

Taking Charge!

The Richtersveld Community Conservancy: the first of its kind in South Africa

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Tucked neatly under the final bend in the Orange River, the Richtersveld exists where the icy winds of the Atlantic challenge the cooked earth of the interior. Here, the great river (!*Gariëp* in the language of the Nama) passes sheepishly through the forbidding mountains that straddle the border between South Africa and Namibia, before making an abrupt 90 degree turn towards the sea. But



forbidding as it may be, the consequence of this radical geography has been an abundance of unique plant species, making the Richtersveld a core of the Succulent Karoo Biodiversity Hotspot and recognized by Conservation International as a globally significant centre of endemism. It is also due to this remote environment that a similarly unique culture has evolved in the region, it too with the Richtersveld as its core. And as creators of South Africa's first community conservancy, the local groups - collectively known as the *Richtersvelders* - are charting new territory in conservation.

For many years, while extensive parts of the region were being disembowelled to satiate humanity's great appetite for diamonds, parts of the remote communal lands were utilized only for raising goats and sheep, much as they had been for millennia. These lands are relatively well-maintained and, being a region of extremely rich biodiversity, they eventually caught the attention of scientists and conservationists. Local people also realized the value of this biological and economic asset and mobilized to protect the area for science, tourism and sustainable livestock grazing.

Equal in size to the neighbouring Richtersveld National Park, the Richtersveld Community Conservancy is designed to encompass many of the microhabitats created by stone and differential fog deposits where much of the rich biodiversity occurs. The motivation was to protect the last pristine land in the Richtersveld, an area conspicuously devoid of the mine dumps and devoured earth that can be seen throughout the rest of the region. What was previously a former 'coloured reserve' in a neglected, faraway region is fast becoming a model community conservation area, whose members are now requested to speak internationally about how the balance between conserving biodiversity and boosting local livelihoods can be achieved.

The road has been long. Creating a conservation area which is communally-owned and held in trust for the future benefit of all Richtersvelders and all of humanity is no small task and

one which has required great vision and steadfast commitment. Much has been written about the need to link local communities with conservation efforts, and in the Richtersveld this is happening. Fortunately, the initiative was supported early on by numerous organizations, such as the German government-funded Transform Programme, Conservation International and the Global Environment Facility, as well as South Africa's Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEA&T).

Several years of discussion, disagreement and compromise ensued as the Richtersvelders honed their vision for the land. The process was open to all Richtersvelders, and this widespread participation is now considered a cornerstone of the conservancy's management. In 2003, an interim management committee was formed, later to become a permanent structure, and in 2004 the management plan was finalized, serving as a constitution by which the conservancy will be run.

The evolution of the Richtersveld Community Conservancy

1997: *A seed planted.* The awareness of the need for conservation by Richtersvelders and the subsequent evolution of the Conservancy are said to trace back to a 1997 field trip of the Eksteenfontein Youth Forum to see the petroglyphs along the Orange River. Upon arriving at the site, they discovered that some of the petroglyphs had been removed and that many had been irreversibly damaged. The sense of loss during this event spurred a feeling throughout the community that unless something was done, the cultural and natural attributes of the Richtersveld would forever change – for the worse.

1998: *An idea hatched.* Since that 1997 field trip, a drive for conservation awareness took off, culminating in the proposal in the 1998 Integrated Development Plan (IDP) of the Richtersveld Transitional Council to set aside a large section of the Richtersveld for the purposes of conservation.

1998: *Reference Group elected to develop a Management Plan for a proposed Richtersveld Community Heritage Area.*

2001: *First Operational Plan developed.*

2002: *Conservancy included in 2002 Richtersveld IDP.*

2002: *First Concept Management Plan developed.*

2002: *Conservancy included in 2003 Richtersveld IDP.*

2003: *Second Concept Management Plan developed.*

2004: *Third Concept Management Plan developed.* This was presented to and accepted by the Richtersveld Community.

2004: *Management Committee elected.* A new structure called the Management Committee was elected to replace the temporary Reference Group and to implement the Management Plan for a Richtersveld Community Conservancy.

2004: *Conservancy Manager and Administrative Officer appointed.*

2004: *Ties with //Gamaseb revived.* Historic cross-border trips to the Bondelswartz community of Namibia's //Gamaseb Communal Conservancy revive old cultural links.

2005: *Proposed inclusion of Helskloof Provincial Reserve.* Northern Cape Province opens discussions with the Management Committee over including the Helskloof Provincial Reserve in the Conservancy.

2005: *Government support arrives to develop infrastructure.* Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism allocate 6 million Rand to the development of the Conservancy.

2005: *Richtersveld Community Conservancy included as part of a proposed World Heritage Site.*

The conservancy is making good headway: the area has been mapped by a community GIS team demarcating tourism, stock farming and sensitive wilderness zones, and comprehensive environmental impact assessments will be conducted for any new development. Camping is being properly managed, local field guides have been trained and local privately-run tourism and guesthouse initiatives have sprung up in various towns, such as Kuboes, Lekkersing and Eksteenfontein as well as in the conservancy. To facilitate research, education and local environmental programmes for youth, the Rooiberg Research Station is being upgraded, and the old crumbling washhouse is now being converted into an observatory.

The goal is to manage but not 'over-manage' the land so that it does not lose the charm and feeling of remoteness which make it so appealing and unique. A core value of the conservancy's vision is to ensure the conservancy's integrity as a wilderness area. In addition, its vision statement – *"To protect and manage the unique biodiversity and natural landscape to the advantage of the local people and all of humankind"* – also makes clear the need for the sustainable development of the livelihoods of local people. Joani Cloete, Chairperson of the Environmental sub-committee of the Richtersveld Sida !hub Community Property Association (CPA) and Conservancy Administrative Officer, puts it in typical Richtersveld forthrightness:

"We must take the driver's seat. We are the people who must make decisions, and we are the people who will be accountable for those decisions. After all, it is the local people who must and who can make the correct decisions about land use to improve the lives of local people and to manage the resources for sustainable use and benefit by future generations."

In a country where manicured wilderness areas are fenced off and often sterilized, the Richtersveld stands as a bastion of wildness remaining relatively 'like it used to be'. This is refreshingly evident as one looks up at the silhouette of a goat herder searching for lost sheep or jumps out of the way of a donkey-car barreling hell-bent down a mountain pass. And ultimately it is these sort of scenes, personalities and peculiarities which draw visitors to the Richtersveld. To get a glimpse into the lives of the people, one needs only to take a short – and bone jarring – drive down to Tanie Sana's and Oom Willem's winter livestock post outside Eksteenfontein. Age and hardship are clear on their faces, but Oom Willem chuckles like a boy as he drags a newborn dog to the kraal, and with a cigarette dancing between his teeth, shows off gleefully the puppy nursing contently from one of the goats.

But a great deal of work does remain to be done. The Richtersveld Community Conservancy must now plan the way to further improve the livelihoods of local people without causing negative impacts on the land or cultural fabric of the Tanie Sana's and Oom Willem's of the Richtersveld. It is a challenge indeed and one which is facing wilderness areas throughout the world. In the Richtersveld, this challenge is exacerbated by the downscaling of the mining industry – particularly tough for a region where mining has been a primary source of employment from the early copper days to the present time of diamond mega-mines. However 'good' for the environment the downscaling may seem from an environmental perspective, many Richtersvelders now wonder with considerable worry where the money is going to come from once they have to hang up their signature blue mining uniforms. Community member, Floors Strauss, puts it bluntly: *"We also know that diamonds are not forever."*

Many are pointing to tourism to come up with the answers. But however much tourism can benefit some people, a great deal is often expected from what is a notoriously fickle business. Too often it has been the case that the lion's share of tourism revenue remains safely out of reach of the local people whom it was intended to benefit. It is a familiar story being played out around the world. Hopes are high nonetheless. DEA&T has recently stepped in and allocated poverty alleviation funding to build tourism infrastructure in the conservancy. And the Richtersvelders are a savvy bunch - they know they cannot just sit back and wait for the tourists and their deep pockets to roll on in. All the infrastructure in the world won't mean anything unless the tourism product is appealing, efficient and effectively marketed.

In the face of the challenges and the potential changes that tourism may bring, the conservancy's management remains confident that neither the environment nor the people will be compromised. Faith in the potential of the region is such that funding was recently earmarked to nominate a transfrontier natural and cultural World Heritage Site in the border region of Namibia and South Africa with the Richtersveld Community Conservancy as a vital component. To this end, a feasibility study to investigate potential boundaries was recently completed. By doing so, DEA&T and UNESCO have not only recognized the outstanding natural heritage of the conservancy but have similarly honoured the significant cultural heritage of the Richtersvelders.

Testament to the success of the conservancy so far is the decision by the Northern Cape Provincial government to transfer neighbouring Nababiep (Helskloof) Provincial Reserve to the conservancy. The conservancy has since earmarked the area to be kept free of human settlement and livestock, and plans are also underway for the re-introduction of wildlife such as gemsbok and springbok into Nababiep.

The area's unique biodiversity and culture have also been recognised in the proposed Greater !Gariiep Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCA) initiative. Although still in its development stages, the emerging Greater !Gariiep TFCA incorporates not only the !Ai-!Ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park which was signed into existence in 2003, but outlines a broader vision involving a far wider array of areas to link various conservation-minded entities in the border region, including commercial farms, private game reserves, a Ramsar wetland site, municipal and provincial reserves, national heritage sites and, crucially, communities conservancies, such as the Richtersveld and the //Gamaseb Conservancy in Namibia. This approach underscores the widely embraced belief that conservation efforts – including and especially those crossing political boundaries – must extend beyond government gazetted protected areas to include the full spectrum of land types.

This transfrontier perspective is as old as the petroglyphs along the banks of the !Gariiep. To the cartographer, the river may seem to divide the land, and to the politician this is certainly so. But to the locals, the !Gariiep is a cultural epicentre around which people have always congregated. The river is not only a lifeblood in the desert, but a place which the Nama of both South Africa and Namibia revere as a thread tying them together, despite its political role as a boundary designed to separate people and nations. As the local Community Based Natural Resource Management Coordinator, Henrico Strauss, tells us, *"The river that once divided us, now brings us together."*

One major obstacle remains. While in some parts of Africa, such as Namibia, there are provisions for the existence of communal conservancies, South Africa has no legislation to authenticate in law such a communally-owned conservation area. The Richtersveld

Community Conservancy thus exists through an understanding between the Richtersveld Municipality – who has continually supported the process in its Integrated Development Planning process – and the Community Property Association that represents the land owners, namely every single adult member of the Richtersveld community.

Despite the difficulties, the idea is quickly catching on. Inquisitive ears are pricking up in other communal areas where the prospect of creating something similar is gaining appeal, such as the Vioolsdrif community near to the Richtersveld where eager steps are being taken to create their own conservancy.

All of this is happening in one remote corner of South Africa. While the Richtersveld Community Conservancy is not big five country, it is a one-of-a-kind wilderness with a whole lot of character. What it has achieved in its first three years is admirable and it is rightly touted as a model for other emerging community conservancies in South Africa. The Richtersveld Community Conservancy is standing at the front of the line in showing how the alignment between biodiversity conservation and local economic development can be achieved. Nowadays, as you drive into Eksteenfontein, you may be just as likely to see a local stockfarmer herding his goats as a local mapper, GPS in hand, heading off on a bicycle into the mountains. But perhaps old Oom Dirkie Uys sums it up best:

“Our greatest feat is what we have achieved in the overcoming of exile, struggle and oppression to succeed and thrive here. And we achieved all this long before Apartheid was abandoned in South Africa and set an example to oppressed communities throughout the world.”

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The Richtersvelders

The people of the Richtersveld represent a unique blend of cultures from diverse origins. The memory of the San ancestors of the Nama is preserved in petroglyphs etched out of dolomite rock along the washes near the Orange River. The Nama themselves have been herding livestock in the region for almost 3,000 years. They were joined in the 1940’s by the ‘*Bosluis Basters*’ who, after being forced out off their farms elsewhere in the Northern Cape, arrived after enduring their own Great Trek to carve out a piece of land for themselves. For all, the pastoral livelihood is strong and efforts are also being made to preserve the language and unique *matjieshuis* architecture of the Nama. One recent initiative saw the oldtimers of the Richtersveld journey to Warmbad, Namibia to revive, together with their Namibian cousins, the tradition of building the *matjieshuis*, a clever and remarkably strong abode of reed mats which keeps one cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

The Richest Desert on Earth

The wealth of the desert is not about diamonds. In fact, the Succulent Karoo – of which the Richtersveld is a centre of endemism – is one of only 25 biodiversity hotspots on earth and the only one to exist in an arid environment. The true wealth of the Richtersveld’s flora is often buried underground, as the seeds of many species lay dormant in vast underground seed banks awaiting the opportune moment to come to life. This flowering pageant occurs around the month of September when the otherwise stark plains and valleys transform into one of the world’s most spectacular floral displays. The finer aspects of floral life can be found from the

crevices of remote inselbergs to the white quartz fields which – if one looks close enough – harbour an array of tiny succulents.

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