Archaeological sites in the Fish River Canyon, southern SWA/Namibia

by

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1 INTRODUCTION

The archaeological content of areas managed by the Department of Agriculture and Nature Conservation in South West Africa is not well known. In most cases these areas comprise large tracts of land that are relatively undisturbed and are maintained in a state that probably approximates the conditions of recent prehistoric settlement.

Although management and development strategies pose little threat to the archaeological resources of most park areas, the existence of a popular hiking trail in the Fish River Canyon Reserve provides an exceptional case in which valuable prehistoric materials may be easily and inadvertently disturbed.

The route of the hiking trail follows the deeply incised and meandering course of the canyon from below the Northern Lookout Point (Fig 1 N.L.P.), for 83 km to the rest-camp and mineral spa at Ai-Ais (27°35' S., 17°30'E.). Arid open countryside with a subdued topography dominated by Dwarf Shrub Savanna (cenii 1971: 12) surrounds the approaches to the canyon. Yet, the extended catchment of the Fish River and frequent artesian springs within the canyon provide a well-watered and, in places, densely vegetated environment that is in marked contrast to the surrounding area. Small antelope, gamebirds, waterfowl and other resources such as fish are concentrated within this linear oasis and it is possible that larger game species also frequented the canyon in the past. Evidence from an extensive survey of archaeological sites within the Konkeip drainage to the west of the Fish River and along the adjacent Southern Namib border (WENDE 1980: 41) suggests that a mobile prehistoric population exploited resources concentrated mainly within the dry river valleys of the region. No reliable data on the archaeology of the Fish River Canyon were available at the time of the survey reported here, but the unusual abundance of resources within an otherwise arid region supported the expectation that some evidence of prehistoric settlement would be found in the canyon.

ABSTRACT

Twenty-seven archaeological sites were located in the Fish River Canyon during a survey in June 1981. The presence of Pleistocene (Early and Middle Stone Age) artefacts was noted at nine locations and more recent settlement remains at a further eighteen. The location of these sites is indicated and their associations and distribution are discussed.
2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY

The survey was timed to co-incide with the mid-winter peak in the use of the canyon by hikers in 1981. Hiking activity is mostly limited to the Fish River bed between N.L.P. and Ai-Ais; the area of highest potential impact by hikers lies along the shortest passable route between these two points. Archaeological sites approached or crossed by the well-beaten trails developed during that season were recorded with photographs and descriptions; no material was collected from the sites and little attention was paid to areas out of sight of the trail during the five day survey.

In Fig 1, the distribution of archaeological sites recorded during the survey is shown. The sites, all open-stations, were of two distinct varieties with independent distributions. In the first of these, reworked Pleistocene-age artefacts were associated with the gravels of the present river-course and the lower parts of some scree slopes. The second variety consisted of relatively recent and well-preserved open station settlements with stone hut circles and cairns. These were unevenly distributed on alluvial fans and along the banks of the river throughout the length of the surveyed portion of the canyon. Isolated Early Stone Age artefacts appeared to occur only in the active gravels and showed traces of heavy abrasion and rolling. Somewhat larger numbers of Middle Stone Age artefacts, such as blade-forms with prepared platforms, occurred in the scree gravel. It was unclear whether or not these artefacts were in primary contexts and their numbers were insufficient to warrant detailed examination.

In Fig 1 the eighteen recent open station settlements are grouped into three broad categories, namely single-feature sites, sites with up to five features and those with up to ten, the largest observed concentration. In all except three cases these sites were situated on the inside of bends in the river; the distribution of open pools and jetsam indicated that the most vigorous development of the bends was towards the outside, away from the sites. The few exceptional locations were embayments formed at the confluence of a minor tributary with the Fish River (Sites 10, 13) and a dune field several hundred metres away from the present course of the river (Site 11).

Although three of these sites consisted only of single cairns (Sites 5, 6, 8), the remainder showed traces of hut foundations. In all except one case (Site 9), these were semi-circles and open areas with diameters of between 1.5 m and 3.0 m. In addition, the single hut feature at Site 9 showed a secondary lobe added to the one side. Cairns were associated with the hut at Site 10 and a more elaborate and enigmatic structure — with an upright slab at each end and enclosed by a circle of smaller stones — on Site 16, may mark a burial. The same site was also associated with a small enclosure of stone, with an internal diameter of 60 cm. Similar features in the Zerrissene Mountains of Damaraland have been interpreted as pens for young small stock or as storage cairns (Carr et al., 1978: 251, 253).

Few surface associations were found on any of these sites; irregularly flaked quartz cobbles and stone mortars were the only evidence of stone tools and no relia-
bly associated bone was noted from any of the open station sites. The five historic period European sites in the lower parts of the canyon were similarly lacking in surface materials, although no evidence of vandalism was apparent at these or any of the archaeological sites.

3 DISCUSSION

The brief survey reported here covered most of the possible site locations within the confines of the Fish River Canyon. Access to the canyon floor and its potential area for settlement is limited by the precipitous cliffs. Consequently, there is an apparent decrease in the size of settlements as the canyon becomes progressively narrower up-stream from Ai-Ais. Although there is only a weakly negative correlation ($r = -0.37$) between distance up-stream and the decreasing number of features per site, it appears that access to up-stream sites was limited by space and topography and that down-stream locations were favoured. The five features at Site 2, well within the confines of the canyon, and the occurrence of small and single-feature sites far down-stream suggest that more complex factors may have influenced site selection strategies. This somewhat unstructured distribution is partly due to a lack of chronological control: although it appears from the associations and preservation of the open sites that most are attributable to pre-colonial herders, discoloured soil from within the features of Site 14 may contain dung of a more recent date. The absence of ceramics from these sites may be due to the mobile surface of terraces above the river bends but ceramics and other surface remains are not always associated with residential features on similar sites where some activities are spatially segregated (Kinahan 1984).

The archaeological remains of pastoral settlement are notoriously scant (Smith 1983: 79) and even relatively recent occupations are not easily discerned (Robertshaw 1978: 29–31). The visibility of the Fish River Canyon sites is improved by the remains of stone enclosures, a characteristic shared by similar sites reported from the Zerrissene Mountains (Carr et al., 1978) and at Sylvia Hill in the southern Namib (Shackley 1983), which are also poor in other surface remains.

4 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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