Living with wildlife –
the story of Puros Conservancy

Puros – from ‘omburo’, Otjiherero for ‘fountain’
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

A LITTLE HISTORY
Prior to Namibia’s independence in 1990, communal area residents had few rights to use wildlife. Wild 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, undertaking a national commitment to both rural development and conservation.

The Puros Conservancy covers a large area of over 3,500 square kilometres, but embraces only a small population of around 300 people, most of whom speak Oshimba. The Himbas, who are part of the larger Herero language group, first settled in what is today the Kunene Region around five hundred years ago, arriving from the north. While the main Herero community moved on to settle in central Namibia in the 1750s, some groups stayed in northern Kunene and over time became known as the Himbas. In this remote and mostly arid area, the Himba retained a strong sense of cultural identity still evident today. Because of its arid environment, the Puros area has always been marginal for settlement, but has supported small groups of semi-nomadic Himba pastoralists for generations. The permanent settlement at Puros only began to develop around forty years ago.

After the conservancy legislation was passed in 1996, the neighbouring Puros and Sesfontein communities initially intended to form one conservancy, but logistical challenges and communication difficulties in the vast area proved to great, and the communities registered two conservancies, who still work together on natural resource management issues.

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RESOURCES AND ATTRACTIONS

Conservancies are living landscapes...

The traditional culture of the Himba is iconic. Proud pastoralists herd their cattle across the spectacular landscapes of the north-west, as women in traditional dress, anointed with a mixture of butter fat and red ochre, tend to village chores. While the settlement of Puros has gradually lost many traditional Himba attributes, the nearby Puros Traditional Village allows visitors wonderful insights into the cultural heritage of the Himba, showing practical aspects of daily life and explaining important elements such as the holy fire, and the system of dual descent that governs Himba society. The traditional village also keeps alive a sense of pride in the cultural heritage of the community.

Puros Traditional Village allows wonderful cultural insights and interaction...
The Himba living in Kaoko make up less than one percent of Namibia’s national population and the residents of Puros live in a geographically remote and arid part of the Kunene Region. Himba culture has always been centred around herds of livestock, and the semi-nomadic pastoralists moved over large areas to follow the sparse grazing and ephemeral water sources along the edge of the Namib. In the early 1980s, an extremely harsh drought caused terrible livestock losses throughout the region. Deprived of their main livelihood, the Himba in the Puros area needed to turn to other forms of income generation. 

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Benefits to the conservancy and its members come from a variety of sources. Sources and amounts vary from year to year, depending on factors such as agreements with private sector partners, and market fluctuations. The pie chart shows the main benefit sources in 2010.

The conservancy has developed a borehole to provide the traditional village with water, as well as creating water points for livestock. Harvesting Commiphora resin for the perfume industry is generating important income for Himba women. The resin is naturally exuded by the Commiphora bushes and has been collected by Himba women to make scent for generations. Field-based NGO Integrated Rural Development & Nature Conservation (IRDNC) now buys the harvest and processes it into an essential oil at its natural product facility in Opuwo. The oil is exported to France, where it is used as a perfume ingredient. To be able to maximise benefits from indigenous plants, the conservancy has initiated registration as a community forest with the Ministry of Agriculture, Water & Forestry. Crafts have also become an important source of income and a variety of crafts, including jewellery and baskets, are sold at the traditional village.

Access for visitors to the conservancy is provided by the D3707 gravel road that connects Puros and Opuwo. A number of small four-wheel drive tracks traverse the conservancy, but should only be explored in the company of experienced guides. Direct vehicle access to the Skeleton Coast Park is not possible from the conservancy. A variety of beautiful tourism accommodation options for all market segments exist in Puros. The Puros Campsite, which was already operating long before the registration of the conservancy, is an extremely popular stop-over for camping safaris, while the adjacent Puros Bush Lodge offers chalets for self-catering travellers. Both of these enterprises, as well as the Puros Traditional Village, are managed by the conservancy. The exquisite Okahirongo Elephant Lodge, a joint venture with the conservancy, caters for up-market visitors, while Skeleton Coast Safaris operates a joint-venture camp for their fly-in guests at Leylands Drift in the conservancy. All the tourism enterprises generate significant income, employment and other benefits for the conservancy and its residents.

The conservancy spends money and provides community and individual benefits in various areas. Areas and amounts vary from year to year, depending on factors such as conservancy income and priorities. Private sector jobs are created through agreements with private sector partners. The pie chart shows the main expenditure and benefit areas in 2010.
MANAGING NATURAL RESOURCES

Conservancies facilitate sustainability...

The management structure of Puros Conservancy consists of a management committee of 13 members. Conservancy employees include five game guards, three lion officers, two community activators, a water management officer, seven traditional village staff, five campsite staff, nine bush lodge staff and a cook employed at the school. The conservancy has its own office at Puros and owns a four-wheel drive vehicle to carry out its activities. A range of technical support is provided to the conservancy by IRDNC.

Activities...
The conservancy has been zoned to reduce conflicts between farming and wildlife in the areas where highest game densities occur, but Puros is completely unfenced and wildlife can move freely across the conservancy and beyond its borders. Black rhino were translocated from the Palmwag Tourism Concession to Puros and neighbouring Orupembe Conservancies to boost the existing population. 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. Information is entered 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 is part of the annual North-West Game Count, carried out by the Ministry of Environment & Tourism (MET) in collaboration with the conservancies and with the support of NGOs. The census is the largest annual road-based game count in the world. The MET works with the conservancy and other stakeholders to set annual quotas for using wildlife, based on information from the game counts and the Event Book. This allows the conservancy to carry out own-use hunting to supply residents with meat, as well as entering into trophy hunting concession agreements with hunting operators.

Puros strives to mitigate all human wildlife conflict, and is training staff to monitor other species such as elephant and black rhino. Puros has paid offsets to residents for losses caused by wildlife for a number of years through the Human Animal Conservancy Self Insurance Scheme (HACCISIS). Through the National Policy on Human Wildlife Conflict Management, a new system of providing financial offsets for losses is now 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.

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

**Challenges...** Human wildlife conflict is a challenge where ever people coexist with wild animals, especially if these include lions. Puros is facing this challenge in an innovative way, by choosing to actively look after and live with the lions that have made the conservancy a part of their home range. A general change in attitude towards predators throughout the north-west is reflected by the fact that the free-roaming lions in the Kunene Region have recovered from a population low of only 25 individuals in the mid nineties, to well over a hundred today. The lions range as far south as the Ugab River, north to the Marienfluss and west to the misty beaches of the Skeleton Coast. Conflicts with the lions are a huge challenge for local farmers, and many lions continue to be shot and poisoned. While other predators such as spotted hyaena, leopard and cheetah actually cause more incidents each year, lions feature most prominently in the consciousness of people, as they also present a direct threat to human life. Yet all predators, as well as elephants and other wildlife, are extremely valuable, both to the ecosystem and to tourism, and in the long run benefits gained from them need to outweigh the costs of living with them — if people are to continue to tolerate them. The work done in Puros will hopefully bear fruit and will begin to convince more conservancies to work actively with lions and other potential conflict species.

Puros harbours great potential to overcome some of the development challenges that the area faces — and the conservancy is the ideal structure to coordinate many of the developments that the free-roaming lions in the Kunene Region have recovered from a population low of only 25 individuals in the mid nineties, to well over a hundred today. The lions range as far south as the Ugab River, north to the Marienfluss and west to the misty beaches of the Skeleton Coast. Conflicts with the lions are a huge challenge for local farmers, and many lions continue to be shot and poisoned. While other predators such as spotted hyaena, leopard and cheetah actually cause more incidents each year, lions feature most prominently in the consciousness of people, as they also present a direct threat to human life. Yet all predators, as well as elephants and other wildlife, are extremely valuable, both to the ecosystem and to tourism, and in the long run benefits gained from them need to outweigh the costs of living with them — if people are to continue to tolerate them. The work done in Puros will hopefully bear fruit and will begin to convince more conservancies to work actively with lions and other potential conflict species.

Puros has diverse **opportunities** to expand the range of community benefits generated from natural resource management. Many mobile operators currently utilising the wildlife and landscape attractions Puros has to offer are not sharing benefits with the custodians of the area — the local community. Once mobile operators begin to engage constructively with the conservancy, this will begin to generate additional community benefits and lead to a fair sharing of the income from mobile tourism. Puros has a variety of plans to expand tourism, as well as to improve conservancy management. The concessions policy of the Ministry of Environment & Tourism creates opportunities for park neighbours to benefit from adjacent protected areas. By sharing 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 THE FUTURE**

Puros served as an excellent example for contributing to rural livelihoods while conserving wildlife through tourism in the 1980s. Today, Puros has developed into one of the most successful conservancies in Namibia, generating community benefits from a suite of natural resource management activities. The pilot project for living with lions has been successful and has been taken to other conservancies, and the small community in this remote and harshly beautiful tract of land can continue to find innovative ways to live with wildlife and generate benefits from conservation, ensuring a bright future for the conservancy and its residents.

**Come to Puros — be part of the future...**

Conservancies are full of opportunities...

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benefits from resources to which communities had been denied access, a system of ‘friendly neighbours’ is created through an alliance that benefits both the park and the neighbouring community. Puros has applied for a concession in the adjacent Skeleton Coast Park, which, if awarded, could open exciting new tourism options and generate important benefits for the conservancy.

The conservancy strives to continuously improve its management capacities, and is funding tertiary education for local learners, who can return to the conservancy well-trained after the completion of their studies, to take up management positions. Puros also hopes to share its experiences in working with lions with other conservancies to expand the positive impacts of lion conservation.

**CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES...**

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