

The Wild Horses of the Namib

Greetings to all. As chairman of the Namibia Wild Horses Foundation I would like to share the history of the Namib wild horse population in chronology from its inception until the present.

Firstly, their origins . . .

Namibia's wild horses have been in existence for over a century. They originated from the Kubub stud farm that was established south-east of Aus in 1912 by the mayor of Lüderitz, Emil Kreplin. Kreplin bred horses for the racetrack and working horses for the diamond mines.

Research has shown that this group of horses formed the core of the wild horse population. When World War One reached Lüderitz, Kreplin was interned and later repatriated to Germany. In the turmoil of the war, unattended and with no fences to constrain them, the abandoned horses made their way to Garub, 30 kilometres away. A borehole at Garub, established for the steam trains, provided water for the horses. Garub was in the prohibited diamond area, the Sperrgebiet, where the horses found refuge over the years. As motorisation replaced the horse as transport, there was little interest in the horses. They became a wild population in their own right and were left alone for over fifty years.

It was only in 1986, shortly before independence, that a section of the Sperrgebiet, which included the Garub waterhole, was incorporated into the Namib Naukluft Park. (The southern area inhabited by the horses in Diamond Area 1, remained part of the Sperrgebiet until 2008 when it became part of the protected Tsau //Khaeb or Sperrgebiet National Park.)

At this time the Directorate of Nature Conservation began to review the horses and their status in the national park. In 1987, at the behest of Dr Frans van der Merwe, the Director of Agriculture in South Africa, ten horses were captured for scientific research purposes. This stimulated awareness of the horses. In the late 1980s the horses began to feature in the media. Writer and journalist, August Sycholt wrote the initial articles and produced the first documentary.

In the late 1980s a game-proof fence was erected on the eastern boundary of Sperrgebiet 1 and the Namib Naukluft Park from the Swakop to the Orange River to restrict poaching and the movement of livestock. It reached Aus in 1989 and made it impossible for game, including the horses, to migrate eastwards in search of grazing.

Post-independence: increased tourism into Namibia . . .

Public awareness continued to grow during the drought of 1992 when the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), prompted by the local community, captured and sold 104 horses to interested private parties, and provided the remaining horses with supplementary feed funded by the public. In November 1993, MET officer, Tommy Hall, initiated and facilitated the construction of a viewpoint at the Garub waterhole for visitors. This was the first time that the public was able to view the horses as a tourist attraction and not just in passing from the road.

In 1998 when another drought reached the Namib Desert, articles published in the UK and Germany prompted concerned people around the world to contribute funds for supplementary feed for the horses until the rains returned. In 2000, the wild horses entered the international arena with the film 'Running Free', a popular movie which put Namibia and its beautiful landscape and animals on the world map. Public interest in the wild horses grew.

From 2000 to 2011, improved rainfall ensured a decade of peace, in which the wild horses continued to become an important tourism attraction in southern Namibia and were increasingly used to market the wild and rugged beauty of Namibia.

In 2005 a stakeholder workshop was held to discuss and propose management strategies for the horses. At that stage hyenas did not pose a threat to the wild horse population. The first spotted hyena reported at Garub was in 1998 feeding on a drought mortality horse carcass. From around 2003 the hyenas began to visit the Garub area more frequently but only at the end of 2012, hyena predation on the wild horses increased dramatically.

The Namibia Wild Horses Foundation (a non-profit association under Section 21) was established in the same year by a group of individuals from the tourism, veterinary and environmental-management and -research sectors to monitor the wild horse population, assist MET with management of the horses, coordinate support to ensure their long-term sustainability and to care for and protect the wild horses as a national heritage for Namibia and her people.

In 2013, hyena predation peaked as the hyenas specialised on the horses. Starting with the foals of which there were more than 50, the hyenas' skills improved over the year to be able to hunt adult horses by the end of 2013. Not one foal has survived ever since.

From 2015 until 2018, the Namib Desert, like many parts of Namibia, experienced extreme drought conditions. In 2015 the Foundation, in accordance with the MET and using funds and feed generously donated by the public, began supplying feed to the horses. They continued for the next 23 months. At this time the Foundation began a series of talks with Permanent Secretary Dr Malan Lindeque from MET to convey the seriousness of the hyena predation on the horses and to look for solutions to safeguard the future of the population. The Ministry emphasised its non-interference policy and during the discussions proposed a custodianship initiative to the Foundation as a possible long-term solution to allow the Foundation to relocate and care for the horses.

The Foundation explored this proposal, engaging legal representatives and sourcing suitable land in the area. The local businesses and local community in Aus and Lüderitz declined to support the initiative in view of the benefit the horses have for tourism, bringing in revenue to the region, while they are based at Garub. In further meetings with MET, the ministry stalled on granting the Foundation custodianship of the horses, nor would it offer assistance with solving the hyena challenge. While everyone waited anxiously for the ministry's green light, the situation deteriorated and the wild horse population plummeted over a period of just a few years from 286 to a mere 73 horses and a 7 year population gap.

Last year, in 2018, the drought finally broke and the rains arrived. The horses filled out and gained condition and the hyenas ventured onto adjacent farmland and started preying on livestock. During 2017 and 2018 nine of the hyenas were killed on private land adjacent to Garub. Some of the mares conceived, but the hyenas soon returned to Garub and the predation continued. Every foal born was killed. Public outcry prompted MET to take action. In December 2018, as the situation seemed irrevocable, MET decided to capture the hyenas and relocate them to a different area. The ministry released an official statement acknowledging that the Namib horses are important for tourism and undertaking to ensure their survival. But, after unsuccessful attempts to bait the hyenas, the MET members left Garub for the holiday season, promising to return at the beginning of the year. A month lapsed, during which the hyenas killed off the new-borns, foal by foal. Again Public outcry prompted the current minister, Minister Shifeta to step in with attempts to remove the hyenas.

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We are grateful to Minister Shifeta for recognising the value of the Namib wild horses for both tourism and as part of Namibia's cultural heritage and for becoming personally involved to ensure

their survival. This reflects the attitude of more than 95% of Namibians from all walks of life, who in a recent online survey confirmed that the wild horses should be preserved for future generations.

Horses have a cultural heritage worldwide as they played a huge role in the evolution of humankind when they were first domesticated 6000 years ago. Our bond with them can be traced back through the millennia. All the pockets of wild horses worldwide (except for one) originate from domestic horses.

Namibia holds one of these rare populations of wild horses that have returned to live a life of freedom in their family groups, which is one of the reasons why the Namib's touch our hearts so deeply. It is the only population of wild horses on the entire planet that lives in a real desert environment – and it has managed to survive for more than a hundred years in the Namib Desert. Until now.

Horses have also played a valuable part in Namibia's history and in her people's fight for freedom, and have been important in the lives of various groups from Witbooi in the South and Maherero in the East to Mandume in the North. It goes without saying that most Namibians have considerable respect for horses – and its role it has played in our culture. We share this national pride.

It is remarkable that in African culture, the elders of society still play a vital role and are valued and respected, not thrown to the dogs. This is what our culture stands for and we believe this is applicable to the century-old wild horse population, which is already in its tenth generation. Although the Foundation wanted to prevent drastic measures all along and are most unhappy with the fate of the hyenas, we believe that we must care for our wild horses and give the remaining ones the chance not only to survive, but to thrive.

Honorable Minister, as you will recall from a dinner meeting at the end of last year, I mentioned that I respected your decision not to give custodianship to the Wild Horses Foundation to move the horses. We also offered you financial assistance, with active support in research and monitoring. You might also recall that I pledged with you that if your plan of relocating the hyenas is not successful to please reconsider giving custodianship to the Wild Horses Foundation and to relocate and safeguard them. This offer still stands and will be welcomed.