

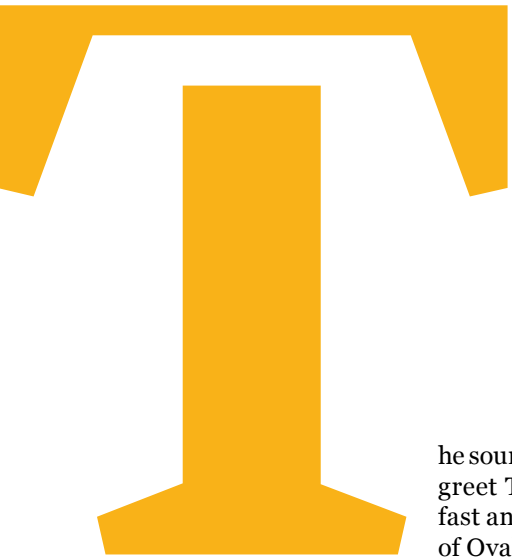
SHARING SPACE

Communities lead the way to a new era of landscape-scale conservation

STORY BY Di Tipping-Woods



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CreativeLAB



he sounds of squabbling baboons and squawking guinea fowl greet Tjavarekua Tjjahura as she rises to prepare breakfast and break camp. She is wearing the traditional clothes of Ovaherero women—petticoats, a voluminous dress with vibrant patterns, and a hornlike headscarf that pays homage to part of her identity: The Ovaherero people are historically cattle breeders, and raising livestock is a common way of life.

While the campsite is far from Tjjahura's village, she says she feels an affinity for this vast landscape. Like many Namibians, she grew up surrounded by wild places and wild animals.

"Although we have cattle, we have always lived as conservationists," Tjjahura says.

Nature, it's clear, is home.

This is not the first time that Tjjahura has traveled through this landscape, which local communities are working to include in the land they have set aside for wildlife as part of a larger vision for conservation and community development. A few years ago, a trip here inspired her and a handful of others to organize themselves into an action group, Women for Conservation, to participate in this historic venture. Now she's returning to discuss this bold vision with them at the Ehi-Rovipuka Conservancy office.

The big idea? Establish support for a wildlife corridor between the Skeleton Coast, where the Namib Desert meets the Atlantic, and the vast Etosha National Park some 100 miles inland (see "Building a Land Bridge" on page 32). The vision is to provide for the free movement of wildlife, shore up the viability of a cherished way of life, and create new opportunities for communities—women included—to benefit financially from the land they have chosen to protect. "The landscape already exists," says Tjjahura. "The corridor from Etosha to the coast has always been there."



Like many Namibians, Tjavarekua Tjjahura takes an active role in advocating for inclusive conservation initiatives around her home.



COMMON GROUND

An elephant traverses the Aba Huab River floodplain. In northwest Namibia, especially during a drought, water and foliage are scarce and must be shared by both people and wildlife.





MEET IN THE MIDDLE
Gustaf Tjiundukamba (left), chair of the Omatendeka Conservancy, walks with Siegfried Muzuma, chair of the Ehi-Rovipuka Conservancy, as they recall how the vision for a new kind of community-led conservation landscape in Namibia came to be.

The Ovaherero experience of human-wildlife coexistence is far from unique in Namibia. When the country gained independence from South Africa in 1990, protection of the environment was enshrined in the constitution—and included the sustainable use of Namibia’s natural resources for the benefit of all Namibians. In 1996 the Nature Conservation Amendment Act put the rights to, and responsibilities for, conserving wildlife in the hands of the communities living with it. The groundbreaking law emphasized local control and encouraged communities to organize themselves as conservancies to manage and benefit from wildlife on their communal lands.

In the decades that followed, the conservancy model flourished and conservancies multiplied. Today there are 86 conservancies covering nearly 65,000 square miles, or 20% of Namibia—the highest percentage of community management in a single nation worldwide. The country’s wildlife populations, from critically endangered black rhinos to desert-adapted lions, have contributed to a tourism economy that employs thousands and generates more than 14% of Namibia’s GDP. WWF has supported the conservancy program for more than 25 years.

But challenges remain, and as the impacts of climate change and other pressures mount, new approaches are needed. Once again, Namibians are at the forefront of change.



At the confluence of two dry riverbeds, two conservancy leaders meet to talk about community collaboration. Siegfried Muzuma is the chair of the Ehi-Rovipuka Conservancy, whose communal lands form the western border of Etosha National Park. Gustav Tjiundukamba is chair of the Omatendeka Conservancy, whose lands are one step closer to the Skeleton Coast.

“We formed our conservancies at the same time,” says Tjiundukamba, “and we have the same goals.” He is nodding as he speaks, and Muzuma jumps in to add, “Joint management means stronger conservation outcomes.”

“These communities have taken the important next step of comanaging their core wildlife areas and becoming partners in the effort to include these areas in the expansive conservation landscape that links the Skeleton Coast to Etosha,” says Juliane Zeidler, country director for WWF-Namibia.

The region hosts much of the country’s desert-adapted elephant population and the only increasing giraffe population outside a protected area in Africa, not to mention a growing black rhino population.

Recognizing the opportunity to team up for greater landscape connectivity, the men met with members of their respective communities, heard voices of support and dissent, and joined with the majority in advocating for consolidation of their core wildlife areas to form the proposed Ombonde People’s Park.

Today, 86 conservancies cover nearly 65,000 square miles, or

20% of Namibia

Working alongside the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism, and with the support of WWF and a host of other organizations, the conservancies hope to secure the legal status of Ombonde and, in doing so, establish their right to control access to defined wildlife areas. At present, unguided cross-country tourists drive through for free. Establishing tourism zones to which the conservancies have sole management rights, says Muzuma, would bring in much-needed jobs and development and “change the living standard of the people on the ground.” In addition, under the future park’s management plan, community members would continue to be able to use the area for emergency livestock grazing in the event of drought—a constant threat in this arid landscape.

Chief Kenamurire Kasaona, a traditional leader, conservancy member, and liaison for Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC)—an NGO that has played a leading role in establishing and supporting conservancies—says he is proud of how Namibia is righting historical wrongs. In giving conservancies responsibility for managing wildlife, Namibia began to restore pre-colonial practices.

Under colonization, he says, game animals were officially owned by the state. Conservation efforts ignored local knowledge and excluded rural people from decision-making. This deprived the people who



ARID AND ABUNDANT
 A lioness pads through a recently refreshed riverbed in the Puros Conservancy. Giraffes stand tall near a tourist lodge in the Palmwag Concession. An elephant grazes on the greenery sustained by the seasonal Aba Huab River.



lived with wild animals and competed with them for water and grazing lands of the benefits of tourism, hunting, and resource use. Allowing conservancies to control access to their core wildlife zones would further empower communities and expand the conservancy model's gains.

"The vision for this conservation area has been to ensure animals can move freely and that people can benefit from this for generations to come," says John Kasaona, executive director of IRDNC (and a relative of the chief). His father was one of the first game guards recruited when the conservancy program was in its infancy—a poacher turned protector. "My dad, and the men he worked with, would be so happy to see

what's happened in Namibia," he says. "They went through many hurdles for the conservancy model to get where it is now. I'm sure they are smiling, wherever they are."



In an area known as Little Serengeti for its sprawling grasslands, craggy buttes, and deep, windswept canyons, oryx and springboks dot the wild landscape and giraffes use their long purple tongues to pluck at camel thorn leaves. "Wild animals can be hard to live with," says Chief Kasaona. "Still, people want them here. They want measures in place to prevent [human-wildlife] conflict. But they don't want the animals to be taken away."

Lions pose a particular challenge. Following the advent of Namibia's conservancy system, the lion population

increased nearly fourfold (after nosediving for much of the 20th century). Although their population numbers fluctuate, the big cats' range has expanded. A recent prolonged drought has thrust wildlife and livestock into ever-closer proximity, and close quarters can spark conflict: Lions, hyenas, and other predators have been responsible for thousands of livestock attacks. Retaliatory killings are the number one cause of mortality for juvenile and adult lions in northwest Namibia.

In a village near the proposed Ombonde park, Himba herder Tjimbali Kamendu lives a simple life in a mud-daubed hut not far from the folds and whorls of one of the ephemeral rivers that offer vegetated pathways through the landscape. Kamendu spends his days

watching over his goats in the veld or taking them to the water to drink. Goats are core to people's livelihoods here; Kamendu says he knows immediately if one is missing.

This is where the Lion Rangers, conservancy-employed game guards, come in. Working with researchers and the government, rangers proactively manage conflict by fitting lions with collars that communicate with receptors in villages. This early-warning system alerts villagers when lions are nearby and allows them to track how close the lions are and in which direction they're moving; in addition, solar-powered lights and sirens keep lions away from livestock kraals.

"The farmers are feeling very good about this system in terms of preventing livestock losses by knowing when there is a collared lion around," says ranger Jendery Tsaneb. He says farmers have become critical partners who help them do their job by sharing information. "If they see a lion which is not collared, they tell us," he says.

LIONESS AND GIRAFFES © MARCUS WESTBERG/WWF-US



RHINO HEROES

In her role as a rhino ranger, Eryln Touros of the Uibasen Twyfelfontein Conservancy scans the landscape for rhinos.



Perhaps the best example of Namibians’ willingness to protect their wildlife? The black rhino. Today, Africa’s largest free-roaming population moves throughout northwestern Namibia’s Kunene Region, where the rhinos are found not only in traditional protected areas like Etosha National Park (the rhinos’ heartland) but also on community lands, under the watch of conservancies. “It’s the only place in the world where you get free-roaming black rhinos living amongst communities,” says Simson Uri-Khob, CEO of Save the Rhino Trust.

The trust is one of the oldest black rhino conservation groups and the only one with an agreement with the government to monitor the population and conduct research on black rhinos in the remote Kunene Region. The group pioneered the strategy of putting the well-being of black rhinos in the hands of communities that live with them, and it’s paid off. In the area where the trust operates, black rhino numbers have increased threefold over three decades. The rhino’s range has also expanded, and people will pay to see them. “Now that [people] get benefits directly from the rhinos, they are proud to have them here and to protect them,” says Uri-Khob.

For some, protecting rhinos has become central to both life and livelihood. The men and women employed as rangers in the region are masters at tracking the animals in their arid, hardscrabble home. It’s boot-stripping, tire-tearing terrain, but rangers move across the landscape with apparent ease, fluent in the language of the rhino—an overturned rock here, some rhino- or oryx-browsed euphorbia there.

Sebulon Hoëb began working for Save the Rhino Trust 33 years ago, and his son, Hofney Gaseb, has followed his lead. “I could track a rhino before I could read,” says Gaseb, recalling his days as a young child in the field with his father and brother. While on patrol for up to 21 days at a time, rangers photograph each rhino they see, feeding a database that informs management decisions. Committed rangers are recognized at annual award ceremonies, can earn performance-related cash bonuses, and vie for the coveted title of “Rhino Hero,” which comes with a bomber jacket for colder months.

In fact, there’s a whole culture developing around black rhino conservation through initiatives like an annual rhino pride march, a rhino conservation-branded soccer league, and early literacy projects that elevate the animals in the eyes of rural Namibians.

“We feel like the rhinos are our children,” says Hoëb, proud of how his work has supported his family and community and cemented deep ties to the wild land he loves. Equally important? Rhinos draw tourists; their presence creates jobs and generates income. Hoëb’s other son, Rodney, is a rhino guide.

“If you don’t have communities on your side in conservation, there is no hope for you,” says Save the Rhino Trust’s Uri-Khob. “We know the people we employ, and the traditional authorities know them. The communities know them. It’s kids growing up in the communities who keep these rhinos alive.”

Just two years ago, he says, a poaching syndicate from up north came into one of the patrolled areas.

“Before they came in, the communities already knew about them,” says Uri-Khob. “The poachers were arrested before they could do any harm.”



Hofney Gaseb, a Save the Rhino Trust ranger, watches a black rhino in the distance. Community engagement and pride are at the core of efforts to protect Namibia’s rhinos.



"As Namibians, we have done things that no one in this world has done before. We have secured wildlife species that went extinct in other countries. They live outside protected areas and are free roaming in their natural habitats. It's a victory for us to see conservancies putting more land aside for conservation. These are all ordinary people, cattle herders who have walked the talk of community-based natural resource management and want to take the next step!"

**—John Kasaona, Executive Director
Integrated Rural Development
and Nature Conservation**



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Deep within Torra Conservancy territory, a black rhino peers from amid sheltering scrub.



Poaching is just one of the challenges conservancies face. In the past few years, the COVID-19 pandemic showed that relying on tourism alone to fund conservancies leaves them vulnerable to disruptive events that impact global travel. At the same time, the prolonged drought has increased conflict over grazing lands and water and wiped out large numbers of livestock and wildlife, including rhino calves.

Satisfaction with conservancies varies from area to area, depending on the level of local engagement, how much revenue is generated, and how it's shared. Conservancies with more wildlife or the most spectacular scenery may find it easier to make money from tourism, for example. Even with this new vision for the Skeleton Coast-to-Etoshia land bridge, and the gains the Ombonde People's Park could provide, not everyone benefits equally, and some feel they don't benefit at all. Yet more than three decades of community-based natural resource management have proven the value of working through such challenges together.

"Now we have a whole landscape of conservancies with the same ambition coming together in this area," says Maxi Louis, director of the Namibian Association of Community-Based Natural Resource Management Support Organizations. "And when conservancies come together institutionally," she adds, "you are addressing many issues at scale"—including wildlife management, human-wildlife conflict, governance, poaching, and gender equity.




At the Ehi-Rovipuka Conservancy office, Tjavarekua Tjijahura and 16 Women for Conservation members gather to discuss the proposed park.

It has been four years since she was first inspired by the landscape and its tourism potential, and it's clear that she relishes her role not only as chair of the group but also as an advocate for her culture and women's inclusion.

"The [vision for this initiative] provoked me to stand up and tell the women that we can play a bigger role. Although women have been left behind, once they take something up, they take it up with both hands," she says.

"We are the caregivers who make sure the children are fed and go to school," adds conservancy member Linda Kavetu. "Why shouldn't we contribute more to conservation and tourism? It will create jobs for our children."

Another member, Tuaeandanavi Ruhamba, nods in agreement as she cradles a child in her lap. The baby was born when the discussion around creating this large, linked landscape was at its height. Taking the chubby six-month-old into her arms, Tjijahura smiles and gives him a little jiggle.

"This little one is called Uekerondavi," she says. "His name means 'landscape.'" 



Members of the Women for Conservation action group assemble to discuss their priorities, which include making sure women's voices are represented as conservation decisions are made.

WWF is grateful for generous support from the Bezos Earth Fund, USAID, and many others whose commitment to community-centered conservation in Namibia is helping to ensure a sustainable future for its people and protect the country's wildlife and natural resources for generations to come.



MOVEMENT MATTERS
Herders tend to their goats on Anabeb Conservancy land. Freedom to follow grazing opportunities is vital for both rural communities and wildlife.

MOVING FORWARD

Namibia is a pioneer of nationally recognized, legally secured, community-led conservation. To ensure that those successes can expand in scale and impact, WWF and our partners are pursuing two initiatives united by a shared vision for a sustainable future.

Building a Land Bridge

Pastoral communities and wildlife—including desert elephants, black rhinos, lions, giraffes, Hartmann’s mountain zebras, oryx, springboks, kudus, and ostriches—have always roamed across the vast landscapes of Namibia’s arid northwest, searching for life-sustaining springs and pastures.

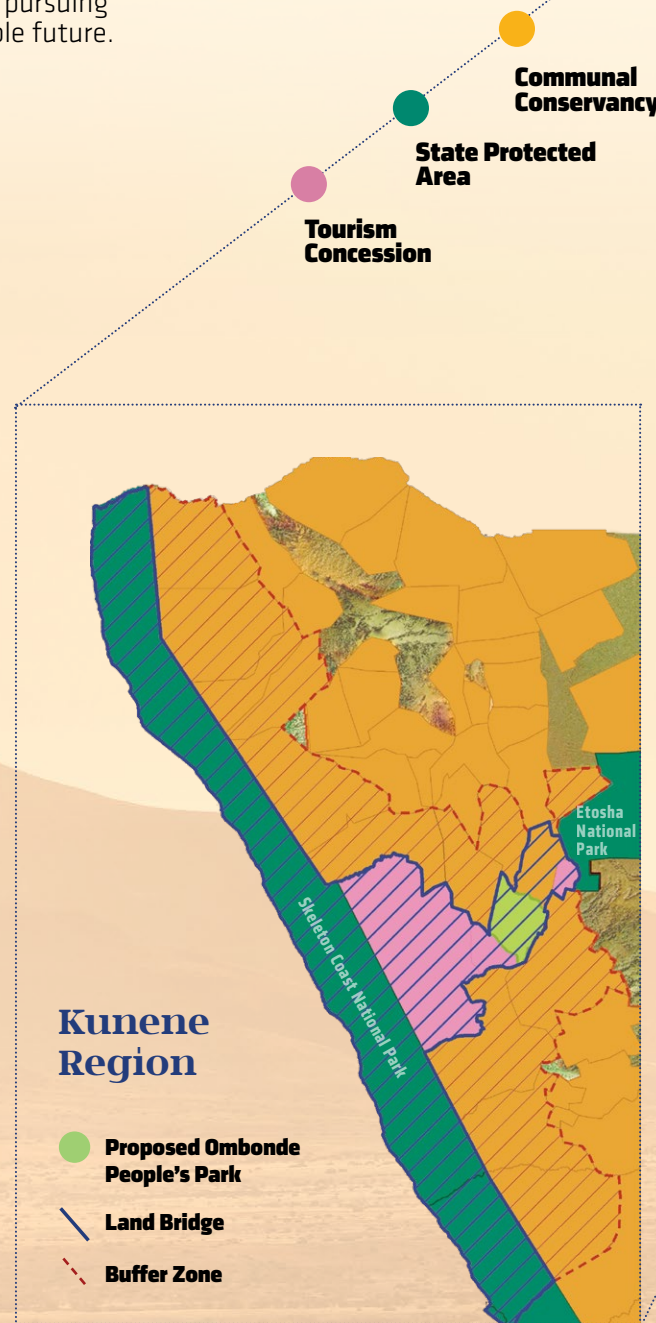
But the legacy of colonial and apartheid land-use policies has made it harder for animals and people to follow historic seasonal routes. And this loss of connected, safe movement corridors has had devastating consequences. Combined with the extended droughts climate change has wrought and the increasing development in wildlife-rich areas, people and animals are in ever-closer contact. And conflict between people and wildlife is on the rise.

Forging better connections between Namibia’s large intact habitats—whether they’ve been secured via traditional protected areas or other forms of area-based land management—remains an urgent need. Only extensive, thoughtfully located conservation will help manage this conflict while allowing people and animals to revive their cyclical land-use patterns, which can be especially important during droughts.

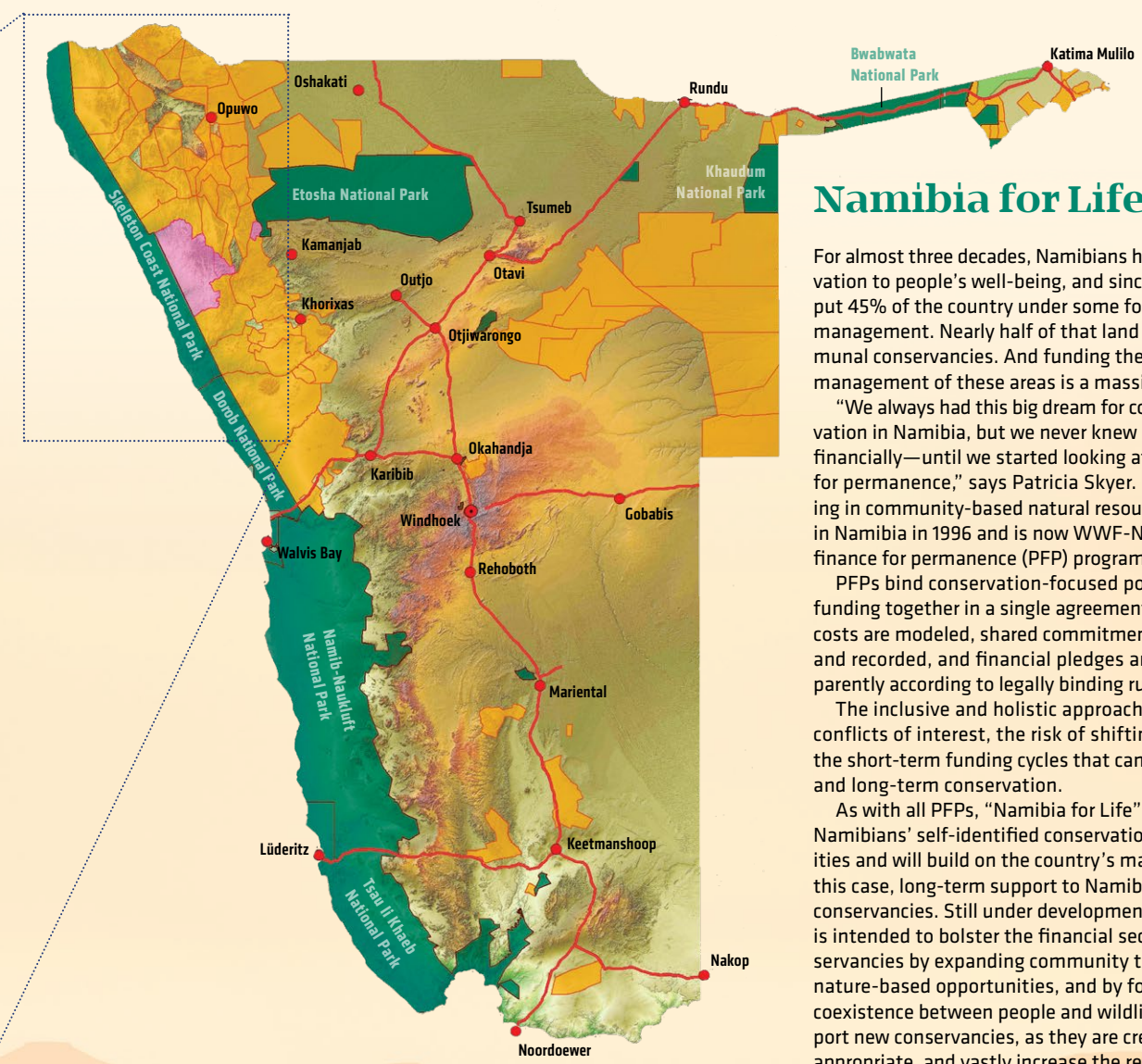
Visionary initiatives to connect Namibia’s Skeleton Coast and Etosha National Parks, including core wildlife areas like the proposed Ombonde People’s Park, will increase conservation-related benefits for people and wildlife, and expand the impact of Namibia’s equitable model of conservation.

Driven by the aspirations of the Namibians who have cared for the land for generations, these initiatives will help conservancies pursue their own socioeconomic goals while coordinating shared responses to climate change, invasive species, and poaching.

The vision, writ large, looks like this: Build on existing connections within the landscape, promote responsible resource use, and protect some of the most important corridors for wildlife—including the areas connecting key pockets of intact habitat for lions, rhinos, and elephants, as well as the spectacularly long migration routes of mountain zebras and oryx. Together, these landscape-scale protections will both offer people economic opportunities and help protect the wildlife that makes Namibia’s northwest such an iconic place.



- Tourism Concession
- State Protected Area
- Communal Conservancy



Namibia for Life

For almost three decades, Namibians have bound conservation to people’s well-being, and since the 1990s have put 45% of the country under some form of conservation management. Nearly half of that land falls under communal conservancies. And funding the protection and management of these areas is a massive challenge.

“We always had this big dream for community conservation in Namibia, but we never knew how to sustain it financially—until we started looking at project finance for permanence,” says Patricia Skyer. She began working in community-based natural resource management in Namibia in 1996 and is now WWF-Namibia’s project finance for permanence (PFP) program director.

PFPs bind conservation-focused policy changes and funding together in a single agreement. To do this, future costs are modeled, shared commitments are negotiated and recorded, and financial pledges are managed transparently according to legally binding rules.

The inclusive and holistic approach helps minimize conflicts of interest, the risk of shifting agendas, and the short-term funding cycles that can derail large-scale and long-term conservation.

As with all PFPs, “Namibia for Life” is based in Namibians’ self-identified conservation needs and priorities and will build on the country’s many successes—in this case, long-term support to Namibia’s 86 communal conservancies. Still under development, Namibia for Life is intended to bolster the financial security of the conservancies by expanding community tourism and other nature-based opportunities, and by fostering peaceful coexistence between people and wildlife. It will also support new conservancies, as they are created and where appropriate, and vastly increase the resources available to support this people-forward, locally driven approach.

“Wildlife in Namibia is thriving not only because others say animals are important but because the people of Namibia value them,” Skyer says. “It’s important to me that the world understand what rural communities with wildlife are willing to sacrifice, not just to benefit themselves, but for all of us.”