

Living with wildlife –  
the story of **Sesfontein Conservancy**



Sesfontein – Afrikaans for 'six fountains'





## Living with wildlife – the story of SESFONTEIN CONSERVANCY

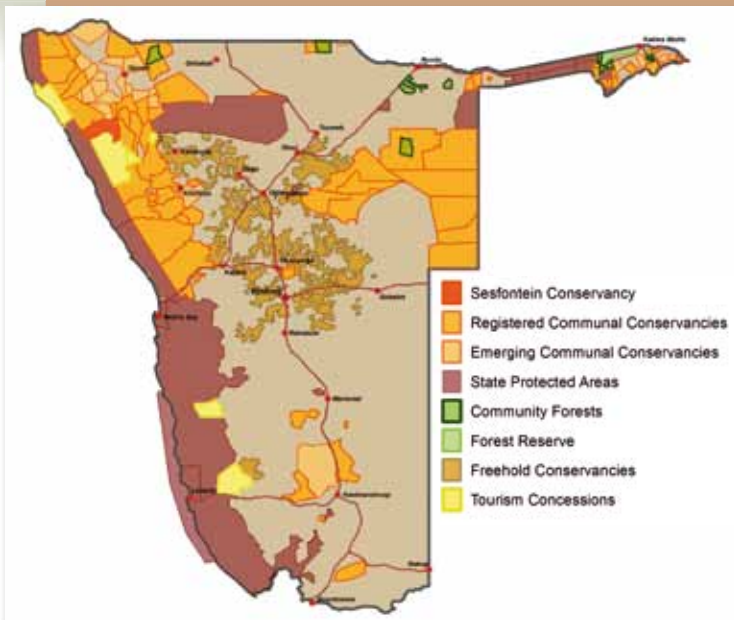
Conservancies  
enable development and conservation over large areas...

### MILESTONES AND SUCCESSES

- 1996** – policy changes allow communal area residents to benefit from wildlife and tourism by forming conservancies
- 1998** – Sesfontein and Puros communities begin the process to register as one conservancy
- 2001** – Sesfontein Conservancy becomes part of the annual North-West Game Count
- 2003** – Sesfontein Conservancy is registered in July, three years after the establishment of the Puros Conservancy
- 2003** – implementation of the Event Book monitoring system in Sesfontein Conservancy
- 06/07** – implementation of the Human Animal Conflict Conservancy Self Insurance Scheme (HACCSIS)
- 07/08** – development of the Sesfontein Fig Tree and Sesfontein Kanamub Mountain Campsites (community campsites)
- 2009** – Sesfontein Conservancy becomes financially independent and is able to cover own operating expenses

### QUICK FACTS

**Region:** Kunene  
**Size:** 2,465 square kilometres  
**Approximate population:** 2,500  
**Main languages:** Otjiherero and Khoekhoegowab  
**Date of registration:** July 2003



### A CONSERVANCY IS...

- a legally registered area with clearly defined borders and a constituted management body run by the community for the development of residents and the sustainable use of wildlife and tourism
- managed by a group elected to serve the interests of all its members
- a place where residents can add income from wildlife and tourism to traditional farming activities
- a place where wildlife populations increase as they are managed for productive gain
- a place where the value of the natural resources increases, enhancing the value of the land
- a forum through which services and developments can be channelled and integrated
- zoned for multiple uses to minimise conflict and maximise the interests of all stakeholders

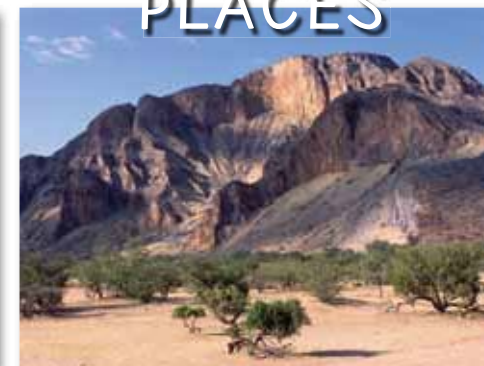
## SESFONTEIN offers an enchanting mix of

### PEOPLE



*interesting cultures and dynamic communities committed to sustainability - people living in Sesfontein share a common vision for managing their area and its resources*

### PLACES



*vast, diverse and spectacular landscapes – the Hoanib River, rugged mountains and endless plains... a healthy environment diversifies economic opportunities and drives economic growth*

### & WILDLIFE



*charismatic, free-roaming wildlife – elephant, lion, leopard, diverse plains game, endemic birdlife... wildlife generates a variety of benefits for local people*

*people are living with wildlife, are managing natural resources wisely and are reaping the benefits...*

### A LITTLE HISTORY

Prior to Namibia's independence in 1990, communal area residents had few rights to use wildlife. Wild animals were often seen as little more than a threat to crops, livestock and infrastructure, as well as community safety. Ground-breaking legislation passed in the mid-nineties laid the foundation for a new approach to the sustainable use of natural resources. By forming a conservancy, people in communal areas can now actively manage – and generate benefits from – wildlife and other resources in their area, encouraging wildlife recoveries and environmental restoration. While a conservancy is a natural resource management structure, it is defined by social ties. Conservancies unite groups of people with the common goal of managing their resources. Today, over 60 communal conservancies embrace one in four rural Namibians, underlining a national commitment to both rural development and conservation.

The **Sesfontein Conservancy** covers close to 2,500 square kilometres and embraces about as many people. The conservancy is named

after the settlement of Sesfontein, although the sprawling village area itself is excluded from the conservancy. Named after six natural springs, Sesfontein has always been a focal point for settlement, because of its abundant water supply and favourable location. The north-west of Namibia has been the heartland of semi-nomadic Himba pastoralists for the last five hundred years or more, but Sesfontein has been shaped by a great variety of forces, including early hunter-gatherers, Damara farmers, Nama cattle-raiders, Boer Dorsland Trekkers, German colonial forces, Owambo herdsmen and South African administrators. All left their mark on the area and created a melting pot of cultural influences, resulting in the vibrant community living in the conservancy today. After the conservancy legislation was passed in 1996, the neighbouring Sesfontein and Puros communities initially intended to form one conservancy, but a variety of challenges persuaded the communities to register two conservancies, who still work together on natural resource management issues.

**The beginnings of community conservation in Namibia:** *Deeply concerned by the uncontrolled poaching and rapid decline of wildlife in the north-west in the early 1980s, community conservation pioneer Garth Owen-Smith, local headman Joshua Kangombe and Department of Nature Conservation employee Chris Eyre initiated the first community game guard system in the Hoanib and Uniab River catchments with the assistance of the Endangered Wildlife Trust. Local people, who knew the area and its community best, were tasked to monitor wildlife and report poaching. The system was extremely successful and laid a foundation for today's conservancy programme.*



## RESOURCES AND ATTRACTIONS

Conservancies  
are living landscapes...

Sesfontein has always been a place of **cultural** diversity and interaction. Damara people may have already utilised the area before Herero-speaking pastoralists first settled here around five centuries ago, having migrated from further north. Around the 1750s, the majority of Hereros moved on to central Namibia, while some groups stayed and later became known as the Himba. In the second half of the 1800s, well-armed Swartbooi and Topnaar Nama entered the region from central Namibia, causing considerable upheaval amongst the Himba for almost half a century, by repeatedly raiding their cattle and displacing them from their lands. The Topnaar made Sesfontein their base and their

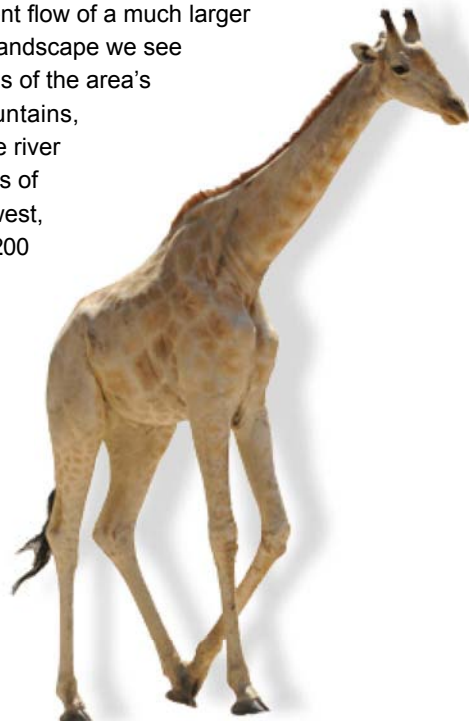


*Himba women anointed with butter fat and ochre, Herero women in colourful Victorian-style dresses and traditional headgear, the heritage of the Topnaar, Damara and Owambo; a historic fort and other relics of the German colonial period... Sesfontein is steeped in history and is a melting pot of cultural diversity*

descendants still live in the area today. In 1896, the German colonial administration created a rinderpest (cattle plague) control station at Sesfontein, which was later turned into a military outpost including a fort, completed in 1906. The historical monument was restored according to its original layout and turned into a tourism lodge after independence. The German presence also included a large police station, built in 1902. The Afrikaans settlers of the 'Dorsland Trek', seeking new land after leaving South Africa during the latter part of the 19th century, also passed through this area, settling for a time at Kaoko Otavi north of Sesfontein. During periods of extreme drought in the last century, the Oshiwambo-speaking Uukwaluudhi living north of Etosha were able to migrate down the Hoanib River to utilise the Sesfontein area as emergency grazing for their livestock. All of these influences contributed to the interesting cultural dynamics that characterise modern-day Sesfontein.

Much of the spectacular **environment** of the Sesfontein Conservancy is dominated by the Hoanib River valley and the rugged mountains into which it carved its course. The Hoanib is an ephemeral river, carrying water for only brief periods after heavy rain, but it is

believed that the permanent flow of a much larger river eroded much of the landscape we see today during wetter periods of the area's history. The stunning mountains, ravines and cliffs along the river display the sculpting forces of erosion over time. In the west, the river is little more than 200 metres above sea level, while the mountains in the east of the conservancy rise to around 1,300 metres. Rainfall along these fringes of the Namib is low and highly variable with an annual average of only 100 to 150 millimetres.



*desert-adapted elephant and giraffe, gemsbok, springbok and ostrich, black rhino and mountain zebra, nomadic lions... the Hoanib River valley and the Sesfontein conservancy create a nucleus for wildlife viewing in the north-west*

Since the establishment of conservancies, **wildlife** numbers in communal areas have rebounded from historic lows prior to independence. Sesfontein is home to a diversity of large game, including elephant, giraffe, black rhino, Hartmann's mountain zebra, kudu, gemsbok, springbok, duiker, steenbok, klipspringer and ostrich. Large carnivores include lion, leopard, cheetah and caracal, spotted and brown hyaena and jackal. A high degree of endemism has developed along the Namibian escarpment,

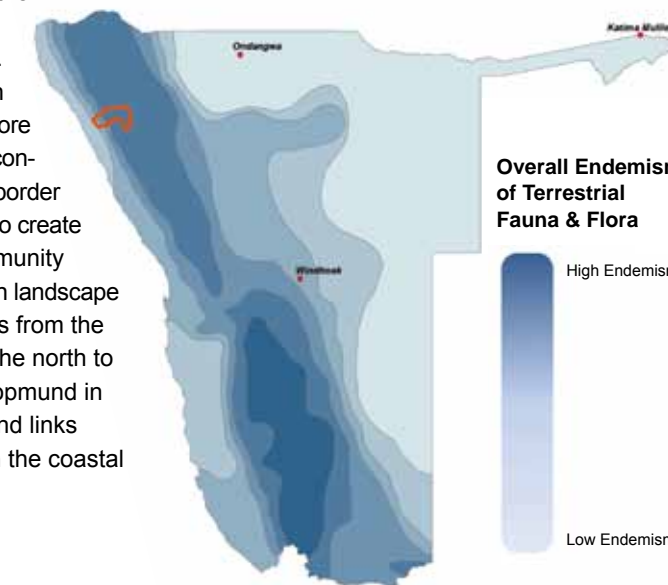


and the conservancy provides habitat to many of the country's near-endemic birds. These include bare-cheeked babbler, Benguela long-billed lark, Carp's tit, Damara hornbill, Monteiro's hornbill, Hartlaub's francolin, rosy-faced lovebird, Rüppell's parrot, Rüppell's korhaan, violet woodhoopoe, white-tailed shrike, Herero chat and rockrunner.

Mopane savannah dominates some of the eastern parts of the conservancy, interspersed with stands of acacias. The rugged mountains covering much of the conservancy support a diversity of interesting plants, including *Commiphora* and *Euphorbia* species, as well as the distinctive kobas. The Hoanib River is lined by extensive salvadora thickets and huge camel thorn and ana trees. It has been estimated that well over 4,000 ana trees grow along the river. The seed pods are an important source of food for livestock and wildlife, with elephants being particularly fond of them.

**Around Sesfontein...** The conservancy stretches along the northern border of the Palmwag Tourism Concession, an important wildlife refuge and travel destination. In the west, the conservancy reaches to the Skeleton Coast Park.

To the north and east, more communal conservancies border each other to create a vast community conservation landscape that reaches from the Kunene in the north to near Swakopmund in the south and links Etosha with the coastal parks.





# LIVELIHOODS AND DEVELOPMENT

Conservancies empower rural people...

Sesfontein lies in the Kunene Region, where Otjiherero and Khoekhoegowab are spoken by around 42 and 36 percent of the population, respectively. The two language groups together make up about 20 percent of the national population. Farming and income from employment make up relatively equal portions of livelihoods in the region and account for over 70 percent of overall income. Sesfontein has always had a special status within historic land allocation and was the first area in the north-west to receive official communal land status in the 1930s, during the South African administration of Namibia after World War 1. The implementation of the Odendaal Commission



servancy. Roadside craft sales provide important income, and this sector can be developed to increase benefits. The use of indigenous plants provides further opportunities, with the harvesting of *Commiphora* resin for the perfume industry providing an important source of income for Himba women. The Himba have traditionally collected the resin to make scent, and oil extracted from it is now exported to France where it is used as a perfume ingredient. The conservancy supports education and sports, including annual cash awards to the top three grade ten learners, a monthly cash allowance to pre-primary school teachers and prize money for quarterly conservancy sports tournaments. The conservancy also provides funeral assistance to residents, supports gardening projects and cultural festivals, creates HIV/AIDS awareness and makes an annual cash contribution to the traditional authorities.

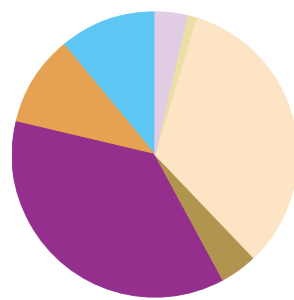
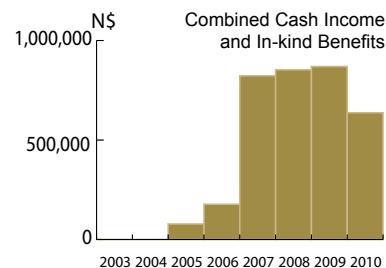
*Sesfontein facilitates access to diverse training and capacity building, empowers individuals, especially women, to actively take part in decision-making, as well as instilling a renewed sense of pride in cultural heritage*

*the conservancy is enabling a range of new livelihood options for its residents, including employment and income from tourism, guiding, craft production and other sales and services based on the sustainable use of natural resources*

of 1964 created various 'homelands', and drew a circle around Sesfontein to include the settlement in Damaraland, while the Hoanib River delineated the remaining border with Kaokoland to the north. Livestock movement out of the area was already restricted during the German colonial period to prevent the transfer of animal diseases such as rinderpest and foot-and-mouth to commercial farmland in central Namibia, economically isolating the important agricultural sector of the region. The liberation war further segregated the area prior to independence and the South African military presence had profound effects on the local environment and culture.

Development was sorely neglected in communal areas during German colonial rule and the South African administration of Namibia prior to independence, an imbalance still evident today. Sesfontein is the largest settlement in the conservancy, yet provides a limited range of facilities and services. A few small shops offer a basic selection of goods and a combined school provides some access to education. Sesfontein has a police station, as well as the northernmost petrol station in the north-west. A clinic offers basic health services,

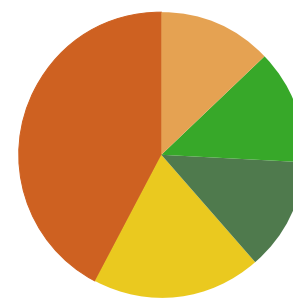
while the nearest hospital is in the regional capital of Opuwo, around 135 kilometres to the north. People in Sesfontein have reasonable access to water, but beyond the settlement water availability is a limiting factor. Boreholes supply groundwater to most residents, but often yield only limited supplies and are costly to drill and maintain.



- Conservancy & Household Income**
  - Craft Sales
  - Campsites & Cultural Tourism
  - Joint Venture Tourism
  - Shoot and Sell
  - Trophy Hunting
- Other Benefits**
  - Own-Use Hunting Game Meat
  - Trophy Hunting Game Meat

The livelihoods of most conservancy residents are based on farming, consisting of a mix of livestock herding, supplemented by small scale crop cultivation. The springs at Sesfontein have supplied water for a variety of crops in the past, including wheat and tobacco, but prolonged droughts have often inhibited cultivation. Income from wages, pensions and remittances provides additional income to most residents. The conservancy has facilitated new jobs in the area, and generates a variety of further benefits. Game meat from own-use and trophy hunting is distributed to residents.

- Conservancy Expenditure**
  - Jobs
  - Running Costs
  - Social Benefits
- Other Benefits**
  - Household Meat
  - Private Sector Jobs



Trophy hunting and shoot and sell hunting generate important income to cover some of the running costs of the con-

Good access for visitors is provided by the western fork of the C43 gravel road between Palmwag and Opuwo. Sesfontein is the tourism gateway to western Kaoko and destinations such as the Hoarusib River around Puros, and the Marienfluss and Hartmann Valleys. The scenic D3707 leading from Sesfontein to Puros, and from there on to Orupembe, requires four-wheel drive. A number of unmarked four wheel-drive tracks also allow visitors to explore the conservancy along the Hoanib River and adjacent areas, but these should only be explored in the company of qualified guides. The Palmwag Tourism Concession is a popular travel destination and generates significant income for Sesfontein and neighbouring Anabeb and Torra Conservancies through a benefit sharing agreement with Wilderness Safaris. Fort Sesfontein Lodge offers excellent tourism accommodation and generates conservancy income, as well as providing employment. The Sesfontein Fig Tree and Sesfontein Kanamub Mountain Campsites are run by the community and offer beautiful camping facilities beneath huge fig trees in Sesfontein and at a stunning site along the road to Puros, respectively.

*Benefits to the conservancy and its members come from a variety of sources. Sources and amounts vary from year to year, depending on factors such as agreements with private sector partners, and market fluctuations. The pie chart shows the main benefit sources in 2010.*

*The conservancy spends money and provides community and individual benefits in various areas. Areas and amounts vary from year to year, depending on factors such as conservancy income and priorities. Private sector jobs are created through agreements with private sector partners. The pie chart shows the main expenditure and benefit areas in 2010.*





# MANAGING NATURAL RESOURCES

Conservancies facilitate sustainability...

The management structure of the conservancy consists of a management committee of nine members. Employees include eight community game guards, a field officer, a receptionist, a financial administrator, four campsite staff, a guard and a cleaner. The conservancy has its own office, beautifully located amongst large trees in Sesfontein, and owns a four-wheel drive vehicle to carry out its activities. A variety of technical support is provided to the conservancy by the NGO Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC). The conservancy also has strong backing from the five traditional authorities in the area.



*the Sesfontein Conservancy provides vital structures for managing the communal natural resources of the area in a way that enhances development and ensures sustainability*

**Activities...** Working with community conservation pioneers Garth Owen-Smith and Chris Eyre, local headman Goliat Kasaona appointed the first community game guard in the Sesfontein area in 1982, long before the formation of the first conservancy. Conservancy game guards continue to undertake active natural resource monitoring throughout the conservancy, including monthly fixed route patrols. The gathered information is entered into the Event Book monitoring system, recording a variety of data such as game sightings, human wildlife conflict, poaching incidents, game utilisation and any other data deemed important by the conservancy. The data is aggregated into monthly and annual reporting charts that facilitate adaptive management.

The conservancy is part of the annual North-West Game Count, carried out by the Ministry of Environment & Tourism (MET) in collaboration with the conservancies and with the support of NGOs. The census is the largest annual road-based game count in the world, covering over 7,000 kilometres of road transects in an area of around 70,000 square kilometres. The MET works with the conservancy and other stakeholders to set annual quotas for using wildlife, based on information from the

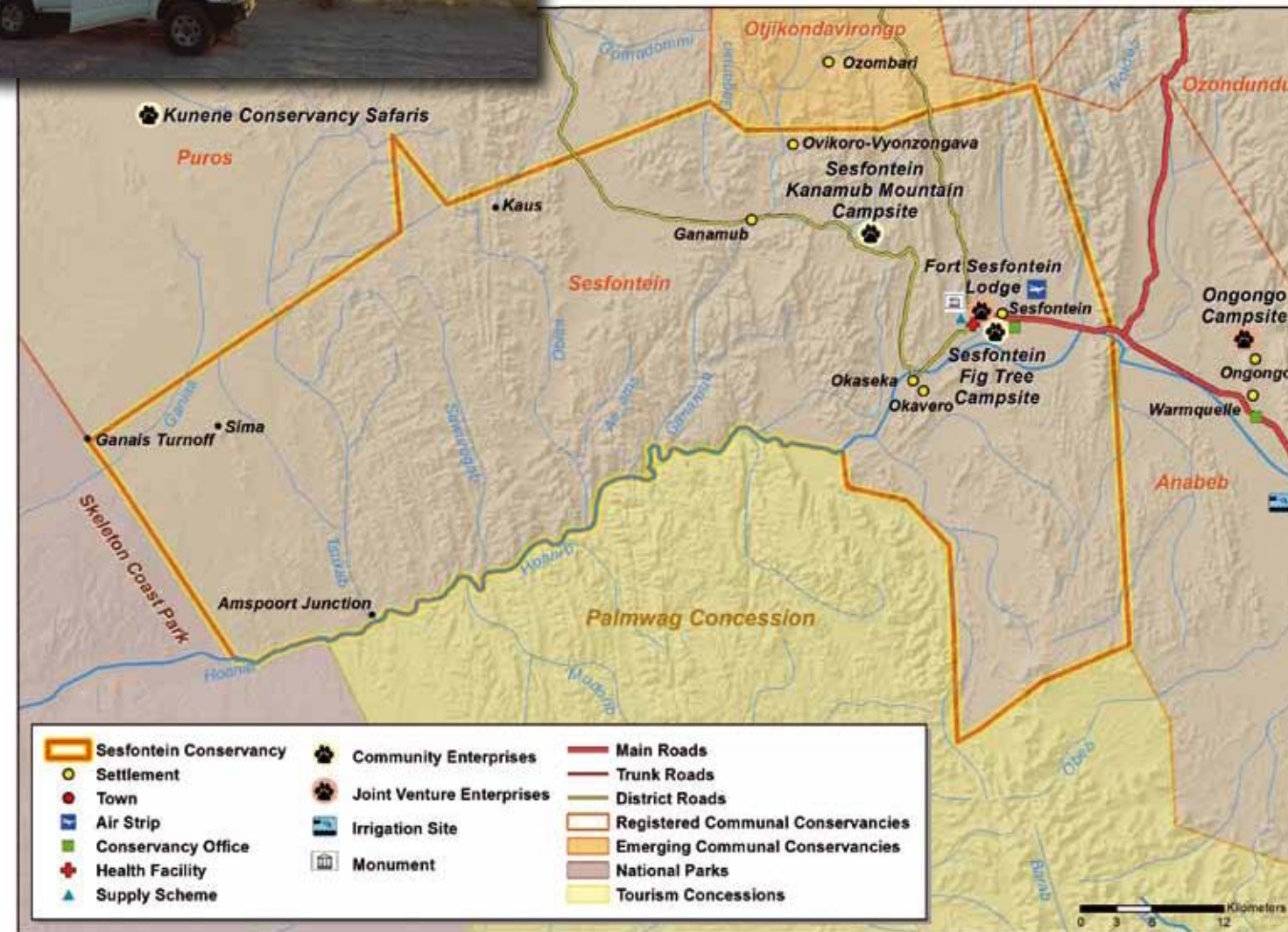
game counts and the Event Book. This allows the conservancy to carry out own-use hunting to supply residents with meat, to organise shoot and sell hunting that earns important conservancy income, as well as entering into trophy hunting concession agreements with hunting operators.

The conservancy strives to mitigate human wildlife conflict, which mainly consists of livestock losses to predators, with occasional incidents with elephants and other wildlife also being recorded. The large contingent of predators, including lion, leopard, cheetah, spotted hyaena, caracal and jackal, certainly doesn't make life easy for livestock farmers. Mitigation measures can include clear zoning of farming activities and core wildlife areas, herding livestock and keeping it in secure enclosures at night. In 2006, Sesfontein implemented the Human Animal Conflict Conservancy Self Insurance Scheme (HACCSIS) to provide some offsets for losses from wildlife to conservancy residents. While the conservancy was not able to pay out the full value of incurred losses, fixed amounts were set for various types of loss and additional financial support was received from donors via IRDNC. Through the National Policy on Human Wildlife Conflict Management, a new system of providing financial offsets

*the conservancy uses a mix of modern technologies and traditional knowledge and skills to enable healthy wildlife populations, a productive environment, and the effective management of natural resources*



for losses is now being implemented. The conservancy receives a fixed lump sum from the MET and is responsible for paying offsets to residents. Claims must be accompanied by a report from game guards investigating the incident, and all claims are reviewed by a panel before any payments can be made.







## CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES...

Conservancies  
are full of opportunities...

The environmental resources of Sesfontein Conservancy, complemented by wonderful cultural dynamics, provide untapped potential.

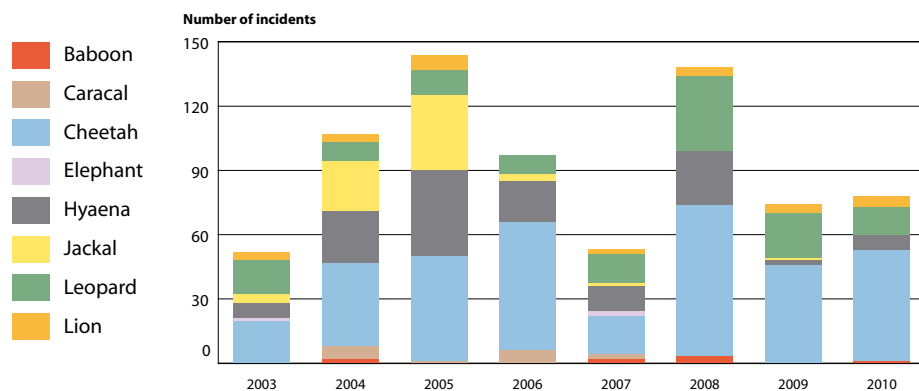
**Challenges...** Sesfontein faces the challenge of balancing farming activities with the environmental limitations of an arid ecosystem, as well as optimising benefits from natural resources amongst a society with a long tradition of livestock herding. The density of cattle and small stock in the Sesfontein valley is amongst the highest in the region, causing overgrazing and related erosion. It is also difficult to reconcile



*Sesfontein harbours great potential to overcome some of the development challenges that the area faces – and the conservancy is the ideal structure to coordinate many of the developments*

livestock farming and large predators, and human wildlife conflict is a significant challenge for most conservancies. This tends to be the case where ever people coexist with wild animals, especially if these include large predators and elephants. Elephants mostly damage water infrastructure in an attempt to reach drinking water, and at times cause extensive damage to crops. The high number of incidents caused by cheetahs in the conservancy indicates a relatively healthy population of the sleek, globally endangered cats. The human wildlife conflict data is in general indicative of a recovery of large predators in the north-west. This trend highlights an increased willingness of communal farmers to live with wildlife as long as it generates tangible benefits. Predators and elephants are of great value, both to the ecosystem and tourism, and in the long run the benefits gained from them must outweigh the costs of living with them, if people outside national parks are to continue to tolerate the presence of dangerous wildlife.

Plentiful wildlife in the wonderful settings that Sesfontein offers is attracting increasing visitor numbers, many of whom utilise the area without leaving any benefits for the custodians of the land – the local community. This is true for both self-drive tourists and many tour operators, and an increased awareness of the conservation role that conservancies play will help to change the situation.



*Human wildlife conflicts are monitored using the Event Book and clearly indicate the main conflict species.*



*strategic development that maximises the potential of the area's natural resources while mitigating pressures on the environment can facilitate a bright future for Sesfontein Conservancy*

The variety of resources and attractions that Sesfontein offers provides diverse opportunities for the conservancy and its residents, as well as the tourism industry. While benefits from nature-based tourism need to be shared more equally and can still be expanded considerably, the cultural resources of the area have been largely overlooked. The vibrant cultural history of Sesfontein can be of



## ... AND THE FUTURE

great interest to visitors, but only once it is made accessible through qualified guiding and interpretive materials. Cultures are dynamic and susceptible to negative tourism influences, and developments should safeguard against a loss of heritage.

Conservancy plans include a variety of tourism developments to generate more tangible community benefits. Planned tourism developments in the Palmwag Concession, including possible new accommodation facilities, will benefit Sesfontein, as well as the other two conservancies involved in the concession agreement, Anabeb and Torra. Sesfontein also hopes to control visitor access to the Hoanib River, as current activities there are not sustainable in the longer term and community benefits from visitors enjoying the area

are minimal. The conservancy is seeking to increase benefits from lodge accommodation, as well as increasing the utilisation of camping facilities in the conservancy, while reducing the impacts of uncontrolled 'wild camping'.

Private sector engagement is a key to maximising benefits in conservancies – to the local community, the tourism operators, the visitor, and to conservation. Optimising this interaction in the Sesfontein area can create a bright future for the conservancy and its residents.

**Come to Sesfontein –**  
be part of the future...







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