

Some progress, but concern remains about Namibia's desert rhinos and elephants

In November 1985 I had the opportunity to return to Namibia, which I had last visited three years previously, and spent three days travelling in Damaraland and the southern part of the Skeleton Coast National Park. This area is part of the driest desert in the world and, as the article in *Oryx*, October 1984 reported, with Kaokoland to the north, provides a unique habitat for subspecies of elephant and black rhino as well as other species normally associated with the African bush and savannah.

The elephant and the rhino are particularly vulnerable there for a variety of reasons, including the harsh habitat and the scattered nature of their tiny populations in a vast area. The latest news on the rhinos of Damaraland, however, is good. The rains of 1984 were plentiful and the water table in the valleys is high. I saw three rhino, all in prime condition. Rhino numbers have risen since 1982 from 35 to a present 52. They are constantly monitored by Blythe Loutit working for The Wildlife Society of Namibia and by arrangement by the Directorate of Nature Conservation.

The main stronghold of the desert elephant is 200 miles further north in north-western Damaraland and the lower Hoanib and Hoaruseb area. Here the picture is not such a happy one, and elephant numbers at around 80 are, at best, static. In the far north of Kaokoland a mere six animals still survive in the area of the lower Kunene.

Overall, poaching of elephant and rhino is being contained through increased patrolling by Department of Nature Conservation staff, whose numbers have recently been increased slightly, and by those such as Blythe Loutit, who are entirely dependent on voluntary contributions and their own fund raising efforts. Regular and prolonged visits to particular areas by working conservationists, together with local media publicity and the full help and co-operation of the Council of the local Damara people, have all helped, and there have been no cases recently involving the military, who with helicopters and modern weaponry are in a position to do irreparable damage. The expeditions into the area
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run by local tour operators in Windhoek and Swakopmund, in full collaboration with the Directorate of Nature Conservation and voluntary bodies concerned, are also beneficial.

However, worries remain. The rhino population would be particularly vulnerable to any resurgence of poaching as animals regularly use the same route, travelling 40 miles or more every four days to particular watering holes. It is also rumoured that military bases may be built in the north. Not long ago there was a serious well-publicized proposal from a local politician, fortunately rejected, that facilities should be sold to West Germany and the US for the dumping of nuclear waste in Kaokoland.

Perhaps the greatest danger arises from the continuing uncertainty over Namibia's political future, which seems to have paralysed future planning. If the situation deteriorates, it is particularly important that conservationists worldwide should be fully aware of what is at stake, and be in a position to give all possible help and encouragement to those on the spot.

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The problem of bore-holes

I was very interested in the piece 'Towards understanding the causes of famine' on page 2 of the January *Oryx*, for it highlights a fact that most authorities are very slow and even more reluctant to admit. My training was basically as an ecologist—for forestry is largely applied ecology—and, since serving in Ghana for 14 years in the 1930s and 1940s, I have been back 14 times to East, South and West Africa. Even when I started work, it was already clear that the arid land such as the Sahel could not be safely occupied other than by nomads, who with their flocks and herds of grazers and browsers can use small patches of mixed vegetation scattered over a wide area, seldom causing anything more than limited short-term degradation, for the nomads had worked out a *modus vivendi*.

The introduction of deep bore-holes has begun a process that must lead to disaster, for the resultant changes are irreversible, certainly in terms of human generations. Two points must be made

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about bore-holes. First, there is no objection to shallow bore-holes (i.e. to 8 or 10 metres) in the big river valleys, for these wells tap aquifers that are recharged as soon as the rains cause the river to flow again. Many Sahel bore-holes are deep—up to several hundred metres—and they tap mostly fossil water, i.e. water stored there in an earlier climatic or geological period. The volume is finite and will not be replaced, certainly not in our era. At first there is ample water, and the tribes bring their flocks and herds from far and wide, which promptly eat every scrap of vegetation. Then the water runs out and the end result is disaster for man and beast, but by that time those who sank the bore-holes are far away. The laudable intention is to help the herdsmen through an emergency, but in fact such action usually leads, often even in a short time, to degradation that is reversible only at prohibitive cost.

Second is the problem of vested interests. Deep drilling equipment represents a big investment in capital and skill, so that vested interests are very active—at a completed cost of towards £200 per metre for Northern Nigeria! With massive American involvement, there is a craze for these deep bore-holes in the Philippines, and the water table around Manila has been dropping by about 5 metres per annum. Some US charities seem to go in largely for bore-holes. There should be a very firm rule—that however strongly a welfare officer or engineer urges the drilling of a deep bore-hole, this may go ahead only if approved by an ecologist or land use expert who can accurately assess the likely environmental impact.

In my time in Ghana there was much talk of the encroaching Sahara, and the fashionable thing was to blame a long-term worsening climate. It so happened that most of my service was in charge of districts through which the high forest/grass woodland margin passed diagonally across the country, and this was a special interest of mine. There was some agreement that there was a short-term climatic cycle (perhaps of the order of 50 years) and the boundary moved back and forth perhaps 10 to 20 miles. It seemed that I was there in the damper phase of this cycle, and we had clear evidence that the forest had recolonized perhaps 12 miles of Guinea grass woodland

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within recent years. The Sahara has indeed extended its boundaries many miles, but largely with human help and with the climate doing little to encourage it.

The truth is that the Sahel and other comparable zones are totally unsuited for permanent occupation. This is not defeatism but realism, and until this diagnosis is admitted, infinite waste of human and financial resources will occur.

If governments would persuade us that large dams may provide the water for irrigation, we should study the appalling environmental impact of such projects as the Aswan High Dam—including a huge increase in bilharzia, the salination of large areas, and the extinction of the estuary sardine fishery, which had been dependent on the silt load now settling in the dam; this same silt, from the times of the Pharaohs, had also made the Nile valley the granary of the eastern Mediterranean. Now the farmers are dependent on artificial fertilizers, which they cannot afford and which bring new problems. My present work is with simple village water supplies, and we are now seeing a big swing towards one-family, one-farm plots and one hand pump as a viable unit. But big dams are still very big business—for those who make them.

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***Homo sapiens*: predator extraordinary**

On and on we go, and must go, to preserve diverse endangered species of animals and plants, world over. But so rarely do we battle with the fundamental cause of the problem, and only sometimes with proximate causes. Rarely even does *Oryx* refer to the real problem.*

Consider a normal food chain, with maximum biomass and number of individuals at the bottom, rising by diminishing stages to the topmost predator with least biomass and least number of individuals. So often, too, it is those top predators that are the special subject of our efforts in preservation, tiger, oryx and the rest. But look at *H. sapiens*, ourselves, masters of the earth, top predator of innumerable food chains, animal and plant, terrestrial and oceanic. Our numbers are