

(With the proclamation of the Sperrgebiet National Park on 1st December 2008, the largest single proclamation in Africa in the past 25 years, Namibia would be the only continental country in the world that had its entire coastline protected as a national park. The NSP would be the 8th largest protected area in the world, the 6th largest terrestrial protected area, and the largest park in Africa, covering an area of 10.754 million hectares, or 107,540 km².)

Overview of the “Namib–Skeleton Coast National Park”

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Background

Namibia’s Cabinet has recently decided to:

- proclaim the Swakopmund-Walvis Bay area as a National Park
- upgrade the status of the old National West Coast Tourist Recreation Area to that of a National Park,
- proclaim the Sperrgebiet as a National Park (this proclamation went through on 1 December 2008), and to
- proclaim various offshore areas as Marine Protected Areas.

Government is considering joining all of these areas together to form one of the world’s largest protected areas – provisionally to be known as the Namib Skeleton Coast National Park (NSCNP).

The purpose of this consolidated proclamation is to:

- protect the world’s oldest desert in a single National Park, and then create north-south linkages between this park and adjoining parks in Angola and South Africa. Also, west-east linkages will be created between the park and inland neighbours, especially conservancies and private landowners who practice conservation-friendly land uses.
- enable cooperative management between the environment (MET) and fisheries (MFMR) ministries
- promote multiple-sector and private sector investment in one of Africa’s most spectacular and prestigious national parks, and to direct that investment towards the achievement of sustainable development. In the tourism sector in particular, projects that reflect and enhance the uniqueness of the Namib coast will be promoted.
- provide opportunities for Namibians to participate in the management of the park through smart partnerships and local empowerment.

The NSCNP will consist of the following 5 administrative areas:

- Skeleton Coast
- Central Area
- Namib Naukluft
- Sperrgebiet, and
- Marine Protected areas.

Each of these areas will be co-run by MET and MFMR according to an outcomes-based Management and Development Plan (MDP). The authorities will be advised by a multi-sector and broad-based Consultative Form, which will include people from civil society, the business sector, tourism representatives, local authorities, regional government representatives, other law enforcement agencies, etc.

Overview of the “Namib-Skeleton Coast National Park”

The Namib–Skeleton Coast National Park (hereafter NSCNP) stretches along the entire Namibian coastline, a distance of about 1,570 km, from the Orange River in the south to the Kunene River in the north (Figure 1). It comprises four main Management Areas, the “Sperrgebiet” (name under review) in the south, the Namib-Naukluft, the Central Area and the Skeleton Coast. At its narrowest point in the Skeleton Coast, the Park extends about 25 km inland, while at its widest in the Naukluft area it extends inland about 180 km to the top of the escarpment.

Namibia is the only continental country in the world that has its entire coastline protected as a national park. The NSCNP is the 8th largest protected area in the world, the 6th largest terrestrial protected area and the largest park in Africa (see Table 1), covering an area of 10.754 million hectares, or 107,540 km².

Table 1: The 10 largest protected areas in the world.

No.	Name	Ecosystem	Country	Size (ha)
1	Greenland’s National Park	Terrestrial and coastal; Arctic island	Greenland	97,200,000
2	Ar-Rub'al-Khali Wildlife Management Area	Terrestrial; Desert	Saudi Arabia	64,000,000
3	Great Barrier Reef Marine Park	Marine & coastal	Australia	34,500,000
4	Northwestern Hawaiian Islands' Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve	Marine & coastal	United States of America	34,000,000
5	Amazonia Forest Reserve	Terrestrial; Tropical rain forest	Colombia	32,000,000
6	Qiang Tang Nature Reserve	Terrestrial; Alpine Tibetan plateau grasslands	China	25,000,000
7	Cape Churchill Wildlife Management Area	Terrestrial; intertidal & marine	Canada	14,000,000
8	Namib-Skeleton Coast National Park	Terrestrial & coastal; Desert ecosystems	Namibia	10,754,000
9	Northern Wildlife Management Zone	Terrestrial; Desert	Saudi Arabia	10,000,000
10	Alto Orinoco-Casiquiare Biosphere Reserve	Terrestrial; tropical rain forest	Venezuela and Bolivia	8,000,000

However, the NSCNP does not exist in isolation. In the south across the Orange River it borders on the Richtersveld in South Africa, which comprises a protected area of about 160,000 ha within a multiple use buffer zone of about 398,425 ha. This whole area forms the Ai-Ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCA) under a formal cooperative Agreement between the Governments of Namibia and South Africa.

To the north across the Kunene River it joins the Iona National Park in Angola, which covers about 585,000 ha. The Governments of Namibia and Angola have signed an Agreement to promote transfrontier cooperation between these parks.

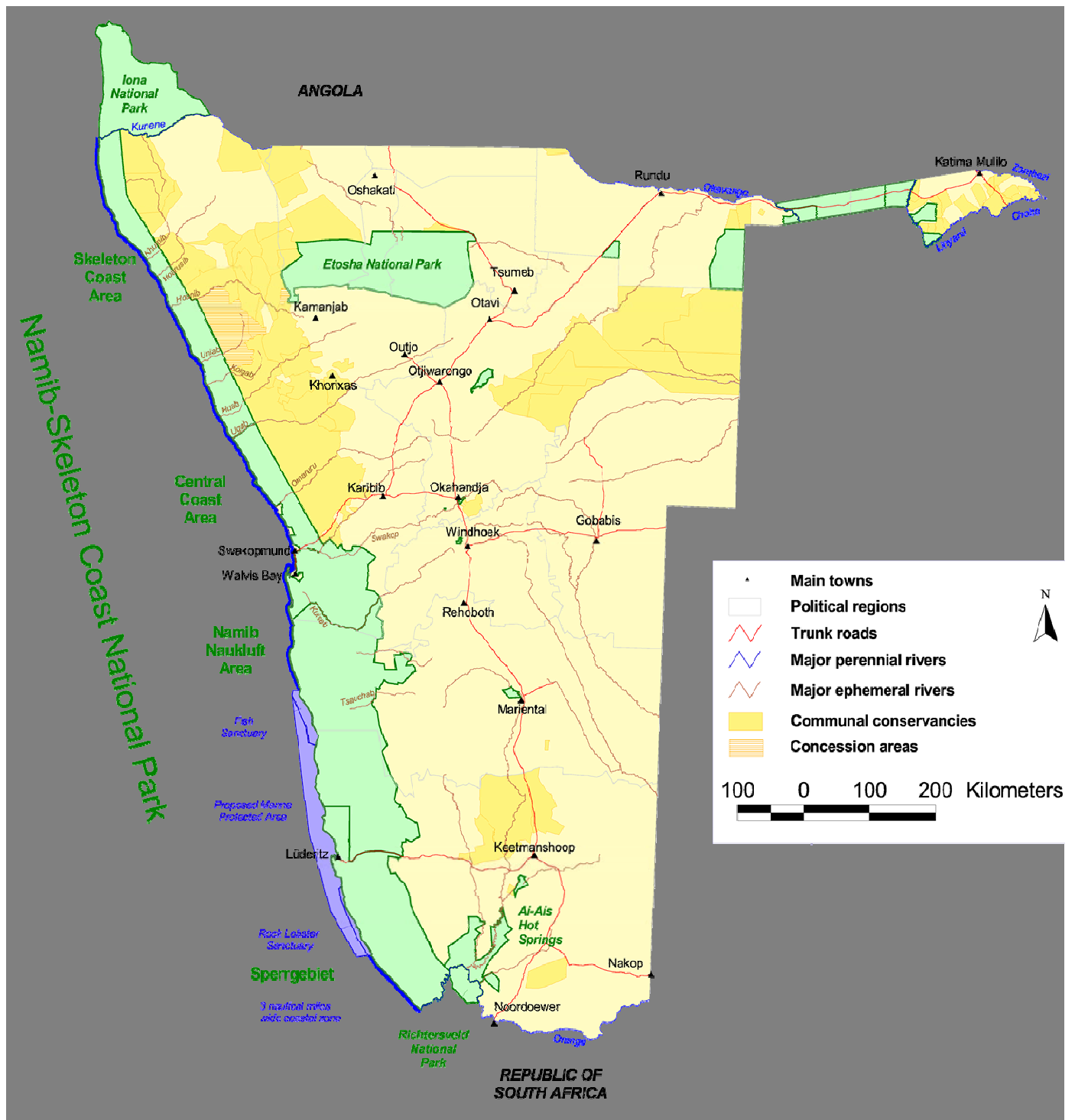


Figure 1: The Namib-Skeleton Coast National Park showing the four terrestrial Management Areas, the proposed Marine Protected Area and the contiguous areas of land under different forms of conservation (e.g. National Parks in Angola, Namibia and South Africa, communal Conservancies and wildlife & tourism Concessions).

In Namibia the NSCNP is contiguous with a large number of protected areas, concessions, conservancies and private land managed for conservation. These are shown in Table 2. Most notable amongst these are the following:

- Coastal and Marine Protected Area off the Sperrgebiet and Namib-Naukluft areas, running for 400 km up the coast and about 30 km wide, covering an area of 1.2 million ha and containing all of Namibia's islands;
- Ai-Ais/Fish River Canyon National Park which in turn borders on private protected areas;

- Contiguous with 20 communal conservancies and three wildlife and tourism concession areas, and via them linked to the Etosha National Park (2.29 million ha) and thence to further communal and private conservation areas;
- Borders on at least 2 million ha of freehold conservancies and private protected areas.

Table 2: *Contiguous conservation areas with the NSCNP*

Country	Name / Tenure	Area (ha)
South Africa	Richtersveld and buffer area / communal (RSA Parks)	558,425
Angola	Iona National Park / state	585,000
Namibia	Communal conservancies	6,235,500
	Wildlife & tourism Concessions	800,000
	Freehold conservancies and private protected areas	2,050,000
	State Parks (Ministry of Environment & Tourism)	2,651,200
	Marine Protected Area (Ministry of Fisheries & Marine Resources)	1,200,000
TOTAL		14,080,125

(Note that the extent of land under conservation, particularly private land, is constantly changing (increasing) and that, because there is no registration mechanism for private protected areas and game farms, this figure represents an absolute minimum area.)

In total the NSCNP borders onto over 14 million ha of land and sea that is managed primarily for wildlife, biodiversity, conservation and tourism. Together with the NSCNP, this represents a contiguous area of almost 25 million ha. One of the greatest challenges with potentially the greatest rewards is to develop effective, constructive and efficient co-management mechanisms across these land- and seascapes to optimize both the environmental (including biodiversity) and socio-economic values, while at the same time using these open systems to (a) allow the historic movement and migration patterns of wildlife in response to the highly variable climatic conditions to become re-established, (b) mitigate and buffer the impacts of climate change and thereby make the area more resilient to change, and (c) create incentives for neighbouring land owners and custodians to become part of this conservation landscape, thereby further strengthening the area's contributions to socio-economic development and environmental conservation.

The proclamation of this protected area represents one of Namibia's greatest conservation achievements since gaining Independence in 1990, and one of the most exciting developments in the history of conservation in this country.

The landscapes

The NSCNP occupies the most arid lands in Africa south of the Sahara. Apart from the eastern edge of the Naukluft, the whole park falls below the 100 mm median annual rainfall isohyet and over 60% of the land area of the park falling below the 50 mm isohyet. In addition to the extremely low annual rainfall it is also hugely variable with an annual coefficient of variation ranging typically from 80% to over 100%. With its high evaporation rates and low rainfall, the NSCNP experiences an average water deficit of about 2 m per year. In the north and central areas rain falls mainly in January to March, while in the Sperrgebiet rainfall is about equally unlikely in all months of the year. The fact that some rain falls in the winter months, derived from frontal weather passing the Cape, results in the succulent vegetation of this area.

The climate of the NSCNP is influenced mainly by the cold Benguela Current and the South Atlantic Anticyclone. Temperatures are generally moderate (average minimum and maximum temperatures during the coldest and hottest months respectively reflecting a range of about 7-32°C), fog is frequent (about 125 days per year on the coast dropping to about 40 days per year 80 km inland) and wind is a dominant feature. The southern part of the coast is a particularly high wind energy area, especially in the summer months with average daily speeds of over 40 km/h. These winds are mainly from the south and drive the Benguela Current northwards, carry sand from the shore into the adjacent land, particularly into the southern dune fields, and cause upwellings along the coast which bring nutrient-rich water to the surfaces.

It is important to understand why the Namib is a desert. First, the cold waters of the Benguela Current cool the air so much that it cannot rise up and develop into large rain-bearing clouds. The sea air remains trapped in a layer from the sea to about 600 m above sea level. Moisture from the sea is seen only as low clouds and fog. Second, moist tropical air from the east and north has usually shed its moisture before reaching the Namib coastal areas. And even when rain-bearing clouds do approach, they are usually blocked by breezes from the sea which blow inland for some distance, often to the escarpment. And finally, any moist tropical air blowing towards the desert descends over the escarpment, warming and drying out as it sinks down. These factors all combine to make rainfall an unusual event in the NSCNP.

The NSCNP covers the coastal biome and three terrestrial biomes, namely the hyper-arid Namib Desert, the Nama Karoo and the Succulent Karoo. The amount of each of these terrestrial biomes protected by the Park is shown in Table 3. These biomes contain a number of different vegetation types and an even greater number of habitats.

The geology of the NSCNP ranges from some of the oldest rocks known, the Vioolsdrift Granite Suite and the Haib Group (2,600 – 1,650 million years ago) in the south of the Sperrgebiet, to the youngest geology comprising the Namib Sands (70 million years old to present) which dominate the central Namib sand sea and large parts of the Sperrgebiet.

Table 3: Percentage of each biome contained within the NSP and within immediately contiguous conservation areas.

Biome	Percentage (%) of biome					
	NSCNP	Communal Conservancies	Concessions	Freehold land	Other State Parks	Total
Namib Desert	76	14	3	2	0	95
Nama Karoo	3	13	1	4	2	23
Succulent Karoo	85	0	0	1	5	91
Coastal	99	0	0	0	0	99

The NSCNP contains a large number of globally significant features. The following are perhaps the most notable:

- A global biodiversity hotspot comprising the Sperrgebiet, the most diverse desert in the world. Nearly 25% of Namibia's plant species (over 1,050 species) occur here, on less than 3% of its land surface, many of them endemic to the area and highly range restricted.
- Three Ramsar sites, being Walvis Bay, Sandwich Harbour and the Orange River Mouth, this last being a joint site between Namibia and South Africa.
- Eight Important Bird Areas (IBA), being Kunene River Mouth, Cape Cross Lagoon, Namib-Naukluft Park, Mile 4 Saltworks, 30 km Beach (Walvis Bay to Swakopmund), Walvis Bay, Sandwich Harbour and the Sperrgebiet. In addition, there are four IBAs covering islands immediately off the Namib-Naukluft and Sperrgebiet Areas and within the Marine protected area, namely Mercury Island, Ichaboe Island, Lüderitz Bay Islands and Possession Island.
- Two Important Plant Areas (IPA), being the Lichen fields in the Central Coastal Area and the Sperrgebiet. Additional IPAs occur immediately to the east of the Sperrgebiet and contiguous with it, and linking it to the Ai-Ais / Huns Mountains / Fish River Canyon complex, and to the east of the Skeleton Coast Area and northern parts of the Central Coastal Area, incorporating the entire northern escarpment zone and linking to the Etosha National Park.
- All the IPAs and IBAs also qualify as Key Biodiversity Areas, sites of global significance for biodiversity conservation, and using globally standard criteria and thresholds.

- The only two perennial rivers crossing the Namib form the northern (Kunene River) and southern (Orange-Gariep-Senqu River) borders of the NSCNP respectively. In addition, 12 significant ephemeral river systems drain westwards across the Park. Of these, the flows of two rivers are stopped by the Namib Sand Sea where they form pans surrounded by sand dunes (Tsondabvlei and Sossusvlei).
- The NSCNP contains a huge diversity of desert landscapes and scenery, habitats, biodiversity and, despite its fragility, a large number of economic opportunities if carefully planned and managed. The Northern Namib comprises large mountainous areas with incised river systems that support some of Africa's most charismatic megafauna such as desert-adapted elephants, rhino, giraffe, lion, leopard and cheetah, made all the more remarkable by their presence in this hyper-arid zone and desert scenery. The Central Namib contains huge vistas over mainly gravel plains with insulbergs that support the plains game such as oryx, springbok and ostrich. The Southern Namib contains Namibia's sand sea, an area of some 4 million ha of sand dunes and ridges, giving way to the escarpment in the east and some of the most dramatic scenery at Sossusvlei and in the Naukluft. And finally, the Sperrgebiet, with its 100 year history of diamond mining and exclusion, with rich archaeological, paleontological, historic and biodiversity values and a dramatic coastline. This diversity offers huge potential for tourism routes from the south to the north, within Namibia's desert biomes, both within and adjacent to the NSCNP.
- Contiguous with the south-eastern point of the Sperrgebiet is the Ai-Ais National Park which contains the Fish River Canyon, the second largest Canyon in the world after the Grand Canyon in the USA.
- The western border of the NSCNP is on the coast, 25% of which is designated as Namibia's first coastal and marine Park. This enigmatic and poignant coast – the Coast of Skeletons – contains many shipwrecks, the bones of early mariners as well as those of whales and seals.
- The Park's northern border is shared with the Iona National Park in Angola, while areas on its southern border in South Africa are being developed under conservancy type approaches. The western border of the Park is shared with communal lands (about 54%), freehold lands (about 45%) and the Ai-Ais National Park (<1%). Almost 100% of the Park's border with communal lands comprises conservancies and wildlife and tourism concessions. At least 60% of the freehold bordering land comprises private parks and land managed for wildlife and tourism. This means that over 80% of the NSCNP's western border is shared with neighbours practicing land uses that are both friendly and compatible to that of the Park. This offers huge opportunities for partnership and co-management.

With these and many other attributes of the NSCNP and its adjacent areas, serious consideration should be given to seeking **World Heritage Site** status for the entire region (the NSCNP and selected areas adjacent to the Park). This would hugely increase its marketability and also assist with its management, without forfeiting any of the options that are currently, or might in future, become available.