THE history of formal conservation in Namibia revolves largely around one man, Bernabé de la Bat, who was appointed biologist and then chief game warden in Etosha in the early fifties. De la Bat saw the birth of the country’s first official conservation body and served as its director until the early eighties. With remarkable vision, courage and foresight, he created a rich legacy of game parks, reserves and resort, on which conservationists could build in years to come. He also laid down the cornerstone for tourism in Namibia, today one of the country’s fastest growing industries.

The story is told that in 1953 De la Bat, who had graduated in marine biology at Stellenbosch University in South Africa, applied for the post in Etosha in the belief that the Etosha Pan was permanently filled with water and was therefore an appropriate place for him to pursue his profession. Instead of practising marine biology, however, he applied his extraordinary organisational and managerial talents to build up the country’s most prestigious government department, today one of Namibia’s most important ministries.

De la Bat advocated the sustainable utilisation of natural resources from the outset. He set the machinery in motion which gave commercial farmers ownership of their game and was largely responsible for the development of the game industry on commercial farms. By initiating the translocation of rare and endangered game species to the sanctuary of game reserves, farmers could in later years purchase the progeny of these animals to stock their farms. A major fund of these species today is the Waterberg Plateau Park, where the resplendent Bernabé de la Bat Rest Camp is a fitting monument to one of Africa’s great conservators.

EARLY HISTORY
The earliest conservation-oriented measures were taken in 1892 when, in an attempt to put an end to the indiscriminate shooting of game, the first hunting regulations were announced. The next meaningful step was the proclamation of three game reserves in 1907, referred to as Game Reserves 1, 2 and 3. The 1905/1907 outbreak of rinderpest had left a trail of destruction, necessitating cattle-free zones in the north. An additional motivation for the creation of the three reserves was that they would act as buffer zones, from a veterinary point of view.

Game protection legislation between the two world wars was based on German laws and was concerned primarily with hunting regulations and related issues. Proclamations made during this period, however, also included regulations concerning the import and export of birds, the protection of pythons and tortoises and the protection of the Welwitschia plant.

In the early years the South African Police and Bantu Affairs commissioners were responsible for the enforcement of game laws and management of game reserves. Visitors to the reserves had to bear with poor roads and take everything they needed with them, as there were no facilities of any kind.
in Namibia:

FOUNDATION

SCHOEMAN

Before World War II there was little tourism to speak of. South West Africa, as Namibia was then called, was largely unknown, means of communication were poor, state funds were limited and tourist attractions were undeveloped. An aftermath of the war, however, was an increasing international interest in travel, game and nature.

In 1947 the author A A Pienaar, who wrote under the pen name Sangiro, was appointed game warden of the Territory, with instructions to promote South West Africa by writing about its wildlife. He was succeeded by Dr P J Schoeman, author of numerous Afrikaans hunting and adventure books and former professor of anthropology and Bantu languages at Stellenbosch University. Schoeman was stationed at Otiwarongo, with the same brief as Pienaar. It is interesting to note that neither of these two writers produced a book on Namibia’s wildlife.

Development in Etosha was started during Schoeman’s period of office. An assistant game warden, Dieter Aschenborn, today a well-known Namibian wildlife artist, was stationed in Etosha in 1952 and a young biologist, Bernabé de la Bat, in 1953. Both appointments were on a contractual basis. In 1955 the SWA Administration established a permanent section to manage the country’s game and game reserves. De la Bat was appointed chief game warden for South West Africa. A newcomer, Dr Rudolf Bigalke, was employed as biologist.

The new section had jurisdiction over the so-called white or commercial areas, while conservation in the homelands was handled by South Africa. This led to many irregularities, primarily the illegal shooting of game, especially elephant and rhino. An oft-cited culprit was a onetime Secretary of Bantu Affairs, who wrote out the permits for his hunting sprees himself. The story is told that all the door handles in his house were of ivory and rhino horn plundered on these illegal hunting expeditions.

Increasing interest in hunting lead to the establishment of a SWA Game Protection and Hunting Board in 1951, whose main function was to advise the Executive Committee of the SWA Administration on hunting matters. An infrastructure was gradually developed, the fishing industry expanded phenomenally, more farms were given out, air transport was improved and an extensive road-building programme was launched. All of this led to growing interest in Namibia as a tourist destination.

DEVELOPMENT FROM 1955 TO 1980

The Game Conservation Section established in 1955 had a budget of R61 000 and a personnel of 31, consisting of Chief Game Warden Bernabé de la Bat, a clerk and 28 workers. This signified the end of the game protection era. The emphasis had shifted to the holistic approach to conservation of Namibia’s natural assets.

In 1956 the SWA Game Protection and Hunting Board was replaced by the SWA Parks Board, entrusted with the task of advising the Executive Committee on general policy and the development of resorts and game...
Following the outbreak of rinderpest in 1896/1897, this limestone fort was built at Okaukuejo as a police post to control the border.

reserves. The SWA Publicity and Tourist Association was established to promote the country as a tourist destination. Increasing numbers of tourists visited Namibia. Honorary nature conservators were appointed to advise and assist the Board. Development in the fields of both conservation and tourism now gained momentum. Numerous historical and natural monuments such as Fort Namutoni, the Brandberg, Waterberg, the Mukurob monolith, Quiver Tree Forest and the Spitzkoppe were proclaimed by the SWA Historical Monuments Commission.

Dr Schoeman had pioneered tourist development in Etosha by building a number of bungalows at Okaukuejo, improving roads, introducing fire-breaks and drilling bore-holes for game. Fort Namutoni was restored and opened for tourists in 1957 and the following year a rest camp was developed at Okaukuejo. The Halali Rest Camp was taken into commission in 1967. In the same year the Okaukuejo rest camp was greatly enlarged.

The pioneers who, with Bernabé de la Bat at the helm, put the conservation apparatus in Namibia on its feet were a divergent mix of characters, each of whom left his own indelible stamp. De la Bat was the proverbial jack of all trades, doubling up as road builder, elephant hunter, pilot, gardener, bricklayer, researcher, marketeer and Etosha’s first tourist officer.

Stoffel Roche, who stayed with the department until 1988, in later years as head of the Nature Conservation section, was first “Commander” of the restored Fort Namutoni. Peter Starck, a poacher of some repute, showed Etosha’s conservators how to track down abscending lions and elephants and bring them back to the park. For 20 years Sixy Holtzhausen was the department’s “scribe” and Meynderd Blom, another behind-the-scenes man, built and maintained the roads. Zakkie Elff, today one of South Africa’s veteran wildlife artists, had many a skirmish with rhinos, leopards and elephants.
Polla Swart, current director of Resource Management in the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, was appointed second in command under De la Bat in 1966 and head of research in 1969. A subsequent head of research who left his mark was Dr Eugene Joubert, appointed biologist in Etosha in 1965. The veterinarian Dr Ian Hofmeyr gained international recognition for his game capture techniques and headed the department's first game capture unit, reputed to be one of the best in the world. Stefants Els, first head of the tourism section, managed the rest camps with a fist of iron.

Major developments and expansion took place in the sixties, due largely to the personal interest of Administrators Wennie du Plessis and Daan Viljoen. Between 1962 and 1968 the Daan Viljoen Game Park, West Caprivi Game Reserve, Fish River Canyon, Namib Desert Park (formerly Game Reserve 3), Naukluft Mountain Zebra Park and the Cape Cross Seal Reserve were proclaimed.

The rest camp at Daan Viljoen, completed in 1962, was built virtually single-handedly by "Groot Doep" Visser du Plessis. In 1964 the Hardap Recreation Resort was built and in 1965 the Ai-Ais Hot Springs Resort was taken into commission.

During the seventies the management of the tourist projects of the municipalities of Swakopmund and Lüderitz were taken over by the Nature Conservation authorities. Conservation areas created during this period included the Skeleton Coast Park and the Waterberg Plateau Park, proclaimed in 1971 and 1972 respectively, the Von Baken Recreation Resort, Terrace Bay angling resort in the Skeleton Coast Park, and the Gross-Barmen Hot Springs Resort. In 1978 the Namib Desert and Naukluft Mountain Zebra Parks, unoccupied state land and a section of Diamond Area 2 were amalgamated and proclaimed as the Namib-Naukluft Park. Overnight camping facilities for approximately 20,000 people were created in the National
West Coast Tourist Recreation Area and Skeleton Coast Park. This productive era was concluded by the purchase of the legendary Duwisib Castle and its contents in 1979.

Not least of De la Bat’s attributes was his far-sighted support of artists, writers, photographers and film-makers. Recognising what they produced as important marketing tools for the promotion of Namibia as a tourist destination, he cleared the way for them to work in game reserves. Well-known artists who depicted Etosha are Fritz Krampe and Zakkie Eloff, Johannes Blatt and his son, Arnfried Blatt, Peter Downing, Hilda Wasserfall, Koos van Eltenkhuizen and Janet Lautenbach are artists who were employed by the Division. Photographers supported by De la Bat were Clem Haagner, Colin Richards, Dick Wolff, Helmut zur Strassen and Mitch Reardon, while film-makers David Hughes, Dieter Plage, Rodney Borland and Des and Jen Bartlett, the latter via Anglia Survival TV and National Geographic, put Namibia on the world map as a travel destination.

**MILESTONES IN THE EARLY YEARS**

The recommendations of the Elephant Commission of 1956 resulted in the expansion of Etosha’s boundaries to include the Otjovarsandu environs. Problems caused by elephants on farms in the Kamanjab area were addressed by sinking a chain of almost 80 boreholes along the 19th latitude to lure the elephants to Etosha. This scheme was almost too successful, as in later years Etosha’s elephants had to be culled from time to time.

The entire Etosha was fenced and a network of game-proof fencing was constructed across the country on recommendation of the Foot-and-Mouth Disease Commission. This effectively stopped natural game migration routes, which led to the virtual extinction of blue wildebeest on farmlands and the drastic reduction of eland and gemsbok populations.

The so-called Nature Conservation or Frank Commission resulted in the realisation of another of De La Bat’s contributions to conservation strategies in Namibia, namely the promulgation in 1967 of legislation which gave commercial farmers ownership of certain game species on their farms. The legislation also made provision for huntable game and bird species, protected and specially protected game and plant species, and game utilisation in terms of hunting, trophy hunting, game harvesting, and the capture and transportation of game. An official survey of the West Coast led to the sanctioning of camping along the coast and introduction of measures to control pollution.

The Odendaal Report of 1963, aimed at applying South Africa’s policies of separate homeland development or apartheid in Namibia, had far-reaching consequences on the Division’s subsequent policies and planning. With total disregard to ecological boundaries, Etosha was drastically reduced in size. This eliminated future building of additional rest camps, with the exception of Otjovarsandu, and necessitated diversification. Land was consequently bought elsewhere to create new game reserves. In certain cases specifically for the relocation of rare and endangered species. This resulted in the establishment of the Division’s Game Capture Unit.

The large-scale translocation of rare and
endangered species under the leadership of state veterinarian Dr Ian Hofmeyr was launched. Black-faced impala and black rhino from Kaokoveld (now part of the Kunene Region), roan antelope and eland from the Okavango and Mangetti, white rhino from Natal in South Africa, and impala and sable antelope, tsessebe and roan from Caprivi and leopard and cheetah from farmlands were translocated to the different game reserves.

Another consequence of the Odendaal Commission was an ever-increasing need for research, since it had become necessary to ‘farm’ with game. A growing number of farms were used exclusively or partially for game-farming, which created an insatiable demand for animals. This, combined with escalating game capture activities, resulted in the relocation of game species into areas where, 80 and more years ago, they had become extinct.

The promulgation in 1968 of the Ordinance on Accommodation Establishments and Tourism created the opportunity for the establishment of a Tourism Board and the introduction of quality control for all accommodation establishments. This included rest camps, safari companies, guest farms and caravan parks. The development of techniques for culling game at night was initiated in 1974 by Piet Brand, which led to an established system of night culling on a scientific and profitable basis.

It was on the initiative of Administrator Wennie du Plessis that a Division of Nature Conservation and Tourism was established. The term game conservation was replaced with nature conservation, promoting the concept that nature in its entirety should be conserved. The idea that the word conserve embraced the concept of judicial utilisation became generally accepted.

DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH FACILITIES

All conservation policies, legislation and management planning were based on research. Initially the emphasis was on applied research, and research projects tended to be problem-oriented.

The appointment of Dr Rudi Bigalke heralded an extensive research programme in the fields of game diseases, development of game capture techniques, ecological surveys, grazing, problem animals and many others. Dr Hymie Ebedes, the first state veterinarian in Etosha, spent ten years researching anthrax and became an expert on the disease. Other early researchers who left their mark were Ken Tinley and Jack van der Spuy. The Etosha Ecological Institute, built at Okaakuejo, was taken into commission in 1974.

Desert research commenced in 1963 under the leadership of Dr Charles Koch, an entomologist from the Transvaal Museum. Dr Koch was the founder of the Desert Research Institute at Gobabeb on the banks of the Kuiseb River, 65 km from the coast, subsequently referred to as DERU (Desert Ecological Research Unit). Another entomologist, the American research scientist Dr Mary Seely, was appointed second director of the Institute, for many years managed and funded jointly by the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, the Transvaal Museum and the Division of Nature Conservation. Under Dr Seely’s leadership the Institute
became internationally known for its desert research. Today it is referred to as the Desert Ecological Research Unit of Namibia (DERUN).

The first issue of Madogo, a scientific journal on nature conservation and desert research, appeared in 1969. It was published by the Directorate of Nature Conservation with De la Bat as editor-in-chief and Eugene Joubert as editor.

Freshwater fish research was initiated in the seventies. Manie Bloemhof, ichthyologist at the Division, planned and built the Hardap Freshwater Fish Institute at Hardap Dam. Completed in 1978, its main function was to produce fingerlings for distribution to other dams and to develop suitable fish species for angling and as an additional source of protein for the people of the country.

Concern that uncontrolled large-scale withdrawal of water from the Kuiseb River would cause incalculable damage to its ecology activated institutions such as Water Affairs, Geological Survey, Agriculture and Technical Services, Forestry, the Weather Bureau and Nature Conservation and Tourism to launch the Kuiseb Environmental Project. The objective was to establish measures that would control the utilisation of the Kuiseb's natural resources, so as to minimise damage to the river and its environs.

**DEVELOPMENT FROM 1980 TO 1990**

When De la Bat left the Division of Nature Conservation and Tourism at the end of 1980 to become chairman of the Civil Service Commission, the conservation potential of Damaraland, Kaokoland, Kavango, eastern Caprivi and Diamond Areas 1 and 2 was still largely untapped. He had, however, done considerable groundwork towards the expansion of existing game reserves and recreation areas and the establishment of new reserves in the northeastern regions of the country. In addition, he had left behind a nucleus of inspired and dedicated conservationists, headed by his second-in-command, Polla Swart, who did much in the ensuing decade to implement his ideals.

The article on Namibia's game parks (see page 32) provides an overview of the more recent proclamations made during this period.

**THE FUTURE**

When asked to comment in 1980, on the 25th anniversary of the Department of Nature Conservation and Tourism in Namibia, Bernabé de la Bat replied, “To place South West Africa on the world map for travellers and to ensure that the country derives a substantial income from tourism, it is essential that planning of conservation and tourism is done on a national basis and involves all population groups, greater participation by the private sector and effective marketing.”

“The sparse population, long distances, high cost of maintaining the infrastructure and importation of consumer goods will prevent
the country from becoming overrun by tourists. With our abundant natural assets and the circumstances currently prevailing, the logical strategy is to plan for quality tourism as opposed to mass tourism."

These same sentiments are echoed and enlarged upon by first Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism after Independence, Hanno Rumpf, in a foreword to Namibia Holiday & Travel towards the end of 1994:

"We are fully aware that an overutilisation of our natural environment will be highly detrimental to the tourism industry. We must therefore guard against unsound utilisation and overdevelopment."

"At the same time we know that the industry can and must be developed to its full potential. There must be broadening of the tourism infrastructure to give access to the regions in Namibia which have not benefited from the industry in the past. There must be a stronger participation by Namibians living in the rural areas of the country."

"The tourism industry can play an important role in guarding against environmental degradation, and can actively contribute towards ensuring biodiversity. In order for this to happen effectively, the people of Namibia must appreciate that tourism will flourish only if our environment remains intact and when people benefit economically from the industry."

---

**Evolution of the Etosha National Park**

THE roots of today's kaleidoscopic network of nature and game reserves, angling, recreation and hot spring resorts, wilderness areas and research institutes lie in Etosha.

Governor Von Lindequist of the German colonial government proclaimed Game Reserves 1, 2 and 3 on March 22, 1907. The most significant of these, Game Reserve No 2, encompassed the Etosha Pan and Kaokoveld from the Kunene River in the north to the Hoarusib River in the south, a total area of 93,240 km². As such it remained intact until 1947, when the Kaokoveld portion was set aside for occupation by the Hereros. During the same year another portion of 3,406 km² was cut off from the reserve and sectioned into farms, an area which subsequently became known as the Gagarus block.

It gradually became clear that Etosha was not big enough to accommodate rare and endangered species such as black rhino, mountain zebra and black-faced impala, migratory eland and elephant and the influx of wildlife from adjacent areas. In accordance with the Elephant Commission of 1956, the boundaries of the park were extended towards the west. Unoccupied state land between the Hoanib and Ugab Rivers was added to Etosha, thereby practically doubling the size of the park. This effectively safeguarded game migration routes and created a corridor to the sea. The new park extended from the Skeleton Coast in the west for nearly 500 km inland to the edge of Etosha Pan in the east, a total surface area of 99,526 km².

The existence of what was effectively the largest national game reserve in the world was short-lived. Implementation of the recommendations of the Odendaal Report of 1963, aimed at applying the South African policies of separate homeland development in Namibia, resulted in a drastic reduction of the park area. With no regard to ecological considerations, 71,972 km² were re-apportioned as Ovambo, Kaokoland and Damaraland.

The entire Kaokoveld had effectively been deproclaimed as a game reserve, with the exception of the 30 to 40 km strip of coastline between the Kunene and the Ugab Rivers, destined to become the Skeleton Coast Park. As a somewhat conciliatory gesture, this narrow strip of coastal desert was set aside to be developed as a tourist area.

The shrinkage of the park caused a national and international furore. After many negotiations, three farms near Otjovasandu were bought and added to the park, and the bergveld to the west and sandveld to the north of Namutoni were retained. This brought the surface area of Etosha to 22,270 km², 77 percent less than before Odendaal. De la Bat said at the time that Etosha had been reduced to little more than 'a plucked fowl'. He was so incensed that he tendered his resignation, which Administrator Wennie du Plessis promptly tore up and threw in the waste-paper basket.