Living with wildlife –
the story of Marienfluss Conservancy

Marienfluss – after the Marienfluss Valley
Living with wildlife – the story of MARIENFLUSS CONSERVANCY

A CONSERVANCY IS...

• a legally registered area with clearly defined borders and a constituted management body run by the community for the development of residents and the sustainable use of wildlife and tourism

• managed by a group elected to serve the interests of all its members

• a place where residents can add income from wildlife and tourism to traditional farming activities

• a place where wildlife populations increase as they are managed for productive gain

• a place where the value of the natural resources increases, enhancing the value of the land

• a forum through which services and developments can be channelled and integrated

• zoned for multiple uses to minimise conflict and maximise the interests of all stakeholders

Conservancies enable development and conservation over large areas...

A LITTLE HISTORY

Prior to Namibia’s independence in 1990, communal area residents had few rights to use wildlife. Wildlife animals were often seen as little more than a threat to crops, livestock and infrastructure, as well as community safety. Ground-breaking legislation passed in the mid-nineties laid the foundation for a new approach to the sustainable use of natural resources. By forming a conservancy, people in communal areas can now actively manage and generate benefits from – wildlife and other resources in their area, encouraging wildlife recoveries and environmental restoration. While a conservancy is a natural resource management structure, it is defined by social ties. Conservancies unite groups of people with the common goal of managing their resources. Today, over 60 communal conservancies embrace one in four rural Namibians, underlining a national commitment to both rural development and conservation.

The Marienfluss Conservancy covers a large area but embraces a small population of around 400 people, most of whom speak Otjiherero.

Because of its arid environment, the Marienfluss has always been marginal for settlement, but has supported small groups of semi-nomadic Himba for generations. The Himba, who are part of the larger Herero language group, first settled in what is today the Kunene Region around five hundred years ago. While the main Herero community moved on to settle in central Namibia, some clans stayed in northern Kunene and in this remote tract retained a strong sense of cultural identity and traditions that are still present today.

The Marienfluss lies in the furthest reaches of an area formerly known as Kaokoveld. Wedged between the mountain ranges of the escarpment in the east and the Skeleton Coast Park in the west, the conservancy stretches north to the Kunene River, the border with Angola. To the south and east more conservancies cover most of the Kunene Region in a vast conservation landscape that also links Etosha with the coastal parks. With the support of a local tourism operator and a field-based NGO, the Marienfluss community registered their conservancy a little over a decade ago.

MARIENFLUSS offers an enchanting mix of

fast, diverse and spectacular landscapes – the Marienfluss and Hartmann Valleys, the Kunene... a healthy environment diversifies economic opportunities and drives economic growth

charismatic, free-ranging wildlife – herds of springbok and gemsbok, endemic birds... wildlife generates a variety of benefits for local people

interesting cultures and dynamic communities committed to sustainability – people living in Marienfluss share a common vision for managing their area and its resources

vast, diverse and spectacular landscapes – the Marienfluss and Hartmann Valleys, the Kunene... a healthy environment diversifies economic opportunities and drives economic growth

people are living with wildlife, are managing natural resources wisely and are reaping the benefits...

MILESTONES AND SUCCESSES

1993 – the first community campsite is developed in the Marienfluss

1996 – policy changes allow communal area residents to benefit from wildlife and tourism by forming conservancies

1998 – the Marienfluss community begins the process to register as a conservancy

2001 – Marienfluss Conservancy is registered in January

2001 – Marienfluss Conservancy becomes part of the annual North-West Game Count

2003 – implementation of the Event Book monitoring system in Marienfluss Conservancy

2006 – harvesting of Commiphora resin for export to the international cosmetic industry begins in Marienfluss and three other conservancies

2007 – Marienfluss Conservancy becomes financially independent and is able to cover own operating expenses

2010 – registration as a community forest is initiated

QUICK FACTS

Region: Kunene

Size: 3,034 square kilometres

Approximate population: 400

Main language: Otjiherero

Date of registration: January 2001

Marienfluss Conservancy

Registered Communal Conservancy

Emerging Communal Conservancies

Date Protected Area

Communal Forest

Forest Reserve

Partially Conservancies

Twilight Conservancies

The Marienfluss Conservancy, located in the Kunene Region of northern Namibia, offers a unique blend of natural beauty, rich cultural heritage, and opportunities for sustainable development.

Conservancies like Marienfluss allow local communities to manage their natural resources, promote wildlife conservation, and generate income through tourism and other activities. This approach has been successful in many parts of Namibia, helping to balance the needs of people, wildlife, and the environment for the benefit of all stakeholders.

Marienfluss Conservancy was established in 2001 with the support of local residents and partners. It covers a large area, home to a small population of around 400 people, most of whom speak Otjiherero. The conservancy is located in the Kunene Region, an arid area that was historically inhabited by the Himba, who have a rich cultural heritage.

The Marienfluss Conservancy is one of many conservancies established in Namibia since independence in 1990. These conservancies have been key to the country's transition from a focus on mining and commercial agriculture to one that prioritizes sustainable use of natural resources, community involvement, and environmental conservation. Marienfluss is one of the many conservancies that have demonstrated the potential for a new approach to managing land and resources in Namibia.
The landscapes of the Marienfluss Conservancy are epic. On the eastern side of the conservancy, the Marienfluss Valley, flanked by the towering ridges of the Otjihapa and Hartmann Mountains, creates a truly magical setting. Springbok, ostrich and herds of long-horned cattle graze in harmony on vast plains, which descend northward to the oasis of the Kunene River. In the west, the similarly spectacular Hartmann Valley is separated by picturesque granite outcrops from the northern Namib dune fields. Here, the Kunene flows through sand dunes interspersed with rocky ridges. This is a place of mystery, tranquility, and great beauty.

Within such landscapes, the traditional Himba culture is iconic, an epitome of timeless Africa. Proud semi-nomadic cattle herders wander the vastness with their herds, women in traditional dress glow red, anointed with a mixture of butter fat, Commiphora perfume and ochre. The holy fire is the centre of the village. Around it, domed clay-and-dung huts encircle stock enclosures. Cattle are at the heart of Himba culture. Tradition dictates much of daily life and a complex system of patriarchal leadership and matriarchal inheritance ensures a balanced heritage. The Marienfluss offers wonderful images of cultural and environmental harmony.

The beautiful but harsh environment is dominated by the Namib Desert, which is perhaps the oldest desert in the world. The Namib stretches along the entire Namibian coastline, reaching slightly into south-western Angola. Average annual rainfall in the conservancy is extremely low at 100 to 150 millimetres and is highly variable, with much higher than average rain in some years and basically none in others. Frequent prolonged periods of drought require a high degree of adaptability. Lying along the eastern edge of the Namib fog belt, the landscape is soothed by 20 or more of days of fog each year, generated by the cold Benguela Current of the Atlantic. The Otjihapa Mountains rise to almost 3,000 metres above sea level, while much of the Marienfluss Valley lies below 500 metres. The atmosphere of wilderness is enhanced by the remoteness, by the Himba culture and by wonderful environmental enigmas. Fairy circles appear most plains – round depressions several metres in diameter where no grass grows, a phenomenon no scientist has been able to adequately explain.

RESOURCES AND ATTRACTIONS

Conservancies are living landscapes...

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an athletic figure strides with casual confidence through the hot, rugged desert landscape, carrying nothing but a walking stick; many kilometres away at his village, women in traditional dress go about their daily tasks of churning milk and preparing food...

Since the establishment of conservancies, wildlife numbers in communal areas have rebounded from historic lows prior to independence. Springbok, gemsbok and ostrich are common in Marienfluss. Other mammals include giraffe, mountain zebra, kudu, klipspringer, duiker, steenbok and the diminutive dik-dik. Chetah, leopard, spotted and brown hyena, and jackal all prowl the vastness. The Kunene supports a large crocodile population, as well as the Cape clawless otter. There are around 65 species of fish in the river. A high degree of endemism has developed along the Namibian escarpment, and the conservancy provides habitat to numerous endemic scorpions and reptiles, as well as many of the country's near-endemic birds. These include Benguela long-billed lark, Grey's lark, Cape’s fitch, rosy-faced lovebird, Rüppell’s korhaan, Monteiro’s hornbill, white-tailed shrike, Herero chat and rocknroller. The riverine habitat of the Kunene is a home to a variety of birds, including pelahouli heron, darter, African fish eagle and osprey. Well over 100 bird species have been recorded in the conservancy. Makalani palms, huge ana trees and mustard tree thrifts line parts of the Kunene, while mopane trees are dominant throughout the eastern parts of the conservancy, giving way in the west to open desert plains. Mopane wood grows slow and hard, and is used extensively to build huts and animal kraals, as well as for firewood.

Fauna & Flora

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It is possible to include the Kunene River in a trip through Kaoko, making for a truly unique experience. The Kunene River supports a healthy population of crocodiles and otters, and is a favourite spot for birdwatching. The river flows through a beautiful landscape, with rocky outcrops and dense riparian vegetation.

The Kunene River is a great place to explore, with its abundance of wildlife and stunning scenery. Visitors can go on boat trips, river walks, or simply relax by the river and enjoy the serenity.

Around Marienfluss...

...to the south and east, most of Kaoko is covered by adjacent conservancies that offer a variety of environmental and cultural attractions. To the west, the Marienfluss Conservancy borders onto the Skeleton Coast Park, an epicentre of remote wilderness travel. Fly-in safaris can easily combine these two jewels of the Namib, and can continue on to explore the length of Namibia’s desert coast, which is protected in its entirety by a number of adjacent parks.

Useful information about the Marienfluss Conservancy and the surrounding area is available on the website of the Namib-Naukluft National Park, which is responsible for the management of the conservancy. The park provides information about the wildlife, flora, and fauna of the area, as well as tips for responsible travel.

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The Himba living in Kacko make up less than one percent of Namibias national population and the residents of Marienfluss live in the most geographically remote and physically inaccessible part of the region. This has allowed traditional Himba society to remain largely intact here. Himba culture has been shaped around the needs of cattle and goats, and as pastoralists they lead migratory lifestyles following the sparse grazing of north-western Namibia. The liberation war further isolated the region prior to independence and the South African military presence had profound effects on the local environment and culture.

**Development** of the area has been extremely limited, with only a basic road network and minimal water supply in place. Lack of water is a harsh environment for the Himba is the most important constraint to agriculture and settlement in the conservancy. The Kunene River and a few natural springs have been the only water sources for generations. Two boreholes with pumps have been developed in the conservancy, but are by no means sufficient. Pumping water from the river is inhibited by intact there. Himba culture has always been centred around herds of livestock. The government school feeding programme provides maize flour for a daily meal, while the conservancy supplies additional food. When food runs out, children are sent home. Literacy rates are very low and only one member of the current conservancy committee can read. Many youngsters choose to leave school and remain in the conservancy to begin farming with inherited livestock.

**Benefits** to the conservancy and its members come from a variety of sources. Sources and amounts vary from year to year, and the residents of Marienfluss live in the most geographically remote and physically inaccessible part of the region, with only one member of the current conservancy committee can read. Many youngsters choose to leave school and remain in the conservancy to begin farming with inherited livestock.

The pie chart shows the main expenditure and benefit areas in 2010. The conservancy has created new jobs in the area, and generates a variety of other benefits for residents, including transport for school children and people needing medical attention. The conservancy has also developed water points for livestock and distributes game meat to households and the schools.

Adventurous **tourism** for visitors is provided by four wheel drive tracks that reach the conservancy from Opuwo via the infamous van Zyl's Pass, or from Sesfontein via Ovamboland and Red Drum. Direct vehicle access to the Skeleton Coast Park is not possible from the conservancy. Several joint-venture lodges offer tourism accommodation and generate significant conservation income, as well as providing employment. Around half of the staff at the lodges are from the conservancy. Camp Sunoro was the first lodge in the Marienfuss, but much of its infrastructure was destroyed in a fire and the site now offers only camping facilities. Wilderness Safaris Serra Cafema Camp, Skeleton Coast Safari’s Kunene Camp and Okahandjra River Camp all provide up-market accommodation, mostly for fly-in visitors. Okarohombo Community Campsite provides direct income and employment. The campsite has a wonderful location but is prone to flooding and has often been forced to close for long periods. Trophy hunting brings some cash income to the conservancy, but there are few valuable trophy species on the conservancy quota, this has been limited.

The **livelihoods** of conservancy residents are based on livestock, supplemented by small scale gardening. Maize, pumpkins, sweet peppers and tobacco are grown in gardens along the Kunene. Small scale mining for semi-precious stones is carried out at two sites in the conservancy, but does not provide much employment. Some residents receive support from family members who have jobs elsewhere. The conservancy has created new jobs in the area, and generates a variety of other benefits for residents, including transport for school children and people needing medical attention. The conservancy has also developed water points for livestock and distributes game meat to households and the schools.

The **conservancy** can enhance a range of livelihood options for its residents, including tourism income, guiding, craft production and indigenous plant harvesting, enabling the Himba to utilise much of their traditional knowledge and skills.
Managing Natural Resources

Conservancies facilitate sustainability...

The management structure of the conservancy consists of a management committee of 16 members including traditional authority representatives, as well as an executive committee of six members. Employees include four community game guards, two field officers and two community activators, as well as two campsite staff. Technical support is provided to the conservancy by IRDNC. The conservancy receives strong support from the traditional authority and representation on the committee ensures good communication.

Committee meetings are held monthly and the annual general meeting is attended by a large part of the community. The conservancy does not have an office and meetings are held under a tree. The conservancy owns two vehicles, which are used for monitoring and other conservancy activities, as well as to assist community members with transport.

Activities... The conservancy has been zoned for a variety of land uses, including an exclusive wildlife area, a rhino sanctuary shared with neighbouring Okupembe Conservancy, a tourism area, a livestock farming area and a multiple use zone. Conservancy game guards undertake active natural resource monitoring throughout the conservancy, including monthly fixed route patrols done on foot across the rugged and largely waterless terrain. The field officers assist with entering the gathered data into the Event Book monitoring system, recording a variety of data such as game sightings, human-wildlife conflict, poaching incidents, game utilisation and any other data deemed important by the conservancy. The data is aggregated into monthly and annual reporting charts that facilitate adaptive management. The conservancy strives to mitigate human-wildlife conflict. Since the conservancy was created, ten people have been killed by crocodiles, and an estimate of people who were attacked but survived is five times that number. Cattle and goats are often lost to crocodiles, and leopard, cheetah, hyena and jackal also prey on livestock. Through the National Policy on Human Wildlife Conflict Management, a system of providing financial offsets for losses is being implemented. The conservancy receives a fixed lump sum from the MET and is responsible for paying offsets to residents. Claims must be accompanied by a report from game guards investigating the incident, and all claims are reviewed by a panel before any payments can be made.

Community game guards actively investigate poaching incidents, which has led to the arrest of a number of poachers. Poachers often cross the Kunene River from Angola to kill antelopes for meat. Game guards have no legal powers to arrest poachers and need to call in the police or MET for assistance, which greatly reduces success rates due to the time needed to reach the conservancy.

The Marienfluss Conservancy provides vital structures for managing the communal natural resources of the area in a way that enhances development and ensures sustainability.
Conservancies are full of opportunities...

The wonderful mixture of environmental and cultural resources in the Marienfluss Conservancy provides untapped potential.

Challenges...
The remote location and difficult access limits development in the conservancy. One of the challenges is to maximise benefits from tourism. Tourist traffic has remained relatively low outside the luxury fly-in safari sector, which is well utilised by the current lodges. The Okarohombo Community Campsite has been rebuilt several times but is prone to flood damage and requires improved facilities and management expertise. There has been limited engagement from the mobile tourism sector, with both self-drive and organised tours often taking liberties with ‘wild camping’, without any benefits going to the conservancy. The conservancy faces a variety of capacity challenges, needing further training in both tourism and natural resource management to optimise conservancy activities and income. Limited availability of funds has inhibited the development and maintenance of conservancy facilities and equipment.

Human wildlife conflict is a challenge where ever people coexist with wild animals, especially if these include large predators. Crocodiles are a huge challenge for the conservancy, especially because of the loss of human life they cause. This can be mitigated through safe access to water for both people and livestock. A variety of other predators are also a challenge, including occasional nomadic lions. Yet predators are of great value, both to the ecosystem and tourism, and in the long run benefits gained from them should outweigh the costs of living with them.

The value of the area for tourism creates a variety of opportunities for the conservancy and its residents. Training plays an important role in developing the conservancy’s potential, with English, financial skills, hospitality and guiding high on the agenda. While the area already has a number of lodges catering for up-market fly-in tourism, other market sectors still have significant development potential. Improved and expanded camping facilities, both in the Marienfluss and in other parts of the conservancy, can facilitate increased benefits from this sector. Benefits from cultural tourism are currently limited, even though the Himba culture is one of the main attractions for most visitors to the area. Improved benefit sharing through controlled access to settlements, and the possible development of a dedicated traditional village, could ensure fair benefits from the cultural resources of the Himba. Craft development has significant potential as part of tourism development, as there is certainly a market for the high quality baskets produced by Himba women, as well as for a great variety of Himba artefacts. Culture is always susceptible to negative tourism influences and developments should safeguard against a loss of cultural heritage through the indiscriminate sale of valuable items or insensitive developments.

Conservancy plans include building an office near the current ‘meeting tree’ to enable more efficient management activities, and tourism operators are providing support to achieve this. The Ministry of strategic development, sensitive to cultural dynamics as well as the environment, can ensure that the residents of the conservancy benefit from their communal resources without compromising their heritage and expanded camping facilities, both in the Marienfluss and in other parts of the conservancy, can facilitate increased benefits from this sector. Benefits from cultural tourism are currently limited, even through the Himba culture is one of the main attractions for most visitors to the area. Improved benefit sharing through controlled access to settlements, and the possible development of a dedicated traditional village, could ensure fair benefits from the cultural resources of the Himba. Craft development has significant potential as part of tourism development, as there is certainly a market for the high quality baskets produced by Himba women, as well as for a great variety of Himba artefacts. Culture is always susceptible to negative tourism influences and developments should safeguard against a loss of cultural heritage through the indiscriminate sale of valuable items or insensitive developments.

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