



# Taking charge

Text by Mark Thornton  
Photographs by Claudio Velásquez Rojas

Tucked into South Africa's far north-west corner, where the Orange River makes its final turn towards the Atlantic Ocean, lies the uncompromising mountain desert of the Richtersveld. It may look forbidding (and, with summer temperatures that soar above 50 degrees Celsius, it certainly is), but this radical geography has spawned astonishing riches – an abundance of both endemic plants and diamonds – and a unique way of life. Tough and independent, the 'Richtersvelders' have a long tradition of doing things differently, so it isn't really surprising that it is they who have successfully created the country's first community conservancy. ▶



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For many years, while extensive parts of the Richtersveld were being disembowelled to satiate humanity's enormous appetite for diamonds, the communal lands were used for the raising of sheep and goats. These lands were relatively well maintained and their rich biodiversity eventually caught the attention of scientists and conservationists. Local people also realised the value of this biological and economic asset and in the late 1990s they began mobilising to protect the area for science, tourism and sustainable livestock grazing.

Equal in size to the South African portion of the neighbouring !Ai-!ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier National Park, the 16 000-hectare Richtersveld Community Conservancy encompasses many of the microhabitats that find a home among the stones and which are sustained by the fog rolling off the sea. The motivation was to protect the remaining pristine parts of the Richtersveld, land that is conspicuously devoid of the mine dumps and devoured earth that can be seen in the rest of the region.

It has been a long road. Creating a communally-owned conservation area that is held in trust for the future benefit of all Richtersvelders is no small task and one that has required great vision and commitment. Fortunately, the initiative was supported from early on by organisations such as the German government-funded Transform Programme, Conservation International and the Global Environment Facility, as well as South Africa's Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT).

It took several years of discussion, disagreement and compromise for the Richtersvelders to hone their vision for the land. The process was open to everyone and this widespread participation is now considered a cornerstone of the conservancy's management. In 2003, an interim management committee was formed (it later became a permanent structure) and the following year a management plan was finalised, which now serves as the conservancy's constitution. What was previously a 'coloured' reserve in a neglected, faraway region has become a model community conservation area and its members receive requests from all over the world to speak on how the balance between conserving biodiversity and boosting local livelihoods can be achieved.



The conservancy has been mapped by a community global information system (GIS) team and tourism, stock farming and sensitive wilderness zones have been demarcated. All new developments have to go through a comprehensive environmental impact assessment. Camping is properly managed, local guides have been trained and privately-run tourism and guesthouse initiatives have sprung up in the conservancy as well as in surrounding towns, such as Kuboes, Lekkersing and Eksteenfontein. To facilitate research, education and local environmental programmes for the

youth, the Rooiberg Research Station is being upgraded and the old washhouse converted into an observatory.

A core value of the conservancy's vision is to ensure the area's integrity as a wilderness area with the idea of managing, but not over managing the land, so that it keeps the charm and sense of isolation that make it so appealing. The vision statement – 'to protect and manage the unique biodiversity and natural landscape to the advantage of the local people and all of humankind' – also makes clear the need for the sustainable development of local livelihoods. ▶





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## The richest desert on earth

The wealth of the desert is not about diamonds. In fact, the Succulent Karoo – of which the Richtersveld is a centre of endemism – is one of only 25 biodiversity hotspots on earth and the only one to exist in an arid environment. However, the true wealth of the Richtersveld's flora is often buried underground, as the seeds of many species lie dormant in vast subterranean seed banks waiting for an opportune moment to come to life. This flowering pageant occurs almost every September when the otherwise stark plains and valleys are transformed into one of the world's most spectacular floral displays. Flowers can be found everywhere, from rock crevices to the white quartz fields which, if one looks closely enough, harbour an array of tiny succulents.

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Joani Cloete, conservancy administrative officer and a member of the Richtersveld Sida !hub Community Property Association (CPA), puts it with typical Richtersveld forthrightness. 'We must take the driver's seat. We are the people who must make decisions and we are the people who will be accountable for those decisions. After all, it is the local people who can and must make the correct decisions about land use to improve our lives and to manage the resources for sustainable use by and to the benefit of future generations.'

In a country where wilderness areas are often fenced off, even tamed, the Richtersveld stands as a bastion of wildness. This is refreshingly evident when one looks up at the silhouette of a goat herder searching for lost sheep or jumps out of the way of a donkey cart barrelling down a mountain pass. Ultimately it is these scenes, personalities and peculiarities that draw visitors to the Richtersveld. To get a glimpse into the lives of the people, one only needs to take a short – and bone-jarring – drive to the winter livestock post of *Tannie* (Aunt) Sana and *Oom* (Uncle) Willem outside Eksteenfontein. Age and hardship have lined their faces, but *Oom* Willem chuckles like a boy as, cigarette dancing between his teeth, he drags a young dog to the kraal and the puppy begins nursing contently from one of the goats.

A great deal of work remains to be done. The Richtersveld Community Conservancy must now plan a way to improve the livelihoods of local people further without causing negative impacts on the land or the cultural ►



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fabric of people like *Oom Willem*. It is a challenge, and one that people are facing in wilderness areas throughout the world. In the Richtersveld it has been exacerbated by the recent downscaling of the mining industry, which has been the primary employer from the early days of copper to the present era of diamond mega-mines. However 'good' for the environment the downscaling may seem, many Richtersvelders are worried about where the money will come from when they have to hang up their signature blue uniforms.

Community member Floors Strauss puts it bluntly, 'We also know that diamonds are not forever.'

Many look to tourism for the answer, but while there is no doubt that it can be of benefit, a great deal is expected from what is a notoriously fickle business. All too often the lion's share of revenue has remained out of reach of the people whom it was intended to assist. Nonetheless, hopes are high. DEAT recently allocated poverty alleviation funding to develop tourism infrastructure in the conservancy and the

Richtersvelders are a savvy bunch – they know they cannot sit back and wait for the tourists to roll in. All the infrastructure in the world won't mean a thing unless the product is appealing, efficient and effectively marketed.

In the face of the challenges and the potential changes that tourism may bring, the conservancy's management remains confident that neither the environment nor the people will be compromised. Faith in the potential of the region is such that funding was recently earmarked to nominate a transfrontier natural and cultural World Heritage Site in the border region of Namibia and South Africa, with the Richtersveld Community Conservancy as a vital component. In so doing, DEAT and UNESCO have not only recognised the outstanding natural heritage of the conservancy, they have also honoured the significant cultural heritage of the Richtersvelders.

## The richtersvelders

The people of the Richtersveld represent a unique blend of cultures from diverse origins. The Nama are descended from the San (whose memory is preserved in petroglyphs etched out of dolomite rock along the Orange River) and have been herding livestock in the region for almost 3 000 years. They were joined in the 1940s by the 'Bosluis Basters' who, after being forced off their farms elsewhere in the Northern Cape, arrived to carve out a piece of land for themselves. The pastoral way of life is fundamental to the Nama and efforts are being made to preserve their language and unique *matjieshuis* architecture. A recent initiative saw the old-timers of the Richtersveld travelling to Warmbad in Namibia to revive, together with their Namibian cousins, the tradition of building the *matjieshuis* – a remarkably strong abode of reed mats, which keeps one cool in summer and warm in winter.

† estament to the success of the conservancy thus far is the decision by the Northern Cape provincial government to transfer the neighbouring Helskloof Provincial Reserve to the conservancy. The conservancy has since earmarked the area as one that should be kept free of human settlement and livestock, and plans are underway to re-introduce wildlife such as gemsbok. ▶

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The area's unique biodiversity and culture have also been recognised in the proposed Greater !Gariep Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCA) initiative. Although still in its development stages, the emerging Greater !Gariep TFCA not only incorporates the !Ai-!Ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park, which was signed into existence in 2003, it also has a broader vision of linking various conservation-minded entities in the border region, including commercial farms, private game reserves, a Ramsar wetland site, municipal and provincial reserves, national heritage sites and, crucially, community conservancies, such as this one and the //Gamaseb Conservancy in Namibia.

This approach underscores the widely held belief that conservation efforts – particularly those crossing political boundaries – must extend beyond government-gazetted protected areas to include the full spectrum of land types.

This transfrontier perspective is as old as the petroglyphs along the banks of the Orange River, or the !Gariep as the local Nama people call it. To the cartographer and the politician, the river may seem to divide the land and the people, but for the locals, the !Gariep is a cultural epicentre around which people have always congregated. It is not only a giver of life in the desert, it is also a place revered by Nama on both sides of the border. As the local community-based natural resource management coordinator, Henrico Strauss, tells us, 'The river that once divided us now brings us together.'

One major obstacle remains. While some African countries, such as Namibia, have made legal provision for the existence of communal conservancies, South Africa has no such legislation. The conservancy thus exists through an understanding between the Richtersveld Municipality, which has continually supported the process in its Integrated Development Planning process, and the CPA representing the land owners – namely every single adult member of the Richtersveld community.

While the conservancy is not Big Five country, it is a one-of-a-kind wilderness with a whole lot of character. What it has achieved in its first three years is admirable and it is rightly touted as a model for other emerging community conservancies in South Africa. Despite the difficulties, the idea is catching on quickly. Inquisitive ears are pricking up in other communal areas and the



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neighbouring Vioolsdrif community is taking eager steps to set up a conservancy of its own.

The Richtersveld Community Conservancy is standing at the front of the line in showing how biodiversity conservation and local economic development can be achieved. Nowadays, as you drive into Eksteenfontein, you are just as likely to see a stock farmer herding his goats as you are a map reader, GPS in hand, heading off into the mountains on a bicycle.

But perhaps old Oom Dirkie Uys sums it up best. 'Our greatest feat is what we

have achieved in overcoming exile, struggle and oppression to succeed and thrive here. We achieved all of this long before apartheid was abandoned in South Africa and so we set an example to oppressed communities throughout the world.'

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### AFRICA Geographic online

Penn Lloyd visited the Richtersveld back in 1997 ('Playground of giants', *Africa – Environment & Wildlife*, Vol.5, No.1) and provided insightful text for a series of stunning photographs in *Africa Geographic*, Vol.9, No.8.

[www.africageographic.com](http://www.africageographic.com)

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### creating a conservancy

The impetus for the conservancy grew out of a field trip in 1997 when the Eksteenfontein Youth Forum went to see the petroglyphs along the Orange River and found that some had been removed and others damaged. The sense of loss created a feeling in the community that something had to be done to protect the cultural and natural attributes of the Richtersveld. The 1998 Integrated Development Plan proposed that a large section of the Richtersveld be set aside for conservation and a reference group was elected to draw up a management plan. This process went through three proposals until the Richtersveld community accepted a management proposal in 2004 and a permanent management committee was elected. In 2005 the South African Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism allocated R6-million for the development of the conservancy and the Richtersveld Community Conservancy was included as part of a proposed World Heritage Site.