



THINKING SUSTAINABILITY PRIZE

Author's Perspective

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Orange River-Karoo Conservation Area (ORKCA) – What Does It Mean to Rewild and Sustain a Desert Landscape?

Original Version

As an ecologist working in southern Namibia, it is a question I often find myself reflecting on as I travel across the vast landscape and on the wide open roads. The answer is quite straightforward in landscapes where ecological processes are intact but becomes far more complex in a landscape such as the Orange River-Karoo Conservation Area, where ecology, history and culture have been intertwined for centuries.

I have come to realise that what appears to be an empty desert landscape is in fact a landscape full of stories. Stories carried in places names, old movement routes, abandoned windmills and the memories of people who continue to call this place home.

The Orange River-Karoo Conservation Area (ORKCA) covers a vast arid landscape along the lower reaches of the !Garib River, known more widely today as the Orange River. It is a place shaped by geological forces over hundreds of millions of years, but also by people. For generations, the region formed part of seasonal movement corridors used by Nama pastoralists, trading routes connecting communities across present-day Namibia and South Africa, and later pathways used by Nama survivors of the first genocide of the twentieth century. The landscape also carries evidence of more recent history, including the Battle of Sandfontein during the First World War and the rise and decline of the karakul sheep industry, evidenced by abandoned old farm houses and dysfunctional windmills.

Many of these historical activities have left their mark on the landscape with fencing, fragmented habitats and livestock production that altered grazing dynamics. Wildlife populations have dramatically declined and some completely disappeared. Ecological processes that once operated across these large connected areas became increasingly constrained, but despite these changes, the Orange River-Karoo remains remarkably resilient.

There are historical accounts that describe enormous migrations of springbok, known as trekkbokken, moving through this region in their millions. Predators such as lions and leopards followed these migrations, while elephants moved along river systems. These movements were part of ecological processes that maintained healthy rangelands, distributed nutrients and connected ecosystems across large areas.

Rewilding in the Orange River-Karoo area is therefore not simply about bringing back wildlife but it is about restoring ecological functionality, reconnecting fragmented habitats, removing barriers to movement, rehabilitating water infrastructure, restoring degraded rangelands and creating conditions where wildlife populations and people can recover together. This is where the sustainability lies.

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Sustainability in this landscape cannot be separated from people. The Nama communities who continue to live in the region maintain deep cultural, linguistic and historical connections to the land. Their knowledge of water, grazing, plants and seasonal conditions reflects generations of adaptation to one of the most challenging environments in southern Africa. Conservation success and sustainability depends not only on ecological restoration, but on ensuring that local communities remain active partners in shaping the future of the landscape.

This understanding sits at the heart of ORKCA's approach. Our work combines restoration and rewilding with environmental education, community partnerships and cultural heritage preservation. Through collaborations with local communities, schools and conservancies, we aim to create opportunities for people to engage directly with conservation while strengthening local stewardship of natural resources.

The Nama-!Garib Geopark initiative led by ORKCA reflects this integrated approach. The geopark brings together geological heritage, biodiversity conservation, cultural history and education within a single landscape framework that can not be separated. It recognises that sustainability requires more than protecting species or restoring habitats. It requires understanding how ecological systems, cultural identity and economic opportunity interact across time and space.

Working in the Orange River-Karoo area has challenged many conventional assumptions about sustainability. In an arid landscape, sustainability is not about preserving a static condition. Variability is natural where droughts come and go, wildlife populations fluctuate and communities adapt. The challenge is not to prevent change, but to ensure that ecological and social systems retain the capacity to recover and adapt. Rewilding therefore becomes an investment in resilience. It seeks to restore the ecological processes and cultural relationships that allow both people and nature to thrive despite uncertainty.

The Orange River-Karoo Conservation Area therefore provides an important example of how restoration can contribute to climate resilience in arid environments to restore the ecological functionality and social stewardship required for the landscape to remain productive and resilient into the future.

