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Volunteer Project Briefing

EHRA is a Namibian registered non-profit organization that strives towards assisting the Ministry of Environment and Tourism and other NGO's in promoting a mutually beneficial relationship between the humans and the desert adapted elephants of the northwestern regions of the Namib Desert.

Welcome

Thank you for your interest in working with EHRA. This briefing is designed to answer some of the questions you might have with regards to EHRA, the work we do, and the contribution you can make to help us reach our objectives. Please also ensure you have read through the volunteer section of the web site.

As a result of EHRA's strive to run our conservation initiative independent of outside funding and donations; we launched a volunteer work project in May 2003.

This project also gives us the opportunity to expose dedicated enthusiasts to the work we do in the field and offer a unique chance to make a personal difference and a real contribution to conservation and biosphere development in Namibia.

Working from mobile base camps in the vicinity of the Brandberg in the ephemeral Ugab River, the volunteer teams immerse themselves in pioneer conservation work. This project is not for those interested in bottle-feeding cuddly baby elephants.

This is about real; spearhead conservation work in a harsh desert environment where small bands of secretive, desert adapted elephants roam vast wilderness areas. Where subsistence farmers eke out an existence and need all the help they can get in their confrontation with the elephants competing for precious water resources.

So come, join us in the desert, the place where your mind has to expand to fill the spaces.

The EHRA Team

Conservation Project

Our project takes you to the northwestern regions of the Namib Desert, traditionally known as 'Damaraland'.

This harsh tribal wilderness area, runs parallel to the skeleton coast national park, and is home to a small population of desert-adapted elephants.

The first week of the project will see you working with the local subsistence farmers, building protective walls around their water points, or constructing new water points for elephants away from homesteads and farms.

The following week is spent assisting the staff of EHRA in following, and monitoring the movements of these elephants on patrol, camping wild and living close to the earth, elephants and people.

In brief, project aims and objectives

This project is part of a long-term initiative to find solutions to the ever-growing problem of facilitating the peaceful co-habitation between the subsistence farmers, and the desert adapted elephants, through:

- **research**
- **education**
- **development**

The project's emphasis is on the building of protective structures around communal water points, creation of additional water points for elephants, assisting with, and teaching the farmers skills to financially benefit through tourism in the area, researching elephant movements, distribution and compiling identikits on herds and individuals.

Why is EHRA there?

The EHRA project was launched in December 2001 as a result of the escalation in competition for natural resources between the desert dwelling elephants and human inhabitants of the northern Erongo and Kunene regions.

Through concerted efforts by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), IRDNC, Save the Rhino Trust and other NGO's over the past 20 years, the population of desert dwelling elephants in the region has grown from as low as 52 members to a current population of over 600 elephants.

As a result, elephants have expanded their range to the south and east into territories they have not occupied for many years. Subsistence farmers husbanding mainly cattle, goats and sheep, traditionally occupy these areas. As a result competition for water and grazing has escalated tremendously causing conflict between farmers and elephants.

Depletion of the natural water table with increasing human use has led too less available surface water for consumption. Therefore, man-made water points located close to the riverbeds have become the target for elephants in their quest for fresh water.

In their search for the source of such points elephants cause extensive damage to windmills, dams, reservoirs, hand-pumps and wells. As the farmers homesteads are normally located close

to the water source, secondary damage is also caused and the lives of humans and livestock are threatened.

With the escalation of tourism as an increasing potential earner of revenue for these communities, the value of elephants and other wildlife in communal areas has increased dramatically.

EHRA believes that through assisting these communities by constructing protective structures around water points, educating community members about elephant behavior, creating alternative drinking points for the elephants and promoting tourism in the affected areas, we can assist in alleviating the current pressure facing communal farmers. Thereby helping to promote the future of the desert dwelling elephant in harmony with the continuous positive development of the conservancies and their ideals.

Surrounding area, and other inhabitants

Damaraland is vast, scarcely populated communal trust land. As it is a transitional zone between the high rainfall area in the east, and the Skeleton coast in the west, it is regarded as un-farmable on a commercial basis. Therefore it has become a natural, unfenced refuge for desert adapted animals such as;

black rhino, oryx, giraffe, springbuck, kudu, steenbok, baboon, lion, leopard, cheetah, spotted hyena, brown hyena, black backed jackal and more.

These areas used to be inhabited by nomadic bushman hunter-gatherers, of whom there is lots of evidence in the form of thousands of rock paintings and engravings. Now, beyond the fringe of permanent settlements, only nomadic pastoral farmers, and tourists venture.

This area is still regarded as one of the last true wilderness areas left on earth!

Induction and training

Besides a willing mind, and a strong back, you do not need any special training to work on this project. During your time spent with us, we would teach you the following:

- Camp craft including cooking over a fire, bush camp setup, safety and hygiene.
- Bush craft, such as approaching dangerous animals on foot, animal behavior, bush walking, navigation, map reading, GPS etc.
- Compiling identification kits on elephants.
- Traditional building skills.

A day with EHRA

During the first week we cheat the heat and wake up early, for our first cup of coffee around the campfire. After the team member on duty served breakfast, we head out to our project site for the day.

It is likely you will be busy building a wall around a local farmers windmill, although we also work on other projects such as, doing work on our base camp, helping community members build a tourist camp or fix a rural school.

We head to our camp for lunch and siesta. You could be tasked to update data forms, be on kitchen and camp duty for the day. The evenings are spent around the campfire, eating and talking about the day's events. We live closely in our desert camp.

The second week is spent out on elephant patrol. We pack some basic camping equipment in the 4x4, and set off looking for the illusive elephants. On patrol we camp wild, and sleep under the stars. We follow elephants on foot, sometimes for hours under the desert sun, and sit patiently observing from some rocky outcrop whilst they laze away in the shade!

This life, few ever have the privilege to live.

What we need you to be

This project is real spearhead conservation work. It is not about cuddling baby animals, or being an observer of conservation from the comfort of a game drive vehicle.

You need to have an open mind, a willing heart and be prepared to put in work for something bigger than yourself.

This is about true adventure with likeminded people that care. This is about teamwork and tolerance. We live close together, close to the ground, and close to the animals.

Your project managers are there to make your time in the bush educational and safe, but it is up to you to make a success of the expedition. We ensure that you have the means to be comfortable and well fed, and will teach you how to be that!

You need to have an average degree of fitness, as lot of the work is manual, and we could spend a lot of time in high temperatures on foot. A bit of training beforehand would make your time more comfortable.

But don't worry, anyone is capable, and we would be there for you every step of the way. The volunteer groups are always a mix of ages and everyone works together as a team doing as much as they are able

You need to be able to speak and understand English.

Living environment and support

Camp

We set up our mobile base camp at each project site, which we try and make as comfortable as possible! You will be accommodated in two man tents or you can choose to sleep under the stars. Washing facilities are limited but a 'bushman' shower may be made available if there is a water dam at the site. Toilet facilities will be in the form of long drops (enclosed and private).

Meals are prepared on a rotational basis, over the open fire, and eaten around the campfire together. We supply basic, but balanced food with adequate vegetarian options, examples would be Spaghetti Bolognese, Roast Chicken or Thai Curry. Whilst on patrol, we camp wild, and sleep under the stars on our bedrolls with mosquito nets. Toilets or showers are not available this week.

Vehicles

Members make their own way to the assembly point in Swakopmund (we give advise on this). From the first day of project till your return to Swakopmund, all transport is supplied.

Medical

Our project managers are first aid qualified, and have years of experience in handling problems in the field. Namibia has first world medical facilities available and first-rate emergency service.

It is compulsory for volunteers to have medical insurance cover for evacuation and repatriation. We also require you to complete our medical form. Please ask us for further information about this or to check your policy before you purchase it.

Please note that our area of operation is regarded as malaria free, but if you are traveling on afterwards, consult with your physician with regards to malaria protection.

What to bring, and how to get here

We supply all equipment needed whilst on site, and will forward you a detailed personal equipment list upon booking your expedition.

The project meeting point is the Namibian coastal town of Swakopmund and we will assist you with arrangements of how to get there including airport transfers. Before you book your flights please contact us for advice. Further information on planning your trip will be found in the document we send you once you have booked.

We strongly advise that you fly to Walvis Bay in Namibia; South African Airways have a direct connection from Johannesburg or Cape Town. Walvis Bay is just 20 minutes from Swakopmund. If you do decide to fly into the capital of Namibia, Windhoek, we can help you with booking transport and accommodation if required. If you do fly into Windhoek you must allow sufficient time to get to Swakopmund for the Monday morning start. It is therefore advisable that you arrive in Windhoek at the latest on the Sunday before 12 pm so you can catch one of the shuttle services through to Swakopmund. Please indicate your requirements on the information form.

EHRA stays at Villa Wiese in Swakopmund and we would recommend you also stay here. The cost is N\$110 per night, which includes breakfast. If you book independently be sure to let them know you are an EHRA volunteer and they will put you in the same dormitory. Contact details are: 00 264 64 407105 or e-mail: villawiese@compuscan.co.za

How it works, and what you pay for

All projects run for a minimum slot of two weeks and you can join for multiples of that, up to three months (six slots). We meet the night before departure to discuss the upcoming project, and meet our team members. The next morning is spent in town re-supplying, and tending to administrative matters.

We depart midday on the Monday from Swakopmund for the base camp, +- three hours drive north.

We spend two weeks at a time in the field, after which we head back to Swakopmund on the last Friday of the project. For those who have booked longer trips with EHRA, there is the opportunity to stay in camp rather than heading through to Swakopmund.

Projects run continuously throughout the whole year with the exception of (December and January) departing every two weeks, so you can slot in when it suits you. Please refer to our departure dates. Your payment covers all your food, transportation and accommodation during the project (not including weekend in Swakopmund). Your funds also contribute towards the project cost such as building materials, fuel, vehicle cost and administrative costs such as staff salaries.

The volunteer project provides the funding for the operation of EHRA.

Group size is kept at a maximum of 14 team members to minimize impact and maximize safety, and is made up of people from all walks of life and nationalities with a similar passion and interest.

Is this me?

This project is for those that care enough to get up, and do it. Those willing to make a personal sacrifice for a belief in the ability of anyone that cares enough to make a difference. That hunger not only for adventure and wisdom, but the satisfaction of giving some back of what we have taken for so many generations.

This is not a package holiday, or a feel good charity case. This is real conservation. You will learn to be one with nature, awaken long-lost memories, do hard satisfying work, and walk away with a longing to be back under the desert stars. So, if you realize that man and beast is one, and without the preservation of the wild places in the world, we would lose the wild places in our hearts, this is for you.....

A visitor at EHRA base camp

A few weeks after the first volunteer group finished the first part of our old base camp under the giant acacias on the banks of the Ugab River, the camp had a visitor.

Fleeing the blazing white desert light, an old elephant bull plunged into the dappled pools of shade. He picked his way past the bohma, sniffing the newly constructed fireplace. Then he softly made his way to the tree we used as our kitchen area and stood there resting from his long desert road. His trunk probing the corners where we used to sit and talk over a steaming plate of food. Warm gusts of air, creating puffs of dust on the ground, then a deep inhale to taste the traces of scent we left behind.

It looks like he stood there for a long time thinking, before he gathered his saggy old trousers and ambled off looking for water. What could he have thought, standing alone under that tree? I wonder if he knows what we do.

I don't know, but what I do know is that he did not touch one hut we built, or pushed over any of the newly constructed pole walls barring his way. He gingerly picked his way around all of the obstacles we put in his way, and only left us a steamy heap of dung as his as his sign of approval!

See you in the desert.

The EHRA Team