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How conservation may make cultural heritage invisible: Intersecting on-site oral histories with land claims for settler colonialism, conservation and tourism in north-west Namibia

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ABSTRACT Oral histories concerning people's past experiences in land areas claimed for settler colonialism, conservation and tourism are rather muted in Namibia. Their invisibility is perhaps because they illuminate complexities that the state, conservation NGOs and the private sector might wish to avoid. At the same time, oral histories speaking of past dwelling places and species use practices constitute rich cultural heritage dimensions that have become disembedded from lands historically reimagined for settler farming, conservation and tourism investment. In this article we draw on several years' research with Nami-Daman elders in north-west Namibia that builds on an on-site oral history research praxis. In this methodology, we have been led by specific individuals to places of their past, enabling iterative documentation of livelihood and mobility practices, ancestral graves, and genealogies. These journeys have focused on the Northern Namib/Skeleton Coast National Park, Palmwag Tourism Concession and connections between Sesfontein and Puros, in conjunction with archival and historical research about these land areas. In carrying out this research, we have been able to reconstruct something of the mesh of relations with places, animals, plants and ancestors that once constituted these areas as thriving, flourishing and multi-dimensional spaces infused with Indigenous cultural histories and meanings. We argue that careful oral history methodologies are essential for understanding these areas as cultural landscapes made invisible through their constructed contemporary visibility as wilderness areas oriented towards tourism profit-making. In keeping with Article 19 of Namibia's constitution, we thus emphasise the justice dimensions of recognising these histories and their displacements.

KEYWORDS conservation and tourism; eviction; memory politics; Namibia; on-site oral history; recognition justice; settler colonialism

"If they tell the truth, it is because they remember" (Foucault 2014[1980]: 38).

INTRODUCTORY VIGNETTE: 'OUR HEARTS WERE HAPPY HERE'

We, the authors, met in 1994 in the process of beginning field research for a PhD on *People, Plants and Practice* in the former 'Damaraland Homeland' (Sullivan 1998). This research was supported by the Desert Research Foundation of Namibia (DRFN), Save the Rhino Trust Namibia (SRT), the National Botanical Research Institute (NBRI), and a Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) research permit. It was during this time that we began to learn about local and Indigenous histories embedded in the broader landscape around the current Hoanib River settlements in north-west Namibia. This is an area known today for its spectacular landscapes and its populations of desert-adapted black rhino (*Diceros bicornis bicornis*) (Sullivan et al. 2021), elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) (Wenborn et al. 2024), and lion (*Panthera leo*) (Brassine 2024, Heydinger 2024, Muzuma 2024). The area is now prioritised for conservation and as a sought-after tourism destination catered for by luxury eco-lodges linked with locally-run conservancies (Lendelvo et al. 2024). Through on-site oral history research over the last ten years, however, we have come to learn that the landscapes described as 'wilderness' in tourism brochures advertising the area are full of the traces of former dwelling places and the graves of known ancestors.[1] People alive today are amongst those who lived at these places. They remember their experiences of these places and their mobilities through the landscape in times past.

We started recording oral histories with Khoekhoegowab-speaking Damara/ǂNūkhoe and ǁUbu individuals in 1999.[2] We worked mostly with people living in Sesfontein[3] and Kowareb; on redistributed former Afrikaans settler farms near the Aba-ǁHuab River that in the early 1970s were incorporated into the 'Damaraland Homeland' (Sullivan 1996); and in settlements along the !Uǂgâb river. The first of these interviews, on 15 April 1999, was with Suro's grandmother, Philippine ǀHairo ǁNowaxas,[4] who opened her narrative by saying, 'I was born at Sixori in Hurubes'. At this point in time we did not know where the place Sixori was located, or the dimensions of the land area known as Hurubes. ǀHairo spoke of how they lived there in circular stone houses (see Figure 1) with a shrubby *Petalidium* plant (*ǁō-na*) used to protect them as they were sleeping. ǀHairo continued by saying:

> we moved around and moved around. My father [!Khaiǁgoe ǁNowaxab] was really from this place [!Naniǀaus] and my mother [ǁHūri Juligen ǀAwises] was from Hurubes, really she's from Hurubes; she's ǁKhao-a Damara.

She also began to list various places saying,

> this is Sixori, this is Tsaugugam, this is Oronguari, this is the home of Xoms, here is the field [*!garob*]. I move to and sleep at the places where the rain falls, because the food is there.

We have now studied multiple maps from the period of German colonial rule of Namibia that started formally in 1884, until the present time. None of these named places and land areas appear on any printed map we have seen of the area.[5] It is as if these personal histories and place-located experiences simply do not exist in formal representations of the territory, thereby constituting an 'imaginative geography' (Said 1978) that erases people's pasts. These places, however, are known and spoken about locally. They linger in the memories of now elderly people dwelling in settlements to which they became constrained after being removed from this dry and mountainous corner of west Namibia.

After several false starts we eventually found the place Sixori that in 1999 started this thread of research. Sixori is named after the *xoris* (*Salvadora persica*) bushes that grow around a permanent spring of clear, sweet water and whose fruit

[1] For example, https://gondwana-collection.com/accommodation/palmwag-lodge

[2] Khoekhoegowab includes four click consonants, as follows: ǀ = the 'tutting' sound made by bringing the tongue softly down from behind front teeth (dental click); ǁ = the clucking sound familiar in urging on a horse (lateral click); ! = a popping sound like mimicking the pulling of a cork from a wine bottle (palatal click); ǂ = a sharp, explosive click made as the tongue is flattened and then pulled back from the palate (alveolar-palatal click).

[3] There are multiple names for Sesfontein – meaning 'six fountains' – even though in fact there are more than six large springs in this area. The names include !Naniǀaus ('six springs') which is the most commonly used name for Khoekhoegowab-speakers in the area. An older name is ǂGabiaǂgao meaning 'confused heart', and referring to the confusion arising when seeing the multiple springs of the area. The otjiHerero name is Ohamuheke, and the old German name was Zeßfontein.

[4] Note that those mentioned in our research would like their names to be included.

[5] Although the Kunene Regional Ecological Assessment (KREA) of 2008 led by Jeff Muntifering provides some exceptions (Muntifering et al. 2008).

Figure 1 The incised landscape south-west of Sesfontein, positioned now in Sesfontein Conservancy and the Palmwag Tourism Concession. Sixori, as marked, is just within the Palmwag Concession. The stone circle huts that ǀHairo slept in as a child are shown in the bottom left image, with Ruben Sanib walking towards the spring in the centre image. Composite image by Sian Sullivan and Mike Hannis, incorporating aerial photographs from the Directorate of Survey and Mapping, Windhoek.

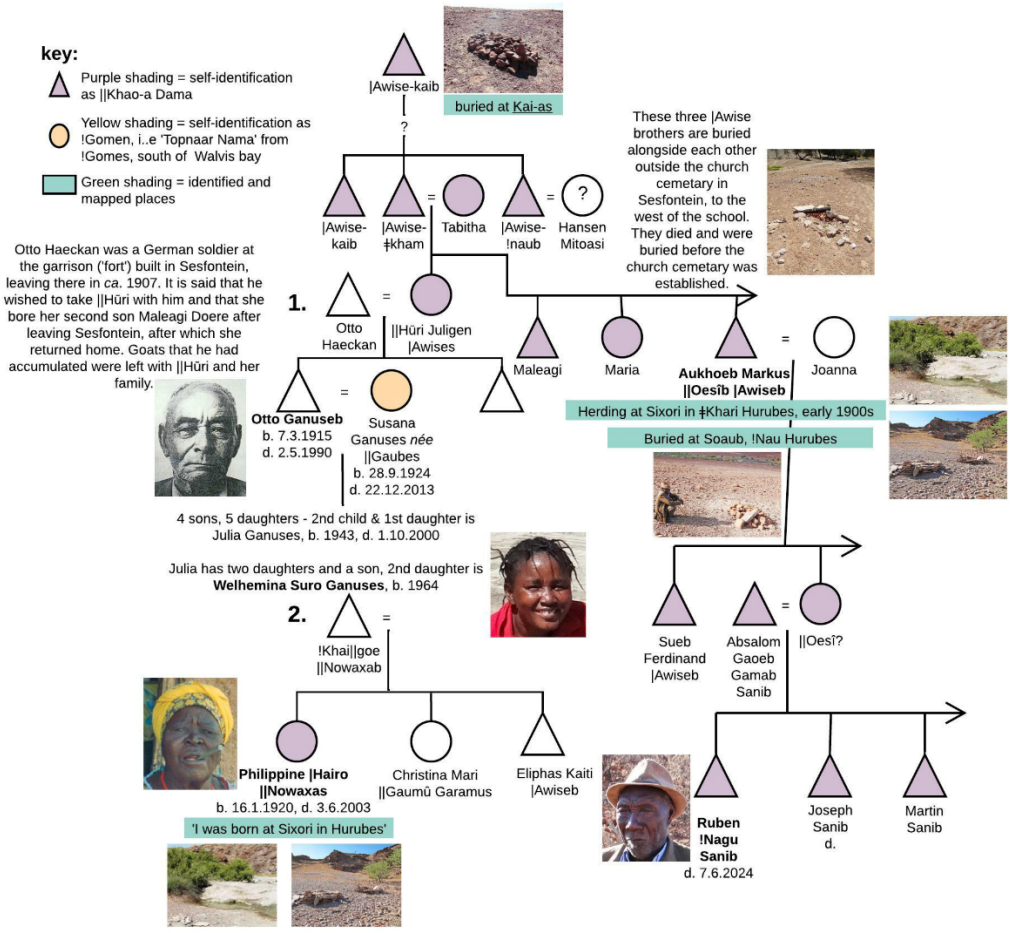

Figure 2 Genealogy of the ǀAwise and ǁNowaxa families, connecting Sixori with other places in the north-west landscape, such as Kai-as, Soaub and Sesfontein/!Naniǀaus.

provide a filling dry season food. This spring is located in the deeply incised landscape to the south-west of Sesfontein. As we walked to the spring, we passed the stone circle huts that ǀHairo told us they had slept in (Figure 1). Finding Sixori on a brutally hot day in March 2015 required triangulating the orientation skills of the late Ruben !Nagu Sanib, who remembered Sixori from past visits, and Filemon ǀNuab, a younger man and well-known rhino tracker, who knew from recent patrols in the area the location of the spring, but had not known its name 'Sixori'.

As we sat in the shade of a rocky overhang close to the spring, Ruben Sanib told us of harvesting honey from a hive in the vicinity of Sixori, the year being around 1940 (Sullivan & Ganuses 2021: 40–41). He was with Aukhoeb ǀAwiseb (also called ǁOesîb after his daughter ǁOemi), Seibetomab and Am-!nasib (also known as Kano). Aukhoeb was the brother of ǀHairo's mother (ǁHūri Juligen ǀAwises), and was living at Sixori when ǁHūri visited him and gave birth to ǀHairo, Suro's grandmother, in 1920. The honey cave was west of Sixori and Sanib and companions travelled there to pull (*sam*) the honey out. They then came to Sixori to make *sâun* beer (*!khari*) with that honey, using *Stipagrostis* grass seeds extracted from harvester ant nests (*ǂgoberun oms*). From Sixori they walked back to Sesfontein through the pass called ǂAu-daos. The genealogy shared in Figure 2 includes some of this detail, illustrating the strong connections with Sixori shared by both Aukhoeb ǀAwiseb and ǀHairo ǁNowaxas, as well as wider connections through the landscape such as with the former settlements of Kai-as and Soaub.

Through our on-site oral history research, we have returned with elderly people to the traces of dwelling structures as well as graves at many of these remembered places. This process stimulates memories for those who once lived there. At times returning to these places has been emotional. People are reminded of friends and relatives who have now passed on. And they remember assumed futures altered by broader historical processes not of their choosing, as detailed in the Section below on 'Chronology of clearances'.

At the permanent clear waters of Kai-as spring in November 2014, Ruben Sanib and Sophia Opi ǀAwises recalled how people from different areas gathered at this place to play their healing dances called *arus* and praise songs called ǀ*gais*. These were times when young men and women would meet each other, and when different foods gathered in different areas were shared. As Ruben Sanib said,

> when the ǁUbun and ǁKhao-a peoples met in the rain time, for example at Kai-as, the ǁUbun would bring *!nara* melons [from the coast] and share with the others. The *!nara* has fat inside. We would mix the *!nara* and the *sâui and bosûi* together—it was delicious food![6]

Sanib and Sophia conveyed urgently that 'our hearts were happy here'.

USING ON-SITE ORAL HISTORY FOR UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY CONSERVATION LANDS

Finding and returning to former places of settlement such as Sixori, Kai-as and Soaub evokes memories of practices, people and events from the past. This research methodology opens a window into how people lived in and moved through this dryland landscape in former times. Multiple oral history interviews have been carried out since 1999, with our recent research focusing on recorded oral accounts gathered during a series of multi-day journeys between 2014 and 2019 (Table 1). Follow-up triangulation work with different individuals has also been carried out to clarify and confirm details. These journeys were mostly undertaken with Khoekhoegowab-speaking Damara/ǂNūkhoe and ǁUbu elders specifically recognised as holding significant knowledge about the wider landscape, but who are currently constrained to residing in the settlements of Sesfontein and Kowareb. They of course also have wider connections with others, frequently mentioning those they inhabited past places with, as well as working with us to relocate graves of known ancestors.

The map of land-lineage relationships in Figure 3 should clarify the ethnonyms listed in Table 1. Note that these land and lineage relationships were not

[6] Ruben !Nagu Sanib, ǀAwagu-dao-am, 18.2.2015. *!Nara* are melon fruits from the near-endemic cucurbit *Acanthosicyos horridus* which were collected from the Northern Namib in times past (Sullivan & Ganuses 2024). *Sâui* and *bosûi* are the seeds of *Stipagrostis* spp. grasses and *Monsonia umbellata* respectively, both collected from harvester ant nests (*ǂgoberun oms*) (Sullivan 1999).

static positionings, as suggested by Rosengarten (2023: 41) who writes of 'a tight relationship for Khoi-speaking, Damara-identifying people today between the concept of clan (!haos) and specific land areas (!hūs) in northwestern Namibia'. Instead, these were lands of substantial mobility, aggregations and dispersals, and social interactions. Thus:

> I sit here at !Hubu spring and I am

Table 1 Journeys forming the basis for on-site oral histories in the broader landscape with elderly Khoekhoegowab-speaking inhabitants of Sesfontein and Anabeb Conservancies.

Date	Name	Ethnonym	Focal Plces
27–28.10.2014; 20–23.11.2014	Ruben !Nagu Sanib, Sophia Opi ǀAwises	ǁKhao-a Dama, ǁUbun	Kowareb, Mbakondja, Top Barab, Kai-as
17–19.2.2015	Ruben !Nagu Sanib	ǁKhao-a Dama	Kowareb, Kai-as, Hûnkab, Sesfontein
21–22.2.2015	Ruben !Nagu Sanib	ǁKhao-a Dama	West of Tsabididi, ǂKhari Soso, Aogu‖gams, Bukuba-ǂnoahes, ǁHuom
7–10.3.2015	Ruben !Nagu Sanib	ǁKhao-a Dama	Sixori, Urubao/‖Guru-Tsaub, Sanibe-‖gams
7–9.11.2015	Ruben !Nagu Sanib, Sophia Opi ǀAwises	ǁKhao-a Dama, ǁUbun	Kowareb, ǁKhao-as, Soaub (Desert Rhino Camp area)
13–14.11.2015	Christophine Daumû Tauros, Michael ǀGâmigu Ganaseb	!Narenin Hoanidaman / ǁUbun	Sesfontein, Puros, Hoanib
20–26.11.2015	Franz ǀHaen ǁHoëb, Noag Mûgagara Ganaseb	ǁUbun	Sesfontein, Hoanib, Möwe Bay, Northern Namib, Kai-as
5–9.5.2019	Franz ǀHaen ǁHoëb	ǁUbun	Sesfontein, !Uniab mouth, Hûnkab, Mudorib, ǁOeb, Hoanib
12–15.5.2019	Ruben !Nagu Sanib	ǁKhao-a Dama	Sesfontein, Gomaxora, ǀNobarab, ǁKhao-as, Soaub
17–20.5.2019	Julia !Nâuna Tauros	Puros Dama	Sesfontein to Puros, with multiple locations visited and recorded
22–24.5.2019	Hoanib Cultural Group, Sesfontein (n = 18, + 7 facilitators)	Multiple	Kai-as

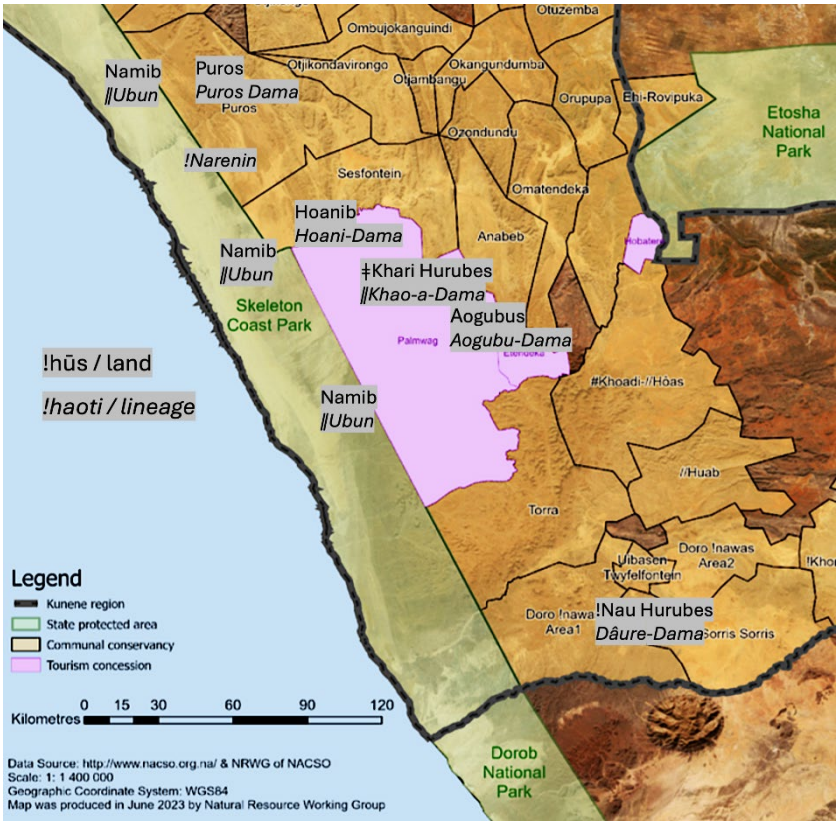

Figure 3 Reconstructed land-lineage groupings for Khoekhoegowab-speaking Damara/ǂNūkhoen and ǁUbun in north-west Namibia. Oral history makes clear that there was much mobility and reciprocity between these lineages and land areas, as well as by other ethnicities, including Nama and ovaHimba/ ovaHerero.

> reminded of all the places where the old people [*kai khoen*] lived. People lived a lot in this land, and we met with Daûre-dama people and we exchanged things with them. ǁKhao-a Dama met with the people from the ocean [Hurib] side [ǁUbun] and at Kai-as, and we collected [*ôau*] food [*xaira*]: *bosû*, *sâub*, *danib* [honey]. And we danced *|gaib* and *arub* and we sing *he he, hue hue, urr urr*!, and suck [*xoma*] the sicknesses from each other. … It is how we lived in this land.[7]

Our research intention has been to relocate places mentioned in prior interviews as where an array of now elderly people used to live. Our method of 'on-site oral history' has been led by the elders with whom we have worked. It constitutes what anthropologist Anna Tsing (2014: 13) describes as 'historical retracing': 'walking the tracks of the past even in the present', drawing out 'the erasure of earlier histories in assessments of the present' so as to fill 'the present with the traces of earlier interactions and events' (also Sullivan 2017: 219). On-site oral history thereby has the power to draw into the open occluded and alternative knowledges, practices and experiences that continue to 'haunt' the present despite their diminution through various historical processes (see, for example, Basso 1996, Bell 1993[1983], Brody 2002[1981], Davenport et al. 2005, de Certeau 2010: 24, Dieckmann 2023, Dieckmann 2024, Slim & Thompson 1993, Tsing 2005: 81). As Moore and Lenggenhager (2025: xvii) similarly write for the Orange River area in southern Namibia,

> This relationship with their ancestral lands began beyond the living memory of any individual person today or of previously-known generations, and it continues up to the present day, despite the actions of colonial, apartheid and capitalist settlers and/or 'conservationists'.

All interviews from field research were carried out by both authors. Interview transcriptions in Khoekhoegowab and translations from Khoekhoegowab to English were led by Ganuses. Informed consent for the use of this material was confirmed by all of our research participants, who are enthusiastic about their knowledge and past experiences being shared. We worked on interpretations of this material together, as well as iteratively with our research collaborators. Sullivan carried out the literature review, archival research and the drafting of this article, with Ganuses checking our work. All our on-site oral history journeys were guided by Filemon |Nuab, a 'Rhino Ranger' based in Sesfontein whose knowledge of the north-west Namibian landscape is renowned. Field research benefitted from oversight and permissions by the Nami-Daman Traditional Authority and the Sesfontein Conservancy, combined with a research collaboration with the National Museum of Namibia, and research permits from the former MET[8] and the Namibian Commission for Research, Science and Technology (NCRST).[9]

Additionally, our process has been one of a consistent letting go of preconceptions of the extensive and diverse landscapes of north-west Namibia. In *Maps and Dreams*, anthropologist Hugh Brody (2002[1981]: xxvi) writes of 'how much prejudice and misconception I had to shed' in his work with diverse inhabitants of the Canadian sub-Arctic. In research with Apache people in North America's south-west, Keith Basso (1996: 39) speaks of how '[t]he problem we face is a semiotic one, a barrier to constructing appropriate sense and significance […] in a culturally constituted world of objects and events with which most of us are unfamiliar'. In this sense, a significant amount of 'unlearning' is required to be open to learning of past experiences and knowledges of those who, as we will see, have been marginalised and somewhat silenced.

Our mapped dataset of named springs, former dwelling places, graves and landscape features recorded through this research, combined with stories, memories, genealogies and images can be viewed online at https://www.futurepasts.net/cultural-landscapes-mapping. This dataset, which is continually being updated, formed the basis for reporting to the Nami-Daman Traditional Authority (TA) (Sullivan et al. 2019), and in 2019

[7] Ruben !Nagu Sanib, !Hubu spring, 14.5.2019; also Sullivan (2024: 353). For similar wide-ranging interactions amongst Khoekhoegowab-speaking Haillom of the Etosha area, see Dieckmann (2023, 2024).
[8] MET research permits 2023/2015; 2190/2016; 2311/2017, plus a one-day special permit in 2019, and a short preparatory day-journey through the Hoanib into the Skeleton Coast National Park with Gobabeb Namib Research Institute staff on 7.4.2014.
[9] NCRST permit AN202101038.

was mobilised as part of this TA's submission to Namibia's Ancestral Land Commission Report of 2020.[10]

We proceed now to document some of the clearances that took place in these specific land areas of north-west Namibia, drawing attention to intersections between settler colonialism, conservation expansionism, private sector tourism investments and contemporary Community-Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM). We then document three on-site oral history journeys so as to share some of the complexities of people's memories of how they once lived in and moved through the Northern Namib – now the Skeleton Coast National Park; Hurubes – now the Palmwag Tourism Concession; and Puros – now the Puros Conservancy. We also take a particular look at graves of known ancestors, thereby illustrating the embeddedness of human lives in these areas, and the desire to remain connected with ancestors buried in lands we visited. We close with a brief conclusion emphasising the justice dimensions of recognising these histories and their displacements.

CHRONOLOGY OF CLEARANCES

In thinking through past connections people had with places and landscapes of north-west Namibia, it is important to situate these connections within strategies of displacement stretching back to the onset of colonial rule in the late 1800s. People were repeatedly cleared from lands they considered home, usually to serve the aims of a ruling white elite who sought to gain land and resources. In this section we trace some of these clearances, highlighting how today they serve as a created 'imaginative geography' (Said 1978) intersecting settler colonialism, ideas of 'pristine wilderness' (as critiqued by various authors, including Adams & McShane 1997, Cronon 1995, Nelson 2003), and private sector tourism investment. As Said (1978: 59) perceptively writes, such categories are 'not so much a way of receiving new information as it is a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things'. Much of the detail and experiences of these pasts in the specific area of north-west Namibia we focus on are mostly absent from contemporary understandings of this landscape, meaning that the area's value for conservation and tourism overshadows people's pasts. This is the case even though it seems clear that those living here in the past displayed acute sensitivities and understandings of 'sustainability' in relation to the now conserved ecologies with which they lived and through which they sustained themselves, as we convey further in the section on 'three journeys' below.

We are thus dealing here with the implications of epistemic and recognition justice. As Martin et al. (2013: 122) write for contexts of global environmental justice and biodiversity conservation, 'environmental justice analysis will need to provide a "difference-friendly" conception of justice', so that environmental justice moves beyond a focus on the distributive and procedural dimensions of justice to engage also 'with the dimension of "recognition"'. In this sense, a focus on distribution and procedural justice alone may mask recognition of cultural difference, historical memories and Indigenous knowledge (Maffi 2001). Therefore, 'a globalised environmental justice analysis applied to biodiversity conservation needs to address the structural causes that suppress some groups and allow others to dominate' (Martin et al. 2013: 124). In addition, a lack of acknowledgement of people's histories and knowledges may also undermine recognition of people's identities.

In connection with these implications, we start our 'chronology of clearances' with the outbreak of rinderpest in north-west Namibia in 1897, which itself led to significant displacement.

1897–1898: Rinderpest pandemic, an Indigenous uprising and subsequent displacement

Rinderpest became prominent in 'Deutsch Südwestafrika' (German South West Africa) in 1897 (Kalb 2022: 90–97), causing the death of significant numbers of cattle and other cloven-hooved animals (Miescher 2012: 22). It seems that '50% of the country's cattle herd perished within the first six months of the panzootic and over the next year up to 90% mortality was reported among Herero herds in the central highlands' (Rohde & Hoffman 2012: 278). The pandemic precipitated heightened colonial control, intensified Indigenous resistance to the relatively new German colonial regime, prompted militarised colonial response, and

[10] Available at https://the-eis.com/elibrary/search/34417

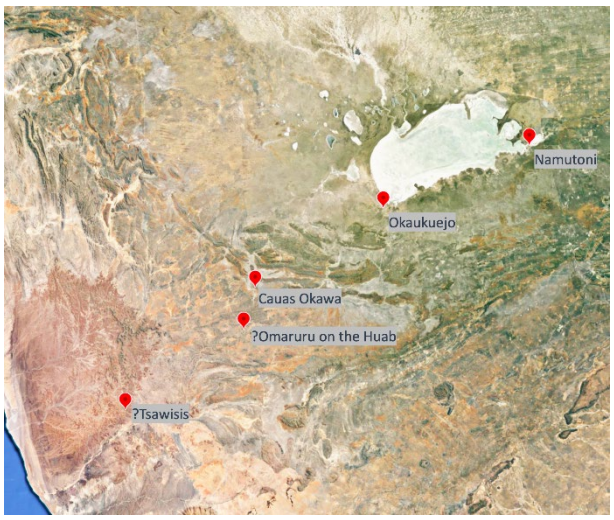

Figure 4 The most westerly veterinary stations in the 'cordon' (red markers) established between November 1896 and February 1897. The question marks signify that the two most westerly place locations are not completely exact. Map prepared by Sian Sullivan, using Google Maps: Map data © 2024 Google, INEGI Imagery © 2024 NASA, TerraMetrics.

ultimately caused systematic appropriation of land and livestock (Sullivan et al. 2024: 51–58).

Following a conference on the rinderpest crisis convened in late August 1896 by the British Cape Colony at Vryburg (British Bechuanaland, now Botswana), a 'defense line' or *Absperrline* was established in German South West Africa to control movement of livestock between northern 'native' areas and southern and central European settlement areas (Miescher 2012: 3, 19–20). This cordon consisted of a chain of military outposts, some of which became permanent after the pandemic ran its course, with lasting effects for Indigenous inhabitants. The 'northern district' centred on Outjo, where a military station had been established by Governor Leutwein in 1895, and was officially charged with controlling the spread of rinderpest and trade in livestock (Rizzo 2012: 66). The four most north-western stations were located from west to east at Tsawisis, Omaruru on the ǁHuab River, Cauas-Okawa, and Okaukuejo (the largest station), from which it ran along the southern margin of Etosha Pan towards the next station at Namutoni (Figure 4). A roughly 30 km neutral zone or 'no go' area was proclaimed north of this cordon, 'defined by the specific water holes that were banned from use' (Miescher 2012: 26).

At this time, the north-west was populated by Indigenous Swartbooi Nama (ǁKhau|gôan) focused around Otjitambi and Fransfontein, !Gomen Topnaar Nama in and around Sesfontein, Damara/ǂNūkhoe lineages (*!haoti*) throughout the landscape, and ǁUbun connected with the Northern Namib. OvaHerero were also present mostly in the northern Kaokoveld and the central parts of Namibia to which they had migrated from around the second half of the 18th century (Lau 1994[1987]: 31), with rather severe consequences for Indigenous Nama, Damara/ǂNūkhoen and San living in these areas. In the north-west, conflict combined with complex alliances characterised relationships between these different groupings of people (Bollig 1997, 1998). Outpost guards were 'instructed to maintain the "neutral zone" along the cordon, keeping it free of humans and animals' (Deputy Governor von Lindequist, quoted in Miescher 2012: 25). As documented below, the clearance of livestock north of the cordon echoes today in projections of these lands as a 'wildlife corridor' rather than a livestock-herding and inhabited area (Bollig 2020: 206–217, Sullivan 2024: 358–367).

The establishment of these militarised veterinary posts thus began the process of separating indigenous herds north of this line from the herds of emerging settler farmers to the south of the veterinary cordon. This situation lingers today in the increasingly controversial 'red line' or fenced veterinary cordon stretching east to west across Namibia, which continues to divide the country between north and south. Indeed, rinderpest was in some ways a gift to the consolidating German colonial government (Drechsler 1980[1966]: 98). The decimation of indigenous herds, coupled with some disintegration of pastoralist societal organisation, opened the door for state appropriation of territory and livestock, facilitated by militarised state power (Henrichsen 2011). Prompting a full-blown militarised campaign by the German colonial administration were a number of attacks in north-west Namibia, ultimately by an anti-colonial alliance of Swartbooi/ǁKhau|gôan, !Gomen Topnaar, Damara/ǂNūkhoen and followers of the ovaHerero leader Kambatta based around Omburo (south of the District Command town of Outjo). These attacks took place in Aub, Ehobib, Tsaub, Anabis, Gaus, Klein-Tsaub, Khauas and Haudamab, building up to major military

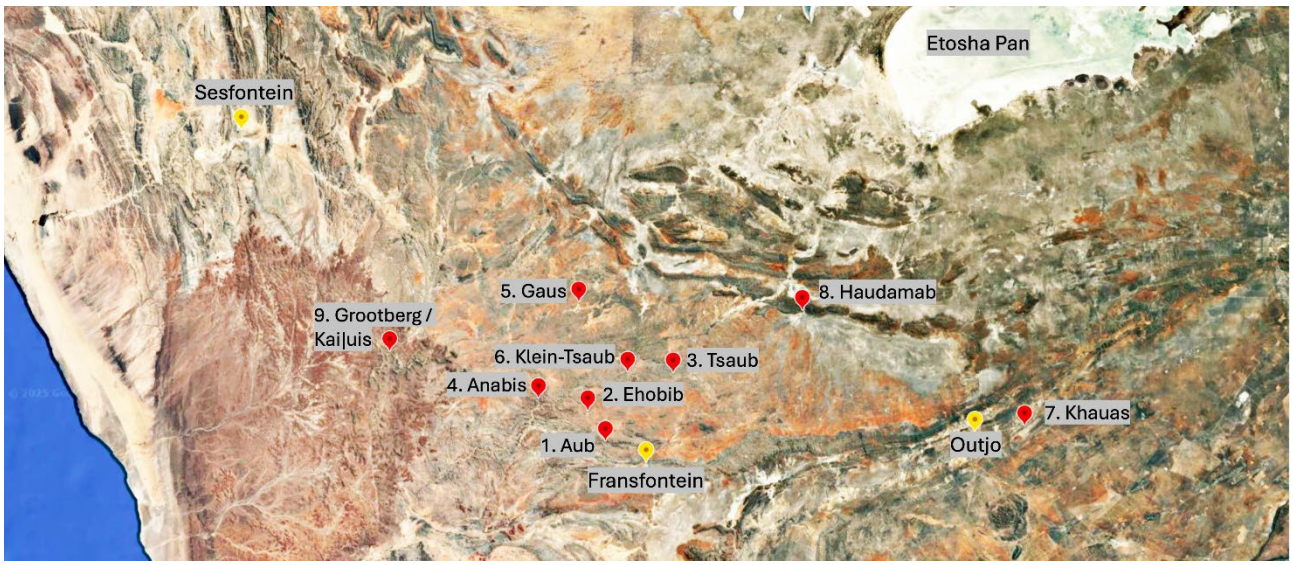

Figure 5 Locations and order of the main skirmishes and battles in 1897-1898, indicating the wide-ranging terrain in which resistance and militarised suppression took place. Map prepared by Sian Sullivan, using Google Earth: Map data © Landsat / Copernicus Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO, 2021.

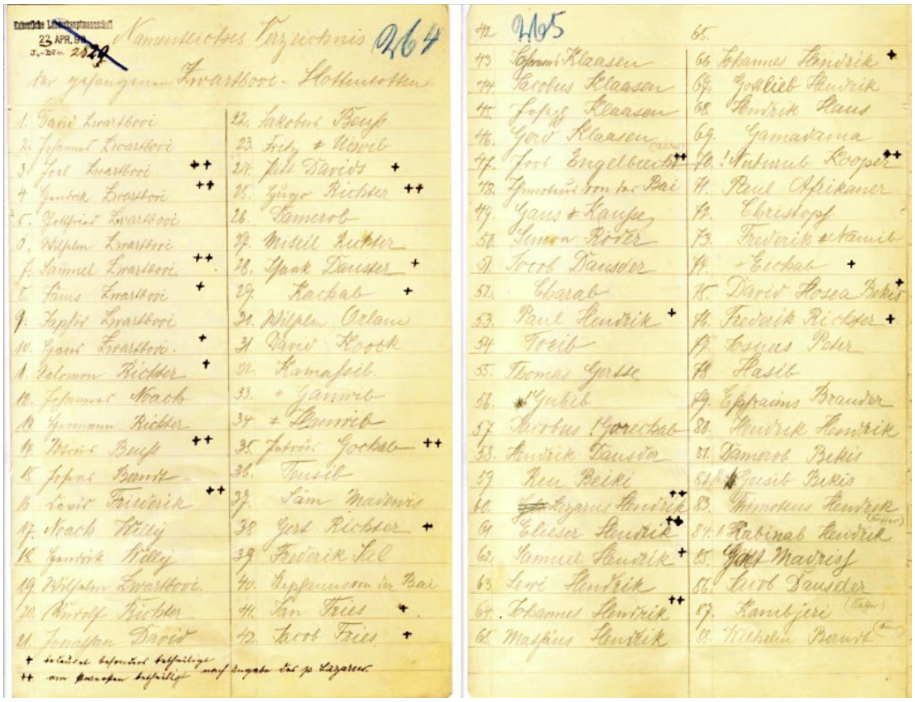

Figure 6 NAN ZBU 440D-IV-f v2 'List of names of the captured Zwartbooi-Hottentots and those not yet captured, as well as those not involved in the war', (undated), vol. 2: 264–272.
Key: + means especially involved in the campaign; ++ means involved in the campaign, according to Lazarus Swartbooi.

suppression at Grootberg (Kai|uis) on 26 February 1898 (Figure 5). At this time, ovaHerero leaders Manasse Tjiseseta of Omaruru and Samuel Maharero of Okahandja enthusiastically supported the German military with dozens of ovaHerero fighters.[11]

[11] NAN ZBU 440D-IV-f v1 'Kaptain Manasse of Omaruru communicates that he is ready to help', Manasse Tjiseseta (Omaruru) to v. Lindequist (Windhoek), 26.12.1897, vol. 1: 94–95; NAN ZBU 440D-IV-f v1 'No danger from Manasse of Omaruru, who wants to support the German government with 200 men; six Hereros were sent to Franzfontein with Lt. Bensen', v. Lindequist (Omaruru) to Imperial Chancellor (Berlin), 10.12.1897, vol. 1: 23; NAN ZBU 440D-IV-f v1 'previous measures', Duft (Windhoek) to Lt. Reiß (Windhoek), 26.2.1898, vol. 1: 212. All NAN ZBU 440D-IV-f documents were transcribed from German Kurrent script by historian Dr Wolfram Hartmann, translated by Sullivan using the Deepl translator app., with the translations checked by Hartmann.

Men were killed on both sides of this war. Its outcome was the deportation to Windhoek of hundreds of Swartbooi men, women and children as forced labour from as young as ten years.[12] The first two pages of a long list (nine pages) of those deported (Figure 6), and the photograph of Swartbooi removed to Windhoek (Figure 7), provide some evidence for these removals. Indicating the true aims of this war, in 1895 Governor Leutwein had already articulated an aim 'to expropriate the Zwartboois entirely in favour of the Kaoko-Land- und Minengesellschaft', the company then charged with allocating land to settlers in north-west Namibia (quoted in Drechsler 1980[1966]: 91). Alongside the Swartbooi deportations, insurgent ovaHerero were placed in heavy chains and deployed as forced labour on railways from the coast.[13] Jan ǀUixamab, Captain at the time of Sesfontein, was ordered to 'pay 1 000 head of small cattle to the German government as punishment for having made war without any reason and for the great expenses incurred by the German Government'; and

> to recognise the German Emperor and his representative, the Imperial Governor in Windhoek, as your lord and master and to be faithful and obedient to him at all times and never again to make war against the German Government.[14]

These circumstances rather contradict a statement made by Miyamoto (2022: 18) that '[t]hough Namibia was under German colonial control from 1884, its north-western regions began to feel the impact of colonial control only under the subsequent South African governance'.

Figure 7 Captured Swartbooi Nama in Windhoek in 1899. Photo by August Engelbert Wulff, 1899, out of copyright. Source: Ubersee-Museum Bremen, P00092, https://nat.museum-digital.de/object/1101015.

Settler colonialism

The events outlined above paved the way for a vision of settler colonialism. By 1901, 39 settler farmers (including 11 German, eight 'Transvaalers', seven 'Capelanders' and seven Englishmen) were reported for Outjo District (Kruger n.d.: 15, 37 in Dieckmann 2007a: 162), with settler farming consolidated here under the South African administration following World War 1 (Miescher 2006, 2012). Repeated attempts were made to keep land north of white settled areas clear of Indigenous dwelling places and livestock. 'Game Reserve No. 2' was also established in 1907, stretching from Etosha Pan to the coast and the Kunene River in the north-west: although it is important to note that people remained living throughout this game reserve area (Sullivan et al. 2024: 58–61). The intention was to protect species such as elephant which had been severely depleted in the 1800s through commercial hunting for ivory by incoming hunters and traders (Bollig & Olwage 2016).

Increasingly, the 'buffer zone' between 'native' areas and the settler colony was patrolled and policed, resulting in people being demanded to move from areas where they were living. The 1930 Annual Report of the South West Africa Administration (SWAA) thus emphasises the establishment of a 'buffer zone between the natives in the Kaokoveld and the occupied parts of the Territory', ostensibly to control the transmission of lung sickness (bovine pleuropneumonia) from the former to the latter (SWAA 1930: 72, Fuller 1993: 74). As Ruben Sanib recalled from around the late 1930s and early 1940s:

> The government said this is now the wildlife area and you cannot move in here. We had to move to the other side of the mountains – to Tsabididi [Figure 8, the area also known today as Mbakondja]. Government police from Kamanjab and

[12] NAN ZBU 440D-IV-f v2 'Please be allowed to take a Zwartbooi boy [or girl] into service', Pastor Siebe (Windhoek) to Imperial Government (Windhoek), 5.5.1898, vol. 2: 181.
[13] NAN ZBU 440D-IV-f v2 'To railway construction command Swakopmund: delivery of 27 captured Hereros for chain work', v. Lindequist (Omaruru) to Railway Construction Command (Swakopmund), 16.4.1898, vol. 2: 135–136.
[14] NAN ZBU 440D-IV-f v2 'Conditions of Submission', v. Lindequist (Outjo) to Capn. Jan ǀUixamab (Sesfontein), 9.4.1898, vol. 2: 132–133.

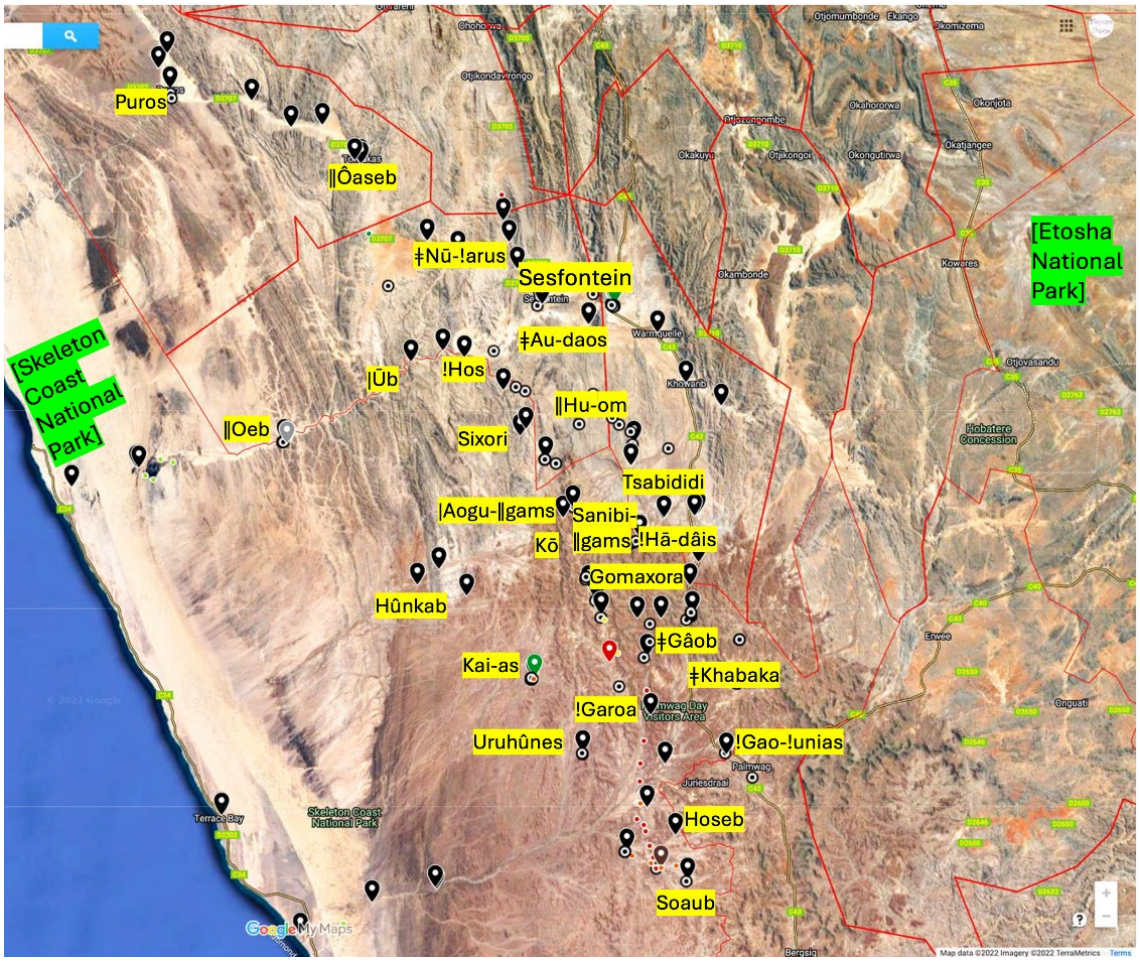

Figure 8 Some key former dwelling places positioned within and near to the Palmwag Tourism Concession, in between the Skeleton Coast National Park and Etosha National Park. The black place-markers indicate former (and some current) living places; the red dots crossing the !Uniab River in the lower part of the map mark the cutline at the western edge of the 1950s commercial farming area; the red boundary lines mark the borders of communal-area conservancies; and the fainter red line marks the current veterinary fence. Prepared by Sian Sullivan (2024: 351), including Google Maps data © TerraMetrics 2022.

> Fransfontein told the people to move from here [Hurubes].[15]

There are also reports of cattle being shot in the course of this policing, as documented further below.[16] Prior to these times, however, people regularly moved from south to the north of today's Palmwag Tourism Concession, through places and springs now within the concession area (Sullivan 2024: 351–357). Figure 8 shows some of the key and well-known places that people would move to and through with their livestock, and for accessing other key resources.

In the 1950s under South African rule, the Police Zone – where commercial farming by white settler farmers was permitted – was expanded in a north-westerly direction (Kambatuku 1996). As shown in Figure 9, surveyed farms were extended into the areas that are now the Palmwag and Etendeka tourism concessions (Figures 3 and 12), a consequence of the veterinary cordon being relocated north-westwards in 1955. This 1950s north-westerly expansion of commercial farmland acted to prevent local land-users from living in, accessing and utilising the newly surveyed lease- and free-hold farming area (Sullivan 2024: 347).

Damara/ǂNūkhoen were moved both northwards to Sesfontein and other settlements in the vicinity of the Hoanib River, and southwards towards Okombahe/|Âǂgommes on the !Uǂgâb River.[17] The

[15] Ruben Sanib, ǂKhabaka, 20.11.2014.
[16] Andreas !Kharuxab, Kowareb, 1999.
[17] NAN SWAA 2513 Inspection of the Kaokoveld by Agricultural Officer. 6.2.1952.

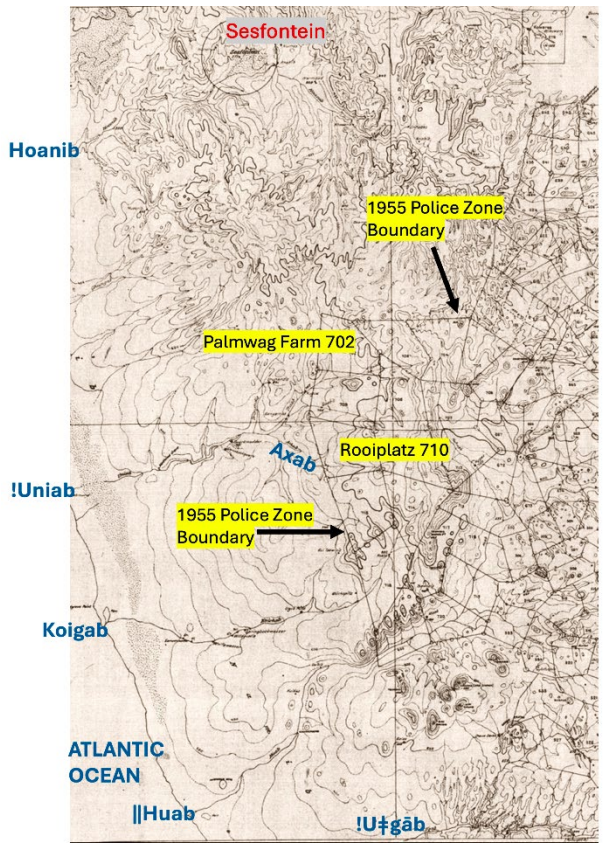

Figure 9 The expansion of settler farms into the north-west in the 1950s. The land beyond the 'Police Zone' boundary was intended to be cleared of people and livestock. Palmwag Farm 702 is now the site of Palmwag Lodge run by the Gondwana Collection, whilst Rooiplatz 710 is the site of Desert Rhino Camp run by Wilderness Safaris.

late Ben Fuller (1993: 69), who carried out PhD research in Sesfontein and Otjimbingwe/Âtsas, noted that in the 1950s there was an 'influx [to Sesfontein] of outlying residents' termed 'Namidaman', under the leadership of Simon ‖Hawaxab. It should also be noted that the circular area of the Sesfontein 'reserve' (Figure 9) did not reflect the broader area utilised and known by inhabitants of this area. Indeed, in the SWAA Annual Report of 1939 it was acknowledged that the 'Zesfontein reserve' was 'much too small', and 'a number of the Zesfontein Natives are now living on Crown land', i.e. beyond the reserve enclave (SWAA 1939: 172).

The distress caused by the 1950s and earlier evictions from this wider area of so-called 'Crown land' was articulated to a United Nations Special Committee for South West Africa meeting in Sesfontein in May 1962, in which the loss of land and grazing was high on the agenda of resident concerns (Sullivan 2024: 356–357). Present at this meeting were Simon Hawahab [‖Hawaxab] 'Headman of the Topnaar Nama residents' (36 to 40 persons), Elias Amxab (!Anubaeb) 'Headman of the Damaras' (200 to 300 living in the Reserve), and 'Herero Headman' Urimunge Kasaona, as well as around 100 additional residents. The Kasaona family from Etanga in north Kaokoveld, together with allied ovaHimba families (Karutjaiva, Uararavi, Kasupi and Uatokuya), had approached Sesfontein Headman Levi |Nâbeb |Uixamab prior to his death in 1918, requesting living places at ǂGuwitas (Otjindakui), Ganamub and Puros: pleading that they were fleeing the war of Chief Vita Thom (Oorlog/'Oloxa') in north-east Kaokoveld.[18] At the UN meeting, it was stated that,

> the people of Sessfontein used to be able to graze their livestock south of the Hoanib River. However, European farmers had taken the land [...], and were occupying most of the grazing veld which had been formerly used by the people of Sessfontein. Moreover, the farmers did not want the people of Sessfontein to travel through the land now occupied by the Europeans.[19]

In other words, settler colonialism impacted people's access to dwelling places, as well as their pastoralist mobilities to springs and grazing throughout this landscape. New mining investments also began to prevail in the Northern Namib for diamonds and semi-precious stones, creating restrictions on accessing the coast, thereby preventing people from harvesting the significant staple food *!nara* (Sullivan & Ganuses 2022: 128–129, Sullivan & Ganuses 2024: 325). These increasing restrictions damaged people's livelihood autonomy, whilst simultaneously creating a labour pool of inhabitants of the north-west. Oral histories thus describe how many individuals began working around this time as labourers for the new settler farms, as well as for the newly established mines in the coastal areas. As Kössler (2015: 14) writes, settler colonialism has created significant inequalities and continues to 'affect public memory and the image of the nation and its past'.

[18] August Kasaona interview at ǂGuwitas/Otjindakui, 11.11.2015; also Ruben Sanib and Sophia |Awises, Mai Go Ha, 27.10.2014.
[19] NAN.A/5212/Add.1 20.9.1962, Meeting with Headmen and residents of Sessfontein Native Reserve, 10.5.1962, United Nations Special Committee for South West Africa: 13–16.

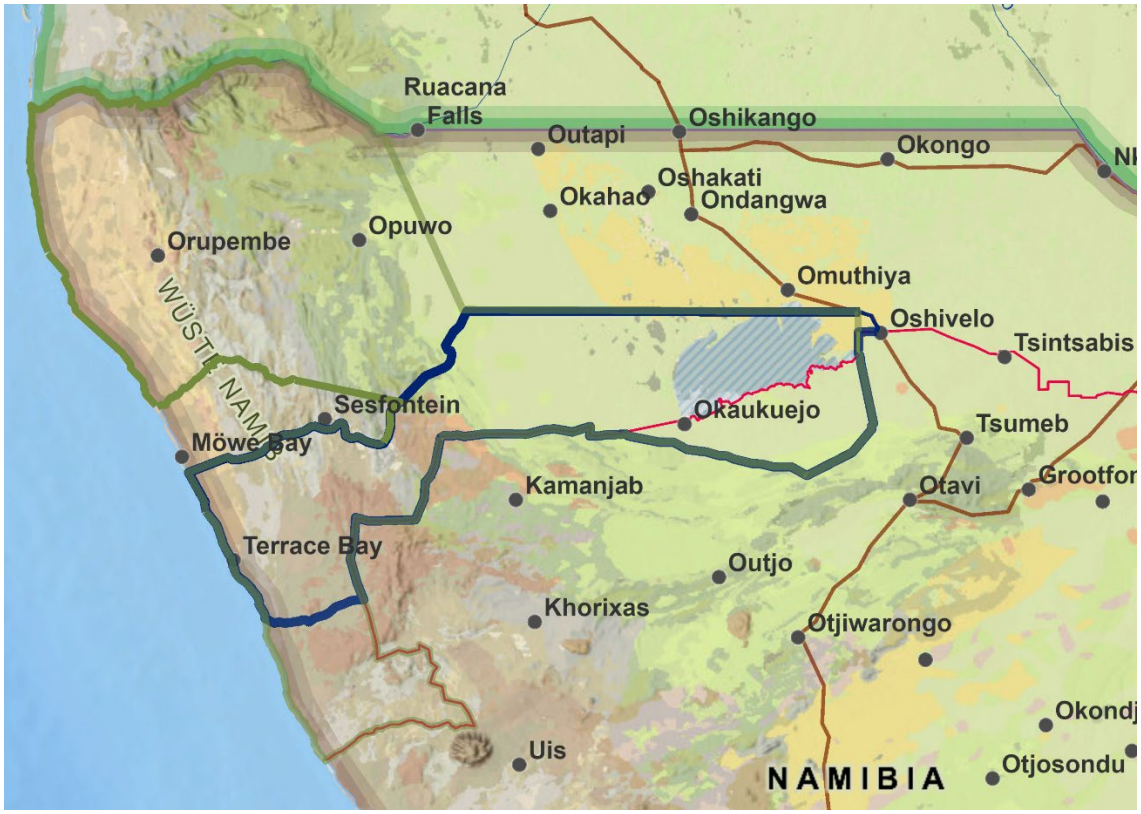

Figure 10 Map of Etosha Game Park in 1962 (blue contour) and Game Reserve No. 2 in 1958 (green contour) (for which Government Notice 20 of 1966 retains the 1958 boundary); with the 'red line' in 1955 (red) and main roads (brown lines). The southern boundary of Game Reserve No. 2 (in green) overlaps with the veterinary control boundary (in red). © Ute Dieckmann; data: Ordinance 18 of 1958; Government Notice 177 of 1962; Atlas of Namibia Team 2022, used with permission.

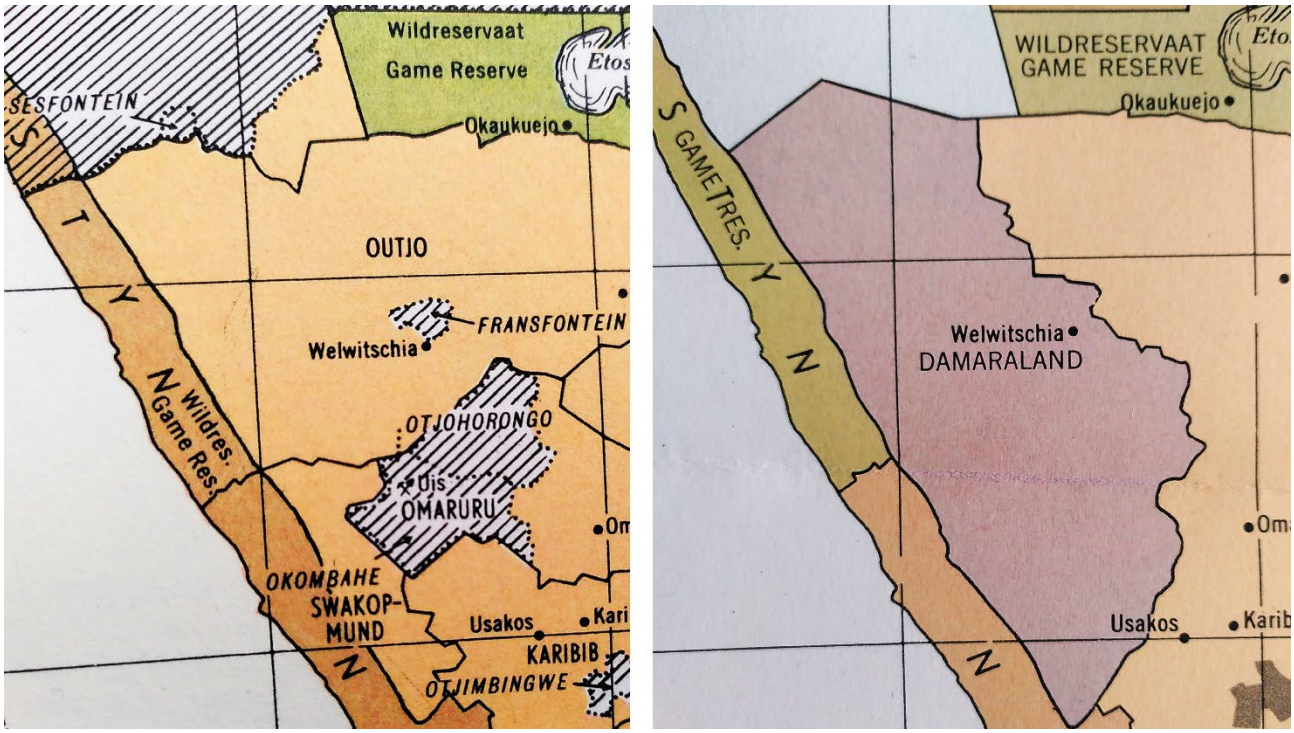

Figure 11 The map on the left shows the existing 'native reserves' in west Namibia, namely Sesfontein, Fransfontein, Otjohorongo and Okombahe, that were to be joined into a single 'homeland' called 'Damaraland' as shown in the map on the right. Source: adapted from Figures 9 and 27 of the Odendaal Report (1964), out of copyright.

Conservation expansionism

Alongside the expanded settler farming territory into the north-west, and the repeated clearances of people north of the new 'Police Zone' boundary, Etosha Game Park was extended westwards to the coast in 1962 (Dieckmann et al. 2024: 87–91). This expanded conservation area, set within a south-westwards expansion of 'Game Reserve No. 2' in 1958, thereby absorbed space north of the new Police Zone boundary, incurring further restrictions on people's mobilities through this area (Figure 10).

Arguably, the south-westwards extension of Game Reserve No. 2 in 1958, and the later Etosha Game Park extension to the west in 1962, did not have much additional effect on the people of Hurubes from the Hoanib to the !Uǂgâb rivers, because they had already been iteratively cleared from the landscape. It instead consolidated their severance from resources and living sites in this area (Sullivan 2024: 359). It should be noted, however, that conservation expansionism in the 1950s also resulted in evictions of Haiǁom from Etosha Game Park (Dieckmann 2007b, Peters et al. 2009), and Damara/ǂNūkhoen from Daan Viljoen Game Reserve near Windhoek who were relocated to Okombahe and Sorris-Sorris on the !Uǂgâb River (Sullivan & Ganuses 2020: 307–308). In the 1960s, the expanded Etosha Game Park also affected ovaHerero to the north-east of today's Palmwag Tourism Concession. As Fanwell Ndjiva related to Arthur Hoole,

> In 1967 we moved from Ombombo to the area by Sesfontein and Warmquelle. The South African governor came to Warmquelle and told the headman that our cattle are not healthy and that we cannot move across the Hoanib River […]. Langman Muzuma stayed at Otjondeka and could not move his cattle. Over a certain line he could not go below it in the area between Otjivero and Warmquelle he couldn't go south of that (Hoole & Sullivan 2024: 380).

'Homelands' and conservation crisis

The extended Etosha Game Park was very short-lived, however, due to the 1964 publication of the *Commission of Enquiry into South West African Affairs* (the 'Odendaal Report'). For the north-west, the Commission proposed reconnecting the fragmented 'Native Reserves' of Sesfontein, Fransfontein, Okombahe and Otjohorongo to form the 'Damaraland Homeland' (Figure 11). An expanded 'Kaokoland Homeland' was created north of Damaraland, with the latter losing a large stretch of land north-east of its original boundary; meaning, for example, that the settlement of Warmquelle known as ǀAexaǀaus and inhabited by many Nama and ǂNūkhoe individuals and families, became part of the Kaokoland Homeland, causing evictions of Khoekhoegowab-speaking people living there (Sullivan 2003). The Odendaal Report, to some extent, reflected prior mobilities and uses of land between these reserve areas (Figure 8) that had been disrupted due to the 1950s settler farming area and the extended Etosha Game Park in 1962 (Figure 10). The expanded 'homeland' of 'Damaraland' created in the early 1970s, ushered in a 'communalisation' of the settler farming area in the north-west (Sullivan 1996). It also appears that white settler farmers in this area may have benefitted significantly from the sale of their farms (Kambatuku 1996, Sullivan 2024: 348).

Although the expanded Etosha Game Park of 1962 had only existed for a short period of time, and with little personnel or infrastructure on the ground, the homeland areas precipitated a huge crisis for conservationists. As de la Bat, biologist and conservation leader in the former South West Africa, writes:

> After Odendaal Etosha resembled a plucked fowl. 17 972 square kilometres had to be *sacrificed* to the land needs of Owambo, Kaokoland and Damaraland. (de la Bat 1982: 20, emphasis added).

As Melber (2005: 105) writes, however, a statement like this also 'denies recognition of the particular sacrifices' of those who had lived in these areas and experienced repeated removals through the layers of history unfolding here. A rush to remove valued wildlife from 'Damaraland' to what became Etosha National Park (ENP) followed, relating especially to black rhino (Joubert 1984, Sullivan et al. 2021: 12–14); even though it appears that these animals are currently better protected in the communal lands of north-west Namibia than in either national parks or freehold farming areas, where both black and white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*) are often illegally hunted (MEFT 2024, Schneider et al. 2025).

In addition, the repeated displacements experienced by Damara/ǂNūkhoe and ǁUbu inhabitants of this land area seem to have fed into a particular downplaying of their histories and knowledge of the landscape. Etosha ecologist Ken Tinley (1971: 14), for example, advocated for the complete removal of Khoekhoegowab-speakers inhabiting the Hoanib river valley settlements to the Fransfontein Reserve, making no mention of the large numbers of Damara/ǂNūkhoen inhabiting these areas and claiming that the 'Strandlopers' (ǁUbun) were 'extinct'. Conservationist Garth Owen-Smith (1972: 32, emphasis added) similarly rather diminishes the presence and histories of Khoekhoegowab-speaking peoples of the area in inaccurately stating that,

> It appears likely that in the distant past, both the Bushman and the more negroid Damara were widespread in the Kaokoveld, but within the last twenty years, *the 'Strandloper' Bushman has passed from the scene, and only a few Damara remain*, in the dusty Hoanib river valley between Warmquelle and Sesfontein.

Here again we see an 'imaginative geography' leaning towards conservation urgency that diminishes people's presence and knowledges of these lands.

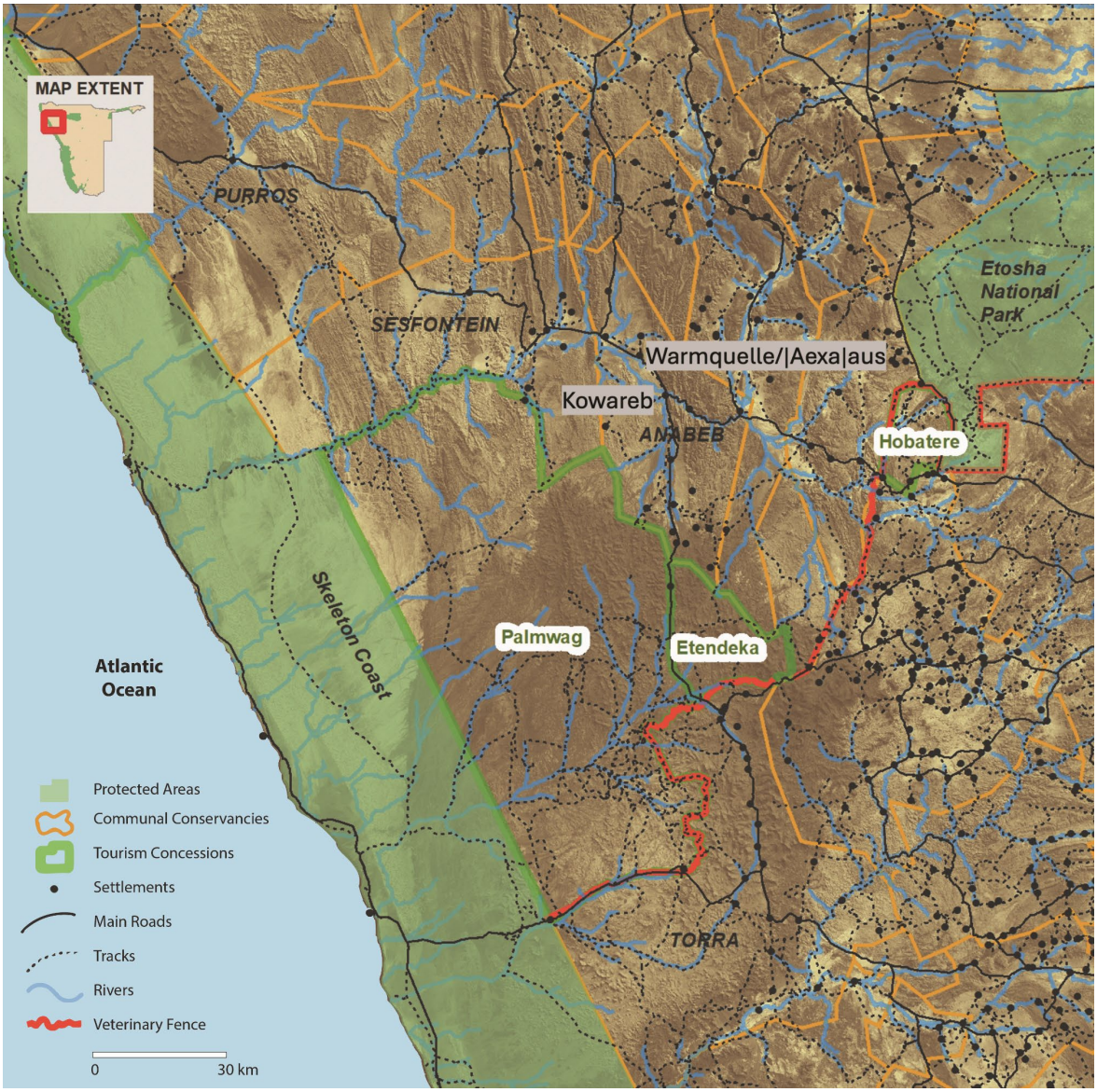

Figure 12 Communal area conservancies (with orange boundaries) both north and south of the present location of the 'red line' (veterinary cordon fence), in between the Skeleton Coast National Park and Etosha National Park. The dotted lines represent tracks through the area, the black dots are current settlements, and the blue lines are ephemeral rivers. Map prepared by Jeff Muntifering.

Simultaneously, a huge area stretching from the !Uǂgâb to the Hoanib Rivers became a trophy hunting concession (Sullivan 2024: 365–367); an initiative that Justus ǁGaroëb (2002: 5), then leader of the 'Damaraland Homeland', vehemently disapproved of.[20] Following drought in the late 1970s and early 1980s, this trophy hunting concession became the Palmwag and Etendeka tourism concessions, around 600 000 ha in total. At this time the idea was that the concessionaire should benefit from tourism proceeds from these areas whilst local and Indigenous inhabitants could still access concession lands for food gathering and other practices. ǁGaroëb (2002: 9) confirms this perspective in stating that:

> Such Concession Area can only be exclusive in relation to the specific purpose for which it was granted/leased. Concessionaire can therefore not prevent the right of entry by others, such as indigenous peoples of the area who for whatever cultural or religious reasons or for collecting wood, wild food, herbs etc. may want to enter such Concession area without any permission to do so.

Post-Independence CBNRM and private sector tourism

The circumstances chronicled above clearly led to repeated removals of people from land areas they were familiar with, combined with a strong diminishing of people's knowledge base, autonomy and food security connected with these lands. They have additionally generated a perception of these particular landscapes of north-west Namibia as valuable for conservation and tourism. Following independence in Namibia in 1990, the conservation emphasis has thus been

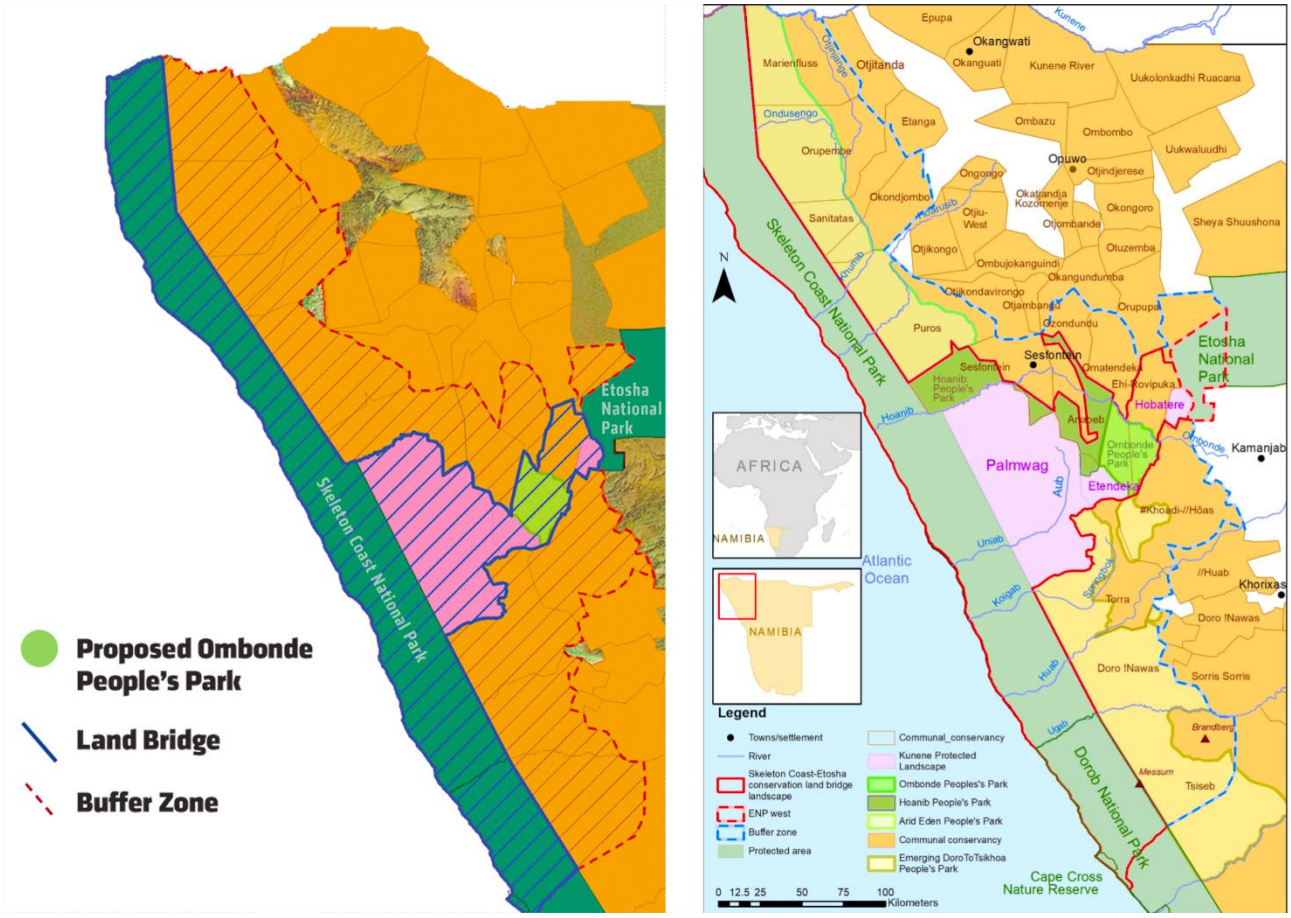

Figure 13 Left: 'building a land bridge'. The pink areas are the Palmwag, Etendeka and Hobatere Tourism Concessions; the orange areas are the surrounding communal-area conservancies. Public domain image downloaded from https://www.worldwildlife.org/magazine/issues/summer-2023/articles/moving-forward#popup1; Right: map including the 'Kunene Protected Landscape' (Palmwag, Etendeka and Hobatere tourism concessions) with new and emerging 'People's Parks' (MEFT 2025: 13).

[20] Gaob Justus ǁGaroëb, Anker, 7.3.2022.

towards opening landscapes beyond the 'red line' to private sector invested tourism and trophy-hunting facilities (Denker 2022, Lapeyre 2011, Schnegg & Kiaka 2018, Sullivan 2006, Sullivan 2023). This process has been connected with a proliferation of conservancies established following independence through new legislation, particularly the Nature Conservation Amendment Act, 5 of 1996, known as the 'conservancy amendment'. There are now 86 communal area conservancies established in Namibia, with the highest number by region (38) located in Kunene Region (Figure 12). Tourism dividends to locally-run conservancies established as part of Namibia's Community-Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) programme are an essential aspect of tourism-related investments. At the same time, it remains somewhat unclear to what extent local communities and conservancy members benefit from these dividends compared with profit made by the private sector (Koot 2019, Kalvelage et al. 2020, Sullivan 2023).

The loss of the short-lived expanded Etosha Game Park that connected Etosha to the Skeleton Coast has additionally led to a recurrent aim to create a wildlife or conservation corridor that reconnects Etosha and the Skeleton Coast National Parks (Figure 13). This aim has culminated in a well-funded initiative to create a conservation 'land-bridge' between these two National Parks (LLF, WWF & IRDNC 2024). This 'land-bridge' would connect the Palmwag, Etendeka and Hobatere Tourism Concessions via the Ombonde People's Park/Landscape, with a far-reaching 'buffer zone' around the land-bridge area (Figure 13). Indeed, a statement on the Legacy Landscapes website confirms that this initiative will reinvent the German colonial proclamation of 'Game Reserve No. 2', through which people continued to live, asserting that,

> The Skeleton Coast-Etosha Conservation Bridge will enable us to restore a conservation landscape envisaged over a century ago when Game Reserve No. 2 was proclaimed in 1907.[21]

The Palmwag, Etendeka and Hobatere tourism concessions are now being referred to as the Kunene Protected Landscape, with new 'People's Parks' also named (MEFT 2025: 11–14). These include: a Hoanib People's Park west of Sefontein and also incorporating a large part of Anabeb Conservancy; an Arid Eden People's Park stretching from Puros Conservancy to the Kunene River; the Ombonde People's Park east of the Etendeka Tourism Concession; and an emerging DoroToTsikhoa People's Park south of the 'Red Line' (Figure 13). Further tourism facilities are also being promoted ostensibly to benefit local communities (see, for example, Denker 2022), although these facilities may also impact people's livelihood practices and pastoralist mobilities (Lendelvo et al. 2024; Miyamoto 2022; Olwage 2024).

THREE JOURNEYS

As stated before, we seek to convey how people once lived in and moved through landscapes now envisioned as essential for conservation and associated tourism income. We have shared details of our on-site oral history research in several publications (Sullivan & Ganuses 2021, 2022, 2024, Sullivan 2022, 2024). Here, we provide an overview of three specific journeys carried out in 2019 with Franz ǀHaen ǁHoëb (ǁUbun), Ruben !Nagu Sanib (ǁKhao-a Dama) and Julia !Nâuna Tauros (Puros Dama). These individuals were all in their 80s when we undertook these journeys. Each journey was between 200–400 km, and was undertaken in a 4x4 vehicle, with walking to specific sites as a key part of the journeys which were also filmed through collaboration with film-maker Oliver Halsey.[22] Links to the films, which provide more detail than we can convey here, are shared below. Our aim now is to draw out some of the more-or-less hidden historical complexities relevant for those who lived in the Northern Namib desert, now the Skeleton Coast National Park; the area known as Hurubes, now within the Palmwag Tourism Concession; and Puros, now the Puros Conservancy.

One dimension we would like to highlight here relates to the acute sensitivities related by multiple participants in our research regarding the sustainable utilisation of varied foods found throughout these landscapes. Hunting, for example, was guided by strict rules and rituals designed to ensure the presence of animals into the

[21] https://legacylandscapes.org/map/skeleton-coast-etosha/
[22] https://www.youtube.com/@oliverhalsey1810

future. These rules included no hunting of females with young, and limiting each hunter to only one animal: if a hunter took more than this he would be prohibited from hunting for two months and would have to leave his bow and arrow in his hut.[23] The importance of supporting future sustainabilities have tended to be present for a wide variety of harvesting practices. For example, when gathering grass and *Monsonia* spp. (*bosûi*) seeds from harvester ant nests, normal practice is to leave enough seed within the nest so that the ants can survive and continue to store seeds in future seasons (Sullivan 1999: 12). These points are significant in terms of the pragmatic and appreciative aspects of people's approach to the lands in which they lived and from which they have been removed, thereby denying them access to the diverse foods they utilised that supported a more varied diet in the past.

First journey: Skeleton Coast and Hoanib River – Franz ǀHaen ǁHoëb

Franz was born into a ǁUbu family at Auses, a large and brackish spring now within the Skeleton Coast National Park (SCNP). He remembers living in areas of the Northern Namib that are now part of the SCNP, as well as moving from the coast to areas inland and between east and west of the Hoanib River (Sullivan & Ganuses 2022, Sullivan & Ganuses 2024). The sites we visited with Franz on this particular journey are shown in Figure 14.

Franz recalled harvesting *!nara* melons (from the near-endemic cucurbit plant *Acanthosicyos horridus*) with his parents and grandparents, in the Hoanib and !Uniab rivers, as well as at other sites such as Samanab, north of the !Uniab (Figure 15). As mentioned in the 'chronology of clearances' above, people were discouraged from travelling westwards

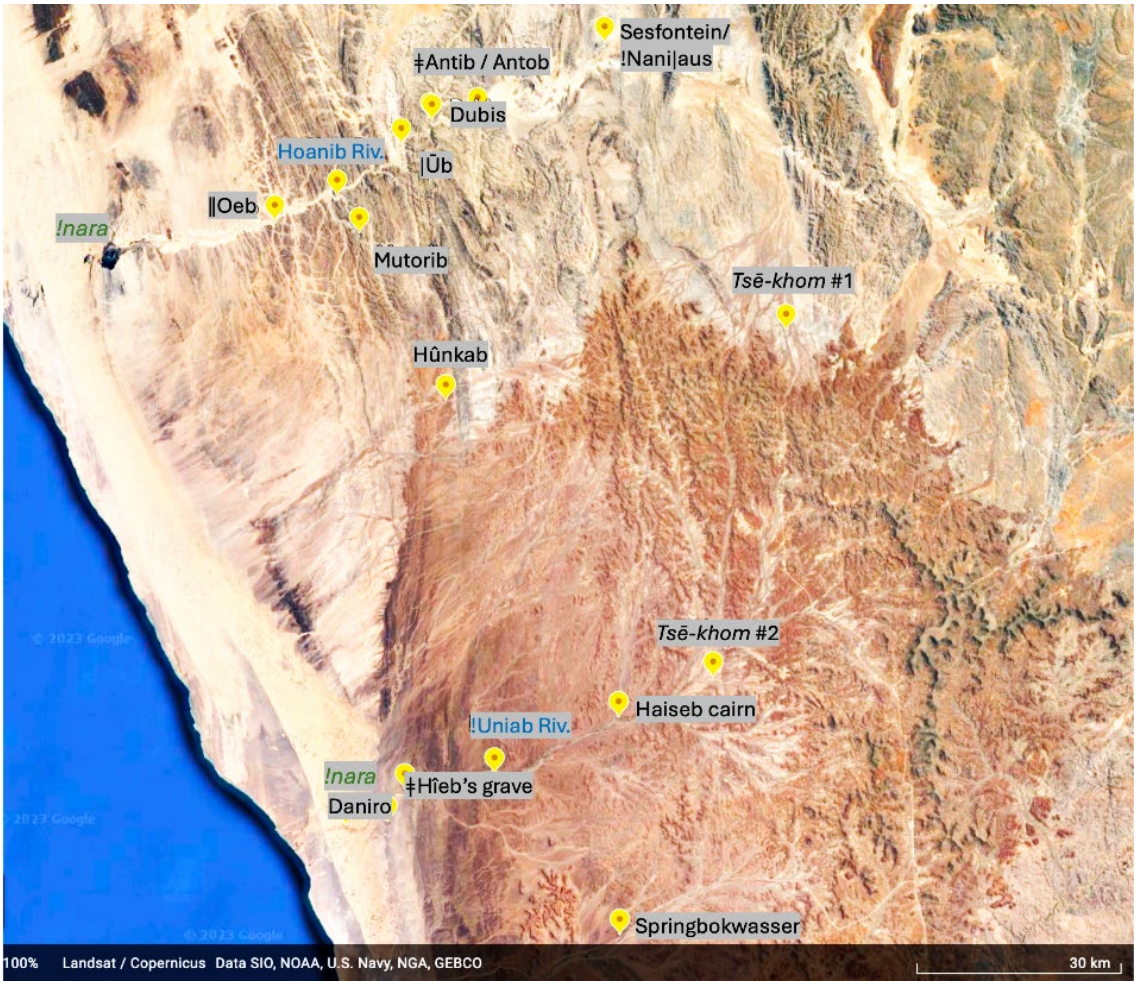

Figure 14 Places visited with Franz ǀHaen ǁHoëb in May 2019.

[23] Franz ǀHaen ǁHoëb and Noag Mũgagara Ganaseb, Hoanib Camp/ǁOeb, 22.11.2015.

Figure 15 Above: reconstructed mobilities by ǁUbun (and others) to harvest *!nara* (*Acanthosicyos horridus*) melons from plants in the !Uniab and Hoanib rivers, now in the Skeleton Coast National Park, via inland dwelling places and springs. Below: key plant foods and their localities in the western part of the Hoanib river valley, including *!nara* melons in the west, the fruits of *xoris* (*Salvadora persica*) in many locations throughout the Hoanib, and grass seeds called *ǂares* (*Setaria verticillata*) closer to Sesfontein. Based on site visits and multiple conversations with especially Franz ǀHaen ǁHoëb and Noag Mûgagara Ganaseb. Photos: © Sian Sullivan.

Figure 16 Franz ǀHaen ǁHoëb stands at the grave of his maternal grandfather ǂHîeb. The footsteps from a recent sports run across the desert are visible on either side of Franz. Photo: screenshot from the film *Lands That History Forgot: 1st Journey, Skeleton Coast & Hoanib River* https://vimeo.com/947316591, 2024.

from Sesfontein from the 1950s onwards, when mines began to be opened along the Skeleton Coast, making this a restricted area. In 1971, this part of the coast was gazetted as the SCNP, creating further restrictions on people's mobilities and food gathering practices. This meant that people could no longer access important foods in this western area, with implications for both autonomy and food security.

Travelling into the far west of the Palmwag Tourism Concession and the Skeleton Coast National Park with Franz and others, has enabled us to document some of the prior mobilities of people through these challenging desert landscapes. These mobilities enabled people to access different foods across this large area. As Franz relates:

> Near !Uniab River, there is a place called Samanab. So, from Samanab they came to Kai-as, and from Kai-as they came to Lotati [in the Obob River?], and from Lotati to !Garuǂgaeseb [river], and from !Garuǂgaeseb to Herero, and from Herero to ǂNâbina-ǂoahe, and from ǂNâbina-ǂoahe to ǀAuros to ǀGuiǀnarab, and from ǀGuiǀnarab to Hûnkab. This is the route that they were walking. And from Hûnkab they go to Hoanib, to Auses, and they were collecting there the *!naras*, and when the *!naras* were finished, they came to ǁKhams [Amspoort] in the Hoanib, and then back to the !Uniab, via !Haub where a large rock is balanced on the mountain.[24]

In Figure 15, the top image shows routes that people took between *!nara* melons at the !Uniab river mouth and the area of Auses in the Hoanib river, via inland springs such as Kai-as and Hûnkab. The bottom image shows the locations of key plant foods in the western part of the Hoanib river valley, including *!nara* melons in the west, the fruits of *xoris* (*S. persica*) along the Hoanib, and grass seeds called *ǂares* (*Setaria verticillata*) closer to Sesfontein. These foods could be gathered in large quantities and stored, meaning that they formed staple foods for people living in these areas.

As well as mobilities through the landscape and recall of key foods once part of people's livelihoods, the return to graves of known ancestors has played a major part in our on-site oral history journeys. With Franz we thus returned to the grave of his maternal grand-father ǂHîeb in the lower !Uniab river (Sullivan & Ganuses 2022: 133–134, Sullivan & Ganuses 2024: 333). This grave is located exactly as mentioned in numerous prior interactions and interviews, close to the !Uniab River in the present-day SCNP (Figure 16). Franz had been brought to this grave by ǂHîeb's younger brother Sorerob, in the course of harvesting *!nara* in the !Uniab, prior to their displacement from this area. ǂHîeb's grave is next to the former dwelling site called Daniro (the place of honey, *danib*), where ǂHîeb and others first encountered German men travelling down the !Uniab; described to Franz as being the first occasion when ǁUbun had seen white men and encountered food in tins. This encounter was perhaps connected with an 1896 journey by Captain Ludwig von Estorff in which 'Bushmen' harvesting *!nara* in the !Uniab mouth are described (Jacobson & Noli 1987: 174). When we relocated this grave spoken of in previous interviews, there were footsteps all around it (as can be seen in Figure 16), which we later learned were from a running event of around 40 people

[24] Franz ǀHaen ǁHoëb, Hûnkab, 8.5.2019.

across the Skeleton Coast National Park, held in April 2019. It would mean a lot to descendants of ǂHîeb living in the Sesfontein area today for this grave to be marked and protected from human and animal disturbance into the future.

Second journey: Palmwag Tourism Concession / Hurubes – Ruben !Nagu Sanib

Ruben !Nagu Sanib previously lived in a land area he knew as ǂKhari (small) Hurubes, now forming the northern mountainous part of the Palmwag Tourism Concession (Figures 3 and 12). His ancestors moved through this area from a mountain they knew as ǁKhao-as, positioned at the confluence of the !Uniab and Aub (ǂGâob) rivers, in the southern part of the concession. It is from this mountain that ǁKhao-a Dama now based in Sesfontein derive their lineage identity, even though they can no longer access the area of ǁKhao-as mountain. When we first visited this mountain with both Ruben and Sophia ǀOpi ǀAwises they began to sing an *arus* healing song about this mountain and its history of association with the ǀAwise family, illustrating the significance of this now inaccessible mountain (Figure 17).[25]

Ruben spent some time at ǁKhao-as celebrating his ancestors through the practice of *tsē-khom*, which involves talking to one's ancestors in the daytime:

> You ǁKhao-a Dama, come and eat this food at night. I give this food to you. You who are moving down from ǁKhao-as, I share with you. Answer me, answer me, you people who danced the ǀ*gais* all through the night [ǀ*gaini*]. We must go well in the vehicle – it must not be stabbed by a thorn. Did you hear me ǀAwise kaib, ǀAwise !nau, and you ǀAwise in the middle? [Ruben's direct ancestors]. You who moved down from ǁKhao-as [to Sesfontein]. I share with you, to share with us. Let's make the things easier. Yes, yes you hear me! You hear me.
>
> This is my grand-father's mountain; the mountain of ǁKhao-a Daman. From this mountain called ǁKhao-a the brothers called ǀAwise-kaib [old], ǀAwise-ǁaegu-mab [in the middle] and ǀAwise-!nau [big] moved from here; they moved from here. ǁOesîb [Aukhoeb], Christjan, Khaini, ǂGâbab are the children of those men, and they moved

Figure 17 Sophia ǀOpi ǀAwise (L) and Ruben !Nagu Sanib (R) stand with the table mountain of ǁKhao-as both behind them and to their left, positioned where the ǂGâob (Aub) and !Uniab rivers meet. Composite image by Sian Sullivan and Mike Hannis, incorporating aerial photographs from the Directorate of Survey and Mapping, Windhoek.

[25] This song can be heard here: https://soundcloud.com/futurepasts/ss-khao-as-arus-selection.

> down with them from ǁKhao-as and from those springs where they were living. And they came to Uruhûnes [Urunendis], and from Uruhûnes they came to Kai-as, and they went up to ǀUi-!narab, and they went up to !Hubu, and they came to ǀNobarab, and to Nara, !Hago, Kō, Nabuamûe, and to Xom-di-ǁgâus – where I was born. And in Xom-di-ǁgâus area are ǀAuros, Tsaugu-ǁgams, ǀHarugo, Kowas, Urubao, Sixori, ǁHu-om. We are living in those places with those men like that. My father died in !Nani-ǀaus [Sesfontein] and my grand-fathers brought me here. And they said, this is ǁKhao-as – our father's mountain.[26]

Over the years we have visited many places throughout the Palmwag Concession and beyond with Ruben (Table 1), with our 2019 journey focusing on several key sites (Figure 18). We started this journey at the place Gomaxora – 'where the cattle dig' – now within the Palmwag Tourism Concession, but clearly a former settlement where reportedly both ovaHerero/ovaHimba and Damara/ǂNūkhoe resided. Here, a dramatic experience of eviction took place prior to the death of a Nama headman of Sesfontein called Nathaniel Husa ǀUixamab, who died after being mauled by a lion at the place ǂAu-daos in 1941 (Sullivan & Ganuses 2021: 170–173). As Ruben relates,

> We were living at ǀGui-gomabi-!gaus [west of Gomaxora]. While there we were ordered to move the cattle from this land to !Nani-ǀaus [Sesfontein] area. Some people were living here with their cattle, and my grandfather was at ǀGui-gomabi-!gaus with his cattle. When the authorities took the cattle to Gomaxora to be shot, the men in my family took their bull and killed him at the spring near here [so that the authorities could not shoot the bull]. When the bull was killed, they named the place ǀGui-gomabi-!gaus [the cave of that one bull]. […] The government [*ǂhanub*] first said take the cattle [*goman*] out, but you can stay here with goats [*birin*] only. But some of the cattle remained in the area and the government came and shot those cattle. This land was ǂNūkhoe land. But Herero wanted to move here. They were told to move out and ǂNūkhoe were then also told to move out with their cattle and goats.[27]

Ruben also took us to a series of graves of family members. For example, a known ancestor of his ǀAwise ǁKhao-a Dama family is buried at the former settlement of Kai-as. A more recent ancestor, namely Aukhoeb, who had herded livestock at Sixori south-west of Sesfontein where

Figure 18 The route taken with Ruben in May 2019 from Gomaxora to Aukhoeb's grave at Soaub.

[26] Ruben !Nagu Sanib, ǁKhao-as, 13.5.2019.
[27] Ruben !Nagu Sanib, in between Gomaxora and ǀGui-gomabi-!gaus, 13.5.2019 (also Sullivan 2024: 354).

Figure 19 Ruben !Nagu Sanib sits at the grave of his grand-father Markus Aukhoeb ǀAwiseb at the former living place Soaub in the Palmwag Concession. Photo: © Sian Sullivan, 15.5.2019.

Aukhoeb's sister ǁHūri ǀAwises gave birth to Suro's grandmother, is buried at Soaub in !Nau ('fat') Hurubes (Soaub is positioned at the bottom of Figure 18). When we first located Aukhoeb's grave in 2015 it had been very badly damaged by wildlife, to the extent that Aukhoeb's bones were visible. People were cleared from the settlement of Soaub in the mid-1950s, when it became the settler farm known as Rooiplatz (Figure 9). Today this farm is where Desert Rhino Camp is located, a high-end lodge run by Wilderness Safaris[28] focusing on exclusive black rhino tourism (Muntifering et al. 2017). As we sat at Aukhoeb's grave (Figure 19) Ruben related that:

> This is my grandfather Aukhoeb's grave. Aukhoeb was visiting from the other side [Sixori area] with his wife [ǂGaidâis, also called Sabuemi]. !Abudoeb, ǂKharub, Gaoeb, Sâtagob, Dawarib, ǁÂsûb, ǀHetub and !Naberob were the people who were living here. And he visited with his wife. As I told you, people were visiting each other in the different places. And when he visited here with his wife, he died here, and we buried him here. And his wife went back to !Nani-ǀaus [Sesfontein]. And the government told the people living in this area they must leave. And they moved from this land to Sesfontein area.[29]

Third journey: Julia Tauros returns to her birthplace, Puros on the Hoaruseb River

Julia !Nâuna Tauros grew up in the Puros area on the Hoaruseb River where her family had lived for several generations, leading to this Damara lineage now living in Sesfontein becoming known as 'Puros Dama', the name 'Puros' being a Khoekhoegowab name. Puros Dama were additionally connected with Damara/ǂNūkhoen known as !Narenin, who lived in and moved through the dryland landscape north-west of Sesfontein, harvesting *!nara* at springs such as Ganias and Sarusa, and in the Hoaruseb river. It appears that !Narenin had lived in these landscapes for generations. Whilst Damara/ǂNūkhoen did collect honey (*danib*) in the Puros area, they did not only visit the area in order to gather honey (Jacobsohn 1995: 98). The so-called 'Puros Dama' had lived in this area from at least the 1800s, with !Narenin being present here for longer: !Narenin were encountered as already inhabiting this area when Julia's ancestors moved northwards, fleeing conflict near the !Oeǂgâ/Erongo mountains in central Namibia. Julia was received exceptionally warmly at Puros by those who knew of her and were related to her, perhaps contradicting detail of a curse connected with male children born to an ovaHimba man who had taken Damara/ǂNūkhoe women as partners (Jacobsohn 1995: 95–97).

Although Julia had not been back to Puros since the 1960s her memory of names for the mountains and

[28] See https://www.wildernessdestinations.com/africa/namibia/damaraland/desert-rhino-camp
[29] Ruben !Nagu Sanib, Soaub, 15.5.2019.

other places in the area was astonishing, as indicated in the map of places we visited (Figure 20). Indicating the importance of these places to Julia, she recounted how:

> Even there where I am in Sesfontein I am thinking about the mountains on the way to Puros. I write in my mind the mountains and the places where we were living, even if I am there in Sesfontein, I also have in my mind the mountains and places of Puros.[30]

As Julia recalled the first decades of her life in Puros, she related that:

> When it's raining at Puros, at the plain there, ǂ*Nurusôa* [*Trianthema triquetra*, with edible seeds] grows, and the soft grass ǂ*habo* [*Stipagrostis hirtigluma*, a source of edible *sâui* seeds] stands tall like this. At Puros ǀ*garib* [*Cynodon dactylon*] and ǀ*harun* sedges [*Cyperus marginatus*] come out in the river and the cattle eat those sedges. There was no hunger. The cows get the calves, and they praise Puros where the cows don't finish the milk:
> 'Hoaruseb Tumida,[31] bitter meat of the people'.
>
> We eat those foods like they are grown in a garden. We eat ǂ*ares* [grass seeds of *S. verticillata*] and *!unis* [*Hyphaene petersiana* palm] fruits that have been knocked down by elephant [ǂ*hoan*]. […] And my grandfather [Guseb Mbomboro] took us from Puros to !Gao-!unias [in Hoaruseb River], and from !Gao-!unias to here at ǁÔaxab – those are the places where my grandfather was living with us […] and it was good.[32]

In a long interview on Kurubisa plains, west of the Hoaruseb River and amidst a spectacular surrounding of mountains all around her

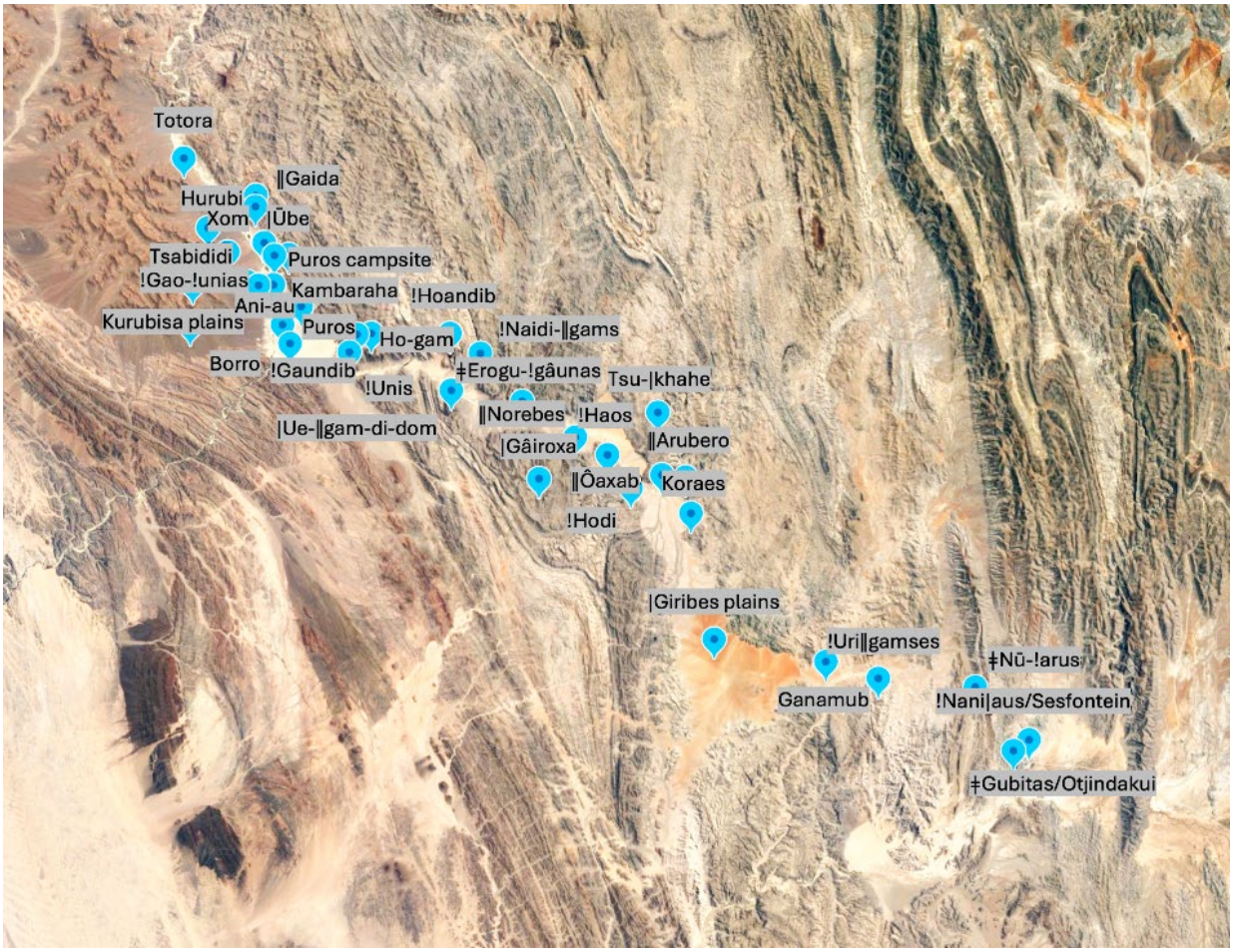

Figure 20 Places visited with Julia !Nâuna Tauros in May 2019.

[30] Julia !Nâuna Tauros, ǁÔaxab, 17.5.2019.
[31] Tumida is the water underground that bubbles up at places in the river-bed.
[32] Julia !Nâuna Tauros, ǁÔaxab, 17.5.2019.

Figure 21 Julia stands on Kurubisa plains, west of the Hoaruseb River, amidst the mountains familiar to her from the first decades of her life. Photo: © Sian Sullivan, 19.5.2019.

(Figure 21), Julia spoke of her familiarity with these mountains:

> Now that one standing in the middle is Tsabididi. It is my ancestors' [*Aboxan*] mountain which doesn't have an end. Those big mountains are our beautiful mountains with red rocks, from which red honey comes that smells nice like *sâi* [perfume], which is why we like this honey. And when we come here I feel happy to come to the place where I was born and grew up, at the good smelling honey place. […]
>
> We stayed there and harvested honey, and cut the wooden bowls there. This was with Uncle ǁGâu-o, Uncle ǂGere, Bau, !Hâ-ai and ǂKhainî. We also collected ostrich eggs [*|ami !ubina*] and we cooked them in the pot and ate them. And we cut *ǂgaub* [wooden bowls] to bring with us for harvesting *xoris* [berries of *S. persica*].
>
> That big mountain facing !Gao-!unias spring is the big temple Totora. The big temple. The big mountain behind the spring, looking black [*ǂnuum*] is !Uri-!norob. My father and I climbed on that mountain [Totora], looking for honey. There is honey on that mountain and it's difficult to harvest, but he taught me how to pull [*sam*] the honey out from between those gaps in the mountains.
>
> The big river Hoaruseb looks small from there, and the trees in the river look like a rope tied together. If you climb on that mountain all the other mountains look small. It's long and big – it's not a joke! That's the way we harvested the honey.[33]

We were also able to visit graves of Julia's maternal ancestors, which she and her mother Elizabet Ge !Abasen had been telling us about since the 1990s. The two graves we visited at the red rocks of

Figure 22 The graves of two female ancestors of Puros-Dama Julia !Nâuna Tauros, at !O-anib, near Puros: !Gôahe on the left and Ma!hana !Oe-amses on the right. Photos: © Sian Sullivan, 18.5.2019.

[33] Julia !Nâuna Tauros, Kurubisa plains, 19.5.2019.

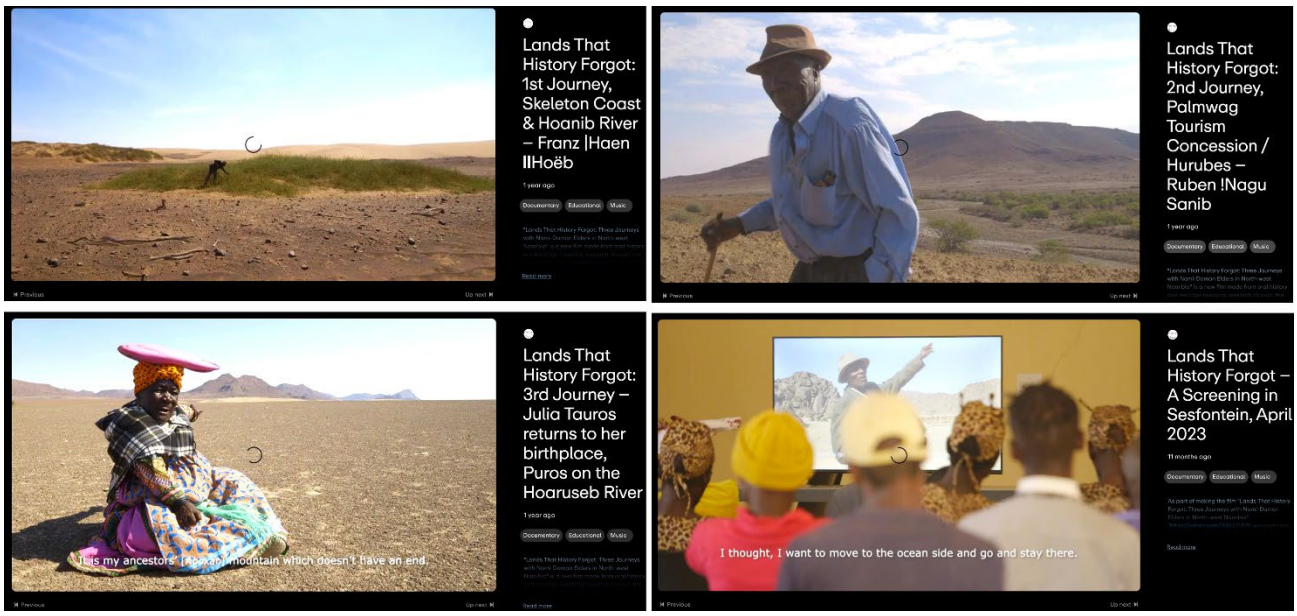

Figure 23 Screenshots of the three journeys films and a short film of a screening in Sesfontein in 2023: 1st journey with Franz at https://vimeo.com/947316591; 2nd journey with Ruben at https://vimeo.com/947727077; 3rd journey with Julia at https://vimeo.com/948318666; and screening film at https://vimeo.com/990504595.

!O-anib are of her aunt !Gôahe, daughter of Julia's great aunt !Hanre !Oe-amses and Guseb Mbomboro; and her great-grandmother Ma!hana !Oe-amses, who fled from the !Oe‡gâ/Erongo mountains during conflict in the 1800s (Figure 22). Julia additionally recalled a number of other graves of family members in the Puros area where Damara/‡Nūkhoe people had lived for generations, illustrating cultural connections across large distances and between the Sesfontein and Puros conservancies.

All of these three journeys can be watched and explored in greater depth at the links shared in Figure 23. As we were making the films we also shared it through several screenings with the Sesfontein community, including the Nami-Daman Traditional Authority, the Sesfontein Conservancy and the Hoanib Cultural Group. These screenings helped make sure the details in the film are accurate and appropriately conveyed. The fourth short film linked here is of one of these screenings in 2023, and includes feedback from Franz, Ruben and Julia about what the films mean to them.

Graves of known ancestors

On top of the rather orchestrated collapse of Indigenous subsistence economies that relied on access to and through this large tract of land, a further dimension of loss is keenly felt by elderly residents now constrained to live in the Hoanib valley area. This loss is of their inability to access the graves of members of their families buried here, as indicated in the three journeys shared above. Figure 24 shows the mapped locations of some of the graves known to be present in and near to the Palmwag Tourism Concession, demonstrating the intimate knowledge of these landscapes for elders who once lived here. Indeed, elders who often have been unable for some decades to return to places where they once lived, have unerringly led us to graves of their family members. These experiences demonstrate the significance of these graves and the landscapes in which they are situated for those family members who remember their ancestors, the circumstances of their death, and their former dwelling places. Many of these graves are of named family members, remembered by those alive today (as documented above).

Graves constitute signifiers of cultural heritage whilst also being the resting places of known ancestors and loved ones. How might such graves be acknowledged, recognised and protected in lands directed towards biodiversity conservation effort and tourism investments? We follow here South African anthropologist Lesley Green (2020: 127) in proposing that 'reclaiming practices of care for soil, and connection with ancestors buried in soils, does not have to be translated into a territorialist [even ecofascist] narrative of "blood

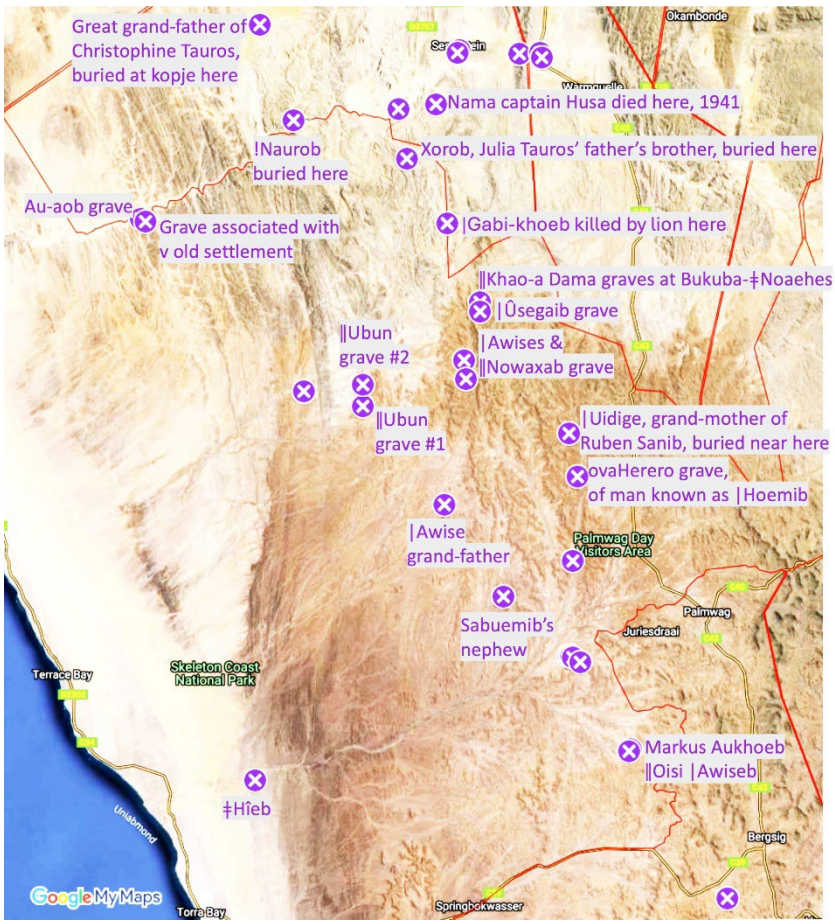

Figure 24 Locations of graves of known and named ancestors in and near to the Palmwag Tourism Concession.

and soil"'. Our discussions indicate that people would like these graves of known ancestors to be protected from wildlife and other sources of damage, perhaps through the construction of small fences or stone walls around a grave. Signage indicating 'who sits here' and building on research that includes genealogical information and the circumstances of death, is also desired, so that a record is created of the presence of loved ones. Such information would no doubt also be of interest to tourists visiting the area.

CONCLUSION: 'HIDDEN HISTORIES' AND THEIR FUTURES

As the late Deborah Bird-Rose (1991: xxiii) writes through research on the hidden and colonised histories of Australian Aboriginal peoples, 'there can be no possibility of an equitable future without due recognition and understanding of the past'. We have similarly documented the silencing of people's ecological knowledge and past experiences in specific landscapes of north-west Namibia. As explored in the section detailing the 'chronology of clearances' in this large area, it seems that people's complex histories have been radically downplayed or removed in various ways. The histories of Khoekhoegowab-speaking peoples associated with land between the Hoaruseb and !Uǂgâb Rivers seem to have been especially 'disappeared' (Sullivan & Ganuses 2022, Sullivan 2024), alongside consolidated expansions of settler colonialism and conservation space (Bluwstein et al. 2024). The suppression of such histories, however, rather contradicts Article 19 of the Namibian Constitution:[34] '[e]very person shall be entitled to enjoy, practise, profess, maintain and promote any culture, language, tradition or religion subject to the terms of this Constitution […]'. As Moore and Lenggenhager (2025: 14) articulate, people's removal or eviction from land areas considered home, 'do not constitute merely the loss of livelihoods derived from the land' but also 'a loss of cultural grounding and historical reference points'. As such, clearances of people from land areas with which they are familiar

[34] Available at https://archive.gazettes.africa/archive/na/1990/na-government-gazette-dated-1990-03-21-no-2.pdf with updates here: https://namiblii.org/akn/na/act/2014/8/eng@2014-10-13.

disrupts people's spirited and autonomous understanding of who they are, where they come from, and how they prefer to live. In addition, the detail of peoples' pasts that run through the Namibian Government's *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Claims of Ancestral Land Rights and Restitution* (2020) have barely become part of Namibian policy regarding land restitution.

Harley (1988: 289) additionally states that there are 'numerous cases where indigenous place-names of minority groups are suppressed on topographical maps in favour of the standard toponymy of the controlling group'. This situation brings us back to our argument for detailed and on-site oral histories so as to draw out the complexities of such landscapes often now seen in rather abstract terms as spaces for tourism profit derived from the scenic drama of these landscapes and their value for conservation. The fine-tuned complexities of people's pasts, combined with the ecological sensitivities that permitted them to flourish in lands from which they have been repeatedly removed, sits in stark contrast to the rapid increase of the tourism footprint that now determines these lands. In intersecting on-site oral histories with contemporary land claims for conservation and tourism in north-west Namibia, we are thus making a justice argument for greater recognition of people's pasts and presences in these lands (Martin et al. 2013). In doing so, we are responding to what might be perceived as a possible overconfidence in the recognition justice and distributive dimensions of Namibia's wildlife and tourism economy.

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