 2016. We are fortunate that the Nature Conservancy (www.nature.org) has agreed to fund the running costs of the GSNL for the next five years until the Association can hopefully be self-sustainable. Turn out at the AGM was tremendous and the enthusiasm by our partners for this landscape co-management approach is unmistakable.

Our new wardens Lee and Murray Tindall have settled in well and have done a great job in familiarising themselves with the Reserve and the day-to-day workings. We are very happy to have them with us and their professionalism and enthusiasm for our conservation project is infectious!

Nils Odendaal



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A Word from the Warden

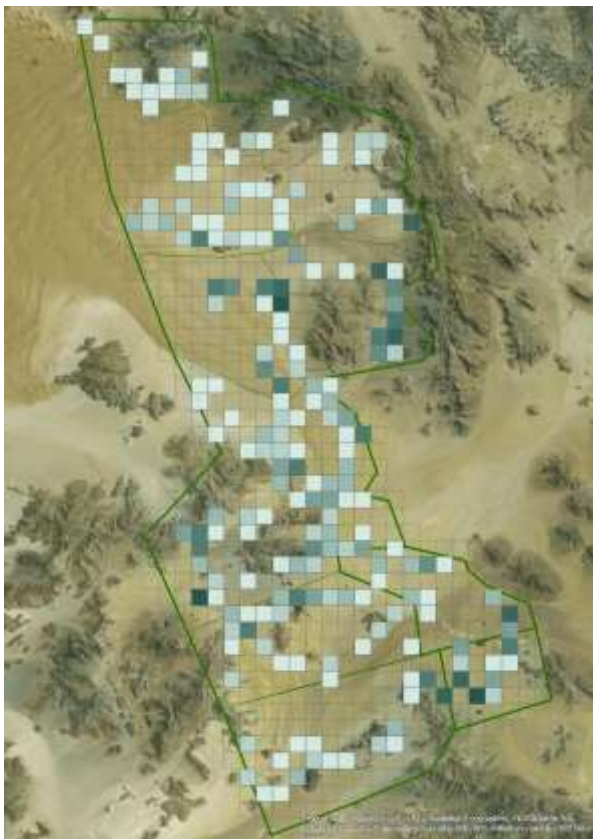
Our arrival here was marked by some big up and coming events: one of the big ones which we were particularly excited about was the Namib Rand Nature Reserve AGM and Game Count! This was the 12th game count which the Reserve undertook. A big thank you to Wolwedans, who hosted the AGM and the game count briefing in their impressive new classroom.

The game count report is coming together and is near completion. Some glitches occurred in this, that required more time than anticipated.

The game count this year was marked by wonderful weather, great participation and incredibly dry scenery due to the lack of rain these last few years. The drought has affected the animals numbers and their movements. This is to be expected and unsurprising.

A great piece of news that has come from the game count is that there were a few sightings of Bat Eared foxes. They seem to be making a come back, after having been a little scarce for a few years. These are not counted, but are noted for interest and information's sake.

A sneak peak (below) at the combined distribution map gives an idea of where the animals were seen and their current, preferred locations. The darker the block, the more animals were seen in that area.



Murray Tindall

Over the last four months we have had several fantastic bird events at Keerweder.

Shortly after arriving at Keerweder, we noticed two resident owls in the big tree at the back of the homestead. One evening, an owl was in the front garden and roosting in the wild olive tree. We assumed it was one the two from the back. On closer inspection though, we found that a third owl had ventured into our garden and was feeling comfortable enough to make this home! While doing some gardening over a weekend, I heard a strange, out of place call, upon investigation I found a white fronted bee-eater on the fence post singing to his hearts content! This is rare, as he was well out of his distribution area and should have been in the Zambezi Region of Namibia or in the eastern parts of Southern Africa



A White fronted Bee eater

Photo: Murray Tindall

A week ago, after hearing a familiar and (yet again) out of place call, I wondered around and found the source. Another bird, out of his comfort zone! An african grey hornbill! What a beautiful sight. They, traditionally, occur more towards Windhoek and the north of Namibia.



African Grey Hornbill

Photo: Murray Tindall

It has been wonderful to see some of our more common birds in the garden. The dusky sunbird comes daily to enjoy the flowering aloes and the rock martins are busy remodeling their nest in the roof beams. This bird activity is a sure sign that spring is coming nearer and nearer.

Murray Tindall

Summary of the Game Count

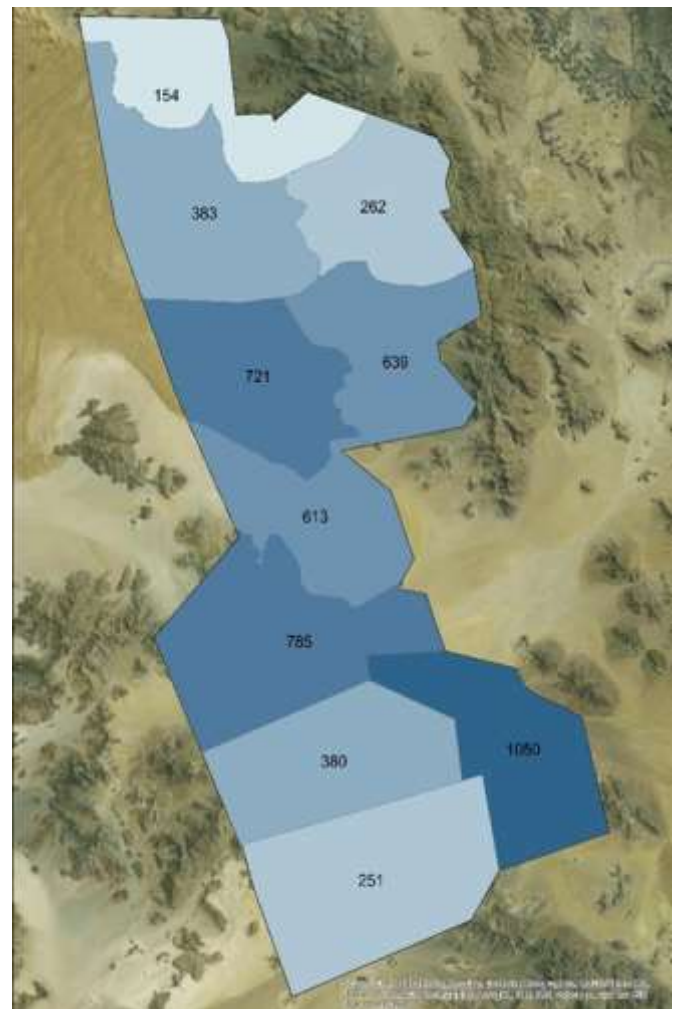
A visual walk through the results

As one would expect after the fourth consecutive year of drought, animal numbers on NamibRand Nature Reserve have decreased from the previous year's count. However, the overall decrease was less than 10 percent of the total population. Part of the reason for this is that as the Burchell's zebra continue to expand their range across the Reserve, their numbers continue to grow! In addition this year's count showed a dramatic increase in the number of Rüppell's korhaan although it is likely that this is a result of their increased visibility without any grass rather than an actual increase in the population. The total number of animals counted and estimates of the population size are shown in the table below as well as a comparison to the previous year's count.

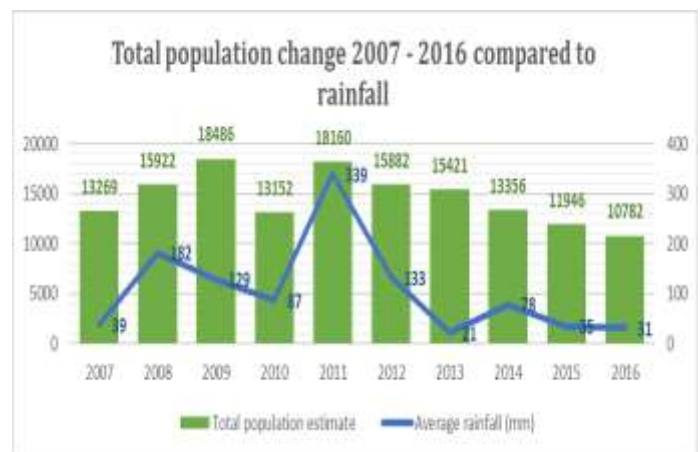
Total estimated numbers of game (Zone 1 -10; May 2015 - May 2016)					
Species	May-15		May-16		Percentage change
	No. Counted	Total estimated number	No. Counted	Total estimated number	
Gemsbok	2099	7447	1778	6650	-10,70%
Springbok	633	3420	690	2944	-13,92%
Kudu	2	7	0	0	-
Steenbok	0	0	0	0	0,00%
Ostrich	80	218	55	144	-33,94%
Ludwigs Bustard	13	119	11	92	-22,68%
Ruppel's Korhaan	11	145	29	363	150,34%
B. zebra	219	377	280	440	16,71%
Hartebeest	66	180	72	149	-17,22%
Total	3123	11913	2915	10782	-9,49%
Giraffe*	9	9	9	9	0,00%

* Total numbers known

The distribution of animals across the Reserve showed a concentration in the central zones with lower densities in both the far north and the far south of the Reserve with the notable exception of zone 9 which comprises the farms Dina and Excelsior in the south-eastern corner showing unusually high densities. The figures in the distribution map below represent the comparative densities for each zone and are measured in animals per 100km.



The last ten years of data show that animal numbers are very closely linked to the amount of rainfall that the Reserve receives with population peaks in wet years followed by a gradual decline in drought years. This relationship is very nicely demonstrated in the graph below.



Murray Tindall



News@NaDEET

During the past several months, NaDEET staff have added value to the educational activities that we implement with children and adult groups regarding the NamibRand Nature Reserve.

As the educational core of the NamibRand International Dark Sky Reserve, we continue to look for ways to improve our astronomy programme. We were very fortunate to have an amateur astronomer, Alexia, from a Canadian Dark Sky Reserve join us to share her knowledge and enthusiasm for several weeks earlier this year. It was a great opportunity for NaDEET's education team to learn more information about the night sky, but to also share our own African perspective and stories. In addition, several great projects were designed and implemented.

Large Night Sky Objects

To illustrate to participants what night sky objects such as planets, stars, nebulae and galaxies look like, NaDEET staff cut out and painted over 30 objects. In addition an enormous cloth was sewn and painted to look like our Milky Way Galaxy. The participants sit on the galaxy while they see and learn the other objects. This is now a great introduction to the night sky which is followed by an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to observe and discuss the real night sky from the top of a dune by NaDEET Centre. There is no doubt that participants continued to be awed by this experience and they rate it as one of their favourites.



St. Paul's College learners holding the Sun, Earth and Moon together with our International Dark Sky Reserve sign

Photo: NaDEET



Photos: NaDEET

Above: Learners in the Milky Way

New short video on NamibRand Nature Reserve

It is important to us to teach our participants about the NamibRand Nature Reserve. For years we have used a power point presentation to show maps and background information while on a dune walk we can explain more about the landscapes, geology and management of the Reserve. Now we have a short film that has replaced the power point presentation that makes the background and management of NamibRand Nature Reserve come alive. It also shows our participants part of the Reserve that they normally are not able to see. The film's main character is a school boy named Greg who hears about NamibRand Nature Reserve on TV and decides that he needs to go see it for his self. He pretends to become a superhero that he has the powers to travel "faster than a human". It is full of lots of laughs, but good information about NamibRand including these ten fun facts:

- 1) NamibRand Nature Reserve is the size of small country like Mauritius
- 2) Over 1,600 km of fences have been removed to allow animals to migrate freely.
- 3) There are 29 waterholes for animals to drink water.
- 4) Depending on the rainfall, up to 12,000 gemsbok live on NamibRand Nature Reserve.
- 5) Only 5 companies are open for exclusive, low-impact ecotourism.
- 6) NamibRand Nature Reserve is the first International Dark Sky Reserve in Africa
- 7) Mysterious fairy circles are found on the grassy plains... and no one knows why!
- 8) Hundreds of different animals live in the dune sand.
- 9) The Losberg mountain is the highest peak at 1976m!
- 10) NaDEET is the educational core of NamibRand Nature Reserve.



To watch the film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynzcSq3ZLrE&feature=youtu.be>

Viktoria Keding

News from the South

Greetings to all from what is at the moment a very cold south. Snow on the Berg is delivering the first really cold spell of the winter. Until now it has been remarkably mild although we did experience some unusually windy days for the time of year.

One of the windiest of course had to be the day of the GNSL game count! Real August weather with an east wind one could hardly stand up in. It occurred to me we should double the count just to make up for poor visibility! I was fortunate enough to experience a new part of the Namib when I assisted with the count for the Namib Naukluft Lodge. The variety in the Namib never ceases to amaze me – so different.

The past while has been busy, mostly with issues relating to damage control. The solar stand at Kalkpomp was buckled by strong winds and at the same time the corrugated iron dam in which the tanks are situated was ripped to shreds. A new solar stand was built and a new perimeter fence put in around the installation. The panels at Straussenwasser finally gave up the ghost and were replaced with fewer 200 w panels, also requiring that a new solar panel stand. Otherwise damage to pipes due to high game concentrations in certain areas has been common, with a little help from our Hyena friends which have also inflicted their fair share of damage.

On top of the list of highlights is that work has begun to remove the border fence between Stellerine and Aandster, and the latest addition to the Reserve, Dina. The first five kilometers in front of the Family Hideout have been removed and what a difference it has made. The view south from the Hideout is a thousand percent improved. Three of the gates going into Dina from the C27 have also been removed and fenced closed.

Although we did get a small amount of scattered rain at the beginning of June drought conditions prevail. The animals are having to survive on old veldt, which one must admit they do remarkably well. Hopefully a lot of these areas will be grazed enough to make up for the lack of fire in recent years, making way for new growth when the torrential rains hit next season! Interestingly there are a number of pregnant oryx and also a number of plains zebra foals. The giraffe remain separated with one group of five sticking together and one loner. Boulders clients were also treated to leopard feeding on a freshly killed steenbok!

Elton has now moved from the A-frame to Jakobus' old house after extensive repairs were under taken to replace roof timbers, replace some of the roof sheets, rebuilding the stoep and an inside paint job. Work to fix up Ruben's house is currently underway.

As the NAMPLACE project draws to a close, so the work continues as the GNSL. The AGM was held at the Sossusvlei Lodge. Crucially funding of the project for the next five years has been secured allowing us to go forward with the vision of a joint cooperation between stakeholders to protect our precious Namib.

So all good! We wish everyone success in their ventures going into the season and let's hope La Nina delivers what we all so badly need.

Cheers from all of us in the South.

Peter Woolfe



The team removing the fence lines! Hard work, but what a difference their efforts are making to our beautiful landscape.

Photos: Peter Woolfe



Above: A small part of the fence that has been removed,

Photo: Peter Woolfe

Wolwedans

Dark Sky Reserve

What is a Dark-Sky Reserve and why do we need it.

In order for me to explain the purpose and need for a Dark-Sky Reserve I think one should have a look at what a Dark-Sky Reserve is. A Dark-Sky Reserve is an area, usually surrounding a park or observatory that is kept free of artificial light pollution. (Wikipedia). This is then just an area where legislation is used to protect the area from light pollution in order to allow the observatory (or park) to have the darkest sky possible without any light interference. The International Dark-Sky Association (IDA) makes a difference between Dark-Sky Reserves and Dark-Sky-Parks and currently are there only 11 Dark-Sky Reserves registered with the IDA versus the 37 Dark-Sky Parks which is registered with the IDA. The Dark-Sky Reserves currently registered with the IDA are (in alphabetical order and according to the IDA website):

Aoraki Mackenzie (New Zealand)
Brecon Beacons National Park (Wales)
Exmoor National Park (England)
Kerry (Ireland)
Mont-Mégantic (Québec)
Moore's Reserve (South Downs, England)
NamibRand Nature Reserve (Namibia)
Pic du Midi (France)
Rhön (Germany)
Snowdonia National Park (Wales)
Westhavelland (Germany)

The IDA would define a Dark-Sky Reserve as follows: "An IDA International Dark Sky Reserve is a public or private land possessing an exceptional or distinguished quality of starry nights and nocturnal environment that is specifically protected for its scientific, natural, educational, cultural, heritage and/or public enjoyment." (IDA website). In order to become IDA Dark-Sky Reserve the applicant must comply with all of the IDA requirements. This includes things such as the fact that the core area must be public or private land

protected for the reasons mentioned above and that the core area must have some form of public access. The peripheral area should encompass a minimum of 70 000 hectares to protect the core area from possible nearby light pollution.

Some of the IDA requirements are as follows:

1. A quality comprehensive Lightscape Management Plan (LMP) should be adopted by sufficient number of communities in the entire Dark-Sky Reserve (DSR) and must be at least 80% of the intended area of the reserve.
2. Fully shielded light fixtures are standard throughout the reserve. Any light fixture above 500 lumens are required to use fully shielded fixtures emitting no light at or above the horizontal.
3. Methods of determining the appropriate type of lamp, (color, efficiency, technology) and fixture that should be used for particular tasks and in particular areas with goal to maximize energy efficiency and minimize the impact to human vision dark adaptation (recovery time), wildlife and the nocturnal ecology. (IDA Website)

This is to only name a few. A detailed lighting report must then be handed in on a yearly basis on which each area lights, with photos as well as all new lighting fixtures are indicated. The IDA then uses this report to determine whether the specific reserve lightning plan still falls in the prescribed criteria.

Once a Reserve has been approved as an IDA Dark-Sky Reserve, they will get a TIER accreditation which could be either Gold, Silver or Bronze. A Gold accreditation would correspond to natural, non-polluted or near natural night skies. Silver would correspond to night-time environments that have minor impacts from light pollution, yet still display good quality night skies and has exemplary night landscapes. Bronze would correspond to areas not meeting the criteria of Silver but yet still offering people, plants and animal a respite from an otherwise degraded nocturnal environment. (IDA Website)

With the constant growth of urban areas and the ever expansion of light pollution is it apparent that there should be areas where their respective owners and managers takes the effort to preserve a beautiful dark sky seriously. Light pollution may not sound as much of a problem as other forms of pollution, but once you realize that people from first-world countries suddenly notice a beautiful night sky, only then it becomes apparent on how much light pollution there is in these areas. I have had guests at Wolwedans saying countless times that they are absolutely amazed with the amount of stars they can see down here and how little they see where they come from.

The NamibRand Nature Reserve is the first, and so far



only, Reserve in Africa that received the IDA Dark-Sky Reserve accreditation. The NamibRand Nature Reserve received a Gold Tier for its efforts to maintain an almost natural dark sky with almost no light pollution at all. It is quite possible to walk away only a few steps from any of the lodges in the Reserve and do stargazing because you have a perfectly dark sky above you. Well, that is actually a contradiction. The sky is not dark at all, it's lit up by millions of stars and some planets and galaxies and the Milky Way. What a sight we have every night.

So: Why do we need a Dark-Sky Reserve? The answer is simple and quite clear. We need Dark-Sky areas simply so that we can see out there, see all of the stars visible to the human eye, to be amazed at the beauty of a starry sky and ponder our place in the universe. Do we really want to get to the point where we only realise what is lost once we can't change it back anymore?

Patrick Schoonbee

Boscia Milky way! A beautiful image taken by Morgan Hauptfleish—very fitting for this edition, as we have a special article from Patrick Schoonbee regarding Dark Sky Reserves!



Photos: Morgan Hauptfleisch

Wolwedans Sustainability

Acting today for a better tomorrow

Wolwedans – a household name in the Namibian tourism circuit

– is more than a collection of camps. It's ethos lies in setting an example in sustainable business practices.

During 2015 the entire Wolwedans Collection was audited by Eco-Awards Namibia and scored a five-flower rating at the very first go. This remarkable achievement affirms the leading role Wolwedans has adopted in running a sustainable tourism operation.

How did this come about?

Since the early days, Wolwedans has been guided by an approach where people, nature and business were all equally important. Right from the start the aim – apart from making money – has been to ensure the NamibRand Nature Reserve's financial viability, assuring the conservation of the Pro-Namib for future generations. This approach was captured in Wolwedans' earliest mission

statement: *"We are committed to sustainable growth by carefully balancing quality leadership, economic progress, social responsibility and care for our environment"* (Dec 1998).

In 2011, as a result of Wolwedans' efforts over the last decade, it was

chosen as a founding member of the Global Ecosphere Retreats

(GER), an international sustainability initiative inspired by a vision of the Ecosphere – our planet and all of its life-sustaining regions – maintained in the healthiest possible state. GER's promote an inclusive, holistic paradigm of conservation and tourism that enhances livelihoods and fosters intercultural dialogue. In short, a new way of going about doing business.

Committed to be "in it for the long run", Wolwedans has adopted the

4C-model, which balances Commerce, Conservation, Community and

Culture. This 4C strategy provides Wolwedans with a pertinent framework allowing it to effectively manage and monitor progress towards sustainability goals. What does this mean in terms of walking the talk?

Commerce

Trading and the accumulation of wealth have been central to the development of civilizations over thousands of years and are likely to remain so. Uncontrolled, this commerce has had negative impacts (as we all know), but conducted in a more holistic and sustainable way, it can be a positive contributor to a sustainable world. The commerce dimension addresses aspects that affect the financial sustainability of the business and its capacity to provide a source of income for those people that depend on it. Profits generated also enable Wolwedans to reinvest back into initiatives in the other 3Cs (Conservation, Community and Culture).

Wolwedans operates a number of tented safari camps and lodges within the NamibRand Nature Reserve, as well as the NICE restaurant and bar in Windhoek. The group employs some 150 Namibians, pays taxes and keeps on investing in infrastructure -hence contributing significantly to the development of Namibia and the wellbeing of its people.

Conservation

Biodiversity is life. Conservation is safeguarding this



biodiversity and the integrity of the ecosystem services it provides which support global needs. Conservation and the sustainable use of natural resources is a core component at Wolwedans. Activities in this dimension address issues related to biodiversity and ecosystem services as well as management of energy, water and waste, land management and carbon impact reduction.

Apart from being able to collect park fees on behalf of NamibRand Nature Reserve through the commercial activities, conservation initiatives include, amongst others, substantial investments into renewable energy (all camps by now run 100% on solar, both power and hot water), professional water management (every liter of water is measured and accounted for), low impact building style (all camps can be removed if need be without leaving any trace of human occupation), complete recycling (no waste whatsoever remains at Wolwedans), organic gardens (50% of all greens consumed by guest and staff alike are grown at Wolwedans, hence significantly reducing the operations' carbon footprint) and environmental education to name but a few.

Community

People matter; it is the right of every person to have their basic needs met and enhancing the well-being of communities is a fundamental obligation of all. Wolwedans addresses fair working conditions, fosters local and regional relations, engages in capacity building and support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs).



When it comes to community support, vocational training in the hospitality sector is Wolwedans' primary way of "giving back. Since inception of NICE (the Namibian Institute of Culinary Education) and the Wolwedans Desert Academy back in 2007, some 200 young Namibians have received NQA--accredited training, got certified and successfully entered the job market. With institutional co--funding secured, the program will be expanded to cater for 80 trainees by

2018, making vocational training one of the Wolwedans groups core focus areas (purpose).

Culture

The world is culturally diverse. Respecting differences is crucial to humanity's future. Wolwedans - -- where ten Namibian languages are spoken --- strives to strengthen intercultural relationships and

understanding, to safeguard Namibia's cultural heritage and peace. A variety of platforms are created (i.e. the annual Wolwedans Winter games) which support, advance and celebrate cultural diversity, and enrich lives by awakening people's creative spirit.

Sustainability entails more than solar panels (reduction of fossil fuel and carbon footprint reduction). Whilst the latter seem to be the core focus of climate change adaptation and mitigation interventions, the Wolwedans 4C model shows a new way of going about business. Business that is more just, fair, inclusive and, in the end contributes sustainably to the development of Namibia, and the wellbeing of its people.

Stephan R. Brückner

Greater Sossusvlei-Namib Landscape (GSL) Update Closure, Game Count & More Helicopters

The NAM-PLACE project officially closed at the end June. We held the GSL AGM on the 1st July, followed the annual game count on the 2nd July. The 2nd July was an extraordinarily windy day, with sandstorms plaguing dedicated counters. Despite the inclement weather, every route was counted and all the major data was returned. For this, a huge thanks has to be given to every person, company and organization that was involved. It would not have been possible without any of that dedication and passion. The data and the report are being processed and will be sent out shortly.

In the midst of this, we finally managed to have dates that coincided for everybody involved in the follow up darting exercise that we have been wanting to do. After weeks of logistics, emails, phone calls and following animals movements particularly closely, Dr Mark Jago arrived at Keerweder. After a short briefing on the Friday afternoon and readying of the kit that was needed we went out to look for a springbok that could be collared—this was to replace the animal that had fallen prey to (what we think) was a cheetah. After a rather lot of driving around, Dr. Jago managed to dart and collar a beautiful male springbok. The perfect candidate for this operation. 4—5 years old, old enough to have stopped growing, young enough to (if all goes well) have a few more years left of being monitored.



The springbok collared and ready to be woken up again! After receiving the antidote and having a short dozy moment—he went off and joined his herd again! Success.

Photos: Lee Tindall

Once we had achieved this, our next objective was to make sure that the collars that had been put on the mountain zebra in December, were not causing them any harm. We were able to ascertain this at Solitaire (where two were collared last year). The collars seem to have been fitted well and were not, causing the animals any discomfort. This information allowed us to proceed to Neuras, where 2 more mountain zebra were collared. The Neuras team and volunteers were amazingly helpful and assisted where and how they could.

After the excitement of helicopters, 4x4 driving and seeing the vet at work, I did a small, impromptu talk with the volunteers as to why this was a relevant exercise to conservation. Dr. Jago assisted me with this, with the technicalities of the collars and conservation updates from the North.

Ilze Phillipson, who joined the crew at Neuras, kindly gave me permission to use some of the photos she took.



Photos: Ilze Phillipson

The R44, which was used in the collaring operation, ably and impressively flown by Bernie Simon.



Photos: Ilze Phillipson

Mountain Zebra up and off, after his collaring ordeal. The bright green stuff on its back is a disinfectant that is sprayed on the dart site to prevent infection.

After our adventures at Neuras, we returned to Keerweder, in the hopes of some rest, a debrief and some more willing springbok. We found some more springbok and managed to collar one more! This operation was a huge success. Once again, there were many, many people involved, a number of schedules that had to be combined and a huge amount of ground support. Dr Jago, Kelly (the Vet tech student), Bernie Simon, Nils (who did a ton of ground support), Carey, Pasquale, Kate and the Solitaire teams, Ivan, Ilze and the Neuras teams and of course my fellow coordinator Murray Tindall. A huge thanks to all for the patience, the assistance and the understanding of what went into the planning and the logistics of it. A report and update on animal movement will follow shortly!

Any reports of sightings of the spotted animals would be wonderful.

Happy spotting

Lee Tindall

Zebra News

Seasonal Movements

The first four months of 2016 saw a high level of movement in the NamibRand mountain zebra population. In our study most animals are individually known and such events are signaled when a large proportion of the animals identified have never been seen before. This has been the case in the camera trap records to date: of the 240 individuals identified so far in 2016, 36% were new. Most of the new animals appeared in January and February when they came to drink at the waterhole at the eastern end of the Moringa valley. By May the influx had ended and the new animals had mainly disappeared, presumably returning to the Nubib mountains in the East.

While mountain zebra are known to move large distances in response to variation in rainfall the movements seen early this year are relatively unusual. The evidence for this comes from detailed records of individual zebra obtained from camera trapping over the past six years. The individual-based approach allows us to separate animals that are new because they have been born recently from those that are more likely to be immigrants because they were first identified as adults. So, for example, of the 305 individuals identified during 2015, only 28 (9%) were new and, of these, 15 (54%) were less than two years old. Many of the new individuals in 2015 were thus probably born in breeding groups that are either resident in or regular visitors to NamibRand. In contrast, of the 87 new animals that have been identified so far in 2016, 86% were over two years old and are thus likely to be immigrants. Camera trap photographs show that the immigrants were members of both breeding and bachelor groups.

The rainfall of the 2015-16 season has been well below average and this may be partly responsible for the observed movements. As in most droughts there is patchy, localized rainfall and, within a few days, localized sprouting vegetation appears whose biomass is directly related to the amount of rain and soil conditions. On lowland plains the amount of green vegetation is greater for the same amount of rain than in rocky areas and so, at the start of the rains, mountain zebras typically move down towards such green flushes when they are available. When the vegetation is exhausted they move back to higher altitudes where vegetation has meanwhile recovered (again depending on local rainfall) and where springs persist into the dry season. A detailed spatial analysis would be needed to explain the influx of mountain zebras earlier this year but movements of this kind were probably responsible. One part of this analysis would be to consider the condition of the animals when

they arrive and when they leave. An example of this is shown in the following figure with a photograph of the adult female NR776f on the 23rd January 2016 when she was first detected and another of her just over three months later, on the 1st of May. The improvement in body condition is dramatic and supports the idea that the movement of which this female was a part is part of a seasonal feeding strategy to take advantage of localized grassland productivity.



Figure. Body condition of the adult female NR776f on the 23rd January 2016 (top photo) when first detected in the north-east of the Reserve and on the 1st of May (photo below). ©Morris Gosling.



In the last report on the mountain zebra project I estimated that the total source population (that is the number that visit in the year, not the number present at any one time) of mountain zebra in the north of NamibRand in 2015 was about 767 animals at a density of about 2.2 per km². The 240 animals identified so far in 2016 are thus only a part of this larger group and further information will be collected over the year to help place the seasonal movements observed over recent months in a wider context.

I am grateful for the support and collaboration of Nils Odendaal, Murray and Lee Tindall and their colleagues at Keerweder. Thanks also to the Directors of NamibRand for permission to carry out this work and to the Rufford Foundation, Parc Zoologique de Montpellier, the Whitley Fund for Nature and the Namibia Nature Foundation for financial and other support.

Morris Gosling

Vulture Vibes

King Vultures

In this corner, dressed in black, weighing in at 7 kilograms is King Vulture, in the other corner, at about 70 kg, Francois Levaillant. The first recorded clash, ladies and gentlemen, between these two assailants, King vultures and man, took place in 1783 on an island in the Orange River, closest to what is now the Namibian bank. The odds against King Vulture were heavy and of the outcome, there was no doubt!

When 18th century French explorer, artist and author Francois Levaillant won his first encounter with a King Vulture, he did not quite adhere to the Queensbury Rules during the fight. He wounded the "superb vulture" as it was feeding on the carcass of a hippopotamus and had to despatch it with the butt-end of his musket. In 1795, Levaillant published his *Second voyage dans l'intérieur de l'Afrique par le Cap de Bonne-Espérance dans les années 1783, 84 et 85* and he wrote of his opponent: "it defended itself a long time with great intrepidity". The huge bird impressed him and he described it as "unquestionably the most beautiful of its genus". Levaillant's description and painting of the King Vulture was the first scientific report on what is today known as the Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotos*.

With its size, bearing and behavior, it is not surprising that it earned the title of King Vulture. Although the biggest vulture in Africa, with a wingspan of 2,8 m., it is not the heaviest with an average mass of 6,9 kg. Everything about the Lappet-faced Vulture is big. It has the largest bill of any raptor in the world and the sharp, triangular point is used to rip into the tough skin of its prey. It feeds on the skin, ligaments and tendons that other vultures generally leave.

Unlike some other species, it is not a messy feeder and seldom gets its head and neck covered in gore. At a carcass or waterhole, where vultures are gathered, the threat-walk of a Lappet is impressive. The wings are held slightly open, the red, bald, head is thrust forward and the tail is raised. This menacing act seldom leads to physical aggression, but when it does, the feet are used to strike at one another. The outstretched foot covers the same area as the outstretched hand of a man and they are formidable weapons with the curved claws.

Lappets, because of their large wingspan, cannot fly into the canopy and thus the nests are usually visible on the tops of trees and on average 2,4 m in diameter. One nest in a camel thorn tree in the Namib-Naukluft Park has a diameter of just over 3 m and is 1,5 m thick. This nest has probably been in use for decades. The height above the ground depends on the trees. In the Namib, some nests are as low as 2,5 m, with an average of 6,5 m, while a nest in Zimbabwe was found at 23 m. One egg is laid at the beginning of the cold season from June to August and after an incubation period of 56 days, the chick, weighing about 190 grams, hatches. For the first month, the chick is closely brooded by one of the parents. At two month of age, the chick is fully feathered dorsally and has a mass of 5 kg. After four months in the nest and having consumed approximately 50 kg of food, supplied by both parents, it takes its first flight. The young vulture will still be dependent on its parents for a few more months and will often return to the nest. The entire breeding cycle lasts almost a year. It has to be taught to forage for itself and the first year of its life is the most critical in the struggle to survive and fend for itself. If the young bird does survive, it will only be sexually mature at five or six years of age.

Peter Bridgeford



Photos: Peter Bridgeford

Lappet faced vulture chick



Photos: Peter Bridgeford

Tagged Lappet faced Vulture Chick

An Interesting Picture



Starks' Lark Nest: A precious find. This bird (Alauda starki), occurs in grass land. It can be seen in large flocks near pans in the dry season. (Info from Newmans Birds of Southern Africa)

Photos: Karin Behnsen

Introduction: Stark's lark (*Spizocorys starki*) were first recorded by Arthur Cowell Stark (1850-1899) the author of the first 2 volumes of 'Birds of South Africa'. Sparse shrub or grass cover in arid and semi-arid open plains are favoured, as well as gravelly and stony soil.

Distribution: Common in mainly western and southern Namibia. Fairly common in the northern Namib Desert and the Skeleton Coast. Also found in Etosha National Park with some a thin scattering in the south of the country.

Diet: Eats mostly grass seeds, ants, bugs, flies, solifuges and spiders.

Description: A small lark with a short bill. Buffy brown upperparts, faintly streaked with dark brown. Often confused with the Selater's lark which had darker brown upperparts and buffy (not white) underparts.

Breeding: As a rule, 2 to 4 eggs are laid from March to August, in a simple grass cup.

Size: 14cm. **Weight:** 19g.

Thank you

Many thanks to those of you who have contributed to this issue of The Barking Gecko by providing articles/information: Nils Odendaal, Murray Tindall, Viktoria Keding, Peter Woolfe., Patrick Schoonbee. Special thanks is extended to Peter Bridgeford for the 'King Vulture' article and to Dr. Morris Gosling for his article on Seasonal Zebra movements. The photos of the Starks' Lark is courtesy of Karin Bensen – what a treat to see it.

The Barking Gecko is your newsletter and, as always, we invite you to keep on sending us your contributions of news and views, short reports, sightings, artwork and photographs.

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