

Press release by the **Gondwana Desert Collection**

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Subject: **Wild Horses of the Namib** (near Aus in the south of Namibia)

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Main text

1

The Wild Horses of the Namib Desert - Life at Subsistence Level

Every couple of years, when the area on the fringe of the Namib Desert in southern Namibia is hit by a drought, they cause headlines far beyond the country's borders: the Wild Horses of the Namib. The horses and possible measures for their care were discussed at an expert meeting in November 2005. And on the side the secret of their origin was revealed...

by Manfred Goldbeck

Relentlessly the sun is beating down on the desolate land. Rocks, rubble, sand. Here and there a shrivelled shrub or a tuft of yellow grass. The heat fills the sweeping valleys with liquid air. Shadows are swimming on the shimmering plain and slowly start to take shape: a stallion and two mares. Step by step they struggle along. It is a long way from their grazing area to the horse-trough. As grass becomes sparser, the distance increases with each day that passes without rain. The last rains must have occurred long ago: the horses' ribs are sticking out sharply.



03 - Wild Horses at Garub. In the background the mountains of the Great Escarpment.

The Wild Horses in the area around Garub, 20 km west of Aus, have a tough life. Rainfalls are rare and unreliable - often just enough for succulents, prickly shrubs and grasses. Still, the horses usually find sufficient grazing. But years of drought occur regularly in the fringe area of the Namib Desert. Like in 1991/92, or in 1998/99, when the horses were starving and weaker animals perished. The public outcry in Namibia and far beyond the borders resulted in costly efforts to catch or feed the horses. In both cases success was only moderate.



04 – Wild Horse at the watering trough at Garub.
Photo: Telané Greyling

At the same time an old debate was rekindled: should the horses be tolerated there? After all, a large part of their habitat is situated in the state-owned Namib Naukluft Park, which is supposed to protect the indigenous flora and fauna - and not these 'aliens' which are descended from domesticated horses, have only been in the area for 90 years and would not be able to survive without the watering trough set up at Garub by man (see box 'origin'). Besides, some conservationists feared that the Wild Horses would drive out indigenous plants and animals and therefore wanted to remove them from the park. Due to massive pressure from the public, the media and horse-lovers in the Ministry such plans were dropped, however. Since then the horses have become a tourist attraction and as such generate earnings and jobs for local people.

Disruptive element in a fragile environment?

The justified concerns, however, were still not eliminated, the problems were far from being solved. The surroundings of Aus are regarded as a ‘biological hotspot’ – with more than 500 plant species, some of them endemic (which means that they do not occur anywhere else). What if the horses were a disruptive element in their environment and contributed to unique plants becoming extinct? What does the presence of the Wild Horses mean for the management plan of the nature reserve? Can the horses be treated like game and can they simply be abandoned in years of drought? Or should there be any intervention? If so, what form should it take?



05 – The watering trough at Garub with the shelter for visitors.
Photo: Telané Greyling

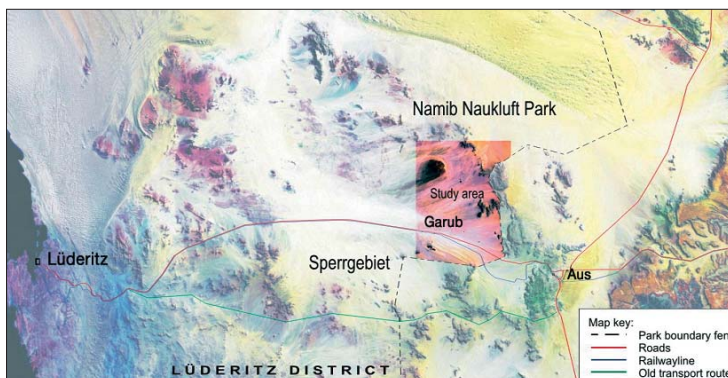
Supported by the Ministry for the Environment and Tourism, as well as lodge and tour business Klein-Aus Vista and the Nature Investments company (t/a Gondwana Desert Collection), biologist Telané Greyling has dealt with these and other questions in her thesis. She presented the results of her research to a work meeting which was held at Cañon Village in November 2005 to discuss future steps concerning the Wild Horses. Among the participants were representatives of the Ministry, nature conservation, the veterinary services, tourism and scientists from Namibia, South Africa and Britain.

On the basis of her extensive research the experts first debated the key issue of whether the horses should be seen as aliens in the Namib Desert’s fragile ecosystem. Greyling, however, has not been able to substantiate the claim that the horses displace the indigenous flora or fauna. She stated that by and large the same species and same numbers of individuals which are found in nearby areas of comparison occur also in the area where the horses live.

Sound Management instead of Contingency Aid

In a second step the meeting looked at recommendations, especially tailored to the horses, for a possible management plan to be drawn up by the Ministry. Of course the horses can not be regarded as ordinary game like Gemsbok or Springbok. On the one hand they are no longer domesticated animals but part of the ‘wide’ open and as such subject to nature’s rules. Therefore the death of weak animals in times of drought is the natural cycle taking its course. On the other hand, man can not simply deny all responsibility. Fences block access to natural watering places and better grazing on farms bordering the area to the east (a death-trap for Gemsbok as well, by the way). And in times of drought the number of animals might drop so severely that the gene pool is affected negatively and their survival endangered by inbreeding. Saying yes to the horses also means yes to preservation.

Before considering possible steps, the desired goals have to be clear. The meeting agreed on the following: to ensure a stable population of Wild Horses, to keep the costs for their care as low as possible, to utilise the attraction more efficiently for tourism, to gather more information on the animals and to improve the knowledge of the public.

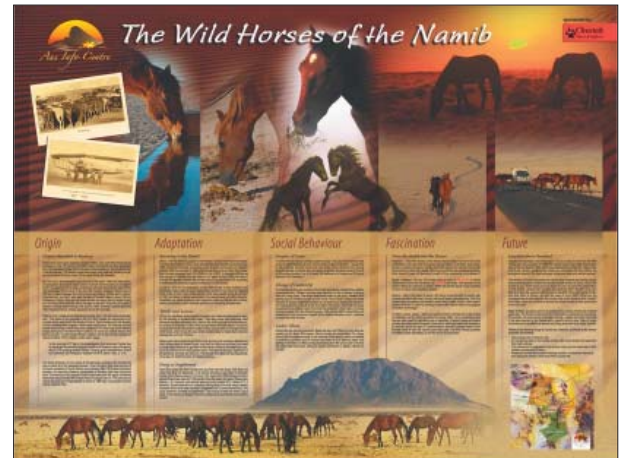


06 – Map of the area of the Wild Horses in the southern Namib.
Source: Telané Greyling

A prerequisite for controlling the horse population is to monitor rainfall, grazing, the numbers and the condition of the animals on a regular basis. It was agreed that the reference value for a stable population is 130, with short-term fluctuations between 80 and 180. Such fluctuations occurred in the past as well. During the seventies and eighties the number of horses was estimated at 250, but when fences were put up in the late eighties the number dropped considerably. 104 horses were

caught in June 1992. There were 110 horses in 1993, in 1997 the number had risen to 149, in 1999 it dropped to just 89, and at present it is back to about 150 animals.

The expert team also recommends to set up a watering place in a neighbouring grazing area in times of drought to shorten the horses' trip to the water, even though they have adapted to the arid conditions and can go without water longer than domestic horses and without stress. During summer (November to March) they come to the drinking trough in 30-hour intervals, in winter (May to September) in 72-hour intervals. But the longer the way from grazing to water the more energy they spend. In cases where the condition of the horses deteriorates it is envisaged to make lucerne available as additional fodder. It was emphasised that it is important to spread fodder over a wide area in order to prevent stressful competition and fighting.



07 – This display on the Wild Horses can be seen at the Aus Tourist Information Centre.

Proposals were also put forward with regard to catching horses as a way of keeping the population stable. Young animals (2 to 4 years) and equal numbers of mares and stallions should be chosen from the herd to avoid long-term disruptions in their social structure. Such disruptions were caused when more than 100 horses, regardless of age or gender, were caught in 1992.

The people who live in the area and indirectly benefit from the horses as a tourist attraction also rated highly in the expert discussions. Visitors can watch the horses from the shelter at the drinking trough near Garub, and from the middle of 2006 lots of background information will be available at Aus Information Centre, just 20 km away. A booklet about the horses is in the pipeline and will also be sold there. The Information Centre serves as a source of income for the community of Aus and could at some stage in the more distant future be combined with a horse research centre. With both centres the envisaged fourth goal of improving public information about the Wild Horses of the Namib could be realised.

A similar article on this topic was published in the Gondwana News 2006 (included in your press kit). For text and pictures in print quality see the enclosed CD or 'Info Downloads / Press Releases' at www.gondwana-desert-collection.com.

Captions

- 01 - Manfred Goldbeck, Managing Director of the Gondwana Desert Collection
- 02 – South African biologist Telané Greyling has intensely studied the Wild Horses and their environment for years.
- 03 - Wild Horses at Garub. In the background the mountains of the Great Escarpment. Photo: Telané Greyling
- 04 – Wild Horse at the watering trough at Garub. Photo: Telané Greyling
- 05 – The watering trough at Garub with the shelter for visitors. Photo: Telané Greyling
- 06 – Map of the area of the Wild Horses in the southern Namib. Source: Telané Greyling
- 07 – This display on the Wild Horses can be seen at the Aus Tourist Information Centre. Source: Gondwana Desert Collection
- 08 - Logo Aus Info Centre
- 09 - Logo Gondwana Desert Collection

Information:

Gondwana Desert Collection
 Marketing Manager Miriam Spatz
 Tel +264 (0)61 230066
 Fax +264 (0)61 251863
 Email info@gondwana-desert-collection.com
 Web www.gondwana-desert-collection.com



Press contact:
 Bush Telegraph CC
 Editor Sven-Eric Kanzler
 Tel +264 (0)61 224822
 Fax +264 (0)61 255148
 Email kanzler@mweb.com.na
 Web www.bush-telegraph-namibia.com