

# NATURE IN LOCAL HANDS

## The Case for Namibia's Conservancies

**N**AMIBIA IS A STRIKINGLY BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY OF DESERT DUNES, WOODLAND SAVANNAHS, open plains, and river valleys. Its small but growing population of 1.8 million people is highly dependent on natural resources for food and livelihoods. Large areas, primarily in the wildlife-rich plains of the north, are communally managed by more than a dozen different ethnic tribes.

By the early 1980s, ecosystems were rapidly deteriorating in the north, with rampant poaching of elephant ivory and rhino horn and severe overuse of drought-prone land. Populations of Namibia's world-renowned wildlife plummeted, including the desert elephant, black rhino, zebra, lion, impala, and oryx.

In the mid 1980s, an innovative anti-poaching program developed by Namibian conservationist Garth Owen-Smith provided an early template for community-based conservation. He won the trust of traditional leaders in the Kunene region, who agreed to appoint local people as community game guards and work with local NGOs to promote an increased sense of stewardship over wildlife.

Meanwhile, Namibia's Nature Conservation Department (now the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, or MET) had devolved wildlife user rights to white-owned freehold farms. Private farm-owners were allowed to sustainably utilize animals for game meat, trophy hunting, and tourism.

Following independence, these two models formed the basis of government action to extend the same kinds of use rights that farm-owners had enjoyed to those who lived on communal lands. The Nature Conservation Act of 1996 enabled the establishment of conservancies—legally gazetted areas within the state's communal lands—through Namibia's Community-Based Natural Resource Management Programme.

Namibia's establishment of conservancies is among the most successful efforts by developing nations to decentralize

natural resource management and simultaneously combat poverty. In fact, it is one of the largest-scale demonstrations of so-called "community-based natural resource management" (CBNRM) and the state-sanctioned empowerment of local communities.

Most of the conservancies in Namibia are run by elected committees of local people, to whom the government devolves user rights over wildlife within the conservancy boundaries. Technical assistance in managing the conservancy is provided by government officials and local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In late 2004, 31 conservancies were operating on 7.8 million hectares of desert, savannah, and woodlands occupied by 98,000 people. Fifty more were in development.

To qualify, communities applying had to define the conservancy's boundary, elect a representative conservancy committee, negotiate a legal constitution, prove the committee's ability to manage funds, and produce an acceptable plan for equitable distribution of wildlife-related benefits. Once approved, registered conservancies acquire the rights to a sustainable wildlife quota, set by the ministry. The animals can either be sold to trophy hunting companies or hunted and consumed by the community. As legal entities, conservancies can also enter into contracts with tourism outfits.

The first four conservancies were legally recognized in 1998. By October 2004, there were 31, with 31,000 registered

members spread across six geographic regions. Conservancy committees had also set up 18 joint-venture agreements with private safari hunting and tour operators.

This rapid expansion can be traced to a combination of factors. Government leadership and community enthusiasm were the prime ingredients. But an equally crucial factor was a strong commitment from support organizations. Collectively known as NACSO—the National Association of CBNRM Support Organisations—these included the University of Namibia and 12 national NGOs.

Namibia’s experiment in people-led natural resource management has led to striking gains for wildlife. Populations of elephant, zebra, oryx, and springbok have risen several-fold in many conservancies as poaching and illegal hunting have fallen. Northwest Namibia now boasts the world’s largest free-roaming population of black rhino, while game in the large Nyae Nyae Conservancy have increased six-fold since 1995. In Caprivi’s eastern floodplains, seasonal migrations of game between Botswana and Namibia have resumed for the first time since the early 1970s.

Benefits for human populations are also clear-cut, although they vary among conservancies. Over 95,000 Namibians have received benefits of some kind since 1998, according to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), a funder and supporter of the conservancy effort. These benefits include jobs, training, game meat, cash dividends, and social benefits such as school improvements or water supply maintenance funded by conservancy revenue.

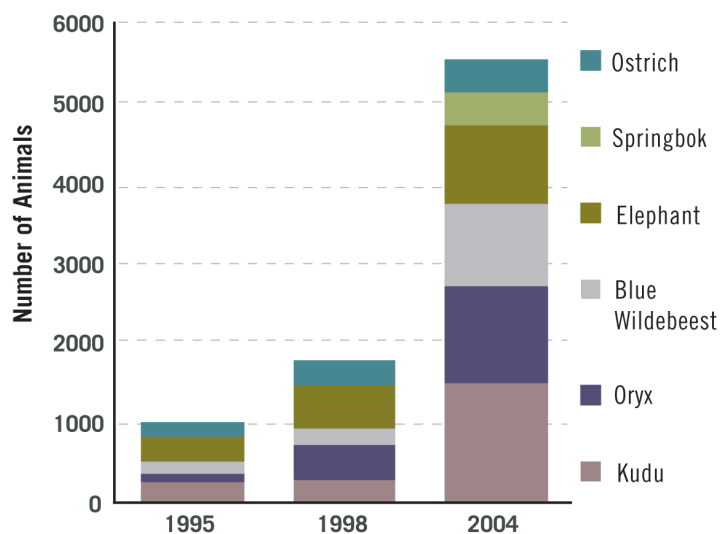
In 2004 total income from the CBNRM program nationwide reached N\$14.1 million, up from N\$1.1 million in 1998. Of

### CONSERVANCY INCOME BREAKDOWN, 2003

#### Sources of Cash and In-Kind Income to Conservancies and Their Members, By Percentage

Community-based tourism enterprises and campsites	36%
Joint venture tourism	27%
Trophy hunting	17%
Thatching grass sales	7%
Crafts sales	4%
Game meat distribution	3%
Game donation	2%
Own-use game	1%
Live game sales	1%
Interest earned	1%
Miscellaneous	1%
	<b>100 %</b>

### WILDLIFE RECOVERY IN NYAE NYAE CONSERVANCY



this, N\$7.25 million was distributed across communities in the form of cash dividends and social programs, with the rest earned by individual households through wages from conservancy-related jobs and enterprises. Tourist lodges, camps, guide services, and related businesses such as handicraft production employed 547 locals full-time and 3,250 part-time. In all, 18 conservancies received substantial cash income, averaging N\$217,046 in 2004.

A 2002 World Bank study of 1,192 households in Caprivi and Kunene found benefits spread equitably across conservancy members. In Kunene the researchers recorded a healthy 29 percent increase in per capita income due to the combined direct and indirect effects of community-based natural resource management, and that did not include non-financial benefits such as bush meat. These findings suggest Namibia’s conservancies are starting to play a significant role in fighting rural poverty.

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