



Southern Africa

GEOGRAPHY

Namibia's Skeleton Coast

The Atlantic coast of Namibia is a largely unsettled region that is so dry and forbidding that is appropriately known as the Skeleton Coast. However, two Australian filmmakers spent eight years living there in order to film, photograph, and learn about this region of southwest Africa. The following reading reports some of their findings.

All we could see at first was a boiling cloud of dust, storming across the desert like some frightful dervish [demon] run amok. Then we realized that there was an elephant ahead of the dust cloud. The elephant was trying to charge us. . . .

Elephants in the desert? In northwest Namibia, an area known as the Kaokoveld, such apparitions [appearances] are not mirages. Neither are the giraffes that haunt the barren plains and black rhinoceroses that ascend steep, rocky slopes. Foraging for seasonal grasses, mountain zebras and antelope keep a wary eye out for lions, whose far-reaching tracks extend all the way to the seashore, where they hunt . . . seals and other marine mammals.

Here, too, much more diminutive [small] creatures, ingeniously [cleverly] adapted, live among, and even within, the seemingly sterile [lifeless] dunes. Some of the mounds . . . even roar when an avalanche of sand slowly cascades down their steep slopes.

In all, the Namib Desert stretches 1,300 miles along Africa's southwest coast. We have seen and marveled at the survival techniques of creatures great and small while filming the . . . northern Namib, which covers some 19,000 square miles. Imagine an area of sand and rock nearly as big as Lake Michigan. . . .

The Namib has existed for perhaps 55 million years; it is one of the world's oldest and driest deserts. Rainfall . . . averages a little more than half an inch a year. What sustains this ecosystem is a series of rivers—rivers that are nearly always dry. In the distant past they carved their way . . . from the interior highlands westward to the Skeleton Coast. Today, only if enough rain falls in the highlands do some rivers occasionally flow. This is by no means an annual event, and when it does happen, the rivers' largesse [gift] usually trickles into the sand well short of the coast.

But water remains trapped under the sand, turning the dry riverbeds into what scientists studying this country often call "linear oases." Following these life-giving channels, wildlife seeks out permanent springs—elephants can tap new sources by digging with their trunks—and feeds on the . . . vegetation sustained by subterranean [underground] water sources. . . .

Just offshore flows another natural source of abundance, a permanent force without which life on the Skeleton Coast would be impossible. The Benguela Current sweeps northward along the coast, bringing waters from Antarctica. Prevailing winds create a constant upswelling of cold bottom waters that sustain great pastures of marine life. The Benguela also brings a vital source of water to the desert: fog.

When warm air farther out to sea sweeps in across the cold Benguela, fog forms. This fog drifts onshore most of the year. In the dead of the desert night, on leaves, rocks, grass, even on the bodies of living things, that fog condenses. Thus, lives that might not be able to wait for thunder to roll over Etosha [a large salt basin in northern Namibia] and for dry riverbeds to heave with a lifetime flood—those . . . lives have another chance.

Nearly everything depends on fog and dew, from plants to massive animals. . . . Giraffes . . . frequent the lower Haonib, where fog condenses on the leaves of the acacia trees they feed on, helping fulfill their water needs.

When a searing hot spell strikes . . . the fog disappears. After the heat subsides, on the first evening of the fog's return, the desert is a busy place. On one such night we were camped in the dunes near the Haonib, a hundred yards from a colony of dune ants. . . . Ants of this species are normally . . . in their holes by night. But many from this colony were outside digging furiously. Later we found them still outside and all nearly motionless. Fog had condensed on the ants themselves, and they were drinking the droplets from one another's bodies—one of the desert's unique rites of survival.

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. How do the desert's dry riverbeds sustain wildlife? Why do elephants have an advantage in finding water?

2. Describe the Benguela current and its role in the Namib.

Activity

Imagine you have made a movie about life in the Namib. Create a movie poster that symbolizes the region's harsh environment.