Etosha Pan to the Skeleton Coast

Conservation Histories, Policies and Practices in North-west Namibia

Edited by Sian Sullivan, Ute Dieckmann, and Selma Lendelvo

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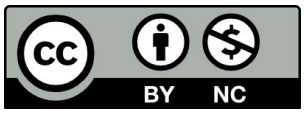

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Conclusion: Realising conservation, from Etosha Pan to the Skeleton Coast

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Abstract

This final chapter sums up the Etosha-Kunene Histories project's exploration of colonialism, indigeneity and natural history in Namibia, through a wide-ranging analysis that aims to initiate and inform discussions on conservation policies in the region and beyond. Contributions in the volume from diverse scholars and practitioners have highlighted the complex and often conflicting narratives in conservation efforts, for which Namibia's northern regions offers a case in point. The history of conservation in Etosha-Kunene spans pre-colonial to post-Independence periods, reflecting shifts from unregulated exploitation to formal conservation policies under German and South African rule, and finally to more inclusive approaches post-Independence. These transitions illustrate the political economy and socio-ecological dynamics of conservation, emphasising the interplay between local communities, colonial legacies, and global environmental trends. The volume addresses themes of belonging, co-existence, inclusion, and exclusion, underscoring the ongoing negotiations and conflicts over land use, wildlife management, and human rights in the region. Through its comprehensive historical and political ecology lens, this book hopes to contribute to understanding the intricate relations between nature, culture and economy in conservation practices.

This volume and the workshop preceding it were part of the Etosha-Kunene Histories project (https://www.etosha-kunene-histories.net/) aiming at a multivocal and historical analysis that contributes new thinking on colonialism, indigeneity and "natural history" in Namibia. We (the editors and principal investigators of the project) hope this volume provides an entry point for a conversation on conservation policies and practices from Etosha Pan to the Skeleton Coast, and beyond.

The scholars and practitioners contributing to this volume came from a wide range of disciplines and backgrounds and dealt with the issue of conservation from markedly different angles and research foci, revealing manifold concerns but also possible paths for future conservation. Our objective was not to present a "homogenous" story of conservation, but instead to offer polyphonic, with at times (subtly) dissonant voices on conservation, to show the complexity, tensions and frictions inherent in the troubling question of how to live with our planet into the future. This conclusion highlights some major threads the volume has shed light on.

History of conservation in Etosha-Kunene

"Etosha-Kunene" is a region exemplifying both the reasons for, and the transformations of, approaches to nature conservation practices in Namibia.

In "pre-colonial" and early colonial times, the region was characterised by lively spatial and socio-cultural dynamics. Local human groups were mobile and responded to both ecological and political conditions with shifting groupings and alliances of people. Precolonial and early colonial travellers from overseas embedded in a consolidating capitalist world system, came to the area in search of resources: mainly ivory, ostrich feathers, animal hides and guano from the coast along with cattle for trading. Clearly, sustainability was not on their agenda. They did not initially aim to

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settle, but to search for commercial goods to be exploited, starting to turn the "natures" of south-west Africa into commercial enterprises, with detrimental effects. The unregulated depletion of wildlife during the 19th century by men of European and American origin (including Boers from South Africa) made the establishment of formal conservation policy during the German colonial period necessary. Wildlife was increasingly seen as an economic resource which had to be used "wisely" through regulation by the German administration. The first three game reserves were established, the largest being Game Reserve No. 2, stretching westwards from Etosha Pan to what became known as the Skeleton Coast, and northwards towards Angola (Chapter 1).

During the initial phase of the South African administration of Namibia the game reserves were retained, although nature conservation was not particularly high on the political agenda. Increasingly though, nature conservation was given more attention, also because the economic potential of protected areas for tourism had become evident in South Africa's Kruger National Park. The "fortress conservation" model found its way to Etosha which—as a game park—turned into the prime tourist destination in Namibia. Nature conservation became increasingly professionalised and institutionalised, research institutes were established and the focus on game preservation was broadened to include flora. The major focus remained on "game", however, with African wildlife being the main driver for tourism. The area around Etosha Pan became the enclosed Etosha National Park. Former migration routes of wildlife became restricted, and translocations of animal species became the order of day. "Nature" needed to be protected against humans by other humans. Nature conservation had become a complex management task, with side effects of this effort to conserve "nature" increasingly evident: including, for example, overgrazing by concentrated animal populations, animal diseases, new population dynamics, and so on (Chapter 2, also Chapter 10).

With Namibia's Independence, the politics of nature conservation moved away from the "fortress conservation" model to include local inhabitants in conservation management. In Etosha-Kunene this was possible on communal land in the areas west and north-west of Etosha National Park, where 38 conservancies were established in the last 25 years. At the same time, the "fortresses" of conservation in Etosha-Kunene, namely Etosha National Park and Skeleton Coast National Park, were maintained, but with the possibility for various kinds of tourism concessions and limited access rights for neighbouring communities and external investors, as outlined in the National Policy on Tourism and Wildlife Concessions on State Land of 2007. Today, six conservancies benefit from concessions in the Skeleton Coast National Park, while three conservancies and one association benefit from concessions in Etosha National Park; with conservancies additionally having concessionaire rights to the three major tourism concessions between Etosha and the Skeleton Coast—namely, Hobatere, Etendeka and Palmwag (Chapter 3, also Chapter 13).[1]

Political economy of conservation

As this volume has revealed, the history of nature conservation cannot be read in isolation, as much as Etosha National Park, for example, is not an untouched island in the middle of the political changes in its surroundings. Aiming at unravelling the diverse entanglements between politics and ecology and the complex relationships between "natures", "cultures" and "economies" in Etosha-Kunene, this volume has thereby contributed to the field of political ecology.[2]

The economic greed and recklessness of European incomers during the pre-colonial and early colonial periods were responsible for the necessity to conserve wildlife, although it was local peoples who were increasingly alienated from protected areas. As Gissibl[3] has pointed out, the first steps to

1 https://www.meft.gov.na/files/files/LIST%20OF%20CONCESSIONS%202016.pdf
2 See, for example, Roberts (2023)
3 Gissibl (2006: 137)

establish so-called game reserves were also done in the interests of European hunters and to serve settlers' interests in wildlife, both as consumptive and increasingly as commercial resources.

The history of nature conservation in Etosha-Kunene is also embedded in global discourses and developments. Already in 1900, European colonial powers convened the first International Conference on the Preservation of Wild Animals, Birds and Fish in Africa.[4] The control of wildlife by the state was affirmed and the establishment of protected areas was encouraged.[5] Evolving in the 19th century in the US, the concept of a "national park"—as a demarcated area controlled by the state for the protection of "nature" with limited human influence—travelled all over the globe, including Africa, where it was initially applied for the preservation of wildlife rather than entertainment, as in the US. It also reached "South West Africa", via the Kruger National Park, which had become the first South African National Park in 1926.[6] Kruger had become saturated with visitors during peak seasons and the South West African Administration was urged to develop similar national parks, which became the destiny of the eastern area of Game Reserve No. 2, the Etosha Pan Game Reserve.

The move towards more participatory conservation models after Namibia's Independence also happened in regional and global context. Donor-funded community-based conservation programmes had internationally become the paradigm of the neoliberal 1990s.[7] Zimbabwe's USAID-funded Communal Areas Programme for Indigenous Resource Management (CAMPFIRE), for example, had significant impacts on the Namibian approach.[8]

The recent "landscape approach" in which landscapes are understood not exclusively as "natural" landscapes but as politically, historically, economically and culturally influenced socio-ecological systems with—at times—human modification,[9] has gained increasing importance in Namibia in recent years, also due to the changing priorities of donors and international agendas (Chapter 3). While the conservancy programme was/is more focussed on the local scale, this approach aims to conserve nature and especially wildlife at the regional level, whilst making these natures available to investors and tourists, taking various human inhabitants and diverse forms of land uses into account.

While in the initial stages, colonial nature conservation in Namibia was restricted to game preservation, the focus shifted via an increasing inclusion of flora and fauna more generally towards "biodiversity" in the 1990s, a change again linked to global developments. The term biodiversity gained prominence from the 1980s, becoming a new buzzword in conservation. It is also mentioned in Namibia's constitution (see Chapter 3). In 1993, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity was enforced, ratified by Namibia in 1997. 2010 was declared the International Year for Biodiversity[10] and 22 May is the International Day for Biodiversity.[11] This new focus developed in a framework in which the United Nations, nation states and international actors realised that humankind is dependent on "nature", on ecosystems, genetic and species diversity: "[b]iological diversity resources are the pillars upon which we build civilizations".[12]

Nature conservation was both embedded in and constrained by diverse colonial and post-colonial interests. While the lobby to fight for some kind of "nature conservation", preserving "wilderness" or "untamed Africa" became more powerful, professionalised and media-savvy during the South African period, although the concerns of these conservationists had still to be negotiated with other colonial objectives and initiatives. The demand for land for "fortress conservation" had to be negotiated with the need for land for settlement and the interests of settlers in the colony. Parks

4 Child (2009: 22)
5 *Ibid.*
6 Carruthers (2009: 39)
7 e.g. Sullivan (2002), Bollig (2022: 117–18)
8 Jones (n.d.: 4)
9 Schütz (2019: 3)
10 https://www.cbd.int/2011-2020/about/iyb2010
11 https://www.un.org/en/observances/biological-diversity-day
12 *Ibid.*

were created in areas which were not seen as valuable for settlement,[13] and game reserves were opened for emergency grazing in times of drought. There was also the colonial aim to take control, exploit and "administer" local populations and to locate them in spatially demarcated areas, first "native reserves", later "homelands". The—at times awkward and frequent—boundary changes of Game Reserve No. 2 and the Etosha Game Park/National Park (outlined in Chapter 2), and the parallel existence of a Kaokoveld as "native reserve" and part of Game Reserve No. 2 between 1947 and 1967, epitomises these conflicts. In Independent Namibia, rural communities are supposed to sustain themselves and the needs of rural livestock owners whilst nature conservation concerns have to be continuously negotiated (see Chapters 3, 5, 6, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19).

Nature conservation was and is additionally entangled with developments in science and technology. For instance, new immobilisation techniques made the translocation of game species more successful from the early 1970s onwards. More scientific research in animal diseases was required due to the unforeseen consequences of the fortress conservation model applied in Etosha National Park (Chapter 2). The emergence of a hydro-scape described in Chapter 7 is another example illustrating the extent to which science (in this case) geological research, and advances in technology (drilling and pumping techniques), were important prerequisites for "development" and thereby also significantly influenced nature conservation (see Chapter 10).

As this volume has unveiled, the economy—following specific though slightly changing economic models of the powerful—was and is a major driver of nature conservation. This was true for the establishment of the first game reserves and their transformation during colonial times, and to some extent remains the case in current approaches to biodiversity conservation. While the answer to the question of who should economically benefit differed considerably through time (be it the colonial administration, European hunters and settlers, or "communities"), the dominant assumption that economic benefits provide the most successful incentive for nature conservation remained unchanged.

The politics of nature conservation seriously affected the diverse local populations of Etosha-Kunene as outlined throughout this volume, in colonial times but also in Independent Namibia (Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16). During colonial times, it meant for many communities removal and relocation from lands where they were living. Affected communities thereby lost—*inter alia*—their livelihoods and access to culturally important land. What Gissibl describes for Africa in general, is true for Etosha-Kunene too:

> Africans lost access to the wildlife which served as a food resource while also losing the ability to control animals that threatened their fields and crops. In short, they experienced imperial environmentalism as a form of environmental imperialism; a process which saw the re-ordering of space, the often violent expropriation of traditional rights, enhanced vulnerability and the imposition of European values. Indeed, the problems arising from the separation of humans and wildlife in Africa may well be the most persistent legacy of imperial environmental internationalism shaping African conservation to this day.[14]

During post-colonial times, the legacies of colonial politics on local populations still need to be dealt with, e.g. the "fortress" of Etosha and the relocation of Hai‖om and ovaHerero (Chapters 4, 14, 15, 16), and the restriction of access for various Khoekhoegowab-speaking groups to the Northern Namib that is now the Skeleton Coast National Park (Chapter 12). Yet new challenges were additionally arising in post-Independent Namibia for local communities, e.g. human-wildlife conflicts adjacent to Etosha National Park and in the conservancies in the west (Chapters 11, 17, 18, 19), or the imposition of new institutional arrangements (Chapters 4, 6, 7).

Still, it also became clear that, since pre-colonial times, local communities (or particular members of these groupings) have resisted or actively shaped the "developments" to come. The Swartbooi/Grootberg Uprising (Chapter 1), the resistance of local authorities to the drilling of new

13 See also Child (2009: 22)
14 Gissibl (2006: 137)

boreholes (Chapter 7), or negotiations of the Damara Regional Authority with regard to the Palmwag Concession (Chapter 13), are three examples of this resistance.

Conservation, belonging and co-existence

This volume also reveals stories of belongings—understood both as "supposed to be together" and of "peaceful coexistence"—and stories about negotiations of belongings, inclusion and exclusion. Which people "belong" to which area and vice versa?

The feeling of belonging by particular human groupings to a specific area surface throughout this volume. Damara/ǂNūkhoe and ǁUbun families felt a sense of belonging to the area which is now the Palmwag Concession (Chapter 13), Haiǁom subgroups felt a sense of belonging to the south-eastern part of the Etosha area (Chapter 15), as was the case for ovaHerero families for the western part of Etosha (Chapter 14). What became the Skeleton Coast National Park and ǁUbun, !Narenin, Hoanidaman and ǁKhao-a Dama lineages also formerly belonged together (Chapter 12).

Who has the power at which time to decide on "belonging"? For instance, the colonial administration decided at the end of the 1920s that an area formerly used by ovaHerero families all of a sudden belonged to incoming settlers (Chapter 14), whilst in the early 1950s it was decided that Haiǁom did not belong to Etosha (Chapters 2, 15, 16). In creating "homelands" at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, the colonial administration again made a particularly strong statement about which "ethnic" group belonged to which area. Nowadays, Traditional Authorities and conservancy committees have a say on who "belongs" to an area (see Chapters 3, 6 and 13), whilst Haiǁom inhabitants of Tsintsabis, a resettlement farm on commercial land, with a strong sense of belonging to this place and an equally strong feeling of who does not belong to the area, have no power to restrict incomers seeking to settle on this land (Chapter 16).

The story of belonging goes beyond relationships between humans and land. Connected to the question of which human groupings belong to which area is the question of where livestock belong. The Red Line, functioning as a veterinary control border, was the physical manifestation of the colonial decision regarding whose livestock belonged to which area (Chapters 2, 13 and 14).

Yet, belonging is also at stake with regard to wildlife. The "fortress conservation model" entailed the notion that wildlife mainly (but not exclusively) belonged to protected areas, exemplified by the translocation of particular species to these protected areas and by the physical enclosure of these areas. Exploring the impact of giraffe browsing behaviour on particular tree species in Etendeka Tourism Concession and protection measures for these trees (Chapter 9), the question of belonging surfaces as well. Can these species co-exist in the same area and what are the techniques needed to manage this? Chapter 10 can be read as exploring the question of whether or not mountain zebra and plains zebra belong together or should be kept apart (in order to avoid hybridisation). Chapter 11 suggests arguments that elephants and human communities can belong to the same area, while Chapters 17, 18, and 19 reveal initiatives trying to establish that lions and human groupings can co-exist—i.e. belong—to the same area. In all these chapters, particular humans (in different positions) are unquestioningly asserting decision-making power on belonging and co-existence.

Spatiality of conservation, exclusion and inclusion

The question of belonging is connected to the politics of inclusion and exclusion and the histories of boundary making and fencing. From the perspective of incoming travellers-hunters-traders, the pre-colonial period was a time of orientation and exploration: watercourses and waterholes were mapped, as were people encountered and the roads travelled (Chapter 1). Once this initial orientation and way-finding had advanced, the colonial administration began the spatial reorganisation that continued throughout the colonial period (Chapters 1 and 2). In Etosha-Kunene, Game Reserve No.

2 was established by the German colonial administration, with boundaries of the game reserve put on paper, and later neatly defined and mapped in the South African period. The Police Zone border, later the "Red Line", cut across the region. Native reserves were established in the north-west of Etosha-Kunene and commercial farms for white settlers were surveyed and increasingly fenced in the south-east. The shape and size of the game reserve was changed considerably during the 1950s and 1960s, the course of the Red Line also underwent several changes and with the Odendaal Report in the 1960s "homelands" were created, consolidating former "native reserves" with commercial land and part of the game reserve added to these "homelands". While some of the boundaries were mostly on paper, many of these boundaries were implemented with fences and border posts or gates within the physical landscape. The re-organisation in the late colonial times (with apartheid ideology behind it) can be read as a functional severance according to colonial needs, specific "entities", such as "ethnic groups" and "white settlers", with wildlife and livestock spatially separated according to the needs of the colonial powers. This is a period of significant de-coupling of former socio-ecological systems,[15] with tremendous effects on human and beyond-the-human inhabitants. People were removed from protected areas, i.e. land they had been living on, and were thus cut off from their former "resources", including wildlife and plants (e.g. Chapters 12, 13, 14 and 15). Animals were cut off from migration routes and grazing grounds and translocated to and across protected areas (Chapter 2).

With Independence, Namibia had to deal with this legacy and spatial reality. The communal areas of "homelands" were transformed into "Communal Land Areas", including the right to establish conservancies on this land (e.g. Chapters 3, 5, 6, 13 and 14). Etosha National Park was maintained but some concessions were being made to neighbouring communities over the years. A few commercial farms were turned into resettlement farms (see Chapters 4 and 16).

The maps of Etosha-Kunene nowadays show a much patchier and more segregated landscape (see e.g. Figure 3.2) than those of the late colonial time (see e.g. Figure 2.5). The contested question of boundaries, inclusion and exclusion remains (e.g. Chapters 4, 6 and 16). Not only do conservancies need to have defined boundaries surrounding them, they also need to have a land use plan for the land covered, and many conservancies have different zones for tourism, hunting, farming and multiple-use purposes, again aiming at excluding and including specific beings and activities in each zone. Yet, conservancies had up to now no legal power to enforce these zones.[16]

The recent landscape approach (Chapter 3) can be understood as an attempt to re-arrange the landscape yet again, to allow for larger tracts of land to be directed towards conservation and tourism, albeit alongside livestock herding, mining and other activities.

Realising conservation together

The 'imposition of European values' mentioned in the above quote by Gissibl points to another theme of this volume, namely the ontological hegemony of European worldviews. Yet, colonial powers could not implement their ideas on *terra nullius*, used as a kind of foil for the realisation of their ideas. They had to deal with a multitude of human and beyond-the-human actors/actants on the ground. Human resistance was already mentioned above. Non-human troublings play an important part too: from elephants breaking through the fences of Etosha National Park, to increased wildlife deaths as the result of diseases caused by the drilling of more boreholes or restricted migration (Chapter 2), to zebra species interbreeding (Chapter 10).

The same holds true for post-colonial conservation efforts. Many of the chapters testify to the contestations, negotiations, resistances or troublings of human and beyond-human actors

15 See also Beinart (1989: 158)

16 https://communityconservationnamibia.com/support-to-conservation/natural-resource-management/adaptive-management

around the politics and practices of CBNRM. A wide range of human actors are pivotal in shaping the current conservation landscape, e.g. conservancy committees, community game guards and lion rangers, traditional authorities, conservancy members and incomers (e.g. Chapters 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, 17, 19). Furthermore, the actions of the Namibian government in relation to the colonial legacies of protected areas are also contested and at times resisted (Chapters 4, 14 and 15). But beyond-the-human actors shape the conservation landscape too. Protected or conserved species, such as lion (Chapters 17, 18, 19), elephant (Chapter 11), giraffe (Chapter 9) and zebra (Chapter 10) cause trouble at times for humans, plants and domesticated animals (e.g. cattle and goats, Chapters 6, 7, 8, 19) or for the survival of other species. Plants, e.g. *Maerua schinzii* (ringwood tree) and *Boscia albitrunca* (shepherd's tree), important for pollinators but loved by giraffes (Chapter 9), or the cultivated plants grown in conservancies, loved by elephants (Chapter 11), thereby become visible in terms of conservation concern.

It is a truism that the role of water in its manifold presences and absences is crucial as well. Drilled boreholes influence migration patterns and animal demography, in Etosha National Park (Chapters 2 and 10), in the communal areas and in conservancies (Chapters 7 and 11). The absence of rain water due to drought, changes mobility patterns and population dynamics too (Chapters 2 and 6).

In shedding light on all these actors/actants (the above is of course not a comprehensive list), their relations, interdependencies, and antagonisms embedded in and constrained by specific and changing power structures, this volume aimed at raising awareness regarding the complexities of conservation in Etosha-Kunene.

In sum, we need to understand conservation as realised by all these different actors and actants. All of them (including the contributors and editors of this volume)—promoting, negotiating, contesting, resisting or appropriating conservation—play vital roles in how conservation in Etosha-Kunene evolved, what it means, and how it can be read and understood today. All these human and beyond-human actors, combined with conservation and other organisations, donors, investors and the state, will continue to play a pivotal role in the future paths taken for conservation in Namibia: and hopefully, some of the controversial issues discussed and revealed in this volume can be reconciled.

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