PHOTOGRAPHS BY REMY SCALZA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Top, desert elephants are among the animals endemic to northwestern Namibia's Kunene region. Above, from left, members of its seminomadic Himba people: Uamunikaije Tjivinda, Uapuika Tjivinda and her daughter, and Muhupua Tjambiru; women rub themselves with ocher. Below, from top, nearly poached to extinction, Namibia's black rhinos are increasing on tribal-run conservancies; the Etambura Tented Lodge; Angolan giraffes have also had a resurgence.

Endangered Creatures Find Their Tribe

A wild and sparsely populated region is home to an unusual tourism experiment.

By REMY SCALZA

Uamunikaije Tjivinda squatted in the sand and threw a few strips of dried giraffe meat into a pot of boiling water. Like many Himba women in the arid, northwestern part of Namibia called Kaokoland, she wore sandals, a goatskin skirt and little else. Her skin and long, plaited hair were a striking rust-red, rubbed with ocher dug from the earth.

From nearby hills, other women with young children converged, standing quietly around Ms. Tjivinda's domed hut, their eyes downcast. Out of the back of a Toyota Land Cruiser, my wife and I unpacked gifts brought on the advice of our guide — cornmeal, tea, sugar and other supplies hard to find here.

Though no longer a novelty for these women, these sorts of encounters with tourists are still new enough to be awkward. Only when the food came out did they smile and start to talk.

"The conservancy has been good for us," Ms. Tjivinda said in the local Otjihimba dialect, which our guide translated. "Wildlife are cared for like our own livestock, and money from tourism goes into our conservancy bank account." Goats wandered by as the women sat down to braid hair. Then, from the corner of my eye, I saw a small Himba girl, her hand wrist-deep in the sugar bag we brought. She raised a fistful to her mouth and swallowed.

For nearly two decades, Namibia, a country twice the size of California but with just 2.1 million residents, has been part of an ambitious experiment in both community tourism and wildlife conservation, known as communal conservancies. "The idea was to fight poaching by restoring control over wildlife to the local people," said John Kasaona, the director of Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation, the primary N.G.O. behind the initiative.

In 1996, groundwork laid by the organization paved the way for new laws giving tribal communities — who previously had limited rights to resources on communal lands — the ability to form conservancies and self-manage their wildlife. "We wanted to show them that they could benefit financially from keeping these animals alive, in particular from wildlife tourism," said Mr. Kasaona, who would spend years canvassing the countryside, explaining the model village by village. "Try convincing people who were made these same promises years ago by a colonial regime and then robbed of their land," he said. "At first, no one trusted us."

In the years since, the plan has been a resounding — and rare — success story for African wildlife. Seventy-nine conservancies now cover a full 20 percent of Namibia. Populations of desert lions, desert elephants and black rhinos, all threatened with extinction in the early '90s, have increased several times over, while poaching has plummeted. (One rhino was poached in Namibia last year, compared with 668 in neighboring South Africa.) Meanwhile, conservancies throughout the country have partnered with international tourism operators, giving ordinary travelers like me unprecedented access to both animals and local culture.

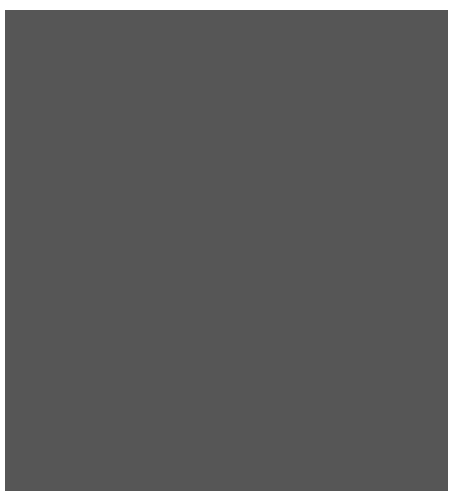
But an increase in wildlife — and tourists — has brought a new and unexpected set of challenges. "We're having some problems with our own success," said Mr. Kasaona, who grew up herding goats in Kaokoland and whose family members still live a pastoral life there. "As we say, lions and cattle aren't always best friends."

Nearly half of all Namibia's conservancies, and many of the country's most ambitious community tourism projects, are in the northern Kunene region, an expanse of dry mountains and valleys the size of Greece but with fewer than 90,000 inhabitants. As we drove north in a rented four-wheel drive, gravel roads gave way to "Kunene highways," rutted tracks that thread through desert, cross dry river beds and sometimes disappear altogether. Against this harsh backdrop, conservancies have logged one of their greatest successes, the return of the endangered black rhino.

"These animals were almost completely wiped out by poachers 25 years ago," said Aloysius Waterboer, a guide at Desert Rhino Camp, a tent lodge located in Damaraland, traditional home of the Damara people. We were bumping along in an open safari car, hoping to spot one of the roughly 30 rhinos that now live in this area. Mr. Waterboer slowed the vehicle and studied the riot of zebra, oryx and elephant footprints in the sand, looking for rhino tracks.

The camp, a cluster of eight tent chalets, sits alone on 1,700 square miles of rocky hills and desert scrub leased from area conservancies, who are also 40-percent shareholders in the project. Nearly 90 percent of employees, including Mr. Waterboer, are drawn from local communities. Many of the expert rhino trackers on staff are former poachers themselves. ("If you're a poacher, all you really want is to feed your family," Mr. Waterboer explained. "So it made sense to put them on the payroll.")

With night falling on the desert, we rolled into a dry riverbed, then stopped sharply. "He hasn't noticed us yet," Mr. Waterboer said, pointing to a gray speck in the distance. Suddenly, the rhino's tail flicked up in alarm and he raised his head to sniff the air. Seen through binoculars, the eight-year-old male looked car-size and prehistoric, a pair of jagged horns curving from his snout.



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It was dark when we returned to camp, and guides made a point of walking guests to their tents: a desert lion, another species rescued from the brink, had been spotted outside staff quarters the previous night. "Rhinos are very well accepted by the locals now," Mr. Waterboer said. "The lions are a bit more complicated."

The next day, we set out for lion country. Reaching camps north of Damaraland requires either pricey bush flights or, in our case, a willingness to endure bone-jarring rides along bad roads. Remoteness rewarded, however. In the conservancies we drove through, desert elephants grazed on acacia trees and Angolan giraffes stared as we passed. But resurgent wildlife presents its own hurdles.

"It's a constant competition between the livestock and the wildlife for resources," explained Dux Tjipombo, a guide at the Purros Community Campsite, a small conservancy-run campground reached after a half-day's drive. "The fact that we haven't got any rain this year only makes things worse."

Beside a dry tributary of the Hoarusib River, we turned off-road. Nearby, farmers had spotted a pride of eight lions, suspected of killing two cattle earlier in the week. "You have to understand that cattle are wealth here," Mr. Tjipombo said. "That's like someone robbing your bank."

Philip Stander, a Namibian biologist who has dedicated his career to protecting the country's desert lions, spends 350 days a year in the bush as part of his one-man Desert Lion Conservation Project. Since 1998, he has watched the population of these unique animals, which can go for months and even years without drinking water, grow from 20 to nearly 150. "The question," he said, "is what happens next."

His Web site is full of case histories of desert lions collared and tracked for years, only to be shot by villagers. Conservancy funds are set aside to compensate farmers for losses and discourage revenge killings, but human-wildlife conflicts are rising. "I understand why they retaliate, and they have every legal right to," he said. "I just sometimes wish we had a chance to intervene first."

Back on the river, the lions were nowhere to be found. We pushed on past the last town on the map, just a circle of huts with sheet metal roofs. Mirages glimmered in the distance, while a hot wind whipped up the dusty soil. The inhospitable terrain marked the edge of Kaokoland, one of the wildest and least populated parts of Namibia and the home of what may be its most unusual community tourism experiment.

The first guest camp partially owned by the Himba people, one of the country's last truly seminomadic tribes, sits on a mountaintop inside the Orupembe conservancy. Opened in 2011, Etambura Tented Lodge — five comfortable tents with thatched roofs, concrete floors and even indoor bathrooms — is hundreds of miles from the nearest paved road or village on the electrical grid. Many of its Himba owners reside in the surrounding valleys, herding goats and cattle, and living in dung-and-stick huts, as they have for centuries.

More than wildlife, it is these people whom travelers come to see. And unlike tensions with animals, the challenges to isolated tribal communities posed by the conservancy model are just beginning to be acknowledged.

"Before the camp opened, there were almost no tourists in this part of the country," said Kaku Musaso, a camp manager brought in from the city of Opuwo who, like many modern Himba women, wears Western clothes and speaks impeccable English with a British accent. "It was rare to see any white people here."

Early one morning, Ms. Musaso guided us by foot along a rocky ridge, then down a steep slope to a watering hole. Hundreds of goats clustered around a shoulder-deep depression dug in an otherwise dry river bed, where a young boy was scooping buckets of water into a wooden trough. In the shade of a shepherd's tree, six Himba women and at least a dozen children gathered. The ocher from their bare bodies had stained the rocks they sat on red.

Six months ago the women received their first visitors. By the time we got there, they knew the routine: Blankets were unrolled and topped with woven baskets and colorful necklaces and bracelets made of beads and ostrich bone. After Ms. Musaso bargained on our behalf, we handed over the equivalent of $20 in Namibian bills, which the women rolled into tubes, wrapped in scraps of plastic and tucked into their skirts. I asked what they used the money for. From a small bundle, one produced a brightly colored cellophane package showing a picture of a young woman with long, regal tresses: synthetic hair extensions, made in South Africa.

HOW EXTREME?

Rankings are from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very).

REMOTENESS: 3
Northern Namibia is among the last true wilderness areas in southern Africa, with few paved roads; four-wheel-drive vehicles and bush flights are the only reliable ways to get around.

CREATURE DISCOMFORTS: 2
Long drives over very rough roads can be taxing, but accommodations at camps and lodges — even in remote locations — are generally comfortable, with running water and electricity.

PHYSICAL DIFFICULTY: 1
Because of the distances involved, much of the trip is simply spent driving; getting out of the car to stretch your legs may be your main exercise.