

NAMIBIA: TURNING FARMLAND INTO CONSERVATION

Building up a research station at Ongos in Namibia by *Dr. Ulf Tubessing*



AREAS



With roots (of German origin) going back five generations, one can surely say that I am firmly anchored in Namibian soil. My fascination with our abundant wildlife and nature goes back to my childhood, when I spent most of my free time roaming the Namibian bush.

Shortly after completing my veterinary studies in 1983 I joined the staff of the Veterinary Faculty Onderstepoort, South Africa as lecturer in small animal internal medicine. Even though I thoroughly enjoyed the high-tech academic environment, after nearly ten years “the call of the bush” became overpowering and resulted in me returning to Namibia, where I worked in a mixed animal hospital.

I soon became more involved in wildlife medicine and worked closely with various conservation organisations such as the Cheetah Conservation Foundation (CCF) and the Smithsonian Institute. National Geographic TV accompanied me on a couple of outings and thus “documented” cheetah, leopard and giraffe capture and translocation actions as well as work I did on a family of leopards with serious brain affliction producing a number of shows that aired globally.

In 2003 I managed to realise my dream of buying into a farm. I purchased the stunningly beautiful farm Ongos (100 km² in size) near Windhoek and, by removing internal fences and ranching infrastructure, converted the cattle ranch into a game ranch. Since I am also heavily involved in game capture and translocation work, I made the reintroduction of large numbers of game to the farm a priority. Today Ongos is well stocked with most species endemic to the area.

Game ranching has, over the past two to three decades, contributed greatly to conservation in Namibia. Numbers of game on private farmland (comprising 43% of the country's surface area) have more than tripled and are exceeding those in Namibian national parks. Since Namibian national parks are under severe tourism pressure (even moderate tourism pressure impacts significantly on arid habitats) and with Namibia's increasing popularity as a tourist destination, there is a great need to increase the total area under conservation in Namibia. Due to budget limitations and pressing sociological needs, our government does not view the addition of more land for conservation purposes a priority. This then places the responsibility (and opportunity) of future expansion of conservation land into the hands of the private sector.

As a conservationist and consultant to game ranchers, I believe that the current private sector efforts fall way short of their potential in fulfilling their conservation role. Most farms are game-fenced, (fragmenting the habitat), individually managed and ecologically speaking small (between 5,000 – 10,000 ha in size), each only representing a limited number of habitat types. Some farmers group together, forming so-called conservancies. Unfortunately competition and the individualistic nature of the farmers, results in few, if any, of the commercial conservancies being managed as one economic or unfragmented ecological unit.

Farmers concentrate all or a large portion of their “farming” activity on game ranching, mostly for

trophy hunting, photo safari purposes and to some extent the breeding of endangered (thus expensive) species. Due to a paucity of knowledge and understanding of natural processes, many techniques applied to both game (highly diverse, indigenous species with different needs) and habitat management are extrapolations from livestock (usually a single introduced species with well specified needs) farming practices. Needless to say, suboptimal management is the order of the day.

As a result I decided to use Ongos as an initial site to start/support research projects and to collect information pertaining to judicial game ranch management. Important to me is that the research conducted is practically oriented and will yield information that will make a meaningful contribution towards our understanding of natural processes and thus aid in sound game ranch management and conservation.

To help us achieve this goal we partnered up with Biosphere Expeditions, who have a great track record of supporting conservation-oriented research through responsible eco-tourism. With pooled resources (our tented lodge and camp research centre), jointly sponsored researcher and Biosphere Expeditions’ equipment (volunteers and funding), we devote time and effort to research as well as education activities focused on finding solutions to specific wildlife and habitat management issues affecting private farmland in Namibia. Some of these are:

African leopard



Using a telemetry antenna to locate collared animals





Taking school children out in the field | data collection | the new research station at Ongos

HUMAN/PREDATOR CONFLICT

Much is known about predator ecology in national parks, where predation on game is accepted as part of management and not seen as a conflict situation. To minimise stock losses, stock ranchers have a couple of predator-friendly management tools (e.g. penning livestock at night, making use of Anatolian shepherd dogs, etc.) at their disposal.

Game ranchers often have a low predator tolerance. This is due to predation on rare and expensive game species often resulting in severe financial losses (some species, e.g. sable and roan antelopes are worth in excess of 20,000 Euros!). We are currently investigating the predation habits and ecology of leopards (and, to a lesser extent, other predators) on commercial farmland in the hope that a better understanding of leopard ecology in this setting will enable us to devise management techniques, which will reduce the risk of predation on rare and expensive game species and thus minimise human/predator conflict.

HABITAT AND PREY BASE MANAGEMENT

Without a well managed and preserved habitat, survival of all species is at risk. We are thus monitoring a number of parameters (game numbers, species composition, habitat degradation indicators, etc.) in an attempt to identify management indicators and strategies that will be useful for both the preservation/restoration of habitat and species (genetic composition, optimal species composition and game density, animal health, etc.).

LIVESTOCK-WILDLIFE DISEASE INTERFACE

In recent years there have been a number of serious disease outbreaks in wild animals that are directly attributed to the relentless human encroach-

ment on conservation areas (e.g. high mortality rates caused by canine distemper virus infections amongst lions in the Serengeti due to domestic dog/lion contact). The close proximity of Ongos to the Katutura township near Windhoek makes this the ideal setting to monitor such disease risk in the wild predators and, if needed, to devise management strategies before major damage occurs.

EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

These programmes - predominantly targeting school children - aim to promote appreciation of nature amongst Namibians. We believe that increasing awareness of the inherent value (both aesthetic and financial) of nature will go a long way towards more responsible utilisation of natural resources (firewood, water, etc.) and also give scholars an insight into potential career options involving nature and conservation.

DEVELOPMENT OF MANAGEMENT MODELS

I consider it a priority to identify and develop possible financial and management models through individual game ranchers, which see the overall benefit in "dropping fences" (and thus habitat fragmentation) between adjacent game farms so that greater areas can be managed as continuous ecologic units to the benefit of both humans and nature. The pinnacle of my dreams is the establishment of a greater Windhoek nature reserve of at least 50,000 ha in size including Ongos as a nucleus.

Without the aid of dedicated partners, researchers and sponsors, the above aims will largely remain dreams. Even though we have only just started, I believe we are on track towards achieving these goals. For this I thank Biosphere Expeditions and all the participants visiting our programme as well as Kristina Kilian (our researcher & Biosphere Expeditions' employee) and all those people who have contributed their time and resources towards this project. ■

This article is an excerpt out of the Biosphere Expeditions Magazine 2011, packed with stories from the field, achievements, looks behind the scenes and an overview over our expeditions, projects, taster days and other activities. Access the full magazine at www.biosphere-expeditions.org/magazine.