It pays, but does it stay? Hunting in Namibia's community conservation system

BY **JOHN GROBLER** ON 26 FEBRUARY 2019
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- *Namibia has designated about 20 percent of its area as 82 communal conservancies run by local communities. Of these, about two-thirds have hunting rights. They retain a portion of their allocated quota to hunt for food for the local community, and sell a portion to professional hunters, who in turn bring in trophy hunters.*
- *In theory, it's a win-win: income and development opportunities for impoverished local people that give them a reason to preserve their wildlife, while using hunting as a tool to keep the species in balance.*
- *A visit to the system's first and most successful conservancy, Nyae Nyae in remote northeastern Namibia, raises questions about how well the system is currently working for either the local San community or their wildlife.*

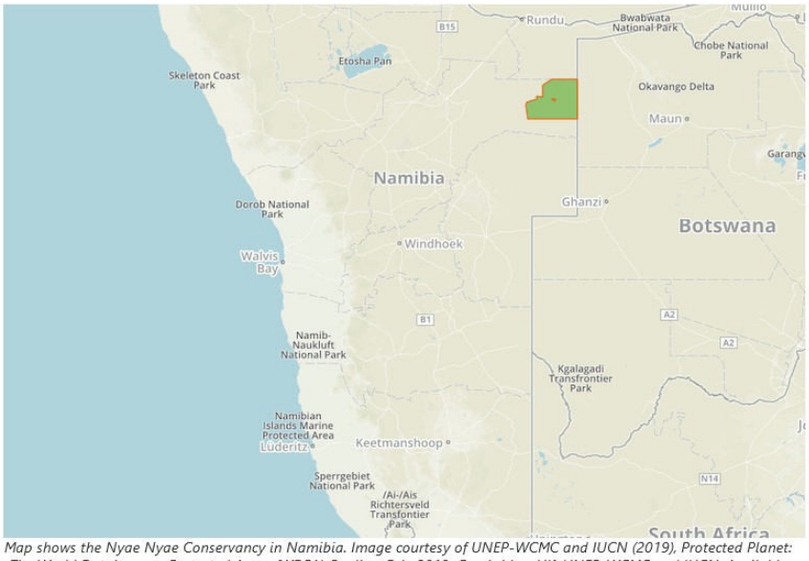
TSUMKWE, Namibia — Just south of Tsumkwe, an isolated San settlement in northeastern Namibia, a sun-shredded sign indicated the Nyae Nyae cultural activity center was 10 kilometers (6 miles) away along a potholed track leading into pristine African bush.

Welcome to what was once mythologized as the original African Eden or "Bushman's Paradise," a nearly 9,000-square-kilometer (3,475-square-mile) communal conservation area close to the Botswana border and the Okavango Delta, run by "the first people," as the San refer to themselves.

The oldest of Namibia's 82 registered communal conservancies, the Nyae Nyae Conservancy is named after the pans located at the northernmost tip of the Kalahari Desert, which fill up with rainwater at the end of summer and attract large numbers of animals, from elephants to apex predators and many species of antelope.

It is also the only place left in the world where the San are still allowed to hunt with their traditional bow and poisoned arrows. But while some still use traditional snares and traps for smaller game, most hunting is done with rifles from the comfort of a pickup truck, of which the conservancy owns several.

"Can you please explain to us what it is that keeps bringing people from the outside here?" the old San hunter known by everyone as Kiewiet had asked earlier that week.



Map shows the Nyae Nyae Conservancy in Namibia. Image courtesy of UNEP-WCMC and IUCN (2019), Protected Planet: The World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA) On-line, Feb. 2019, Cambridge, UK: UNEP-WCMC and IUCN. Available at: www.protectedplanet.net.

The other most pressing question he and all the other old-timers I met during a week in Nyae Nyae had was: where was the meat from the eland and giraffe that were hunted that week? By the end of October, at the close of the six-month-long hunting season, all they'd received was elephant meat, unpalatable for older folks. "An elephant is too big an animal for me to eat," Kiewiet said. "The meat is very tough, you have to cook it at least three times."

There was no sign of any activity at the cultural activity center, a foreign aid-funded cluster of four incomplete, roofless buildings of red-clay brick. A fence surrounded the center, along with litter left behind by the contractors after the money ran out in 2014 and they just disappeared.

Who were the contractors? Some people from Otjiwarongo, the regional capital, some people from Tsumkwe, maybe Chief Bobo knew, said Dunny Coma, a community game guard the conservancy office had assigned to help me find Kiewiet and the other old hunters. No one really understood why it was built in the first place.

The galvanized roof sheets, prized in an area where the nearest hardware store is five hours' drive away by gravel road in the town of Grootfontein, had also disappeared. The traditional San grass lean-to huts are still common here, and a zinc-sheet house is something of a status symbol, Coma explained.

The roofing was not the only thing that seemed to be missing. Apart from harlequin quails (*Coturnix delegorguei*) and sand grouse (family *Pteroclidae*) drinking from the rain-filled potholes and the odd duiker (genus <*Sylvicapra*) diving away into the bush at the sound of a car, there was no other sign of wildlife. The only spoor to be seen were tracks of cattle. Around the dried-up pans, too, the only droppings were from cattle, nothing else.

Under the conservancy rules that divide Nyae Nyae into land-use zones, this area was designated as a core conservation area, where livestock, farming, hunting and other activities were prohibited to avoid disturbing the game.

An ancient baobab tree in the Nyae Nyae Conservancy. Image by John Grobler for Mongabay.

But getting the owners to remove their cattle was a political problem, said Coma. They live in Tsumkwe in the middle of the conservancy, where the core-area rules don't apply, and claimed to have no control over their cattle's grazing habits. Some of them had established cattle posts close to the core conservation area, including a group of 12 well-connected individuals who had illegally fenced off large tracts of land.

With only the one government game warden, who was himself farming cattle on the side, no one seemed willing to act against them or their cattle crowding out the indigenous animals. A court order obtained by the conservancy evicting seven of them had gone unheeded. And where there were people, there was illegal hunting.

And yet, for the past 20 years the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) has given Nyae Nyae the single biggest hunting quota of all Namibia's communal conservancies, about two-thirds of which have hunting rights. In 2018, the conservancy was entitled to harvest more than 1,300 animals and birds, including nine elephants, nine buffalos, seven elands, four roan antelopes, three leopards, two spotted hyenas, one giraffe and a host of smaller species.

This, together with Nyae Nyae's sheer size and pristine wilderness, makes it the largest hunting area and the richest prize among Namibia's hunting fraternity. Nyae Nyae, for example, is famed as the best elephant hunting area in the world, according to its contracted hunter, Stephan Jacobs.

Under the conservancy model, the local communities are entitled to sell most of their allocated quota to professional hunters in advance for cash. A portion is set aside for the conservancy and the local traditional authority to hunt for food to be distributed among conservancy members. The professional hunting outfitters in turn sell individual trophy hunts to well-heeled foreigners who typically spend two weeks in their tented camps or nearby lodges.

Nyae Nyae has other sources of income as well: the subsidized production and sale of ostrich-egg beaded jewelry and the harvesting of Devil's Claw (*Harpagophytum procumbens* and *H. zeyheri*) tubers for the herbal medicinal trade. Its earnings allow it to maintain an office, pay its 27 permanent staff members each a small salary, maintain water infrastructure and pay for other basic social services such as school uniforms for the children.

San children, hamming it up for the camera at one of the villages. Image by John Grobler for Mongabay.

But it's trophy hunting that floats the boat, accounting for 86 percent of total returns in 2017 of roughly $430,000. It's trophy hunting that enables Nyae Nyae to distribute profits (around $120) annually among its 1,500 members, the only conservancy in Namibia that can afford to do so, according to Lara Diez, director of the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation (NNDF) in Windhoek, which provides technical support to various communal conservancies.

In theory, it's a win-win: income and development opportunities for impoverished local people that give them a reason to preserve their wildlife, while using hunting as a tool to keep the species in balance. This is the African conservation success story held up globally by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the MET and others as proof that trophy hunting is key to conservation and development.

So why are people in Nyae Nyae still as poor and hungry as ever? And where is all the game that the ministry claims has trebled in number since it implemented the Community-based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) policy in the mid-1990s? A three-year drought and a recently suspended policy known as "shoot and sell" that allowed conservancies to invite meat hunters to shoot out entire herds of game for quick cash has reportedly left some other hunting-based conservancies with scant game. Here in Nyae Nyae, though, shoot and sell is still allowed. What was the secret of its success?

The incomplete and abandoned Nyae Nyae cultural activity center. Image by John Grobler for Mongabay.

Hunting as a conservation tool

Namibia is a vast, semi-arid country twice the size of California but with only about 2.5 million people. The rural, higher-rainfall north takes up about one-quarter of the country, and that's where two-thirds of Namibians live. Of the remainder of the terrain, the Namib Desert (the oldest in the world) makes up about half, with only the central, Khomas Highland plateau suitable for livestock farming.

The northern quarter of Namibia is fenced off from the rest by the Red Line, a veterinary cordon fence first erected in 1896 by the then German colonial administrators to prevent the spread of rinderpest from East Africa. That fence is still maintained today as a condition to accessing European beef export markets for Namibian commercial farmers south of the Red Line.

Namibia today has designated about 17 percent of its total surface area as national parks and other protected areas. The registered communal conservancies bring another 20 percent of the country's area under conservation management.

Prior to the start of Germany's genocidal colonial occupation in 1884, the vast empty land was the hunting grounds for all and sundry. By the late 1880s, the last elephants around the Etosha Pans in the north, now Etosha National Park, were all shot out, not to return for a century.

Thanks to the pioneering work of South African conservationist Bernabé De la Bat, commercial game breeding and safari hunting was introduced as a key conservation ingredient in the 1970s and 1980s. Hunting was used to maintain a balanced species spread, pruning out the post-breeding animals while generating an income. This approach was what saved the last of the black rhinos from extinction, brought the elephants back to the Etosha Pans, and recovered the plains game (various antelope species) Namibia was famous for.

Animals gather at a waterhole in Etosha National Park. Image by Martin de Lusenet via Flickr (CC BY 2.0).

It also saved many of the farmers along with the game. Income from professional hunting remains critically important to the commercial farming sector south of the Red Line; many farmers would otherwise not survive the challenges of low cattle prices and recurring droughts, according to Rainer Ling, a former vice president the Namibia Professional Hunters Association (NAPHA).

Community-based hunting-related conservation — for example, involving farmers in breeding certain species to sell to the state to replenish national game parks — was part of Namibian conservation since the early 1980s. However, the program applied only south of the Red Line fence, not in the rural communal lands of northern Namibia. It was run by the government, not local people, and strictly policed, with hunting by community members in the rural areas prohibited and heavily punished.

After Namibia gained independence from South Africa in 1990, the concept evolved to embrace bottom-up management by the communities rather than top-down management by the government. An approach known as Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) was initially piloted in Namibia's eastern Caprivi region by noted conservationist Garth Owen-Smith via his NGO Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC).

Devolving responsibility for managing resources to the grassroots level was very much in line with the political climate. The country's newly elected government under the SWAPO Party enthusiastically endorsed CBNRM.

With the financial backing of USAID and the support of WWF, the government passed legislation enabling communities to form communal conservancies in 1996. In 1998, Nyae Nyae became Namibia's first-ever communal conservancy, followed later that year by three others.

A small boy in his father's carefully tended garden. Image by John Grobler for Mongabay.

In 2007, a decline in the value of the South African rand (to which the Namibian dollar is pegged) and political upheaval in Zimbabwe started attracting more foreign hunters to Namibia. Rural communities were encouraged to set up their own conservancies under the CBNRM model and to apply for hunting quotas to sell. Today, the number of conservancies has grown to 82.

Most of the more successful ones have entered into joint ventures to operate tourist lodges and campsites, bringing much-needed expertise, capital and employment opportunities to their people. Others, like Nyae Nyae, have opted for the consumptive tourism model of obtaining and selling hunting quotas to professional hunting outfitters. Most individual conservancy members, however, still rely on subsistence farming as their main source of income, according to the MET.

Two young Tsumkwe residents. Like everyone else, they asked for food because the meat from the hunting was finished. Hunger is a fact of life for many in the Nyae Nyae Conservancy. Image by John Grobler for Mongabay.

Nyae Nyae, flagship of community conservation

On paper, the Nyae Nyae pans and its people had looked to be the perfect model for community-based conservation. Their traditional *!ori* system of carefully allocating and managing their limited food and water resources during times of drought is arguably the oldest form of community-based conservation ever.

But this hunter-gatherer existence had left the Nyae Nyae San ill-prepared for the challenges of a cash economy. It was this realization that prompted the late U.S. filmmaker John Marshall to set up the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation in the 1980s to assist them in transitioning to a more sedentary, pastoralist way of life.

The switch to subsistence farming was difficult for the San, used as they were to following the rain and the game, said Kiewiet, the old San hunter, who everyone credited as being first to see how the San could use the conservancy model to secure a future for themselves.

Sitting on a broken old chair in Makuri village about 20 kilometers (12 miles) outside Tsumkwe, Kiewiet recalled Marshall's efforts to convert them into cattle farmers with bitter mirth: "Many Bushmen drank their cattle away within a week. John Marshall would swear and shout but always brought more cattle," he said.

Kiewiet, the Afrikaans name for the plover bird his gait supposedly resembled when he was still the best hunter among the San, is now in his late 80s. He walks only with great difficulty, his arthritis-crippled fingers no longer capable of pulling his bowstring and his eyesight deteriorating rapidly.

The 1990s were uncertain times for the San people. In 1993, the new government used a more arid area called Gam to the south of Nyae Nyae to settle Otjiherero-speaking Mbanderu people who had fled from German persecution to Botswana in 1904. Soon, they were herding their cattle north across the Red Line fence and taking over waterholes used by the San, in spite of clear laws against this.

Kiewiet's extensive hunting forays in the early 1990s brought him into contact with Garth Owen-Smith's IRDNC pilot project in the Caprivi region, about 500 kilometers (300 miles) northeast of Tsumkwe. Its community-based approach to conservation, which gave the local people responsibility for managing their own natural resources, was a revolutionary idea after decades of apartheid-driven parochialism, and it seemed to him a natural fit for the San. "We live with animals, to us the animals are like our cattle," he said.

It also struck him as the solution to all the San's problems. There was no San chief in those days, or any other traditional authority who could assert their rights on a collective basis. "I could see that this could help us Bushman" to secure traditional land-use and hunting rights that at the time were uncertain, he said, speaking in fluent Afrikaans that he had learned as a tracker for the colonial-era army.

Armed with this knowledge and the IRDNC's support, he started spreading the word around Tsumkwe. For months, he crisscrossed the area on foot until he had visited all the places with people, most too small to call villages, until everyone had gotten the CBNRM message.

In 1998, two representatives (one male, one female) from each of the 27 villages within a proposed conservation area met in Baraka, a village close to the Botswana border. The delegates drew up and approved a constitution and agreed on the zoning of land into conservation and farming areas. They also elected Tsamkxao "Bobo" ≠Oma as their first chief, Kiewiet as the first chairman of the conservancy management committee, and a policymaking tribal council called the *rada*.

With the backing of USAID's Living in a Finite Environment (LIFE) program, WWF and the community's own farmers' cooperative, the Nyae Nyae Conservancy set up its first basic office in Baraka.

The early days were exciting for the first people of Nyae Nyae as CBNRM pioneers. In his new role as the country's first ever formal conservancy chairman, Kiewiet said the donors took him to other rural communities all over Namibia and South Africa to explain the communal conservancy model to them as well.

Kudu, photographed in Bwabwata National Park in Namibia's Caprivi region. Image by Roger Culos via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Between 1999 and 2003, more than 2,000 animals were translocated into the conservancy to rebuild low wildlife populations, including red hartebeest (*Alcelaphus buselaphus caama*), kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*), and springbok (*Antidorcas marsupialis*). More were introduced in later years.

From the start, Nyae Nyae was allocated a hunting quota, at first just 10 animals, including two elephants. Until the early 1980s, the area had no resident elephant population, but the drilling of new boreholes and establishing of new waterholes for the game had started attracting a floating, transboundary herd from neighboring Botswana, said Jacobs, Nyae Nyae's current hunting concession holder.

Jacobs, who grew up on a farm about 200 kilometers (124 miles) west of Tsumkwe, said the construction of a game-proof fence along the Botswana border was disastrous for the seasonal migration of wildlife between the two countries. During migrations, so many animals were trapped by the fence and died of thirst that the stench made it nearly impossible to breathe, Jacobs recalled his father telling him.

However, the fence also created a permanent local elephant population in northeastern Namibia, which grew from a small herd of 30 in 1982 to a MET-estimated 1,000 in Nyae Nyae in 2015, and another 4,000 or more in Khaudum National Park on its northern border. Now, having more than 300 bulls to choose from is what gives Nyae Nyae its reputation as the best elephant hunting area in the world, Jacobs said. But is this possible?

The establishment of permanent water points for the San farmers' cattle also attracted more plains game to drought-prone areas that previously had only seasonal populations. The cattle, however, also attracted more lions, leading to the San poisoning them, said Jacobs.

Nyae Nyae's huge hunting quota, which includes leopard, elephant and buffalo, makes it the most profitable communal conservancy in Namibia, thanks to trophy hunting. The profits brought, at least initially, noticeable improvements to the marginalized San people's lives in an area without any local industry but rich in game.

The number of villages included in Nyae Nyae grew from the original 27 to 38, inspiring the people living 100 kilometers (60 miles) west of Tsumkwe to form their own conservancy, called N≠a-Jaqna, in 2003. The conservancy, Kiewiet said, gave the San of Nyae Nyae their "own independence" and a sense of pride: they were now setting the example for everyone else.

Cattle grazing in off-limits parts of the Nyae Nyae Conservancy has become a problem. The conservancy obtained a court order evicting seven cattle farmers but it has gone unheeded. Image by John Grobler for Mongabay.

Tsumkwe and the cash culture

But somewhere along the line something started changing in the Nyae Nyae character. Kiewiet, like the other four veteran conservancy members interviewed, pointed at the 2009 move of the conservancy's office from Baraka, close to the Botswana border, to Tsumkwe, the de facto regional center, as the start of Nyae Nyae's current problems.

With the move into town, small and grim though Tsumkwe is, came a certain cash culture mentality that led to the slow unraveling of the communalist character of their conservancy, Kiewiet said. Everyone needed more money now, there were more staff members, more office overhead costs and more frequent trips to Grootfontein, and it was leaving less money to be spent on social programs or distributed among conservancy members at the end of each year.

The annual payout also became a honeypot that attracted outsiders to Tsumkwe — the source of all the stray cattle now depleting the water and grazing resources in the core conservation area.

Many of them had taken advantage of Chief Bobo's increasingly enfeebled rule to apply for business licenses to set up shebeens (cheap bars), where they sold home-brewed alcohol to the San on credit, said former conservancy chairman Gcashe /Xao. When they cannot pay, the shebeen owners take their cattle as payment, he said.

A young San woman peddling beadwork at one of the shebeens in Tsumkwe, in order to buy home-brewed beer called tombo. Image by John Grobler for Mongabay.

Gradually, a political culture of patronage and exclusion crept in that has alienated the older members, who have been gradually sidelined by the better-educated people now sitting on the conservancy management committee. Today, there is not a single representative on the committee from any of the villages in the core conservation area, Kiewiet said.

There is also now an east-west division: the villages to the east in the core conservation area were complaining that the meat from the hunts was only distributed among Chief Bobo and the management committee members' families, said /Xuixe, a current rada member and former conservancy chairman. This was no idle crabbing, either, in an area where hunger is more the norm than the exception.

Kiewiet also complained that the modern solar-powered water installation in the village of Makuri, where he and his wife were staying with a daughter, had been broken for more than a month. In spite of the conservancy owning several cars, the office in Tsumkwe had failed to come fetch him and the other elderly San in the village to collect their monthly government pension payout.

Video by John Grobler.

The newly appointed conservancy manager, Heinrich ≠Oma, at a meeting at the end of the week at Nyae Nyae's office during a MET inspection, denied that this was the case. The water problem was a matter of a missing piece of pipe (it actually appeared to be an electronic problem) and he had been to Makuri the day before and was not told of any problems, ≠Oma said.

Which was odd, as this reporter had visited Kiewiet late the previous day to say goodbye and Kiewiet had not mentioned any visit from the office. ≠Oma insisted he was there, though.

As for the meat, everything was fairly distributed between all the villages according to an agreed-to schedule, he said. However, the meat distribution plan he produced showed that with the exception of one eland, only elephant meat had been distributed that year. There was no indication of the eland and giraffe hunted that week, the ones Kiewiet had been wondering about, on any of ≠Oma's schedules.

Some of the complainants were in fact drying the elephant meat and selling it by the sack to the Mbanderu people in Gam, Jacobs, the contracted hunter, later said in a telephone interview.

Who was telling the truth here depended on where one stood: the elephant in the room could not see itself, it seemed.

San council or "rada" member Xuixe at a settlement called Na Pan. Image by John Grobler for Mongabay.

Sustainable hunting

There is an African saying that when the elephant bulls fight, the grass suffers the most. So, how was the grass doing in this fight?

If there was a moment of truth, it came at that meeting, which the MET's regional chief control warden, Maria Sikopo, called to check on Nyae Nyae's game management at the close of the hunting season.

In attendance were the young new conservancy manager Heinrich ≠Oma, four of the management committee members and seven community game rangers, all in neat new khaki outfits supplied by Jacobs and clustered tightly together at the far corner of a long table in Nyae Nyae's cramped and somewhat chaotic Tsumkwe office.

Nyae Nyae Conservancy's office administrator Elizabeth Kgao. Image by John Grobler for Mongabay.

On a whiteboard behind her at the end of the table, Sikopo listed Nyae Nyae's hunting quota: 1,310 individual hunts of 24 species, including elephant, buffalo, leopard, spotted hyena, eland, roan antelope and an assortment of smaller animals like warthog, duiker, springhare and eight species of bird.

The inclusion of each species in the hunting quota, in theory, discouraged its being hunted out for food by attaching a commercial value to every animal. This is the "if it pays, it stays" dictum that underpins the hunting-based conservation model promoted by the IRDNC, WWF and the MET.

The wide spread of species also reflected the CBNRM approach of using selective hunting as a conservation tool to keep the species in balance, for instance by increasing the quotas for overabundant species as needed.

Two broad and overlapping trends were immediately apparent from the numbers supplied by the community game guards under questioning from Sikopo.

Of 1,310 animals in the 2018 hunting quota, the MET had allocated 94 percent (1,227) to the conservancy and the traditional authority, most of them small species trapped for the pot, like springhare (*Pedetes capensis*) and red-billed francolin (*Pternistis adspersus*). The community game guards, however, reported having used hardly any of these "own use" hunts, less than 5 percent of the allocated quota.

The remaining 83 hunts were sold to Stephan Jacobs, who had used 28. He used the entire quota for the high-value species, like elephants, leopards, buffalos and hyenas. Of the lower-value plains game like duiker and wildebeest, Jacobs used just 14 percent of the allocated quota.

Nyae Nyae Conservancy

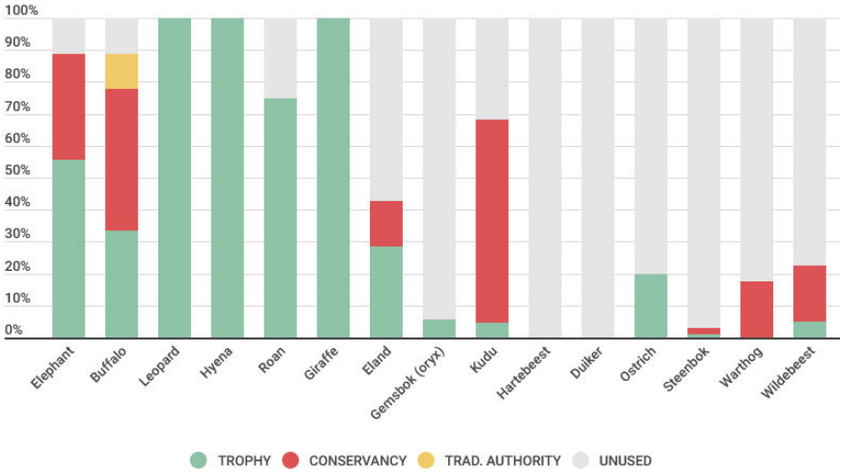
Quotas in 2018

75% of quota

was allocated for birds and small mammals such as the Guinea Fowl and Springhare (not shown in the chart).

100 Steenbok

Among large mammals, the Steenbok had the largest quota in 2018 (100 animals) but only 3% of this quota were reported as being used.



Scroll over each slice to see the number of each species used

Source: Namibia Ministry of Environment and Tourism, conservancy management committee, Tsumkwe office

Credit: Willie Shubert for Mongabay

infogram

A third trend, the very obvious scarcity of game of any kind in Nyae Nyae, had already become evident over the preceding days.

Sikopo gently scolded the conservancy management for only reporting a total of 55 own use hunts for the entire season. While very limited literacy among the community game guards was partly to blame, the absence of game in the area around Tsumkwe made it clear that there was a lot of hunting going on in an area where the people had little else to do.

At a grassroots level, where hunger is always present, attaching a theoretical monetary value to discourage unsanctioned hunting apparently was not having the desired outcome. "The Bushmen are poaching the hell [out] of everything," Jacobs said later by phone.

Hunting as a management tool to ensure a balanced species spread — which is supposed to determine the total quotas set — was also not working, closer analysis of the figures on the whiteboard suggested.

Instead of an even off-take across all species allocated as hunting quota, Jacobs was concentrating on the high-value species for obvious economic reasons. For example, an elephant hunt will cost the client at least $50,000, but a gemsbok hunt would only sell for $500. At a cost of $550 to $750 per day to operate a luxury hunting camp in these remote parts, writing off lower-value hunting quotas represented a better return on his capital investment and operational layout.

Jacobs, questioned about this during the phone interview, said his clients had mostly already hunted plains game elsewhere and had come to Nyae Nyae for the big game hunting, like the elephant. After 14 days of tracking on foot and beating off the mopani flies, they just weren't interested in spending more time in the bush than necessary, he said.

However, Jacobs insisted that Nyae Nyae had never had much plains game to begin with, which raised the further question of how the conservancy's hunting quota was calculated in the first place.

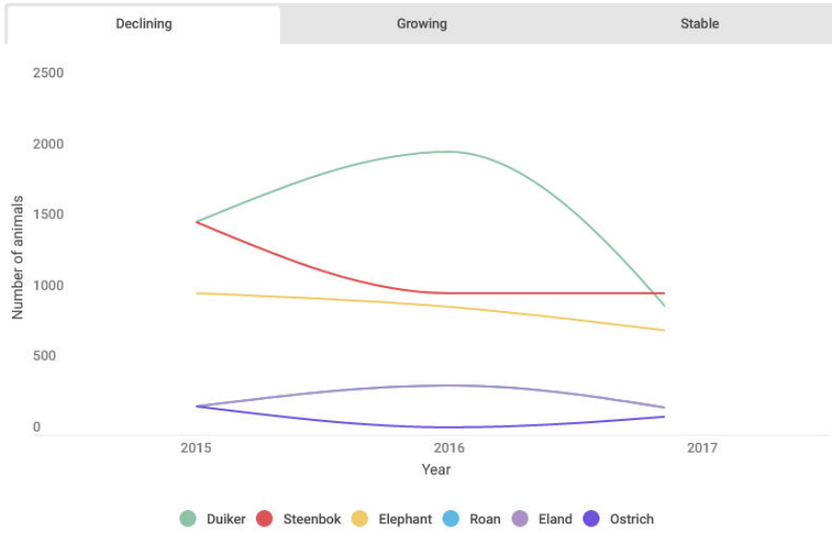
In theory, the hunting quotas are based on an annual waterhole game count, conducted at the end of the dry season during a full moon over a 72-hour period by the community game guards under the supervision of the local MET warden. The waterhole count is then multiplied by a population density factor that is derived from a separate game count done in a transect of the area around the waterhole on foot and the community game guards' and local population's estimates of game numbers. This final result is the MET's official game count, on which basis it calculates and allocates final hunting quotas for each species counted.

But with 19 waterholes spread out over nearly 9,000 square kilometers of deep sand, and only one MET warden stationed at Tsumkwe, official oversight of each waterhole count amounts to a logistical impossibility. During the most recent count, in August 2018, the MET warden was not present at any of the waterhole counts, community game guard Coma and the NNDF's field officer confirmed.

Nyae Nyae Conservancy

Wildlife population trends

Click on the names of the species to toggle their data on and off and make a comparison. Or scroll over each slice to see the individual species estimates or counts.



Species are grouped based on comparing change in the population estimates between 2015 and 2017. All of the numbers are the Ministry of Environment and Tourism's population estimates.

Source: 2015, 2016, and 2017 Full Moon Waterhole Counts posted on the Namibian Association of CBNRM Support Organizations (NACSO) website. Note that the 2015 and 2016 counts appear to include data from one waterhole located in the adjacent N#a-Jaqna Conservancy and 22 and 18 waterholes, respectively, located in Nyae Nyae.

Credit: Willie Shubert for Mongabay

Nyae Nyae game count figures for 2015 to 2017, as reported by the umbrella body NACSO (Namibian Association of CBNRM Support Organisations), brought to light further issues.

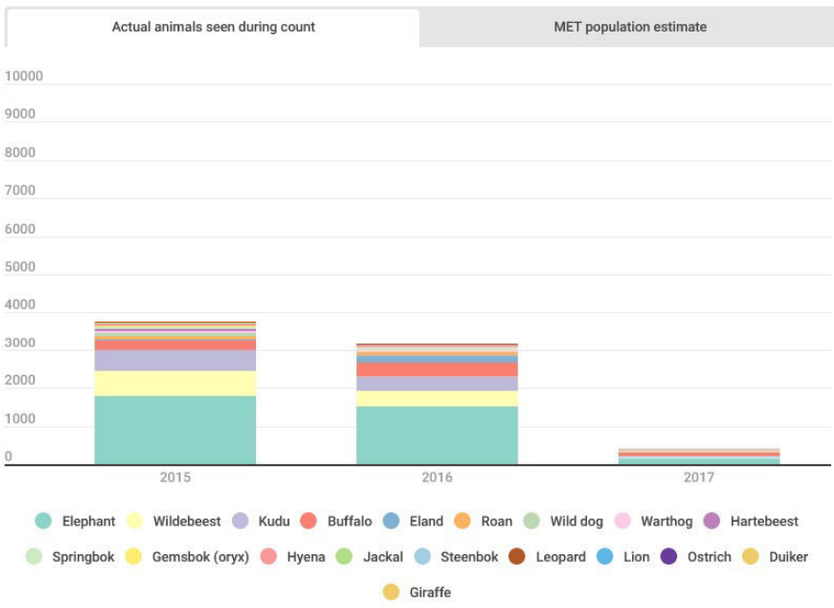
First, the community's game estimates appeared to be exaggerated, by up to 250 percent for species like kudu or steenbok and up to 400 percent for predators like leopards and hyenas that pose a threat to the San and their livestock.

Second, the MET's final game counts consistently amounted to roughly half to two-thirds of the local estimates, suggesting that the ministry is aware of this tendency and therefore heavily marks down the conservancy's count.

Nyae Nyae Conservancy

Wildlife Population Estimates

Click on the names of the species to toggle their data on and off and make a comparison. Or scroll over each slice to see the individual species estimates or counts.



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Credit: Willie Shubert for Mongabay

Share

infogram

Third, the total number of animals actually seen during the game counts has been declining, driven by large declines in several species. Elephants, for instance, plunged from 1,797 animals in 2015 to only 603 in 2017. However, the allocated hunting quota of nine animals remained constant from 2014 to 2018.

This is also the case for two out of five of the other high-value hunts — quotas remained constant in spite of fluctuating or declining actual animals counted, suggesting that the game counts may be tailored to the level of income desired by the Nyae Nyae conservancy, rather than to the actual number of animals available to harvest sustainably. (NACSO's director, Maxi Louis, did not respond to requests for an interview or to emailed questions.)

Former Nyae Nyae chairman Gcashe /Xao on the main road leading into Tsumkwe, past the many bars, called shebeens, that the traditional authority has allowed. Image by John Grobler for Mongabay

Nyae Nyae and beyond

There are signs that these issues are not restricted to Nyae Nyae. Several registered members of NAPHA, the professional hunters' association, had started raising the alarm about the lack of huntable elephant bulls in the Caprivi region four years ago, where the number of communal conservancies grew from one in 1997 to 15 today.

For his part, Jacobs described a 2015 hunting trip to a conservancy in the eastern Caprivi as "the worst experience in my life" because there was so little game left, it was a crime to shoot anything. "How could the MET issue a quota for four hippos when there were only two small cows left in that entire stretch of the river?" he said. "It's just absolute insanity what is going on there."

Yet the Caprivi game counts are based on the same official methodology as those at all the other communal conservancies, including Nyae Nyae.

A spotted hyaena photographed in Namibia's Caprivi region. Image by Per Arne Slotte via Flickr (CC BY-SA 2.0).

Acting MET permanent secretary and current environmental commissioner Teofilus Nghitila, in a letter to a local NGO seen by this reporter late last year, said that Namibia's wildlife had tripled as result of its conservation methods, and that the country has "more wildlife today than at any given time in the past 100 years." Namibia was an African conservation success story and suggestions to the contrary were evidence of an attitude that puts the needs of tourists and wildlife ahead of Africans who share their living space with dangerous animals like lions, elephants and crocodiles, he wrote.

"It is a pity and shameful to see that some international people still think Africans cannot run their own affairs and therefore should be subjected to their ideologies that have no regard for our people," he wrote.

There is just one obvious problem: wildlife in large numbers is scarcely seen anymore in Namibia, according to informal reports from several conservationists, hunting and tour guides, lodge owners, and former MET employees.

It is no secret why the game has disappeared, they say. The worst drought in 30 years between 2013 and 2016 caused major die-offs. While the hardier plains game initially survived, the MET allowed cash-strapped conservancies to harvest their animals, especially plains game, to sell into the bushmeat trade under the shoot and sell policy. Poor controls resulted in the permit system being widely abused and a major public outcry on social media and in the local press ensued. In 2018 the MET suspended the program in most conservancies, according to its director of parks and wildlife management, Colgar Sikopo.

But it was too late, according to Izak Smit, a semi-retired businessman who, with his photographer wife, makes monthly field trips to keep close track of the last of the desert lions in northwestern Namibia's Kunene region, site of 38 conservancies. The pair run Desert Lions Human Relations Aid, a group that helps Kunene farmers protect their livestock from wildlife.

The loss of game has caused the lions increasingly to attack local farmers' cattle and donkeys, which has led to widespread poisoning of the lions, including the five made famous by the 2015 documentary film "Vanishing Kings: Lions of the Namib." Smit said that on all their most recent field trips, the only game to be seen were small, isolated herds of zebra and springbok and the occasional pair of oryx.

"When we queried the low numbers and sharp decrease in numbers since 2011/12 in 2014 by asking a senior office bearer of the IRDNC, we were told that they got the 2013/14 game counting formula wrong which overstated game numbers and resulted in over-utilization," Smit wrote in reply to emailed questions.

"The drought then, of course, followed and did the rest. Urgent moratoria on shoot and sell permits and own utilization were self-imposed by conservancies ever since, but we have yet to see any change or improvement in the status quo," he said.

In a written response to questions, the MET's Colgar Sikopo acknowledged the decline in plains game in Kunene, which he attributed mainly to the drought. He also outlined challenges in Namibia's CBNRM model, including human-wildlife conflict arising from the conservancies' "good conservation practices" and mismanagement of funds by conservancy managers. (To address the latter, the MET recently required conservancies to ensure at least half their hunting and tourism income goes to community development projects, according to news reports.) But Sikopo defended the conservancy model, writing that it "is no doubt a conservation and rural development success story which we are proud of."

His and Nghitila's responses come as no surprise: the ministry's international reputation and every one of its top officials' careers were built implementing CBNRM. Nghitila's predecessor as permanent secretary, Malan Lindeque, who first implemented the CBNRM policy at the MET in 1996, retired mid-2018 but now chairs the MET's new Nature Conservation Board that advises the government and others on sustainable development. The board's other members are mainly like-minded champions of hunting, including the current NAPHA president, Danene van der Westhuyzen.

Neither Nghitila nor the minister of environment and tourism, Pohamba Shifeta, were immediately available for further comment: they were in Texas attending the Dallas

Safari Club Show 2019, where van der Westhuyzen was elected to the club's new Conservation Advisory Board.

There is a well-known Oshiwambo saying in Namibia: what eats the bean is inside the bean.

Banner image: A desert elephant of northwestern Namibia's Kunene region. Image by Rhett A. Butler.

John Grobler is a veteran investigative environmental journalist based in Windhoek, Namibia. He is a two-time CNN MultiChoice Africa award winner for his work on organized and environmental crime.

Disclosure: John Grobler and the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation are neighbors on a shared sectional title property in Windhoek.

Editor's note 5/29/19: Two errors introduced during the editorial process have been corrected: two references to several gazelle species were omitted because only one member of the gazelle tribe lives in Namibia; and the genus of duiker was changed from *Cephalophus* to *Sylvicapra*. Additionally, a name given for an early government hunting-based conservation program in areas south of Namibia's Red Line fence was omitted because it could not be confirmed.

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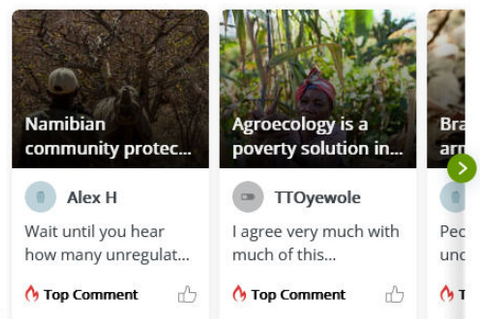

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Dave
3 August, 2021
Can you give an update on the situation? I'm assuming less trophy hunting pressure due to travel restrictions, but probably more subsistence hunting due to lack of tourism dollars.
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GreyCandy
27 February, 2019
This is a well written and vert informative story..Thank you...
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GreyBike
8 April, 2019
One-sided as ever. Perhaps you should include the estimated statistics (because no one is keeping count) of the illegally trapped and shot big cats that farmers preemptively take each year. The numbers dwarf those from conservationn hunting, while bringing zero income to the local San people.
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Chrysser
20 March, 2019

Great read, John, Very thorough. I am sorry to see the same mistake regarding sustainable hunting being made in Namibia that has been made in every other place I've worked and traveled. My take-away: those who see a direct financial benefit from hunting permits cannot set the quotas. It has to be b...**See more**

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GreyCoathanger
1 March, 2019

Good story. I traveled extensively through Africa (including Namibia) a couple years back on my motorbike and what I saw everywhere in Africa paints the same picture. Africa is killing itself - too many people chasing too few resources. I remember coming across a lady in the middle of the bush...**See more**

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GreyDice
27 February, 2019

As Dr. House says, people lie. The real trends in animal populations tell the facts

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2 April, 2019

There are flaws in any system but I hope the purpose of this article isn't to black-mark the hunting industry and Namibia's pro-utilisation stance. No system is perfect and we must remember that Namibia is still an amazing model for African conservation because it gives communities the freedoms and...**See more**

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S Schroeder
9 April, 2019

Outstanding article, John. Trophy hunting is not conservation... it is the game of the very wealthy and the very selfish. True conservationists know that eco-tourism is way more profitable and ethical than trophy killing. I traveled to Africa last year and only saw ONE wild lion in the whole of my ...**See more**

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