

Going Beyond Sustainable Management Of Wildlife

by Colin Nott

Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC) has been dedicated to the management of natural resources on communal land in Namibia for over 20 years. The program focus has been to ensure the future of wildlife in communal areas by creating a sense of community ownership in wildlife populations and meaningful benefits from that ownership. For example, a strategy of involving local leadership stopped the illegal poaching of elephant, rhino, and other game.

As a result, wildlife numbers continue to grow in the communal areas and more and more conservancies are being formed throughout the country. Conservation is once again becoming a norm in the communal areas with photographic tourism and consumptive use opportunities expanding and rural economies benefiting.

However, the intention has always been to move beyond the management of wildlife to the management of other resources such as rangeland because people's livestock, as well as wildlife, depend on this resource. Many years of reflection and planning have resulted in the sourcing of funds to undertake the IRDNC rangeland program called the Holistic Range Management project started in November 2003. Three Kunene conservancies are the focus of these activities, and we currently have five local staff and four vehicles to support the efforts.

The project goal is to: "To contribute to an improved quality of life for members of the three target conservancies by improving rangeland productivity and biodiversity and thereby improving livelihood security using local cultural and conservancy bodies as holistic decision-making structures."

In this first phase we expected to introduce the concept of improved range management, impart an understanding of this to farmers and support agencies, and begin implementation. Rainfall is about 10 inches (250mm) and erratic, fencing of large areas (eg. grazing paddocks or grazing areas or conservancies) is illegal, and people have the constitutional right to move from one place to another, thus complicating resource management.

We first discussed the problem of deteriorating rangeland with the leadership of the region—the traditional authorities, Regional Council, and Ministry of Agriculture and received support for the program. We then selected trial areas using criteria such as social cohesion, strong and proactive leadership, enough livestock, and sufficient water delivery. Lastly, we conducted field extension visits in these areas with youth, women, leaders,

stock owners, government officials, etc and discussed environmental change.

Everyone agreed that degradation was occurring at a large scale and that most perennial grasses have been lost. Once it was understood how grasses grow and the importance of a recovery period, a whole new world opened for farmers. The farmers agreed that the root cause of the degradation was the fact that various owners' livestock moved at will from a single water point. Moreover, degradation had only seriously started occurring since farmers ceased their old practice of moving and herding. People were motivated



The close relationship between farmers and stock allowed herds of over a 1,000 head of cattle in Erora to be herded with relative ease.

away from their current behavior as they realized it would result in the end of their culture. Now, they could see a new future with better grassland and healthier cattle. We then obtained commitment from grazing unit groups to attempt to reverse the degradation.

So we facilitated visits to successful Holistic Management farmers in South Africa and later Zimbabwe (The Africa Centre for Holistic Management) with a cross section of residents, leaders and government officials. This resulted in powerful learning experiences. After each visit we discussed the principles of sound management and what needed to be in place. On returning home, these principles were discussed at the local level and a way forward mapped out.

Each conservancy (wildlife management unit) was divided up into grazing areas. These smaller areas have been mapped, and the farmers of several areas have developed a land plan and grazing plan for each area. Herders have been appointed, and planned grazing has started in five areas. Six additional boreholes have been drilled and are being installed giving added flexibility and increased access to new grazing areas. Herd size varies from 250 animals in some grazing areas to over 1,000 animals in others. A precondition for becoming a part of this program is for all livestock

owners to combine their herds into one herd that is herded daily—allowing for planned grazing.

Holistic Management has not been introduced as something new to the farmers. To a large extent, it is adapting the old way of farming with cattle, before people became settled and stopped herding. The combination of the traditional and the scientific in a socially acceptable way has been the key to progress so far resulting in traditional leaders engaging with the program and taking credit for successes.

We are trialling planned grazing through three mechanisms: 1) A water tanker and trailer driving water to grazing areas without water; 2) Herding from existing homesteads or from new boreholes where homesteads have been established close together, facilitating easier combining of animals; 3) The use of daily grazing camps using game capture nets as fencing, which are moved daily.

In the first two seasons we have had positive anecdotal results with farmers indicating that:

1) Grasses have started growing in places where they previously did not and annual plant density has increased considerably. Moribund grass has also been removed or trampled and ground cover has improved.

2) Livestock losses due to predators, theft, and calf mortalities are virtually zero now that herders accompany stock.

3) Crop damage is reduced because livestock do not enter fields once elephants have broken the perimeter fences.

4) Animal performance is as good, if not better, than adjacent un-herded animals.

In these remote areas we have encountered some challenges that we must continue to address including keeping herders motivated, managing internal community conflicts that impact on combining herds, and addressing unwanted fire that has effectively stopped activities in two grazing areas.

The project has been well received by government, regional council and farmers, and we have obtained good cooperation and support from stakeholders and support organizations because they see this planned grazing approach as socially and culturally compatible with past practices. While we are pleased with the results achieved, we will be embarking on a more rigorous research monitoring component to evaluate the progress of this project. ♻️

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