CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Place of sand and water
Imagine a flat expanse of sand stretching several hundred kilometres in all directions. Cover the sand with grass and trees, and add a few gentle ridges and dips formed here and there by old dunes and rivers that are now dry. The mantle of sand quickly soaks up any rain, leaving little or no surface water in this vast landscape. Life would not have been easy for anyone who made their home in this thirsty landscape.

Now slice a valley through the landscape, a valley long and deep enough to bring a flow of clear and clean water, year-in and year-out. What had been a rather featureless and hard landscape becomes a place where sand meets water. All kinds of new opportunities open up for plants, animals and people to live in a place where few of them would normally be found. The valley and its river is, of course, the Okavango. And the region is Kavango, an area covering about 48,500 square kilometres or roughly 5.5% of Namibia. The 201,000 people who live here make up about 11% of Namibia’s population.

Where did the original population come from, and who now lives in the Kavango? How do people farm, and why is farming generally unproductive? From where does the Okavango River get its water, and how important is the river to the region? Where is underground water most available, and what effect does the provision of this water have on land use? Why have fish stocks apparently declined? Of what value is tourism to Kavango? How is the region governed and who controls the use of land? What, why, when, who and how?

Sand and water: a profile of the Kavango Region has been compiled to bring together a summary of information on the region and to answer some of those questions. There are many different facts and figures, but these are the result of processes and practices, and these are the things that require explanation.

From the image of a river cutting through a large expanse of sand, it should be clear that the region broadly consists of the Okavango River valley and the extensive area of sandy woodlands to the south and north. Comparisons are often made between these two zones in the book, and ‘the river or Okavango’ and ‘inland’ areas are shorthand terms used for them. The veterinary cordon fence is an important border and feature, and its position in the region is shown in Figure 1. Areas south of the fence within the region are controlled by the government and its parastatal, the Namibian Development Corporation (NDC). Within Namibia the Kavango Region is one of 13 regions designated for purposes of administration and political representation. The borders of the region have changed four times (see page 36), while its name has also changed over time from Okavangoland, Okavango to Kavango. ‘Okavango’ was the name given to the river by the explorer Charles John Andersson in his book The Okavango River, published in 1861, but he probably misunderstood the name and incorrectly added the prefix ‘O’.1 Nevertheless, Okavango River is now widely adopted within Namibia and elsewhere, and this is the name used here.

The Kavango and the section of river that runs through it forms part of the Okavango Basin, and many aspects of the region need to be viewed in the context of this larger Basin Figures 3. Most importantly, the Kavango and its section of river fall neatly in the middle of the Basin. Upstream and to the north is Angola, which is the source of all water flowing through Namibia. The water enters Namibia along two
Perhaps the most striking aspect to the Okavango River valley is the massive difference in numbers of people living on the northern Angolan bank compared to the southern Namibian side. The band of cleared fields (coloured pink in this satellite image) is broad on the Namibian side because so many people live there, whereas the small number of people in Angola have cleared only scattered fields. The number of people living across the river in Angola is not known, but judging from the areas cleared for farming it might amount to 10% of the population along the bank in Namibia. Since about 155,000 people live within 10 kilometres of the river in Namibia, perhaps 15,000 people live on the Angolan side.

There are few large rivers in the world that deliver such clear, clean water as the Okavango. Botswana has much greater concerns about the strategic planning and management of the Okavango Basin than Angola or Namibia.

The region of Kavango therefore sits firmly between the major supplier (Angola) and major user (Botswana) of Okavango water. Water is certainly used in Angola and Namibia for subsistence farming and domestic uses, and to supply the needs of a few small towns and irrigation projects, but the political and economic influence of all of these local users is very much weaker than that of various external groups. These include the Botswana government (for its interest in tax revenues earned for the country as a whole), the Namibian government (because of the potential to use Okavango water for irrigation projects, hydroelectric power and to supplement Windhoek’s water supply), and external shareholders (for the profits they earn). As demands for water increase in southern Africa and more people begin to recognize the economic value of tourism to beautiful places, making the best use of water in the Okavango Basin is obviously a difficult, but extremely important challenge.