

Paulus Johannes: Park ranger

Paulus Johannes (photo by Bernard C. Moore, 2021)



In 2008, Paulus Johannes started his new position as a park ranger in the Tsau ||Khaeb (Sperrgebiet) National Park. The conservation area, which is nearly the size of Belgium, encompasses an almost 100km stretch of the international border along the !Garib. Johannes, who grew up in southern Namibia, first began working for the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT) as a volunteer, when the Namibian government constructed the new border post at Sendelingsdrift in 2007. 'I just wanted to get some experiences,' he remembers, 'but soon I knew that I need to apply for a real job at MEFT.' Only one year later he was appointed as a ranger at the newly created Oranjemund office. A team of just three people – Johannes, a higher ranging warden and the chief warden –

oversaw the entire southern part of the Tsau ǁKhaeb. 'We were the only humans within a huge, vast, area of desert,' Johannes recalls.

He remembers their two main tasks: repairing the fence that runs over more than 300km along the Eastern boundary of the park, and general park patrols – particularly along the Orange River. Fencing took up to 90% of his working hours. He explains:

Our storeroom at Kolmanskop was full of droppers which were sponsored by Namdeb.¹ We finished them within three years of fence repairs. Sometimes we had to repeat fixing the fence line, as game crossing to the neighbouring farms kept breaking through in search for drinking water and grazing on the private farms, because inside the park area there were hardly any boreholes, and it was very dry. We never managed to fix the fence 100% but we came nearly close.

We were lucky that the park is only fenced in the east, towards the private farms, while in the north it is only the tarred road that divides it from the Namib-Naukluft Park, in the west it's the Atlantic Ocean, and in the south, it is the Orange River.

On his other primary duty, patrol trips, there were always two people in one *bakkie* (pick-up truck). The rangers/wardens set off at Oranjemund, driving up and alongside the river, while always remaining on the Namibian side. On this stretch of the patrol, they were mainly tasked with law enforcement, i.e., looking for illegal fishing, poaching, and other transgressions. If they found someone breaking the law, they reported this to the Namibian police or the Ministry of Fishing. While the South African police force was, at times, also informed, there were never joint Namibian-South African patrols. 'It was only the bosses that were in contact with the South Africans, on a policy level,' Johannes explains. The patrol continued northwards, along the fence, and then through the desert, down to the coast. There, the men drove southwards, on small tracks, heading back to Oranjemund. Johannes explains: 'we never used the main roads by the mines, because that would then not count as "patrolling".'

The entire patrol took 14 days. Although Johannes has fond memories of the beautiful landscape and the quietness of the area, it was a tough job. 'The patrols in the park were not easy. We had to deal with strong southwesterly winds, long cold nights with heavy fog, and the tracks around the coastline kept disappearing because of the wind.' If something happened, Johannes had to rely on help being sent from Oranjemund or Lüderitz. 'If you did not show up after 14 days, they would send somebody to look for you.' This meant that he and his colleagues always had to account for the possibility of being stuck somewhere in the park for weeks, waiting for people to rescue them.

Today, Johannes works at the small Naute Game Park – much closer to towns and with easier communication and schedules. Still, he has mostly good memories of his eight years in the remoteness of the Tsau ǁKhaeb. 'There was hardly any poaching and other crimes, the tasks were highly interesting, with different landscapes to protect: The mountains, the coastal deserts, and the riverine borderlands.' All in all, he is convinced

1 Droppers are light wooden or iron sticks placed between the planted posts of a fence to keep the wires taut and in a parallel position. Namdeb is the mining company that holds the mining rights within the Sperrgebiet. It is jointly owned by the Namibia state and by the De Beers Group.

that important work has been done there, and hopes that the park will be opened for visitors one day soon.

Based on an interview done by Luregn Lenggenhager, Bernard Moore and Wanda Rutishauser at Naute Game Park, 7 November 2021.

