Overview of the Cuvelai~Etosha Basin

The Cuvelai-Etoshia Basin is the southern half of a much larger depression, usually called the Ovamboland Basin by geologists. This broader basin is an extension of the massive Kalahari Basin spread across thousands of kilometers of central southern Africa.

The Cuvelai, Kunene and Okavango Rivers drain parts of the Angolan plateau highlands. Flows of the Cuvelai and Okavango end in the Kalahari Basin, while the Kunene reaches the Atlantic Ocean.

The Ovamboland Basin largely falls within the Kunene Province in Angola, and inside the Omona, Oshana, Oshikoto and Omusati Regions in Namibia. A substantial part of the basin's economy is derived from cross-border trade, especially at Oshikango/Santa Clara.

Rainfall in the basin varies between about 900 millimeters per year in the north and 300 millimeters in the south. Variation in rainfall is greatest in the south while the north more frequently gets reliable falls of rain. Most rain falls between January and March in the south and October and March in the northern areas.

Major features of the Ovamboland Basin

The Ovamboland Basin can be defined in two ways. One definition focuses on the basin's topography and its surface waters. The section of the Cuvelai in Angola has been defined that way.

The other definition is based on underground bodies of water, called aquifers, and flows of water beneath the surface. It is on this basin that the four Namibian sub-basins are defined. Each sub-basin has characteristic underground aquifers and their delineation helps to identify shared groundwater resources which can be managed by people in each sub-basin.

Population densities in the Ovamboland Basin

An estimated 1.2 million people live in the basin: about 70% in Namibia and 30% in Angola.

The Basin supports much higher densities of people than the surrounding areas of southwestern Africa. This is due to the Basin's relatively fertile soils and also the availability of fresh water in shallow wells. Elsewhere, most soils are poorly suited to crop cultivation, and rainwater seeps away to depths that are hard to reach through hand-dug wells.

Mopane woodland is dominant in the north of the Ovamboland Basin.

The Cuvelais (rivers here) and Muli Rivers are the only perennial rivers in the Basin. Both drain the northern parts of the Basin where altitude and rainfall are highest.