

Protecting Damara Terns in Namibia

Location	Walvis-Swakopmund IBA, Namibia
Rio Tinto company	Rössing Uranium Limited (RUL)
Partner organisations	Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET)
Key people	Rod Braby (MET, now NACOMA); Frances Anderson (RUL)
Habitats	Coastal dunes
Birds	Damara Tern
Outcomes	Protection of tern breeding sites, community education

This project has seen the Namibian government, corporates and tourism operators finding common ground to conserve the endemic Damara Tern, now a symbol of conservation on the Namibian coast. Rössing Uranium Ltd. has supported the project as it was a prominent biodiversity issue within some of the key communities that are associated with the business. A 30 percent decline in hatching losses of this rare tern in 2002 speaks for the success of the project.



The diminutive Damara Tern

Project background and history

Walvis-Swakopmund IBA, known as the 30-kilometre beach, is a narrow strip of coastal dune and beach habitat renowned not only for its density and variety of migratory and resident shorebirds but also for the populous colony of Damara Terns *Sterna balaenarum*. The Damara Tern, an endemic breeding species, enjoys its highest breeding densities along this sensitive stretch of coast. Namibian coastal waters hold unparalleled food resources as a result of an intense oceanic upwelling that brings nutrients to the surface, which are then swept north by the Benguela current. Damara Terns, classified by BirdLife International as globally Near Threatened, breed mainly at Caution Reef, where they can breed at densities of up to 15 nesting pairs per km². Other associated breeding sites occur inland on enclosed gravel plains within the higher dunes.

The dune breeding sites occur within the most popular stretch of Namibian coastline for tourism. Tern nests were commonly destroyed by off road vehicles (ATVs) driving with no restraint over the dunes and clearly what was needed was a practical fencing system that delineated sensitive areas, together with an information campaign educating tourism operators and tourists.

Project details

The Swakopmund office of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism initiated and implemented a fencing programme in October 2000 to protect the Caution Reef colony. The work, extending to 30 kilometres of fencing, continued until 2004 and, until recently, prevented uncontrolled access to most core breeding areas adjacent to the coast and within the dunes. The project is complicated by having a national road passing through the middle of the colony. Tour companies and some free-riding off road vehicle enthusiasts are having some of their routes closed off by cable fencing. This neat, self-contained project was a remarkable success with zero human-induced failures in fully enclosed areas and a 30 percent decline in hatching losses in 2002.

Hatching success within the population increased from 56 to 80 percent, ATV activity dropped from 870 passes per month to almost zero, and nesting density increased from 12 to an optimal 15 nests per km² per month. While the local community's response was initially hostile, it has since transformed into widespread support. Better relationships have been developed with adventure tourism operators who are integral to the addressing the issue of this human-biodiversity conflict. In its lifetime, the project has attracted additional sponsorship from several other corporates and Damara Tern has become a coastal conservation icon. Indeed, two major property development attempts along the coast were diverted elsewhere as a result of this initiative, and a recent Strategic Environmental Assessment completed for the Kunene and Erongo coastal regions has made this area one of the highest conservation priorities, together with the Walvis Bay Lagoon IBA/Ramsar site.

The future

With the protective infrastructure now largely established, the project needs to concentrate on maintenance and monitoring, as well as on maintaining environmental awareness among local stakeholders. Since 2004, maintenance of the cable fencing has been inadequate, and it is clear that the protective cable barrier and information signs need annual maintenance. Further concerted effort is needed if continued breeding success of the Damara Terns is to be realised.

The pressures of coastal tourism development continue to build and, while this brings significant benefits to the area, the associated biodiversity needs to be safeguarded, managed and monitored. Recent residential development on sites important for Damara Terns has seen the remaining colonies having to accommodate additional displaced birds. Therefore, the protection of these existing areas becomes even more important.

Being at the centre of coastal tourism development in Namibia and an area of global biodiversity importance, continued support for protecting the endemic, Near Threatened Damara Tern has strategic relevance. Rössing Uranium previously supported the project as it was clearly a prominent biodiversity issue associated with some of its key communities situated along the coast. A three-year programme of maintenance, education and interpretation, management and monitoring activity is currently proposed, which could see the partnership extended to NACOMA (the Namibian Coastal Management Project).



Caution Reef, the main breeding site for Damara Tern