CAPRIVI, attached to the northeast corner of Namibia like an afterthought in a “lego” model, must surely be Namibia’s best kept secret. Caprivi has, until recently, been veiled with an aura of mystery – a mystery which has hinted of impressive pristine landscapes, largely uncharted waterways, bountiful wildlife and rich tourism potential.

Besides the inhabitants of Caprivi and a procession of civil servants and military personnel, few outsiders were really aware of Caprivi’s natural resources. Its secrets only really started being revealed from late in the 1970s. Only in the 1980s did Caprivi draw the attention it deserved.

Caprivi, besides being a gateway to central Africa, offers a landscape shaped by relatively generous rainfall, quite unlike anything else in a largely arid land.

A number of factors added to its enigmatic status. Until 1989 western Caprivi was a military zone. Its geographical isolation from the rest of Namibia was exacerbated by poor access from the heartland. This limiting factor has been largely removed with the construction of the Trans-Caprivi highway which has seen the completion of a tar road from Rundu to the Okavango River. Once the remaining 200 kilometres through the western Caprivi have been tarred, Katima Mulilo will be easily accessible from the rest of the country.

WESTERN CAPRIVI

The first formal conservation endeavours in Caprivi were initiated in 1963 when the West Caprivi Nature Park was proclaimed. In 1968 the area was afforded higher conservation status when it was proclaimed a game park. This proclamation followed an ecological survey by Ken Tinley in 1966. Despite being given official conservation status the former Directorate of Nature Conservation, due to the presence of the military, had very little influence in the area. Only in the late 1980s did the Directorate start playing a larger role in the western Caprivi. After the withdrawal of the South African Defence Force in 1989 it assumed control of wildlife management in the area.

The Ministry of Environment and Tourism had to address the conservation requirements of an area which contributed significantly to national biodiversity as well as to the needs of more than 4 000 inhabitants who lived in scattered settlements.

The wildlife resources of western Caprivi are considerable. The area supports about 60 percent of Namibia’s elephant and buffalo populations as well as valuable species which include tsessebe, sable, giraffe, zebra, roan, sitatunga, lechwe, hippo and reedbuck. These species occur in numbers below the ecological carrying capacity but, through sound management practices, can increase.

Adding to its wildlife populations is the biodiversity supported by the Kwando and Okavango Rivers and their associated wetlands. These rivers and their floodplains support a high concentration of wildlife during the dry season when little surface water remains in the interior. Wildlife is also attracted to the floodplains and riparian woodland by the higher quality of fodder. The sandy soils of the interior, although supporting an impressive tree savanna, are nutrient poor and offer low quality grazing in the dry season.

One of the biggest challenges in Caprivi was meeting the needs of the people. Together with a number of NGOs and the inhabitants...
Up to 5000 elephant congregate in Caprivi during certain times of the year. Sandwiched between Angola, Zambia and Botswana, the Caprivi strip is an important area for large-scale game migrations. Namibia has an international responsibility to protect this corridor.

Although illegal hunting has significantly reduced crocodile numbers, these ancient reptiles are still common in Caprivi’s protected areas.

The rivers and wetlands of eastern Caprivi make it quite distinct from the rest of Namibia. While large parts are wooded, about 30 percent of the total land area of 11 600 km² is floodplain and a major part of this is associated with the Zambezi River system.

Caprivi has always boasted the greatest diversity of wildlife in Namibia. This has, however, diminished alarmingly over the past two decades. A number of species, such as wildebeest and eland, are locally extinct. The demise of the lechwe is an extreme example of the reduced numbers. Until the early 1970s there were reportedly about 25 000 lechwe on the eastern floodplains. Today little more than 10 percent remains. Among contributing factors are uncontrolled hunting, competition from livestock and loss of habitat due to low flood levels.

The overall picture, however, is not all bleak. Two game parks were proclaimed early in 1990. The Mambil National Park of about 319.92 km² affords protection to the Linyanti swamps. This productive wetland is arguably the most diverse in Namibia. It supports healthy populations of mammals such as lechwe, buffalo, hippo and elephant, and impressive birdlife. The diverse wetland habitats include permanent reed swamps, open-water habitats, ephemeral wetlands and large seasonally flooded plains. These support a wide diversity of less obvious organisms.

The area offers opportunities for low volume and low impact tourism. The mosaic of floodplain, channels, small tree-covered islands and the larger wooded islands, Nkasa and Lupala, offer a magical allure which rarely fail to enchant visitors.

The 1 009 km² Mudumu National Park was proclaimed among other reasons as a sanctu-
ary for species such as roan, sable, zebra and tsessebe. These species have declined at an alarming rate over the previous two decades. In the first five years since proclamation, zebra, impala and kudu numbers seem to be increasing, while the park also supports a significant number of elephant. It is still too early to determine trends in roan, sable and tsessebe numbers.

While the bordering Kwando River offers an obvious attraction, the tall mopane woodland, open grassland and mixed savanna also have a distinct appeal.

The Ministry is in the process of developing a management plan to guide conservation and tourism in this area.

The proclamation of these two parks was an important conservation milestone. The long term future of key wildlife resources and, in fact, of all natural resources which cannot be adequately protected within the parks, lies in the development of an ethic which recognises their finite nature. The parks are important "genetic banks", but given their relatively small sizes, a number of species need to range beyond the park boundaries. The biggest problem in responsible natural resource management is competition for limited resources and changes in human settlement patterns.

Rural communities at this stage have little incentive to conserve wildlife resources as they derive no benefits from these. The Ministry, however, believes that the people should be involved in the management of natural resources and share in the benefits.

Caprivi has all the ingredients for a vibrant wildlife-based tourist industry. There are, however, significant challenges. Government needs to provide the enabling environment for the private sector and rural communities to embark on sustainable natural resource based enterprises. The private sector and the rural communities need to become partners in the development of the tourism industry and in sustainable land use planning. Should this symbiotic relationship develop, there is every chance that Caprivi shall take its rightful place as a sought after destination in the region.

Caprivi's natural resources can certainly be the engine which drives the local economy while also contributing to the national economy. The conservation status of the region, however, must be viewed in a wider context which acknowledges the national responsibility enshrined in Art. 95 (1) of the Constitution of the Republic of Namibia which aims at "the maintenance of ecosystems, essential ecological processes and biological diversity".