ROCKY POINT
Skeleton Coast, Namibia

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Abstract
Rocky Point on the Skeleton Coast of Namibia, is a small rock outcrop on the otherwise flat and featureless sandy coast. It has a small bay north of it, but as the *Africa Pilot* advises, there is no landing place. Despite this, the mere fact that it is the most prominent landmark on the sandy coast between the rocky headland of Möwe Bay and the Kunene River, 250 km northwards, made it an important landmark in the past two centuries.

For the last hundred years, authorities have restricted access, adding to the mystique of this isolated rock outcrop on the Namib Desert coast. For serious anglers, it is Utopia and for those lucky enough to have fished in its rich waters, it is a badge of distinction.

Introduction
Hundreds of people passed or visited Rocky Point over the years. Some played a major role in the history of this intriguing desert country. For many travellers it was the destination, for
Map of the Skeleton Coast area
Holger Kolberg
others merely a stop on the difficult and sometimes dangerous journey along the treacherous Skeleton Coast. A few unfortunate visitors lie buried in marked graves, while the sun-bleached bones of others lie scattered by wind and wild animals and some still lie hidden beneath the shifting sands.

Before the first documented travellers came by boat, indigenous inhabitants of the surrounding desert sporadically visited this prominent landmark. With colonization came explorers, hunters, traders, geologists, civil servants and soldiers. They arrived in boats, on foot and by horse. A handful arrived in the effortless luxury of an aircraft. The first motor vehicles battled soft sand and treacherous salt pans. Before the advent of the modern four-wheel drive vehicle, Rocky Point was difficult to reach. Even today, the ill equipped or unwary can meet with disaster.

The following is a brief description of some of the many travellers and their adventures, of hunger and thirst, heroism and sacrifice, despair and death on the Skeleton Coast of Namibia. The events and people mentioned here start in 1486 and end before independence in 1990.

1486 Portuguese explorers
Diego Cão, in January 1486, was the first known European explorer to reach the coast of the present day Namibia. Early maps indicate a Praia Verde (a Green Beach) and this refers to the reed-beds at the Kunene River mouth (Bridgeford 2002). No mention is made of Rocky Point and the next discernable landmark is possibly the Hoanib River mouth. Cão probably made a seaward tack because of the headwinds and missed both Rocky Point and a few kilometres further south, the Hoarusib River. Portuguese mariners named this stretch of coast the Mar Tenebroso, the dark and gloomy sea (Axelson 1973).
1824 Royal Navy
In 1824, HMS Espiégle, under command of Captain Isham Fleming Chapman, surveyed the west coast between Angra Pequena (now Lüderitz) and the southern part of Angola. He investigated a large river he named Nourse’s River, in honour of Commodore Nourse, the naval commander in the Cape (Kinahan 1992). Today, this is the Kunene River. The boat-party filling the water barrels ascended Nourse’s River for several kilometres and saw large trees, elephants and hippopotamuses. The few surviving documents from this voyage do not mention Rocky Point, but it is unlikely they would have missed such a prominent landmark (Axelson 1973).

1825 Captain William Owen
In 1825, Capt. William Fitzwilliam Owen of the Royal Navy named the rocky promontory Fort Rock Point and in the end, it became Rocky Point. In 1875, the Africa Pilot described Rocky Point ‘as a low sandy point, with a large rounded block of granite close to it. Round the sandy point is a cove, with a bar enclosing smooth water, and here boats may land with facility …’ (Kinahan 1992). However, a hundred years later, the Africa Pilot warned; ‘Rocky Point … is a prominent rocky spit … but there is no safe landing place’ (Africa Pilot 1977). Cape Guano was the name on maps of German South West Africa, printed in Pretoria in February 1915 (Topographical Section, Union Defence Force).

1878 Annexation of Walwich Bay (Walvis Bay)
On 12 March 1878, Capt. Richard C. Dyer of HMS Industry annexed Walwich Bay for the British Crown. The borders of the enclave were delimited (Dierks 1999).

HMS Industry sailed past Rocky Point in early 1878 and comments from the log book read; ‘is very conspicuous from the southward and assumes the appearance of three distinct boulders covered with sand almost to the summit’ (Kinahan 1992).

1878 Gert Alberts
In 1878, one of the most daring and exceptional trips to the Skeleton Coast took place. With no fanfare, seven men set off from Namutoni and rode their horses all the way through the wild and untamed land to Rocky Point and back. The men did not record their adventures on this remarkable reconnaissance. Gert Alberts was the man who led the patrol over a thousand kilometres of unmapped territory.

Gert Andries Jacobus Alberts, born in 1836 in Swellendam, farmed near Pretoria. On 20 May 1874, as leader of the first group of three families to trek with all their belongings packed in ox-wagons and their stock following behind, they moved westwards, looking for a new home (Burger 1978). A year later the group had swelled to 13 families. Alberts was a sensible, diplomatic and prudent leader and when they crossed the dry, almost waterless Kalahari, he split the group into three and they trekked weeks apart, so as not to over-utilise the food and small sources of water they relied on. After many adventures, loss of life and livestock, they eventually reached Rietfontein on 23 July 1877, close to the present Namibia/
Botswana border and stayed there for two years. As they trekked through the most arid areas of Southern Africa, they became known as Dorslandtrekkers (Thirstland Trekkers). Unlike many of the other trekkers, Alberts trekked not for political or religious reasons, but because he could not control his wanderlust (Krüger & Beyers 1977).

Other groups of trekkers were not prudent and many people and stock perished from disease, fever and lack of water. Tsetse flies decimated the herds of cattle, marooning the people in their wagons without food and water. For political reasons, neither the British nor the indigenous tribes, warring for supremacy, wanted the steadily increasing number of Boer trekkers to settle in their areas of influence. In about 1879, the trekkers met William Coates Palgrave, the British Special Commissioner and he advised them to move to the almost unpopulated Kaokoveld, as there they were unlikely to clash with the Herero or Ovambo. The trekkers reached Namutoni, on the edge of the Etosha Pan and camped near the water, while the people and cattle recuperated from the tough trek (Venter 1983). By the time, they reached Namutoni, 80 adults and an unknown number of children had died. Among these was the wife of Gert Alberts (Burger 1978).

The Trekkers commissioned Gert Alberts to lead a patrol to investigate the Kaokoveld and find a place to settle. The patrol included P. J. van der Merwe and M. Roets, experienced scouts and four other men. At Kaoko Otavi, the strong fountains appealed to the scouting party, but they continued their journey. They followed the ephemeral rivers as these led them through the mountains and supplied them with water. The urge to reach the ocean was overpowering and they continued westwards until they could ride their tired mounts into the ocean (Burger 1978). They rode along the seashore for three days, passing Rocky Point, possibly into the Hoanib River, leading to Sesfontein and back to Namutoni (de Klerk 1964). According to Burger (1978), although there was plenty of water at Sesfontein, they found the soil unsuitable for agriculture and stock. A remarkable journey, but unfortunately, few details are available.

1879 William Coates Palgrave
In 1879, Fort Rock received a lot of publicity because of the Dorslandtrekkers. After many trials and tribulations, they settled at the fountains of Kaoko Otavi and Otjitundwa in the north-west. The Cape Government and the public became aware of their dire straits through reports by sympathetic traders like Axel Eriksson. A Relief Committee in the Cape collected food and other necessities of life. The Cape Governor supported the Committee and commissioned an expedition to take the supplies to the Trekkers (Stals 1991).

William Coates Palgrave, born in 1833 in Windsor, England, was the man chosen to lead the expedition. The Cape Government employed him as a Special Commissioner. Palgrave travelled widely and knew most of the
leading personalities, black and white, in the territory. He had been to Damaraland/Hereroland on two previous missions on behalf of the Cape Government. The relief expedition left Cape Town on 24 September 1879 aboard HMS Swallow and anchored off Walwich Bay five days later. They loaded forage for the horses and six Topnaars to act as interpreters. On Saturday 4 October 1879, the Swallow anchored off Fort Rock, but they could not land because of rough seas. On Monday, a steam cutter searched for a landing place, but did not succeed. The schooner Christina, carrying the relief supplies arrived. Another attempt to land was unsuccessful and the boat almost capsized. By Friday, they realised they could not land the horses and supplies. After deliberations by the Relief Committee members and Special Commissioner Palgrave aboard the Christina, they decided to return to Walwich Bay with all the goods (Cape of Good Hope Official Publication 1880, Stals 1991).

W. A. de Klerk, author of the book Thirstland, reported the Trekkers, many suffering from malaria, sent 40 ox-wagons over 600 km to Walwich Bay to collect the supplies of medicine, clothing and food (de Klerk 1966). However, their wagons were such a poor state that Axel Eriksson again assisted by helping with transport. Gert Alberts was one of the men who trekked to Walwich Bay to supervise the transport (Rudner 2006).

1884 Deutsch Südwest Afrika

Raising the German flag on 7 August 1884 at Angra Pequena (Lüderitz) and later at the Swakop River mouth, Sandwich Harbour and Cape Frio, signalled the beginning of the new German colony of Deutsch Südwest Afrika (Dierks 1999).

1896 Dr. Georg Hartmann

In 1896, another adventurer to explore the unknown and forbidding Skeleton Coast was Dr. Georg Hartmann. He was a geologist and director of the South West Africa Company. Formed in 1892, this company with English capital of two million pounds obtained the sole rights for the Damaraland Concession, an area of approximately 13 000 km² from the German Government. It had the rights to minerals and building railway lines to develop the country (Davis 1968, Lenssen 1999, Mouton 1995).

Dr. Hartmann, with the support of the German authorities, organised a large expedition to survey and map the area between Cape Cross and the Kunene River mouth. Hartmann and his party searched for deposits of guano, a suitable place to build a harbour, prospected for minerals, and surveyed and mapped as they moved through the area. The other very important commodity was water and most of the water sources were in ephemeral rivers. Civilians and members of the Schutztruppe accompanied the group. Captain von Estorff, Lieutenants Helm and Volkmann surveyed
the Uniab, Huab and Ugab Rivers. Hartmann took the most difficult and least known area for himself and his companions, namely the Hoanib, Hoarusib, Khumib, Sechomib, Nadas, Munutum and Kunene Rivers. Hartmann’s group ran out of food and ate bread made from the oats intended for the horses. Lack of water was a constant problem and they had many narrow escapes. Sandstorms, strong cold winds and clammy fog all took a toll of the expedition. Despite these problems, they reached the Kunene River by riding for 21 hours from their camp in the Nadas River. During January 1896, Hartmann reached Rocky Point. He recorded a small deposit of guano on a rock outcrop close to the sea (Hartmann 1896).

**1917 Major Charles Nicolson Manning**

Charles Nicolson Manning was born on 7 April 1877, in Pietermaritzburg, Natal. He was involved in the Second Anglo-Boer War of 1899 - 1902. After the war, he worked for the Native Commissioner in Pretoria. He took part in the campaign in German South West Africa and in May 1915, went to Ovamboland as the territory’s first resident commissioner, stationed at Ondangwa. He established the SWA Department of Native Affairs. Manning relinquished his military office in 1924 and returned to his birthplace where he died in 1944 (Beyers 1987).

Almost four decades after Gert Alberts made his historic trip to Rocky Point, Major Manning organised a similar marathon reconnaissance. At the time, the South African Military administered the territory and Manning was the resident Native Commissioner of Ovamboland. He took a train to the north and at Outjo, obtained from the military, horses and an interpreter. Lieutenant Olivier and several troopers with wagons to carry their supplies, water and horse food accompanied Manning. They set off at the end of July 1917, passing Kamanjab, Grootberg, Kowarib and reached Sesfontein on 9 August 1917. Manning kept accurate records of the route, distances, water sources, settlements and other interesting sightings. At Sesfontein, Manning met local tribal leaders and carried out his tasks as Native Commissioner. When they left a week later, Lt. Olivier, 16 troopers, Chief Oorlog and a number of his followers, accompanied him. They travelled north, often leading their horses through the stony areas. They saw signs of rhinos and four days later reached the Hoarusib River. On 29 August, Lt. Olivier and troopers returned to Sesfontein via Kaoko Otavi. Manning, accompanied by Sergeant P. J. Botha, continued the journey and reached the Kunene River, about 50 km west of Swartbooisdrift on 31 August. They heard lions and hippos and saw signs of elephant and wild dogs. By then, their horses’ hooves were in poor condition and needed horseshoes for the stony terrain. They contacted trader Jacob Erickson in Angola and he came to their assistance a week later with horseshoes, nails and other supplies. They passed Sanitatas and on 22 September reached the Hoarusib River. They continued down-river to water their stock at Purros. At the Hoarusib River mouth, they left some footsore horses and loaded packhorses with grass and water. Manning and Sergeant Botha, leading the packhorses, walked on the beach in their bare feet to save their worn-out boots. On 26 September 1917, they reached Guano Cap (Rocky Point) where they left the grass and water. Manning described it as “… 2 principal stone koppies - the smaller jutting a little to sea and on which birds - species of black gull settle in numbers but no great quantity of guano.” They walked back to their camp.
in the Hoarusib River and on the way shot cormorants to eat (Manning 1917). The next day they rode to Guano Cap and fed their horses the food they had left there. They travelled up the Khumib River, past Sarusas and arrived back at Sesfontein on 4 October 1917. Manning estimated the distance covered in his reconnaissance at 654 miles (1 050 km). A remarkable journey completed in just over two months.

1931 Police Constable Fred Cogill
At a meeting in Kaoko-Otavi in December 1925, the administrator of South West Africa, G. R. Hofmeyr and local leaders Vita ‘Oorlog’ Tom and Muhona Katiti, all agreed to the building of a police station in northern Kaokoland. Native commissioner C. H. L. ‘Cocky’ Hahn had it built on the Kunene River at Otjimuhaka, now known as Swartbooisdrif. In 1926, Fred Cogill was posted to this police station with Sergeant H. E. F. Hillebrand and Constable Adams. (Stals & Otto-Reiner 1999).

In his book, Lords of the last frontier, author Lawrence Green states Constable Cogill spent 14 years working in Kaokoland. During this time, he patrolled the area on horseback and later by motor vehicle. He had many adventures in this remote region, but unfortunately, all his diaries were destroyed in a fire (Green 1982).

In 1931, while pursuing diamond smugglers on the Skeleton Coast, Cogill passed Rocky Point. This was the first time a motor vehicle was driven into this inhospitable area. In 1942, while assisting with the rescue of the Dunedin Star survivors, the police patrol, including Cogill, found vehicle tracks near Rocky Point. Cogill confirmed that the tracks had been made eleven years earlier while he was pursuing Portuguese diamond smugglers (Marsh 1967).

1933 Carl Nauer
On 9 August 1933, 23-year old Swiss aviator and member of the Swiss Air Force, Carl Nauer, took off from Cape Town, bound for London. He was attempting to fly between the two cities in record time. Nauer refuelled in Walvis Bay, flew north and then disappeared. The subsequent search for the missing airman made headlines around the world. At the time, Sam Davis, Windhoek correspondent for Reuters and the Cape Argus, reported on the futile search. Davis reported “… he had probably crashed in the sea or in the desert and one day his bones would be found, for this was “Skeleton Coast”, the graveyard of ships and men” (Davis 1979).

The editor of Reuters, Cape Town, writes ‘I have every reason to believe the grim name Skeleton Coast came from the pen of Sam Davis who, for more than 50 years, spread the name and fame of S.W.A. to all parts of the globe’. The description by Davis stuck ‘and is today well-known throughout the world with its special aura of mystery’ (Davis 1979).

Sam Davis, co-founder and editor of the South West Africa Annual for 36 years, retired in 1980. In his last editorial he said; ‘We believe we have achieved the goal we set ourselves in 1945 - to publicise South West Africa …’. In fact, the SWA Annual has become an important archival source in libraries in many parts of the world (Davis 1980).
1940 Major Matthys Uys

During the Second World War, the South African Air Force patrolled the desolate coast of South West Africa. On 6 July 1940, an Anson, piloted by Major Matthys Uys and a crew of two, took off from Wingfield, near Cape Town, on a routine patrol to South West Africa. Almost nine hours later, after having refuelled at Alexander Bay and Walvis Bay, they landed at Karibib, their operations base. The next morning they started their patrol. Three hours later, while approaching Rocky Point, the engine oil pressure dropped and Uys made a forced landing on a saltpan. They landed safely and soon had the oil leak repaired. However, the weight of the aircraft had caused it to sink into the saltpan and they could not budge it. The Skeleton Coast was living up to its name. The few stark words in the logbook do not convey the seriousness of the situation:

“The radio had burnt out and no signal could be sent. No rations or water were carried on the aircraft with the result that I had to stay without food and water with my crew from 10:00 on 7.7.40 to 16:00 on 12.7.40, when we were rescued by Major Botes our commanding officer” (Uys Logbook 1940).

The aviators survived for five days and obtained some moisture by licking the dew from the wings of the plane. Major Botes landed on a level area Uys and his crew had marked for the rescue flight they hoped would find them. They all flew back to Karibib, but the next day, on 13 July 1940, returned to Rocky Point to recover their stranded aircraft (Uys Logbook 1940). With the aid of rolls of wire netting placed under the wheels, they managed to free the Anson and flew it back to Karibib. (Dawson 2006, Marsh 1985). On 15 July 1940, Matthys Uys and his crew were back in Cape Town.

This seemingly minor incident in the distinguished career of Matthys Uys was to play an important role in the subsequent dramatic rescue operation a few years later when the Dunedin Star ran aground (Marsh 1985).

Skeleton Coast, an apt name for the hundreds of kilometres of deserted beaches, the sands scoured by cold currents flowing relentlessly northwards, the sands driven in the same direction by the ever-present, dominant south-west wind. Countless ships stranded on the barren coast of southwestern Africa and tales of death, heroism and suffering abound. However, only a few have captured the world’s attention like the stranding of the Dunedin Star and Rocky Point featured prominently in the subsequent rescue operation. The harrowing tale is told in the classic

Anson 117 refuelling at Rocky Point - July 1940
Photo: SAAF Museum
book, *Skeleton Coast* by journalist John Marsh, first published in 1944 and still selling after more than 60 years.

**1942 Dunedin Star**

The *Dunedin Star* was a 12 891-ton, 530 feet long British vessel. It was built at the Cammel Laird yard in Birkenhead and completed in February 1936. Owned by the Union Cold Storage company, she had sizeable refrigerator capacity and holds for conventional cargo. On 9 November 1942, laden with war supplies, she sailed from Liverpool, bound for Aden via Cape Town. Besides her crew of 85, she carried 21 passengers (Dawson 2005).

Sailing alone and not in convoy, *Dunedin Star* managed to elude the German U-boats and surface raiders causing havoc to the Allied war effort. On a dark night, 29 November 1942, while sailing close to the barren coast of southwestern Africa, *Dunedin Star* ripped her bottom open about 130 km north of Rocky Point. Captain Robert Bulmer Lee grounded the ship to prevent it sinking and sent radio messages to Walvis Bay. After three trips in the motor launch, all the passengers and half the crew were put ashore, but then the launch capsized in the rough seas. Stranded on the wind swept beach, were sixty-three people, including eight women and three babies, with very little food or water and no shelter. Forty-three crewmembers remained on the disintegrating liner. On the third day, four ships arrived to help. The Norwegian vessel *Temeraire* removed the crew and transferred them to the British ship *Manchester Division*. The tug, *Sir Charles Elliott* returned to Walvis Bay as it was running out of coal. Because of rough seas, boats could not remove the stranded crew and passengers off the beach. The police in Windhoek had to send an overland rescue party (Marsh 1967).

Captain William John Brafield Smith left Windhoek with six Ford three-ton troop carriers, an ambulance and a vehicle carrying spares and tools. Meanwhile, the South African Air Force sent a plane, piloted by Immins Naude from Cape Town to drop food and water to the stranded group on the beach. Just north of Rocky Point, the pilot was astonished to see the tug *Sir Charles Elliott* stranded in the boiling surf and three people on the beach, the others clinging to the tug. The plane continued its journey and dropped food, water and medical supplies to the stranded *Dunedin Star* victims. Naude decided to rescue the women and children and landed the plane close to the castaways. The heavy twin-engine Ventura bomber bogged down in the soft sand and could not take off. Now the rescuers had to be rescued. On the sixth day, another plane dropped supplies to the *Dunedin Star* and *Sir Charles Elliott*. Meanwhile, the crew of the stranded tug attempted to row a dinghy with five volunteers ashore, but the dinghy capsized, tossing the men into the water. Three washed out onto the beach, more dead than alive. Mathias Koraseb somehow managed to climb back onto the tug. The other man, first mate Angus McIntyre, carried away by the current, was never seen again. The next day, Koraseb and two others, wearing life jackets, made a desperate attempt to reach the shore. They managed to do so, but Koraseb died a few minutes after reaching safety. His grave is on the beach north of Rocky Point. Now, with five men ashore, the heavy lifeboat was launched and ‘with astounding bravery and skill rowed through the surf to the tug and rescued all their surviving shipmates’ (Marsh 1967).
On the eighth day of the rescue operation, another Ventura bomber dropped more supplies to the stranded group. The crew also searched for the overland rescue party under command of Capt. Smith, but did not find them. It seemed as if nothing could go right and on the ninth day, three Ventura bombers flew north from Walvis Bay. The planes dropped supplies and then two landed close to Rocky Point, picked up the crew of the tug and flew them to Walvis Bay. The minesweeping trawler *Nerine* arrived back at the scene on the tenth day. After a hazardous operation, nineteen of the stranded passengers and crew were taken aboard the *Nerine*. The convoy of trucks neared the castaways, but thick sand and soft salt pans constantly bogged down the heavy trucks. The *Nerine* rescued another eleven crew members and, when two almost drowned in the heavy surf, they steamed for Walvis Bay. Forty-one people, including the four aviators remained at the scene. On the thirteenth day, Smith’s convoy, three kilometres from the castaways, again bogged down and he walked the rest of the way. They eventually used one truck to take everyone to the convoy and on the fifteenth day, started the long, slow journey back to Rocky Point. Here Major Uys managed to fly out twenty-three of the survivors. The strongest returned with Smith in the convoy and after another marathon journey, reached Windhoek on Christmas Eve, 26 days after the *Dunedin Star* ran aground (Marsh 1967).

1943 Captain Immins Naude
The Skeleton Coast drama was not over. In December 1942, Captain Naude and a team of technicians aboard the *Crassula*, returned to the disaster scene. The technicians would service the Ventura bomber and Naude would fly it home. The rough seas prevented them from landing and sixteen days later, they returned to Walvis Bay (Marsh 1967).

On 17 January 1943, a salvage expedition of eight vehicles set off from Windhoek in a final attempt to retrieve the bomber. Capt. Naude was in command of the expedition and they included an aircraft engineer, 6 mechanics and 35 soldiers from Wits Rifles. In Outjo, special constable Fred Cogill once again had to join the expedition as guide and interpreter (Dawson 2006). Even with the aid of a caterpillar tractor aboard one of the trucks, it took nine days to reach the *Dunedin Star*. The maintenance crew cleaned and serviced the bomber and dragged it from its sandy prison, ready to fly. On 29 January, after testing the engines, Naude, air mechanics Aleric Rudman and Bernardus Bloemhof, took off and roared down the coast. They
flew past Rocky Point and just south of the Hoarusib River the starboard engine suddenly seized and the plane plunged into the sea. The engines fell out and the lightened fuselage floated to the surface. The three shocked aviators were lucky and washed up on the beach, battered and bruised, but with no broken bones. They realised their precarious predicament and their only hope of survival was to reach the convoy returning from the *Dunedin Star* at the Khumib River, a distance of 50 kilometres. Rudman was the fittest of the three survivors and Naude sent him ahead. He and Bloemhof, with injuries from the crash, helped each other as they struggled to Sarusas fountain. The passed Rocky Point again and eventually staggered to the fountain at Sarusas on the afternoon of 31 January to find Rudman waiting for them. The next morning Naude sent Rudman to the mouth of the Khumib River to wait for the convoy (Marsh 1967). Naude was afraid the convoy could take another route home. The next day the convoy was surprised to find Rudman waiting for them on the beach at the Khumib River mouth. After attending to the injuries of the three exhausted aviators, the expedition arrived in Windhoek on 5 February, to bring to an end the most dramatic rescue mission in the long history of the Skeleton Coast (Dawson 2006, Marsh 1967).

An interesting sequel to the story of the *Dunedin Star* took place in 1943. Because of the large amount of valuable war supplies still on the beached liner, the authorities decided to salvage as much as possible. Captain M. C. E. McDonald, D. F. C., and Majors John Slabbert and Herman Beyers had to carry out the task. From the base camp at Sanitatas, about 75 km inland from the wreck, they flew to the *Dunedin Star* every day and landed on a stretch of hard sand. Using a small tractor transported in the aircraft and later a light truck from Ohopoho,
they collected the material washed up on the beach. Four men managed to board the vessel and dump the cargo overboard and collected it on the beach. They salvaged many tons of scarce war materials (Davis 1968).

Twenty years later, on 5 July 1963, a short report in the Namib Times, a newspaper published in Walvis Bay, referred to the wreck of the Dunedin Star. The NG Church Mission at Orumana in Kaokoland purchased its timbers to erect mission buildings. According to the newspaper report, the timber was still in a good condition. The person sent to collect and transport the wood to Orumana was Jan Neethling (Grobbelaar 1964).

1951 Bernard Carp Expedition
One of the well-documented trips to Kaokoveld and Rocky Point was the Bernard Carp Expedition in 1951. Carp, of Dutch origin, was a Cape Town-based businessman, adventurer, hunter and collector of biological specimens. The Transvaal and King Williamstown Museums and the National Museum of Southern Rhodesia commissioned and financed a collecting expedition into this relatively unknown corner of South West Africa. Carp apparently bore some of the costs of this and other trips. The near endemic Carp’s Tit *Parus carpi* is named in his honour. What is of interest is the diverse nature of the participants on this expedition, many of whom became household names in Namibia. The author, Lawrence Green published Carp’s experiences in one of his books (Green 1982). The conservationist and mountaineer, Dennis Woods has been into the area on five previous occasions and acted as guide. The Namibian born artist and botanist, Eberhard von Koenen, accompanied Carp and years later illustrated and published a book about edible, poisonous and medicinal plants (von Koenen...
2001). Atti Port, well-known farmer and leopard hunter from the Khomas Hochland, was another member of note.

Other members included the German ornithologist, Walter Hoesch, well known to the birding fraternity. He described several new species after his collecting trips in SWA. Heinz Roth, a Windhoek businessman and photographer recorded the people, events and scenery in Kaokoveld. His photography was analysed in detail by Lorena Rizzo (2004). Entomologist and beetle expert, Dr Charles Koch collected many specimens on this trip. He was instrumental, in 1962, together with other researchers from leading institutions in South Africa, the SWA Administration, the Scientific Society of SWA and others, in establishing the Namib Desert Research Association. As a result, the Administrator of SWA inaugurated the Namib Desert Research Station at Gobabeb in July 1963 (Lawrence 1979). Botanist Harry Hall from South Africa also collected many plants specimens. Several other scientists, a police constable, skinners, cooks and other assistants made up the rest of the thirty strong contingent (Green 1982).

After many adventures, the group reached Rocky Point on 10 July 1951. Their stay was short-lived. During the night, the berg wind (east wind) started blowing and next morning it was a howling, sand-laden gale. They left hurriedly and headed inland, past Sarusas and along the Khumib River. The party travelled all the way to Swartbooisdrift on the Kunene River before returning home (SWA Annual 1952).

1954 van Zyl Expedition
In 1954, the first motor vehicle expedition along the coast, from Walvis Bay to the Kunene River, was attempted. Senator Johannes van Zyl, a member of the Fisheries Advisory Board, led the group. The two-fold aim of the reconnaissance was to determine if it was possible to drive up the coast and to look for a harbour site further north to support the lucrative fishing industry. An aerial survey by van Zyl before the trip started was a wise precautionary measure. The group of nine included a doctor and two motor mechanics. They had a jeep, a light truck (bakkie) and a 4-ton truck for transport, the latter carrying fuel, food and motor spares. The group encountered problems crossing the dry, sandy riverbeds and in the dunes north of Möwe Bay, damaged the jeep when driving over the slip-face of a dune. Johan Viviers and Basie van Zyl had the jeep going again after five hours (Davis 1956, van Zyl 1965).

The next afternoon, 13 September 1954, they reached their first goal, Rocky Point. Two of the party had a narrow escape when their rubber dinghy capsized while attempting to measure the depth of the bay. They washed out cold but unharmed on the beach further north. Senator van Zyl’s most pleasant memories of Rocky Point were the abundance of fish caught from the beach. The expedition finally reached the Kunene River on 17 September, after motoring along the Skeleton Coast for over 900 km (van Zyl 1965).

1959 SWA Safaris
In the fifties, Kallie Zimmer, of Eduard Zimmer (Pty) Ltd., a Windhoek company specialising in transport and earthmoving, used the company trucks to take family and friends on trips to Angola. When political upheavals made travel dangerous to Angola, they started
safaris to Botswana and Kaokoland. Kallie Zimmer and Dieter Aschenborn acted as tour leaders. Aschenborn was one of the first game rangers to work in the Etosha National Park. He became a well-known artist of wildlife scenes. In 1954, the first trip under the name SWA Safaris, a subsidiary of Eduard Zimmer (Pty) Ltd., took place. Also for the first time, the SWA Safaris logo, together with that of Eduard Zimmer, adorned the doors of the vehicles. Passengers travelled in Mercedes Benz trucks converted into safari busses. Uwe Sentefol, who maintained the vehicles for the company and Gerno Sentefol led many of these safaris (W. Sentefol, pers. comm.).

In 1974, Eduard Zimmer (Pty) Ltd. and SWA Safaris became separate companies. The latter registered as a tour operator under the well-known banner they are still using. Zimmer sold the trucks, busses and Landrovers to five partners, Volker Grellmann, Wolfgang Woker, Uwe Sentefol and two others. Until 1961, SWA Safaris used trucks converted to carry passengers. SWA Safaris imported the first luxury busses from Germany in 1961 (W. Sentefol, pers. comm.).

One of the early commercial tourism ventures to Rocky Point, under the leadership of Dieter Aschenborn, took place in the winter of 1959. The SWA Association of Arts, in conjunction with SWA Safaris, organised a long overland trip to Spitzkoppe, Brandberg, Kamanjab, Sesfontein, Kaoko-Otavi, Rocky Point, Ohopoho (now Opuwo), Kunene River and finally Etosha National Park. Pat Honeyborne and his family were on this camping safari and this information is from his book, *Gateway to adventure*. Honeyborne served in the South West African Police from 1926 to 1945. He then joined the security staff of Consolidated Diamond Mines in Oranjemund until his retirement in 1964 (Honeyborne 2003).

After many exciting days of travel through the wild Kaokoveld, the safari reached the Sarusas fountain where they camped. The next day they battled through the sand to reach Rocky Point. Honeyborne’s description; ‘The waves broke over a black rocky promontory, leaving white cascades like lacy curtains…’. This was Rocky Point, just a dot on the map’ (Honeyborne 2003).

In the *South West Africa Annual* of 1960, Alice Mertens, a well-known local photographer, reported on this exciting expedition. There were 59 tourists and 10 personnel in the group, travelling in a Mercedes Benz truck converted into a bus and an open truck with seats. A
Bedford truck pulling a trailer carried food, water, motor spares and camping equipment. A Landrover for reconnaissance accompanied them. At Rocky Point, they caught and ate fresh fish, a welcome variation in the menu (Mertens 1960).

Almost sixty years later, SWA Safaris, the oldest tour operator in Namibia, is still operating from Windhoek. Luxury busses now transport tourists all over the country in air-cooled comfort.

1960 Barend Johannes ‘Ben’ van Zyl

The nearest government office to Rocky Point in the fifties and sixties was Ohopoho. This was the administrative centre for the Kaokoveld. From here, the Native Commissioner and stock inspectors from Veterinary Services worked throughout this vast area, looking after the well-being of the indigenous inhabitants. Commissioner Ben van Zyl first arrived in the dusty little settlement in 1949. During his tenure, he established a road network to facilitate travel to the far corners of this area. Telephone communications with the rest of the country developed over time. Garth Owen-Smith (2010), who worked with Ben van Zyl, had this to say about him and his wife, ‘… their stewardship of the Kaokoveld’s post-war years was tempered by a deep love of the Territory and a genuine respect for the traditional culture of its indigenous people. In turn, they were generally held in high regard by all who worked for or with them’.

Van Zyl worked in several other centres where his experience was required. After a lifetime of service on the frontier, he transferred to Windhoek in 1981 on promotion. He died in 2009.
During his long service in Kaokoveld, he and other civil servants patrolled the vast area around Ohopoho in all directions. On his annual leave, usually in December, van Zyl took his wife Babs and three children to Rocky Point, often in the company of friends and other government officials (B. van Zyl Jr. pers. com.). In about 1963/64, more government officials arrived when a small police station opened in Ohopoho, manned by two young constables. An official post office opened in 1969 with Jimmy de Kock as the first postmaster. Until then, Babs van Zyl managed the postal agency on behalf of the postal authorities (Groenewald 2009). Kamanjab was the nearest centre for supplies for the inhabitants of Ohopoho and Kaokoveld.

Ben van Zyl is the man who built Van Zyl’s Pass. The December 2010 edition of Weg magazine stated: ‘Van Zyl’s Pass in Kaokoland is one of Southern Africa’s most legendary (and infamous) mountain passes.’ The pass is a short cut between Otjitanda and the Marienfluss Valley. Today, this rocky pass is a challenge to many visitors from around the world motoring through the stark but spectacular scenery of this region. In the middle sixties, Van Zyl marked out a route over the mountain and supervisor Jeremia Mosuma oversaw the construction with a twenty-man team. It took them over four months to hack out a rudimentary track of 10 kilometres over the mountains, but it saved many hours of driving (Groenewald 2000). Another important route was the road built between Swartbooisdrift and Epupa, also known as the Vilmor Road, in honour of Administrator Daan Viljoen and his wife. Constructed by manual labour, this 95 km road along the Kunene River runs across difficult terrain. A
major accomplishment, it cost a minimum to build within a short period (B. van Zyl Jr., pers. com.). Sam Davis stated: ‘Many of the other roads we were to traverse in the Kaokoveld owe their existence to the resourcefulness, ingenuity and drive of Ben van Zyl and Jeremia.’ (Davis 1964).

Stock inspector Jan ‘Kat’ Bruwer and his wife Stella lived in Ohopoho from 1959 before transferring to Outjo four years later. He told the author they saw Rocky Point for the first time in 1959, when they accompanied Ben van Zyl. Everybody camped in tents, but because of the wind and cold, conditions were not always pleasant. Live sheep and chickens provided fresh meat when they needed a change from fish. A well dug in the ephemeral Hoarusib River, a few kilometres south, provided drinking water. Bruwer went to Rocky Point in subsequent years and in 1963, he found a small shack built of planks from the many wrecks along the coast. According to him, van Zyl sent his supervisor Jeremia Mosuma to the coast in a 5-ton Chevrolet 4x4 truck. He collected large quantities of timber from the wrecks found on the beach, but primarily from the Dunedin Star (Bruwer pers. com.)

Llewellyn Coetzee, a friend of Ben van Zyl, was another visitor at this time. Coetzee’s first visit was in 1957. He said they built a three-sided shelter to serve as a kitchen, as the paraffin fuelled primus stove did not work well in the wind. The shack, built later, had two rooms at each end, connected by a veranda, with its back to the dominant wind. This was the dining room, protected from sun and wind. A pit toilet stood some distance away (Coetzee pers. com.). In 2011, after an absence of almost 40 years, Coetzee flew to Rocky Point, a place holding many fond memories, in the company of Reini Matheis and the author (Bridgeford 2011).

Pieter Liebenberg, a young teacher in Otjiwarongo and a friend, Johan ‘Jolla’ Antonissen, paid a visit to Ohopoho in September 1963. They undertook this remarkable journey in
a low-slung MG sports car, on roads built for high clearance vehicles. They were fortunate to accompany Ben van Zyl to Rocky Point the following day. The convoy, a Chevrolet 4x4 and Bedford 5-ton truck transported asbestos roof sheets, tools, fuel and other supplies. They collected timber found on the beach to build the shack (Liebenberg 2010).

Coetzee and Bruwer mentioned several other visitors to Rocky Point while they were enjoying the cool coastal weather and catching fish. Jan Botha, the manager of Uis mine, flew to the coast and even took the children for a flip over the area. Botha later crash-landed his aircraft on the Brandberg, Namibia’s highest mountain, when he went to inspect the geological formations. Another visitor, well-known Windhoek businessman Jack Levinson, had the mining rights north of Möwe Bay. The Westies Mineral Group acquired this claim and it became known as Westies Mine.

1963 Ernst Karlowa
Ernst Karlowa, was a Luftwaffe pilot, farmer, prospector, diamond miner and conservation officer. On his first visit to the Skeleton Coast in 1963, he intended to assist a friend for a few weeks. These few weeks turned into 20 years. After the war, in 1950, Karlowa returned to South West Africa. While farming in the Maltahöhe district, a friend suggested he assist with a mining claim at Westies
Mine in the Skeleton Coast. His technical skills at the Westies Mine soon made him indispensable. He then worked for a salary and later became a shareholder. The mine, named after Fanie van der Westhuisen, lay a few kilometres south of the Hoarusib River. Fanie and his two brothers had been prospecting and mining for several years, first from a base at the Ugab River mouth and then at the site they took over from Jack Levinson. A year later, after having processed all the marine terraces, they stopped finding diamonds. Although the concession area had iron ore and amethyst reserves, Westies did not have the financial resources to mine these. Through Windhoek lawyers Schoeman and Lombard, money from powerful South Africa mining and financial groups resulted in a new company, Sarusas Ontwikkelings Korporasie (SOK, Sarusas Development Corporation). The original 25 shareholders of Westies only had 10% shares in SOK and very little influence. Of their freedom as concessionaires, not much remained (Schnurr 1998).

SOK needed modern transport facilities to mine the iron ore and other natural resources. Three possible harbour sites where identified, at Möwe Bay, Rocky Point and north of Cape Frio. The latter received preference. The first priority was a harbour and then roads to link the harbour to the rest of the country. However, the company could not find anyone to do the research and surveys. The desolation and harsh conditions on the Skeleton Coast, the long periods of isolation and working alone, scared off most people. SOK then approached Ernst Karlowa, as they reasoned he had the knowledge and technical abilities required for the task. He accepted the challenge (Schnurr 1998).

Karlowa learnt many new skills needed for the task ahead. These included recording wind and wave patterns, erecting and operating an international weather station, surveying and mapping the area for the proposed harbour and other infrastructure. Besides the planning of the base at Cape Frio and building of living quarters, he had to buy all the material, down to the last nut-and-bolt and then transport it over 700 km. There were no roads, nor did he have all-wheel drive trucks. He spent time in the Archives in Windhoek and obtained maps drawn by the Schutztruppe (German colonial troops) on reconnaissance patrols and the maps of geologist and explorer Georg Hartmann (Schnurr 1998).

No transport company was willing to help with this risky expedition, so Karlowa approached an acquaintance, Rolf Gossow, owner of a transport company in Swakopmund. Gossow agreed to
provide two 15-ton Leyland trucks with double rear axles. His brother-in-law Ulli Bergemann, a young Mal-tahöhe farmer, would drive one and an employee drove the other. Eight labourers accompanied them to help on the trip. Karlowa drove a Chevrolet 4x4 vehicle. The mountain of building material, fuel, spares and food grew bigger by the day. On 24 August 1965, the two heavily laden trucks and Chev bakkie with Karlowa and his friend Heinz Siep left Swakopmund for Cape Frio (Schnurr 1998). Not many of the people who saw them leave, including the Police, believed it was possible to reach Cape Frio with the transport they had. They all knew of the many problems encountered by the rescuers of the stranded passengers and crew of the Dunedin Star (Bergemann, pers. comm.).

Using the Schutztruppe maps and compass, Karlowa led the way and the trucks followed. In the amazing time of three days, the convoy reached Sarusas but they had often worked hard to free the heavy trucks when they sank into the sand. Ulli Bergemann deflated the truck tyres until the double wheels on the rear axle touched and this wide surface helped in the sand. Karlowa’s route, to avoid the dunes, took them along the coast to the Uniab River. They turned inland up the river until they were behind the dunes and then continued northwards. They crossed the sandy Hoanib River and at the Hoarusib River, struggled through the thick sand at a point now known as Leyland’s Drift. The convoy drove down the Khumib River to Sarusas where they camped. The route continued northwards, over the plains, until they reached some rocky outcrops, inland of Cape Frio, where Karlowa built his headquarters. Bergemann did several more trips in the trucks to deliver fuel, cement, building material and food to Karlowa and his two assistants (Bergemann, pers. comm.).

Karlowa lived and worked at Cape Frio for two years. His investigations revealed a harbour and transport network were unfeasible. SOK decided to investigate Möwe Bay
as an alternative site and Karlowa volunteered to stay on the Skeleton Coast to continue the investigations. He took leave to visit family in Germany and there he met Ilse Paatz. On his return to SWA, they corresponded and Karlowa invited her to visit him on the Skeleton Coast. She arrived in Windhoek; they were married and moved to Möwe Bay. SOK built houses, storerooms, garages and guest quarters at Möwe Bay. Water came from the Hoarusib River, about 30 km to the north. After four years at Möwe Bay, his investigation ended and his direct link to SOK (Schnurr 1998). Ernst Karlowa had many adventures in the harsh but beautiful Skeleton Coast, rescued many stranded seafarers from certain death, survived storms, animals, an aircraft accident and the loneliness on the Skeleton Coast. He knew its routes and waterholes intimately and Rocky Point was a landmark, destination and meeting place on innumerable occasions. After nine years, they left with heavy hearts and moved to Windhoek.

1963 Police station at Rocky Point
The removal of the shack built by Ben van Zyl occurred some time after the Skeleton Coast Park proclamation in 1971. Ernst Karlowa, the first conservation warden to live in the Park, appointed in 1973, probably demolished the buildings and cleaned up the area. Ben van Zyl Jr., at school in Outjo in 1974, mentioned his father taking the family to Rocky Point for a weekend, but on arrival found their shack demolished (van Zyl Jr., pers. comm.). After the proclamation of the Park, Torra Bay, south of the diamond mine at Terrace Bay, became the coastal holiday resort for the people living in the northern parts of the country.

The police stepped up their patrols to this lonely coast when the signs of the impending ‘freedom struggle’ increased. Rocky Point again became a focal point and the police erected a few wooden buildings close to the two rock outcrops giving this lonely spot on the coast its name. The exact date is unknown, but it must have been after 1974. Cecil Koorts, a warrant
officer with the then SWA Police Task Force, said he went to Rocky Point for the first time in about 1975 and the buildings were already in use. He further related that in about 1980, he and a team of police officers from Windhoek rebuilt and enlarged the dilapidated buildings piece by piece over a period of a several months. A bathroom, kitchen, dining room and dormitories were constructed. Rocky Point, registered as a police station, also had an ‘incident register’ (C. Koorts, pers. comm.).

Over the years, many people made illicit trips into the Skeleton Coast Park, especially from the east along the long, unfenced and infrequently patrolled border with Damaraland and Kaokoland. These groups often used the facilities at Rocky Point and the house built by Ernst Karlowa at Cape Frio to shelter from the elements. These unlawful incursions into the Skeleton Coast Park were constant problem over the years, resulting in off-road driving, littering and illegal angling.

The area north of Möwe Bay, regarded as a ‘wilderness area’ for management purposes, had several old buildings in it and this detracted from the concept of a wilderness area. These buildings were at Rocky Point, Sarusas and Cape Frio.

In 1989, the rapidly changing political scene in Namibia, prompted the then chief warden for the Skeleton Coast Park and Damaraland, Rudi Loutit, to demolish the buildings at the above-mentioned places. With approval of his superiors in the Conservation Department and heavy equipment from their Maintenance Section, they demolished the buildings and cleared the surrounding area of rubble and rubbish accumulated over many years, especially at Sarusas (Loutit, pers. comm.).

1963 Administrator of SWA, the Hon. Daan Viljoen and Sam Davis
In 1963, Sam Davis, editor of the SWA Annual and the man who gave the Skeleton Coast its name, visited Rocky Point in the company of the retiring Administrator of SWA, the Hon. Daan Viljoen. At the grave of Mathias Koraseb, Sam Davis commented: ‘Surely more than a piece of driftwood and a cairn of stones should mark the grave of this humble war hero.’ (Davis 1964).

After his trip to Rocky Point, Davis returned to Windhoek and through the SWA Publicity and Tourism Association, contacted many influential people and organisations. Davis wanted a more suitable gravestone for the man who lost his life to help his fellow crewmembers. When his pleas for help elicited no response, Davis contacted the new Administrator of South West Africa, Mr Wentzel du Plessis. The meeting resulted in the National Monuments Commission erecting a headstone on the grave of Mathias Koraseb. It included an inscription recording the death of Koraseb and Angus McIntyre (Davis 1966).

1971 Skeleton Coast Park Proclamation
The year 1971, saw the first important step in the protection of a large part of the Skeleton Coast by the proclamation of the Skeleton Coast Park. Proclamation 82 of 1971 defined the borders of the new park. From the Ugab River, the southern boundary, to the Hoanib River, the park was 40 km wide. North of the Hoanib, it bordered on the Kaokoveld magisterial...
district all the way to the international boundary on the Kunene River and this varied from 20 to 40 km.

1973 Islander
In July 1973 the 21 metre fishing vessel *Islander*, registered in San Diego, USA, ran aground about 70 km north of Rocky Point. The 139 gross ton boat, built in San Diego in 1972, had a powerful 630 hp diesel engine. With the stranding of the fishing boat, one of the crew lost his life, but the others managed to reach the shore safely (Hrywniak 1979). As they had not managed to send a distress signal, no one knew of their predicament. The captain and first officer decided to walk to Rocky Point to look for help.

While this was happening, Bernabé de la Bat, the director of the division of Nature Conservation and Tourism of the South West Africa Administration, was on an inspection flight in the Skeleton Coast Park. On the flight, they saw a vehicle driving in the park. At the time, the conservation department was having problems with people illegally entering the newly proclaimed park. Suspecting the occupants were on an illegal fishing trip, they flew low over the vehicle and from its registration number, deduced it was from another government office further east. De la Bat was tempted to have the culprits apprehended by his rangers. For reasons of inter-departmental diplomacy, he decided not to pursue the matter and left the culprits to continue their journey. This decision probably saved the lives of the *Islander*’s crew. When the two exhausted men finally staggered to Rocky Point, they found their saviours fishing. Fortunately, they had a radio in the vehicle and could summon help. Had it not been for the illegal anglers, the aptly named Skeleton Coast would have claimed more victims (Schoeman 1996).

1973 Ernst Karlowa
In the autumn of 1973, Ernst Karlowa became the first conservation officer for this wild and desolate region. The Director of the division of Nature Conservation and Tourism Bernabé de la Bat met Karlowa in Windhoek and invited him to his office. At this fateful meeting, de la Bat greeted him with the words; ‘Mr Karlowa, I give

Bernabé de la Bat, 1976

Ernst Karlowa
Photo: Frank Wittneben
you the Skeleton Coast. Return, we want to develop a Park.’ He arrived back in his beloved Skeleton Coast and lived at Möwe Bay until his promotion and transfer to Swakopmund in February 1981 (Schnurr 1998).

1975 Angolan refugees
North of the border in Angola, a civil war started between the Soviet backed MPLA and Unita, supported by the USA. The South African Defence Force operated in southern Angola. In October 1975, close to the Kunene River mouth, over 200 Angolan and Portuguese refugees, living near the SWA border crossed the river on homemade pontoons. The vehicles included sedans, four-wheel drive vehicles and trucks; all loaded with their owners most precious possessions. Well-known pilot, Max Kessler, of 112 Squadron, on a mercy flight along the coast, looking for a boat filled with war orphans, saw the group and landed his aircraft on the banks of the river. He realised they urgently needed help to reach Möwe Bay or the Skeleton Coast would claim more victims. He flew south and buzzed the conservation station at Möwe Bay and when Ernst Karlowa raced to the airfield, he heard for the first time of the huge refugee group camped next to the river. Kessler had already informed the appropriate authorities by radio and a rescue convoy was on its way (Schnurr 1998).

Colonel Koos Myburgh of the South West Africa Police advance party, arrived at Möwe Bay the next morning in his red Range Rover. He knew the area well from his frequent security patrols along this infamous coast. Laden with food and water, Karlowa, Myburgh

![The remains of an Angolan refugee truck south of the Kunene River - August 1979](image)

*Photo: Peter Bridgeford*
and the other police vehicles, set out for the Kunene River. Warrant officer Cecil Koorts
drove one of the vehicles. For long stretches, they travelled at high speed on the beaches and
reached their destination at twilight, a remarkable feat for the terrain they crossed. The next
morning a radio call instructed Karlowa to leave the refugees to Myburgh, proceed south and
look for the boat with the orphans, reported to be somewhere off the coast. The alternator on
Karlowa’s vehicle had stopped working, but he managed to reach Möwe Bay and then drive
to Walvis Bay in another vehicle to buy a new alternator. Back the 500 km to Möwe Bay, refuel,
have a short rest and then north to meet the refugee convoy near Cape Frio. Karlowa
assisted in getting the sedan cars and other vehicles to Rocky Point to a temporary camp. He
then drove south as far as Möwe Bay to look for any sign of the missing boat and children,
but never found any signs of them. He rested for a few hours and woke to the noise of heavy
trucks. The Army had arrived with tank transporters to load some of the vehicles. At Rocky
Point, aircraft and helicopters delivered supplies and nursing staff. The women and children
flew to Walvis Bay and the men drove the vehicles over the last difficult terrain south of the
Hoarusib River. Ernst Karlowa and Koos Myburgh once again guided, cajoled and led the
convoy of 64 vehicles safely to Möwe Bay (Schnurr 1998).

It was the end of the biggest rescue operation on the Skeleton Coast since the stranding of
the *Dunedin Star*, thirty-three years before.

**1981 P. J. ‘Slang’ Viljoen**

On Sunday, 13 December 1981, the author was on duty at the Möwe Bay conservation sta-
tion. After the routine weather report, an urgent radio call came from Louw Schoeman of

*Another victim of the Skeleton Coast - Landrover engulfed by the sea south of Cape Frio (December 1981)*

*Photo: Peter Bridgeford*
Skeleton Coast Safaris. He urgently required help as his vehicle was stuck on the beach and he had four tourists with him. At the time, Philip ‘Slang’ Viljoen was living at Möwe Bay while conducting his research on the desert elephants. Viljoen and the author left as soon as possible and drove past Rocky Point to find Schoeman and the stranded tourists about 50 km further north. Schoeman had removed as much as possible from the doomed Landrover, by now on its side in the pounding surf. The rather stunned tourists, having flown into SWA that morning and stranded on the Skeleton Coast a few hours later, were all taken to the camp in the Khumib River.

1982 Mike Penrith and John Irish
Mike Penrith, a fish biologist and John Irish, an entomologist from the State Museum in Windhoek, passed Rocky Point on 24 January 1982 on their way to the Kunene River mouth. They had a successful trip and collected many biological specimens for the State Museum.

On 26 March 1982, Mike Penrith was back for a second collecting trip. As the Hoarusib River was in flood, ‘Slang’ Viljoen, ranger Steve Braine and the author accompanied him. At the normal crossing point, some distance from the beach, the river was flowing too strongly. Penrith decided to drive on the beach. He stopped his vehicle and walked a long way on the beach, wading through the shallow water flowing into the sea, but not all the way across the river mouth. He then drove his Ford F250 along the flooded beach and was almost across the river mouth when the nose of his vehicle sank into a deep channel in the riverbed and the engine stalled. Despite their best efforts, the rangers and others could not budge the stranded Ford, even using the two other Fords in an attempt to pull the stricken vehicle from its watery

Mike Penrith’s vehicle stuck on the beach (March 1982)
Photo: Marilyn Bridgeford
By the time they had transferred all the equipment onto the other vehicles, the rising tide was washing dangerously high under them. By the next low tide, sand covered the Ford to window height. A few days later, the vehicle had disappeared, swallowed by tons of sand washed down the river and deposited on the beach.

1982 Rudi Loutit
On 20 June 1982, senior conservation officer Rudi Loutit of the Skeleton Coast Park went on inspection to Rocky Point. Researcher P. J. “Slang” Viljoen and the author, both from Möwe Bay, accompanied him. After a visit to the police barracks at Rocky Point, they inspected Sarusas, the amethysts mine started many years previously. On the northern bank of the ephemeral Khumib River, they stopped to photograph Hartmann’s Beacon. The huge stone beacon is a landmark visible from many miles away. Loutit, who arrived in the Skeleton Coast Park in 1978, later became officer-in-charge of this park and neighbouring Damaraland. On his retirement from the Ministry Environment and Tourism in 2002, he took over as CEO of Save the Rhino Trust (SRT). This successful Trust started in 1983 by his wife Blythe, a well-known conservationist and artist who died in 2005, is one of the leading conservation NGOs in Namibia. Loutit retired as CEO of SRT in November 2011.

1982 Administrator-General Danie Hough
On 9 December 1982, the Administrator-General of SWA/Namibia, Mr Danie Hough passed through Möwe Bay on the way to Rocky Point. Police officers, General Dolf Gouws and Brigadier Koos Myburgh and party accompanied him.

Hartmann’s beacon
Photo: Peter Bridgeford
1983 Steve Braine, John Paterson, John Knowles, Hannes Bartsch and Frans Schuster
On Saturday, 12 March 1983, the author led rangers Braine, Paterson and Knowles on a
reconnaissance patrol to the northern section of the Skeleton Coast Park. It was a working
trip to show the new staff the problem areas, the routes across the dunes, salt pans and along
the beaches of the aptly named Skeleton Coast. Marilyn Bridgeford, Louise Braine, 6-month
old Sean Braine, Frans Hoeb and Gemanual accompanied them. After passing Rocky Point
early the morning, Braine’s Landrover coughed once or twice but then the problem seemed to go away.
At Cape Frio, they counted the Cape fur seals and
then headed eastwards to the house built by Ernst Karlowa. While crossing a huge plain, the Ford en-
gine suddenly made a terrible noise. Despite several attempts, the cause of the knocking noise could not be
found. They decided to leave the vehicle to prevent further damage to the engine and all drove to Angra
Fria in the now rather crowded Landrover. The group thank fully arrived at Angra Fria and after unloading
and a cup of tea, two of the group prepared to drive to
the stranded Ford to collect the remaining food and bedding. However, the Landrover had
other ideas and no amount of ‘combined knowledge’ could start it. The green Racal radio
was set up to contact Möwe Bay during the routine evening radio call, but fate stepped in
again. The radio was out of order. Eight people stranded on the Skeleton Coast and the nearest
habitation, Möwe Bay, over 170 km’s away.
The next day the rangers spent all day attempting to start the Landrover. They checked the
distributor, carburettor and the electrical system, but the vehicle remained stubbornly dead.
The group shared food and bedding, so everybody could eat and sleep. Paterson checked
and rechecked the radio, recharged the battery and at 14:00 managed to contact ranger Peter
Tarr at Möwe Bay. On Monday, Tarr reported the Government Garage in Windhoek were
sending a replacement engine for the Ford and would arrive on Tuesday evening. Water,
food and cigarettes were rationed, but fortunately, they found a drum of water hidden several
years ago, for emergencies, by Ernst Karlowa at the
nearby landing strip. On Monday, they managed to start
the vehicle, but it was not performing at full power.
The next morning Braine and Bridgeford decided to
retrieve the food and bedding from the Ford. If the
Landrover broke down again, they had a rucksack and
water, and could walk back. The recalcitrant vehicle
behaved well and they were soon back with the food
and bedding. Later the afternoon they risked a trip to
the sea and at Cape Frio caught fish and collected white
mussels for dinner.
Late Wednesday morning the cavalry arrived in the form of Hannes Bartsch and Frans Schuster from the Government Garage. Their vehicle had broken down near Sarusas, hence the delay, but the two highly qualified mechanics soon had it going again. The Skeleton Coast was living up to its name. After lunch, Schuster replaced the Landrover distributor cap. A hairline crack had caused all the problems. They all set off for the Ford and two hours after arriving, they had removed the broken engine and replaced it with another. That evening a happy, relieved atmosphere prevailed in the house. Although the vehicle problems had robbed the patrol of several days, a quick visit to the Kunene River mouth was possible, accompanied by the rescuers from Windhoek.

On Thursday morning, the three vehicles headed for the beach across the saltpan on a track built by Ernst Karlowa. They stopped to look at the remains of the wreck of the *Dunedin Star* and 10 km further north, the wreck of *Kaiyo Maru*. She ran aground in May 1978. At 13:00, they reached the Kunene River and saw a big crocodile and a turtle on the southern bank. After filling the water tanks on the vehicles from the river, they headed south to camp at a spot partially protected from the wind at Bosluisbaai and had fresh fish for dinner. On Friday, the group returned to the house at Cape Fria. On Saturday, they arrived back at Möwe Bay after an adventurous week on the Skeleton Coast.

**1984 Prime Minister P. W. Botha of South Africa and Dr Jonas Savimbi, President of UNITA in Angola**

On 10 March 1984 Prime Minister P. W. Botha, R. F. ‘Pik’ Botha, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr W. van Niekerk, Administrator-General of SWA and Magnus Malan, Minister of Defence flew into Rocky Point. General T. van der Westhuizen, General J. Geldenhuys, Chief of the Army, Brig. C. van Tonder, D. W. Steward and D. Auret, Dept. of Foreign Affairs, accompanied...
them. They were there to meet with Dr. Jonas Savimbi, President of UNITA and Mr Poona, Secretary-General of UNITA, flown in by the South African Air Force. This important occasion was to discuss the military position of UNITA in Angola and the diplomatic relationship between South Africa and UNITA (Department of Foreign Affairs 1984).

This isolated spot in the Skeleton Coast Park was ideal for secret and private consultations, away from the prying eyes of journalists and civilians. The military and police arrived beforehand to secure the area and all conservation staff working in the park were told to stay south of the Hoarusib River during this period. The buildings at Rocky Point, used by the police during their coastal patrols and for ‘rest-and-recreation’, served as meeting place for the delegations.

1986 Hannes Holtzhausen and Ben van Zyl

In October 1986, Hannes Holtzhausen, Ben van Zyl and Peet Vermaak worked at the Fresh Water Fish Institute at the Hardap Dam. They had to carry out a survey of freshwater fish in the Kunene River, from Ruacana to the mouth of the river. As Kaokoland was deemed to be dangerous because of the activities of ‘freedom fighters”, the Government Garage of the SWAA Administration insisted they use anti-landmine vehicles. The one was a Buffel, a mine-proof, Mercedes Benz built Unimog and the other a Ribbok, built on a Ford F250 chassis. In a letter to the Government Garage, Hannes Holtzhausen protested that the vehicles were too heavy for driving on the beach, but the authorities would not relent.

In Windhoek, they loaded another two tons of equipment on the newly reconditioned Buffel, weighing eight tons. Hannes drove the Buffel, while the others went in the Ribbok. The expedition eventually reached Ruacana, where they netted fish in the river. From Ruacana, they followed an Army convoy at walking pace for 55 kilometres as Army engineers checked and cleared the road of landmines. They reached Swartbooisdrift safely and the Army left them. They took samples from the Kunene River at various places, moving downriver to Epupa Falls and Otjqingwa. From there they travelled south via Orupembe and the Ondusengo River into the Skeleton Coast Park to reach the coast. The intention was to travel on the beach to the Kunene River mouth.

On the soft sand above the beach, the heavy vehicles could hardly move. The inexperienced team did not even deflate the tyres and then drove on the hard sand just above the waterline. Here the going was better for a short time. Inevitably, the heavy Buffel came to a sudden stop as it sank into a soft patch of sand for which the area is notorious. Despite their frantic efforts, the assistance of the Ribbok and towrope, the Buffel would not budge. The Skeleton Coast had claimed another victim. They removed the equipment, including drums of fuel, water, dinghy, camping gear and food from the stricken vehicle. They watched helplessly as the fierce Atlantic waves smashed against the vehicle and later over it. Although they had no tents, they fashioned a shelter with the equipment and tarpaulins, but spent a miserable night in very windy conditions. The next day they managed to make radio contact with their office at Hardap. The next radio call informed them the Army in Opuwa were on the way to assist them.
To keep themselves busy, they started a catch-and-release angling exercise. Throughout the day, the cold wind howled across the beach and Holtzhausen states; ‘And the sand - everywhere and in everything, your mouth, ears, hair, in the food, in your sleeping bags and in your eyes’. The following day a small Army spotter plane passed over them, dropping encouraging messages and army ‘rat-packs’ for food. During the third night on the beach, the wind died down completely and in eager anticipation of the rescue, the marooned group commenced clearing the sand from around the stricken vehicle and building a wall of sand in an attempt to keep the water away. By this time, the sand was level with the engine cover, normally almost 2 meters above the ground. The rescuers arrived at midday, a whole convoy of eager officers and troops, vehicles bristling with fishing rods, anticipating the escape from normal army routine and the good fishing opportunities.
What impressed the stranded researchers most was a mammoth six-wheeled recovery vehicle. In no time, the experienced crew had two other Buffels attached to the recovery truck to act as anchors and then the huge winch slowly pulled the stricken Buffel from its cold wet grave. Sand was everywhere in the engine and gearbox. Hannes and his team left the army mechanics to clean up the Buffel and they headed south as they had to attend the annual research meeting in Windhoek. They spent the night in the ‘luxury’ of Ernst Karlowa’s empty house at Cape Frio. The next day the exhausted group stopped briefly at Rocky Point before starting the long journey to Windhoek.

The adventures on the Skeleton Coast had a sequel, when some time later, Holtzhausen received a bill of N$80,000, the cost of repairs to the Buffel. Fortunately, he had his letter in which he had warned the Government Garage the Buffel was unsuitable for the task on the coast. He presented his letter again and heard no more from the authorities.

A few years later, Hannes Holtzhausen and Ben van Zyl obtained their doctorates as fish biologists. Dr Ben van Zyl is the son of the legendary commissioner Ben van Zyl of Ohopoho, mentioned earlier in this document.

1987 Chris Eyre and Kim Kotze
Conservation warden Chris Eyre, stationed in Opuwa, was on a patrol in the Skeleton Coast Park. Tsumeb magistrate Kim Kotze accompanied him. North of Rocky Point, an overturned dinghy caught their attention. Lying in the shade of the dinghy was a man in very poor condition. He was obviously severely dehydrated and starved. After feeding him sugar water and a little food, they eventually found out how and why he was alone on the dreaded Skeleton
Coast. He spoke very little English but managed to make them understand he was from Ghana. He and three companions had been stowaways on a ship from their country. When discovered, the captain and crew of the vessel put them aboard the dinghy and set them adrift. He survived but his three companions died at sea. Eyre contacted the police, met them at Rocky Point and left the man in their care (C. Eyre, pers. comm.).

The castaway was a lucky man. Had Eyre and his companions not found him, the Skeleton Coast would have claimed another victim.

According to Schoeman (1996), when the Greek captain of a Pakistani ship discovered the stowaways, they were callously set adrift in the dinghy. Charged with manslaughter, the captain was found guilty and imprisoned. The sole survivor returned to his home country.

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Author’s biography
The author worked for four years in the Skeleton Coast Park, at Ugabmond and Möwe Bay, and visited Rocky Point on many occasions. After 23 years in the Namibian conservation department, the majority in the Namib-Naukluft Park, he moved to NamibRand Nature Reserve for five years before retiring to Walvis Bay. He is actively involved in vulture conservation and bird conservation on the coast.

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