Living with wildlife –
the story of Sorris Sorris Conservancy

Sorris Sorris – Khoekhoegowab for ‘an abundance of sunlight’
A CONSERVANCY IS...
- a legally registered area with clearly defined borders and a 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 conservation and development over large areas....

MILESTONES AND SUCCESSES
1996 – policy changes allow communal area residents to benefit from wildlife and tourism by forming conservancies.
1998 – the Sorris Sorris community begins the process to register as a conservancy.
2000 – Sorris Sorris becomes part of the annual North-West Game Count.
2001 – Sorris Sorris Conservancy is registered in October.
2004 – a grant is received for a feasibility study on establishing an environmental information centre in the conservancy.
2006 – Hartmann’s zebra are translocated into the conservancy to boost the existing population.
2007 – hartebeest are reintroduced into the conservancy.
2010 – through a grant from the Danish International Development Agency, a project aimed at reducing elephant damage to infrastructure is initiated.
2011 – the Sorris Sorris Information Centre is formally opened.

QUICK FACTS
Region: Kunene
Size: 2,280 square kilometres
Approximate population: 1,300
Main language: Khoekhoegowab
Date of registration: October 2001.

Sorris Sorris
- offers an enchanting mix of
  - interesting cultures and dynamic communities committed to sustainability – people living in Sorris Sorris share a common vision for managing their area and its resources.
  - vast, diverse and spectacular landscapes – desert plains, granite formations, the Ugab River...
  - a healthy environment diversifies economic opportunities and drives economic growth.

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, underwriting a national commitment to both rural development and conservation.

Sorris Sorris
embraces a population of around 1,300 people, most of whom speak Khoekhoegowab. Because of its arid environment on the edge of the Namib Desert, settlement in the area has always been limited. The Damara have occupied this region for a very long time, with a centre at Okombahe slightly south-east of Sorris Sorris. Damara origin prior to settling in Namibia centuries ago is uncertain. Settlement in the last century was heavily influenced by the German colonisation and later South African administration of Namibia. During the 1950s, the Khomanin Damara were forcibly moved from Windhoek to Sorris Sorris, and throughout the colonial period much land was divided up as white farmland, with some farms subsequently being reincorporated into the reshaped ‘homelands’ created by the Odendaal Commission’s proposals of 1964.

Taking their cue from the first conservancies formed in the mid-nineties, local farmers saw the benefits of working together to manage resources and develop tourism. Starting the conservancy was not easy and the community at first had no supporting agency. With assistance from the Ministry of Environment & Tourism (MET), Sorris Sorris was registered in 2001.
The Damara were amongst the earliest residents of what is today Namibia. Their culture has undergone many changes, and was traditionally divided into a number of groups that included the Dãorén, or Brandberg Damara. The Damara have a shared language with the Nama, but the linguistic origin of Khoekhoe is uncertain. Historically, the Damara were a hunter-gatherer society, but stock farming started becoming a central livelihood activity at least a century ago. The ephemeral Ugab River delineates the boundary between the Kunene and Erongo Regions. To the south, in Erongo, Namibia’s highest mountain, the Brandberg, rises as an isolated massif out of the surrounding desert plains. To the north lies Sorris Sorris, spread out under the Namibian sun. The tranquil landscape is interspersed with granite outcrops tumbling across the plains in wonderful bolder formations. Long before sheep were introduced to the region, people lived on these plains and left a record of their time, painted in red ochre on overhanging rocks of the area. Local guides know where rock paintings are to be found, some perhaps several thousand years old. They are a prelude to the nearby rock art of the Brandberg and Twyfelfontein, two of the richest rock art sites in the world.

Sorris Sorris stretches along the eastern fringes of the Namib Desert and its environment is heavily influenced by the Namib, which is said to be the oldest desert in the world. The cold Benguela Current flowing along the Namibian coast inhibits cloud formation and influences the climate of a large part of the country. Average annual rainfall in Sorris Sorris is low at around 150 and 200 millimetres. Rainfall is also highly variable, with much higher than average rain in some years and basically none in others. Evaporation is extremely high and frequent prolonged periods of drought require a high degree of adaptability, putting great limitations on agriculture in the area. The Brandberg rises to over 2,500 metres above sea level while the surrounding plains in Sorris Sorris descend to around 500 metres at the Ugab River. The ephemeral river is an important lifeline in the desert, providing a variety of resources for wildlife, as well as people and their livestock.

Since the establishment of conservancies, wildlife numbers in communal areas have rebounded from historic lows prior to independence. Sorris Sorris is home to a variety of charismatic game, including desert-adapted elephant, black rhino, giraffe, mountain zebra, kudu, gemsbok, springbok, duiker, steenbok, klipspringer, ostrich and baboon. Predators include leopard, cheetah, spotted and brown hyaena, jackal and caracal, as well as occasional nomadic lions.

Around Sorris Sorris... The conservancy is completely surrounded by other communal conservancies, which together create a vast contiguous conservation landscape. The area harbours great attractions, including the natural and cultural wonders of the Brandberg, and the renowned rock engravings at the Twyfelfontein World Heritage Site. Sorris Sorris lies between these drawcards and has a lot to offer travellers along the way.
LIVELIHOODS AND DEVELOPMENT

Conservancies empower rural people...

The Damara today live in many parts of Namibia, but make up less than ten percent of the national population. At the turn of the 19th century, the Damara were marginalised and often impoverished by other language groups. Under the South African administration of Namibia, the implementation of the Ondoaad Commission created what was then known as Damarraland. A number of formerly private farms were incorporated into the homeland, and some infrastructure from these farms still exists today. Yet the homelands caused considerable cultural and social upheaval and often had only very limited correlation to settlement patterns prior to the arrival of Europeans.

Development was sorely neglected in communal areas during the German colonial period and the South African administration of Namibia prior to independence. Even today, the arid zone on the fringes of the Namib has received less development attention than other areas. While Uts, around 30 kilometres to the south-east, is the closest town to the conservancy, the regional centre of Khorixas, around 50 kilometres to the north, offers the greatest range of facilities and services for conservancy residents. A primary school at Anixab, the largest settlement in Sorris Sorris, provides some access to education but secondary school students leave the conservancy to study in Khorixas. The nearest hospital is in Khorixas. Limited telecommunication infrastructure or further afield. A clinic at Anixab provides basic health care, and the regional hospital in Khorixas. Maintaining basic health care infrastructure has been a problem for conservancy residents, but improved mobile coverage is alleviating this and the conservancy makes use of the internet and email through donated equipment.

Water supply is an inhibiting factor in the conservancy. Yields from boreholes tapping groundwater reservoirs are generally low and drilling is expensive. There are some earth dams in the north of the conservancy, but these store water for only a limited time after good rains. Some permanent springs in the Ugab River provide localised water points for both wildlife and livestock.

Livelihoods in the area generally focus on a mix of cattle, goats and sheep, and small gardens are maintained by many households. Income from employment, pensions and remittances supplements the farming income for many residents. The establishment of the conservancy is providing new livelihood choices by encouraging tourism, as well as enabling other natural resource use options. While the conservancy is currently not in a position to distribute cash payments to residents, it is generating a variety of benefits. The conservancy has created a number of jobs and is facilitating empowerment in the tourism and trophy hunting industries. Game meat is distributed to residents, and trophy hunting and bird hunting self-hunting generate income at the moment.

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 can create a range of new livelihood options for its residents, including employment and income from tourism, guiding, craft production and other sales and services based on the sustainable use of natural resources. 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 conservation income and priorities. The pie chart shows the main expenditure and benefit areas in 2010.

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Conservancies facilitate sustainability...

The management structure of the conservancy consists of a management committee of nine members, about half of whom are women, reflecting the empowerment of previously marginalised groups that conservancies enable. Employees include four community game guards, a coordinator and an administrative assistant. The beginnings of conservancy management were not easy, with staff working out of a caravan donated by the MET. In 2007, Sorris Sorris was one of 16 conservancies to receive support from the Integrated Community-Based Ecosystem Management (ICEMA) project of the MET, funded by the Global Environment Facility through the World Bank. The small management team was able to move into a purpose-built office, and training was provided in financial management and governance. With a grant from the Spanish cooperation, the Sorris Sorris Information Centre was built opposite the office in 2011.

Activities... Sorris Sorris is divided into four zones in order to reduce conflicts between wildlife and farming activities. There is a buffer zone between the farming area and the exclusive wildlife zone. The conservancy is not fenced, and farmers may graze their livestock in the buffer zone in times of drought, and wildlife can wander throughout the conservancy. No new settlement is allowed in the exclusive wildlife zone and the few farmers dispersed throughout this area pose little threat to wildlife, while suffering considerable losses from elephants and predators. A mini sanctuary adjacent to the exclusive wildlife zone adjoins the rhino sanctuary of Doro!Nawas Conservancy. Sorris Sorris owns a four-wheel drive vehicle, yet game guards often patrol the conservancy with donkey carts, as the limited conservancy budget results in some transport challenges and donkey carts offer an environmentally friendly alternative. The game guards use the Event Book monitoring system to record 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 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, covering over 7,000 kilometres of road transects in an area of around 70,000 square kilometres. 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.

The conservancy uses a mix of modern technologies and traditional knowledge and skills to enable healthy wildlife populations, a productive environment, and the effective management of natural resources.

Conservancies provide vital structures for managing the communal natural resources of the area in a way that enhances development and ensures sustainability.

Human Wildlife Conflict Management, a system of providing financial offsets for such 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 the game guards investigating the incident, and a system for reviewing claims and ensuring financial management must be in place.
Conservancies are full of opportunities...

The variety of environmental assets and cultural resources in the Sorris Sorris Conservancy provides untapped potential.

Challenges... Sorris Sorris has an abundance of sunlight, as well as a variety of resources and attractions, yet income from tourism has been low, as the area has been used as little more than a transit route. The conservancy has thus not been able to distribute many benefits and faces high community expectations. The conservancy has first endeavoured to get a variety of management systems in place, initially with limited external assistance, and can now begin to capitalise on its excellent location. An issue that needs to be addressed is the illegal cutting of firewood. Acacia and mopane trees have excellent wood, used for firewood, and in the case of mopane also as a building material. But the trees grow slowly due to the aridity of the area. An informal industry that has grown up around the supply of firewood to towns and the tourism industry needs to be strictly controlled through the existing permit system to avoid the over-utilisation.

Human wildlife conflict is a challenge where every people coexist with wild animals, especially if these include elephants and large predators. Elephant conflicts have been reduced in the conservancy through dedicated waterholes for wildlife and the protection of water infrastructure. Predator problems can be reduced through zoning and keeping livestock in enclosures at night. Importantly, these species 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 conservancy has a variety of opportunities to increase benefits from existing tourism traffic, as well as to develop new ventures in the area. Elephant, black rhino, giraffe and other wildlife within the stunning landscapes of the conservancy can attract people to spend time in the area, rather than just passing through. The information centre is at the cross roads to Khorixas and Twyfelfontein, and is a natural stop-over for visitors. There is space at the information centre to expand the small craft market and to develop other enterprises such as rock art sites. The conservancy would also like to operate its own campsite, and could benefit significantly from plans to develop a luxury lodge. The conservancy plans to turn a site called Decca Station, currently used as a base for game counts, into a training centre. Another idea is to develop a breeding stud for quality bulls and rams, which could bring income as well as better quality livestock to the area.

Come to Sorris Sorris... be part of the future...