

THE BARKING GECKO

Newsletter of the NamibRand Nature Reserve

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A PHOENIX RISES FROM THE ASHES

December 25, 2002 was the darkest day in the five-year history of the Wolwedans Dunes Lodge. Within 45 minutes the central complex, housing the bar, dining room, library, kitchen, staff quarters and Land Rover "JAB" was reduced to ashes.

July 26, 2003 – only six months later – saw the opening of the reconstructed central complex in a much more open design, an achievement to be credited to the dedication, superb planning and hard work by all those, directly involved with the reconstruction. Very well done – an example to others.

On the morning of Saturday July 26, the special guests invited for the occasion namely Dr Malan Lindeque, Gideon Shilongo and Digu //Naobeb arrived by plane at Sossusvlei Mountain Lodge for a sumptuous breakfast, specially prepared by Jennifer Tooley. Following a "tour" through the Lodge including the "star gazing" platform, the party left by open Land Rovers for the Wolwedans Dunes Lodge via Jakkop and the Dune-belt, where large congregations of wildlife were seen. Following a light lunch and an extended "siesta", we all gathered at sunset in front of the reception platform, decorated with a beautiful candle candelabra and the secretary bird, the only survivor of the inferno – demonstrating perseverance and showing us the road ahead. Stephan welcomed the guests, thanked all his partners in the project profusely and gave a brief overview on what had been achieved in the short time of six months, whereafter the complex was officially opened by cutting the cord – followed by an inspection of the new facility and drinks.

A five course dinner was enjoyed thereafter, diluted by the best wines from the newly constructed wine cellar – and embraced by sincere and motivating speeches by the undersigned and Gideon Shilongo, CEO of the Tourism Board concluded an evening which will be remembered for a long time.

The next morning included a visit to the "viewpoint" and a visit to the Dune Camp, the Private Camp and the Wolwedans base, whereafter the party was over and the guests returned to Windhoek.

It was a great occasion and a memorable event, auguring well for the future of the Wolwedans Dunes Lodge and the concept of soft and eco-friendly tourism in the NamibRand Nature Reserve.

J A BRÜCKNER

An important request:

In the last issue we proposed to send you the "Barking Gecko" by e-mail for a number of reasons and asked you for your e-mail address, but forgot to let you have our e-mail address so that you can advise us. Here it is:—

nrrn@iway.na

Our apologies for this oversight

Astronomy to some, stargazing to others

We were invited by Jennifer and Antony Tooley to spend a night at Sossusvlei Mountain Lodge to attend a lecture on Astronomy by George Tucker who is a professor of Physics and Astronomy in the U.S.A.

We duly arrived at the small but well equipped Observatory to be greeted by George, a very down to earth person. Having set up the telescope, he explained that to orientate a computer telescope one needs two stars separated from each other. As it was shortly after sunset, it was easy to find two stars.

The first star to be picked was Antares, which means opposite of Aries being another name for Mars. The telescope was then focused on Jupiter, the fifth planet from the sun, which is 11 times the size of our planet earth and has four moons circling around it. We were lucky to see Jupiter and its moons very clearly before it disappeared behind the mountains.

George then showed us the faint hazy cone of light visible in the west that we interpret as the last light of the setting sun. It is

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caused by the reflection of sunlight on the dust particles in the atmosphere and is known as the zodiacal light. In Namibia on some nights, this light cone might be seen from the west reaching to the middle of the sky and if one is exceptionally lucky, one might during the early hours simultaneously see the reflection from the sun in the east before sunrise. Where the two reflections from the sunset and the sunrise meet is known as "Gegenschein".

By now the night sky was lit up by trillions of stars and George pointed out the Jewel Box, found very close to the Southern Cross, named this as the stars when seen through the telescope shine like jewels. We, even though not versed in astronomy, could easily identify Scorpius. Sagittarius looks like a teapot and is sighted at the tail of Scorpius. Libra is found near the pincers of Scorpius, which originally used to be the claws of Scorpius. Alpha Centaurus, the bright star of the Southern Cross pointer is not one, but two stars very close together. The other pointer is called Beta Centaurus.

The dark patch next to the Southern Cross, known as the "Coal Sack", is caused by cosmic dust hiding the stars behind.

The galaxy in which we are, can be likened to the white of a fried egg, which bulges in the centre like the yolk of the egg.

A fascinating picture, to be seen only through a strong telescope, is the Omega Centaurus, which consists of a group of 1 million small stars. If you imagine a strong light through a ball of cotton wool, this is what the Omega cluster looks like.

Another cluster, called the Globular Cluster, M4, was discovered by Messier, a French Astronomer, when looking for comets. Messier was more interested in finding comets than interesting stars. So in his search for comets, he did find 2 - 3 in his lifetime, he compiled a list of stars that he noted as not worthy of looking at and listed them with numbers M1 - M109. Although he did not find these stars interesting, most astronomers feel many of these are worthy of observation.

On the northern horizon, he also pointed out three stars of the Ursus Major constellation.

Not only did we look through the telescope but also at the same time we could observe the same planet or star on a computer programme with accompanying descriptions.

After the friendly waitresses served a lovely dinner, we had a look at Mars, the fourth planet from the sun. No wonder astronauts decided to observe this interesting planet from outer space. Through the telescope we were able to see the southern polar ice cap and other features.

By now it was time to say goodnight and we had a good sleep in a cosy room and whenever waking, could continue watching the stars through the skylight above the bed.

The next morning we were spoiled with an excellent breakfast and George asked us whether we would be interested to have a look at the sun through the telescope. "A look at the sun?" we asked incredulously. Yes, with special filters this is possible. Therefore, up we went and again were amazed at what we saw. The sun's surface has multitudes of sunspots that increase and decrease, peaking about every 11 years. They are associated with strong magnetic fields. Yet, as with everything the last peak of up to 1600 sunspots on the sun was seen about 2000 - 2001 and it seems that there is another peak to follow shortly. A

question I raised: "Do these sunspot peaks in any way affect our weather?" The sunspots are cooler than the sun itself and there is a possibility that with a peak of sunspots there may be temperature changes during this time on the earth as well.

Whilst watching the stars and various galaxies through a telescope I invariably asked myself the question: "why is it that we humans think ourselves so important, whilst actually we are less than a speck of dust on this earth compared to all those galaxies known and still unknown to us." However, I had the answer ready: we do matter since God created us for a purpose and we are the only living creatures who have an intellect.

We would like to thank the Sossusvlei Mountain Lodge for this fantastic experience.

Ursi Lenssen



Raleigh International Venturers 'Hide Out' at NamibRand Nature Reserve

From Sunday 10th to Tuesday 12th August 2003, Raleigh International Venturers were privileged to spend time with Achim Lenssen at the NamibRand Nature Reserve.

Raleigh International Venturers are currently working with NaDEET, assisting with the construction of the Namib Desert Environmental Education Centre. This forms the "environmental" phase of a three-phase expedition consisting of community, trekking and environmental projects.

The 48 hours with Achim provided a welcome break from sanding and each Venturer enjoyed a trip around the reserve looking at its flora and fauna, as well at its stone age history. They also experienced 24 hours in a game hide undertaking a full moon game count and a session getting their hands dirty dispersing old fence line rocks.



Despite the chill of an Antarctic wind (note London is currently experiencing all time high temperatures of 37°C), the hard Venturers loved every moment. Game spotted varied from kudu to hyaena, whilst a select few were fortunate to see zebra else where on the reserve. Reported sightings of seal, polar bear and rhino were unconfirmed, but the discovery of ostrich egg fragments and possible stone age pottery provided an additional highlight to the visit.

The group returned to NaDEET brimming with enthusiasm and ready to tackle the next stage of construction and the experience was summed up by one Venturer as 'the best thing I've done on Raleigh so far'.

A huge thank you goes to Achim for such an enjoyable visit, for his informative chat and his longsuffering patience in responding to countless Venturer questions.

Sue Gregory of Raleigh International Venturers



Balls of Fire

The nests of the Sociable Weaver, *Philetairus socius*, on the top of countless telephone poles are a common sight for those travelling by road in the southwestern parts of our country. In the colonial era of our country's history, the technicians removed these nests regularly. Now the birds have a more peaceful life and can build far larger homes that are more impressive on a photograph. These industrious builders will also build in trees and our largest aloe the quiver tree, *Aloe motoma*. By far the largest nests are to be found in the large camelthorn trees, *Acacia erioloba*. These nests can reach diameters of three metres and will house large colonies, nature's equivalent of high-rise apartment blocks. Such a large nest can weigh 200 kg and more. It is often at the end of a branch or limb of the tree. Strong winds frequently tear off the entire limb or at worst, the entire tree falls over.

The nest residents do not wait a day before they start building a new home either on the same telephone pole or tree or one close to it. They are workaholics through and through.

The large accumulation of dry grass is highly combustible and burns readily. Lightning strikes are a great threat. On 11 March, I was sitting on the veranda of the Keerweder guesthouse with visitors. The clouds were dark and ominous when suddenly there was a flash and a bang. We all jumped, "that was close" on our lips. Then there was another strike further away. Within seconds, we saw an orange ball of flame above the ground. It did not take much guessing what had happened. The binoculars confirmed that a large sociable weaver's nest in a camelthorn tree, was ablaze. The ball of fire in the distance was spectacular to witness but disastrous to the birds. Whether they were in the

nest or not, will remain a mystery. Would the lightning itself have killed them? We will not know because the intense heat would have burnt them completely and severely damaged that ancient old giant of a camelthorn.

Four months later, I visited the site again. The branch that had held the nest was dead and had broken off. The main branches were severely burnt on the side facing the fire, but the rest of the tree is alive and well. It is amazing how resilient these old desert giants are. Signs on the tree show that it has lost two other main branches and a second trunk to fire in the past. How much punishment must one poor tree endure in its lifespan of several centuries?

J. Lenssen



Before and after fire photos of *Acacia erioloba* and Sociable Weaver nests

Photos: V. Paulich

Sundowner

Over distant mountains where the day said goodnight –
peaceful and silent like giant tortoises –
framed in colour of yellow, red and purple.
In this golden hour, the fields go to rest.
The dunes become softer.

The shadows like a yawn for a last good night.

The smell of campfire in the distance.

A gin tonic for you in this golden hour –
a moment in time and a thought of peace....

Emotions of love, longing and a tear for another day.

This golden moment keeps us wondering how so much beauty
can with the blink of an eye just become part of eternity.

Another gin tonic then we know sundowners have a special
place under

The African sky ... !

Hermann Cloete



Fairy Circle Adoptees:

456 – A. Antaszek

56 Beethovenstr.

73207 Plochingen

Germany

457 - Mali Antaszek

(as above)

452 - A.L. Herrmann

Am Hirschelbichel 25

803026 Rosenheim

Germany

451 - H. Maynte

Altar Weg 1

28870 Otterberg

Germany

Warden's Notepad

The giraffe that were introduced in early July have at last settled down well in their new home at Draaihoek/Toskaan. In the first two weeks, several escape attempts took place. One managed to cross the mountain range between our northern neighbour and us and had to be herded back from the farm Voorspoed of Mr H. Schulz. Now, having settled, they keep together. It is amazing how well they are camouflaged in their new habitat. Not every attempt at spotting them is successful.

Our spotted cats are the absolute highlight for the guests. A sighting is rare, but reporting to the warden is even more so. I can therefore only describe my own sightings. On 23 June, I was returning from a giraffe-monitoring trip at 16h10 when I saw a spotted cat disappear behind the granite boulders at the mouth of the Moringa valley on Toskaan. It looked like a cheetah and when I started circling the boulders on foot, it dashed off. The long tail held high and the loping stride were unmistakable. It also did not attempt to conceal itself whilst in flight.

A week later, on 1 July, I saw another spotted cat on Draaihoek. My first thought was that it was the cheetah again. It was only slightly later in the day at 16h55 and not far from the previous sighting. However, my workers whose eyesight is much better than mine said it was a leopard. The behaviour of this cat certainly proved them right. It ducked into a dry wash immediately and was out of sight most of the time. Its tail was low and it crouched near to the ground as it moved along to the hill close-by. At the end of the wash, it made a dash for the granite boulders. Once amongst the boulders, it was totally at ease climbing about from one vantage point to another. It watched us for at least 15 minutes before it finally disappeared.

All things come in threes???

On 13 July, we released a grown female leopard at Boscia waterhole on Keerweder. It was causing problems on another farm and the owner thought this beautiful animal should at

least be given a second chance. A vet in a small aircraft brought it in. (Please accept that I cannot give names of persons at this stage.) The leopard was in prime condition and has its own destiny in its paws. It can stay or it may wander back to where it came from as many of the cat species do. Whatever the case may be, we give these rare cats a second or more chances on NamibRand.

Poaching of game was not a problem on NamibRand in the past. This changed on 26 June when family of our southern neighbours and their South African hunting visitors decided to hunt at night along the main road on our property. Andreas at Toekoms who actually heard a shot and saw the lights of the vehicle alerted me. I went up immediately and questioned two of the suspects. Unknown to me, the other two suspects with the firearms were hiding in the bushes about a kilometre away.

The following day a thorough investigation revealed all the facts. The poachers were bad marksmen, possibly due to the amounts of alcohol consumed and had only wounded a Kudu that got away. Because they had been seen, they split up and two of them thought up an unlikely story for being there. Our neighbours knew of these activities but did not participate. Well

as the saying goes – “you can’t choose your family” likewise you can’t choose your neighbours.

Mr Brückner suggested that the giraffes be given a name. The ideas so far are:

- Tate - the giraffe “Sire”
- Nandi and Onduri for the two giraffe ladies.

As we would also like to receive some suggestions from all of you working and living on the Reserve, please let the Editor know as soon as possible. The best names will then be chosen and published in the next edition.

Achim Lenssen



Full moon over NamibRand

... in silence we all wait for this light that never fails, once again like a round slice, it first peeps over the mountains ... then in seconds it rises and enters like no one ever does...!

... behind us a few soft voices describe this event as it was never seen before... nowhere in this world it shines so bright, nowhere does it bring so much discussion as here in the desert!

... while so much is still in darkness it always brings fond memories of a moonlit walk on the dunes... the smell of grass, the sound of silence... for a moment a bit of sadness as so many full moons have passed, a tear of thankfulness for so many still to be...!

Hermann Cloete



Biodiversity and Development in Namibia

Namibia's ten-year strategic plan of action for sustainable development through biodiversity conservation has been launched in 2001. Quote: “Implementing the national biodiversity strategy needs the full and informed involvement of all Namibians. It cannot be carried out in isolation by government or any other group; it must be understood to involve a very high degree of active engagement by stakeholders, interested parties, and indeed all of us.”

Why do I feel this is an issue for the Barking Gecko? As a nature reserve, many of the objectives and strategic aims of the programme are of interest and concern to us. By drawing your attention to them, I hope that NRNR will get actively involved and benefit from the programme. Some examples of objectives and strategies:

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- "Conserving Biodiversity in Priority Areas;
 - Strategic aim 1.2 Promote and support communal and freehold conservancies; (a) Support the role of conservancies in integrated landscape management for biodiversity
 - Strategic aim 1.3 Strengthen conservation measures in and outside protected areas;
 - Strategic aim 1.4 Address the needs of endemic and threatened species
 - Monitoring, Predicting and Coping with Environmental Change & Threats;
 - Strategic aim 3.2 Improve national and local capacity to monitor, detect and predict environmental change
 - Strategic aim 3.3 develop reliable indicators and monitoring systems of biodiversity and ecosystem function
 - Strategic aim 3.4 Enhance national capacity in biosystematics to support biodiversity conservation management
 - Strategic aim 3.8 Reduce the threat to biological diversity from invasive alien species
 - Capacity Building for Biodiversity Management in Support of Sustainable Development
 - Strategic aim 9.1 Promote public awareness of biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource use
 - Strategic aim 9.2 Build capacity to manage biodiversity and sustainable development in Namibia
 - Strategic aim 9.3 Promote effective participation of disadvantaged groups in implementing this biodiversity strategy
 - Strategic aim 9.5 Strengthen and develop Namibian centres of excellence in biodiversity-related fields"
- (All quotes taken from the book "Biodiversity and Development in Namibia", edited by Dr. Phoebe Barnard et al., which can be viewed at the website www.dea.met.gov.na/programmes/biodiversity)
- I am happy to say that NaDEET is busy getting involved, in particular with the strategic aims under objective 9 "Capacity Building for Biodiversity Management in Support of Sustainable Development".

The Namib Desert has been internationally proclaimed as a biodiversity hotspot, NRNR is the perfect location for the implementation of the above-mentioned points. To quote from the Articles of Association of the NamibRand Nature Reserve, "Article 3. Objectives, 3.2 To represent its Members in dealing with Government departments, regional, provincial and local authorities, and private organisations, whose function is to further and promote the protection and conservation of indigenous natural resources in Namibia and elsewhere. I invite the readership of the Barking Gecko to submit their suggestions as to how this can be implemented to the editor. This might also be a point of interest to be raised at the next Kgotla and AGM.

Christiane Berker



Vintage Vehicle

The old Datsun bakkie used on Aandster to check waterpoints, etc., is of unknown vintage. The previous owner guessed it was an early 1980 model. When part of the waterpump rusted through, there was no possibility of getting a spare water pump for less than N\$1 000.

However, I had miscalculated the ingenuity of Aandster's two star motormechanics. Jakobus Kooper and Adam Swartbooi made a new part for the waterpump. They hammered, cut, filed and fitted until it worked. They have been using the vehicle for five months and it is still going strong.

Well done!

Peter Bridgeford



News@ NaDEET

The middle of winter brought the first group of school children to the NaDEET Centre. After a seven-hour ride, thirty 11-13 year olds and three teachers piled out of the bus with eager faces. We spent the next two days exploring solar energy, water conservation, the dunes and their inhabitants. The children all had an opportunity to solar cook on our two parabolic solar cookers and one solar oven. We made mini water cycles and discussed our water *needs vs. wants*. For example, *needing* water for drinking compared to *wanting* to have water to fill a swimming pool. Throughout the weekend, we also went on a walk through the dunes to explore the magnetic property of the Feldspar sand kernels, admire the building skills of Sociable Weaver birds and investigate the adaptations of Tok Tokkie beetles and other small creatures. The weekend was a great start to the NaDEET Centre and gave the NaDEET Team an encouraging push into the second half of this year.

We have been very fortunate to have Raleigh International help with the building of the Centre. Three rotating groups of approximately 15 volunteer builders from several Commonwealth countries worldwide have been assisting Andreas and his team since mid July. The building continues to be on schedule with the main structures finished end of August/

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early September. The next several weeks will be focused on "the finishing touches" including installing a permanent solar system for electricity and lights as well as a sewage system with a wastewater recycling system.

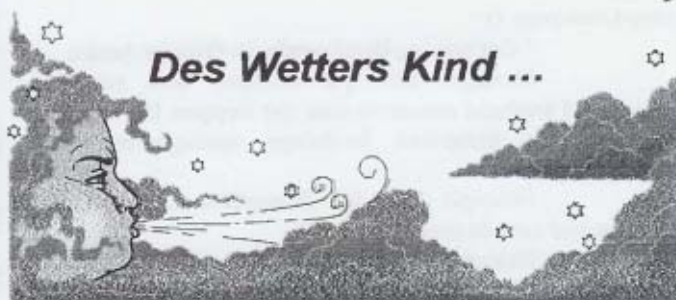
As of the beginning of the third school term in mid-September, NaDEET Centre will be very busy with several school groups visiting from places such as Walvis Bay, Gobabis, Windhoek and Aris. NaDEET continues to be grateful for all of the support it has received from the **Namibian and International** community in developing the NaDEET Centre and its activities. Thank you.

Viktoria Paulick



First group at NaDeet

Photo: Elisita Kieckebusch-Steinitz



Des Wetters Kind
ist der Draaihoek Wind.
Heiss ist dies Land,
von der Sonne verbrannt,
doch wir werdens vertragen,
wollen nicht klagen.

Dies alte Gemäuer
gelbes Haus ist uns teuer.
Hier kommen wir immer,
um still im Gezimmer,
des Alltags Gewühle,
und diese Gefühle,
von dannen zu tragen
und in ein paar Tagen
hier Ruhe zu finden,
an Natur sich zu binden.

Denn hier, bei des Wetters Kind,
man sein Gleichgewicht wieder findl.

Biman D'Nar

(The house at Draaihoek is known for its wind. Here the sun has scorched the land, it is hot, yet we don't want to complain. To us this old yellow house is dear. We come here to get rid of the everyday bustle, rest and once more become one with nature. Here where the wind is the child of the weather, one finds inner balance.)

"The wildlife of today is not ours to dispose of as we please. We have it in trust and must account for it to those who come after us"

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