

# The Richtersveld Community Conservancy

## An oasis in the richest desert on earth

by **Rowena Smuts**, Programme Manager: Southern Africa Wilderness Programme, Conservation International, Kirstenbosch and **Mark Thornton**, Consultant for Eco-Africa

Nestled below the majestic Rooiberg Mountain - named for its russet glow at sunset - stands the recently refurbished Rooiberg guesthouse: an oasis amongst the quartzite outcrops scattered with myriad succulent treasures and set amidst the stark beauty of the rugged Stinkfonteinberg in the Richtersveld. Rooiberg guesthouse forms part of the success story of the recently established Richtersveld Community Conservancy. The first of its kind in South Africa, its creation has doubled the area of Richtersveld land under conservation. It is equal in size to the neighbouring Richtersveld National Park (approximately 160 000 ha) that forms part of the larger Ais-ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park.

Located in one of only two arid biodiversity hotspots in the world, as recognized by Conservation International, and with this hotspot status based entirely on floral richness, endemism and degree of threat, the area is renowned for its botanical diversity. Almost all of the world's population of the endemic *Aloe pillansii* exists inside the Conservancy. It is a threatened species and one of few species believed to be decreasing as a direct result of climate change (see 'Is the flagship of the Richtersveld sinking?' by John Duncan and Timm Hoffman in *Veld & Flora* December 2005). The Conservancy is additionally considered to be a central part of the !Gariiep Centre of Endemism: an area recognized as having the richest variety of succulent plants (primarily the Mesembryanthemaceae family) on earth.

The idea of conserving the Richtersveld for future generations developed after members of the Eksteenfontein Youth Forum visited a petroglyph site along the Orange River in 1997. They were appalled to discover that some of them



ABOVE: The Nama have been raising goats and sheep in the area's rugged desert mountains for close to two thousand years. Photo: Claudio Velásquez Rojas. BELOW: Map by Eco-Africa.



had been removed and others damaged. The sense of loss associated with this vandalism led the community to realize that they needed to be proactive in conserving the remaining natural attributes of the Richtersveld – a part of South Africa dramatically scarred by diamond mining. As a result, the area encompassed by the Conservancy stands firm and protected as the largest unmined wilderness in the Richtersveld.

As the first of its kind in South Africa, the Conservancy has required detailed and committed planning. The Richtersveld is a diverse part of the country with people who have been formerly dispossessed of their land and, as a result, thorough participation of a wide group of stakeholders was necessary. Financial support was also crucial and conservation and development organizations such as the German government funded Transform Program, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Conservation International, the Global Environmental Facility and South Africa's Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, recognized early on the biological value of the property and provided assistance. While technical support has largely

been provided by Eco-Africa to develop the Conservancy's management structures, land-use plans and economic development initiatives, the success of the Conservancy is mainly due to the persistence and vision of the local community members.

The remoteness of the Richtersveld may make it an unlikely place to be described as a melting pot, but as one travels through the Richtersveld's small villages, there appear a diverse and

colourful people. The oldest residents, of course, are the Nama people for which the Richtersveld is well known. As descendants of the Khoi people, the Nama have been raising goats and sheep in the area's rugged desert mountains for close to two thousand years. In a land where water is scarce, the cool waters of the Orange River understandably became a cultural focal point and to this day the Nama regard this river, known to them as the !Gariiep, as an



LEFT: The giant quiver tree *Aloe pillansii* (Aloe family). Almost all of the world's population of this endemic aloe occur inside the Richtersveld Community Conservancy. Photo: Claudio Velásquez Rojas.

TOP: The Conservancy's Rooiberg guesthouse, 15 km from Eksteenfontein, is the perfect launch pad for any expedition into the Richtersveld especially for those in search of Namaqualand's famous flowers. Photo: Rowena Smuts.

ABOVE: The traditional matjieshuis at Kuboes guesthouse. Photo: Claudio Velásquez Rojas.

important cultural place as well as a crucial watering point for thirsty livestock. This semi-nomadic landscape was further enriched with the arrival of the 'Bosluis Basters', who were sent into the arid reaches of the Richtersveld after being forced from Bushmanland farms in the 1930s.

To the visitor to the Richtersveld, the semi-nomadic lifestyles of the Nama are still evident and provide insight into a way of life that has been lost in many other parts of the country. Venture deep into the Ploegberg or Cornellsberg ranges and one may even come across a traditional 'matjieshuis', the deceptively clever abodes which the Nama move from season to season with their herds in search of water and good grazing. That the Nama have been raising and moving livestock this way for as long as they have in an area earmarked by conservation authorities as one of the most botanically diverse in the region is testament to the sustainability of their traditional management of the land.

Above all, a primary goal of the Conservancy's management committee is to retain the sense of wildness which gives the Conservancy its distinct char-

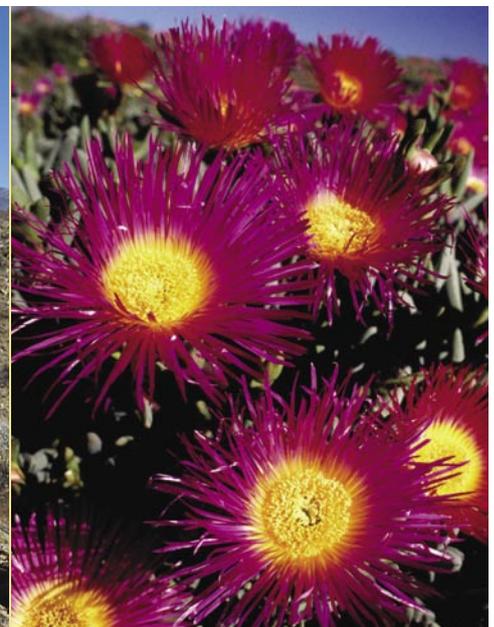
acter. Members of the management committee travelled recently throughout Namibia and South Africa visiting private reserves, national parks and game farms, and realized that what makes the Richtersveld unique is that it feels remote – one of those few remaining places where one can camp out at night and feel the sense of escape so hard to find elsewhere. This wilderness experience, they believe is what tourists will come for - and they may just be right, as for several years the Richtersveld has been a secret place for 4x4 enthusiasts, hikers and campers 'in the know'. Tourism is also helping to provide much needed income for road upkeep, patrols and management.

For those keen on seeing the wonders of the Richtersveld, the Conservancy's Rooiberg guesthouse, situated 15 km from Eksteenfontein, is the perfect launch pad for any expedition into the Conservancy, in particular for those in search of Namaqualand's famous flowers. Every September this arid expanse turns into a kaleidoscope of colour. From Rooiberg, one needs not venture far to experience the flower season, as from the mountain tops to the vast

rocky desert floors, the multitude of succulent plants are in bloom.

Guided walks provide an opportunity to learn more about the local flora, medicinal plants, wildlife and historical culture of the area (including rock engravings and the San graves). Other activities available in the Conservancy are camping and donkey cart rides. A highlight of any visit to the guesthouses is the traditional meals on offer: enjoy the true hospitality of the local people when they prepare traditional meals and bake fresh, homemade bread in their open clay fire ovens. Or just enjoy a true Richtersveld-style braai yourself out under stars as bright as the flowers and in a beautiful solitude that can only be experienced in the Richtersveld. Directions, accommodation rates and maps are all available on the website: <http://www.richtersveldguesthouses.co.za>. 

For more information on the Richtersveld Community Conservancy visit the Conservancy website ([www.richtersveld.net](http://www.richtersveld.net)) or contact Joani Cloete in Eksteenfontein at [joani@richtersveld.net](mailto:joani@richtersveld.net) or Rowena Smuts at Conservation International: [rsmuts@conservation.org](mailto:rsmuts@conservation.org).



ABOVE: *Cephalophyllum spongiosum*. The Conservancy is considered to be a central part of the !Gariiep Centre of Endemism: an area recognized as having the richest variety of succulent plants (primarily the Mesembryanthemaceae family) on earth. Photo: Claudio Velásquez Rojas.

LEFT: The success of the Conservancy is mainly due to the persistence and vision of local community members like Kleinboy and Gert Links pictured here. Photo: Rowena Smuts.

