

A STORY ABOUT A FAMILY AND A FARM IN NAMIBIA  
*Okonjima, the Hanssens and the AfriCat Foundation*



*A world without leopard ... well, who would want to live in it?*

- Diana Vreeland





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Tammy on Pal

Wayne on Nettie with Dingo

Val on Windowmaker with Donna

A STORY ABOUT A FAMILY AND A FARM IN NAMIBIA

*Okonjima, the Hanssens and the AfriCat Foundation*

This narrative chronicles the evolution of Okonjima, transitioning from a cattle and hunting farm to a guest farm and eventually expanding into a vast 220km² private nature reserve.

It’s a tale of shifting perspectives and the determined conservation endeavours embarked upon by a single family.

This account underscores the convergence of wildlife preservation and tourism, and the importance of an environmentally sustainable approach.



Val and Rose Hanssen tie the knot - 1959







## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Back in the 1890s, in the era of colonial South West Africa, the area today known as Okonjima found value as a place of respite for the horses of the German military. Its elevated altitude (1700m-1900m above sea-level) served as an advantage, seemingly safeguarding against the transmission of the African Horse Sickness virus, which is typically carried by gnats and biting flies.

By the early 1920s, the landscape of what is now Okonjima had transformed into a cattle farm.

This transition culminated in its acquisition by Val and Rose Hanssen in the year 1970. Renowned as established Brahman breeders, the Hanssens continued their cattle farming pursuits until the year 1993.



King Ranch in Texas, USA



## INTRODUCTION

As the years unfolded, the Hanssen family found themselves at the forefront of a dual legacy — one rooted in the time-honored tradition of cattle farming and another dedicated to the conservation of Namibia's magnificent carnivores and wildlife in general.

The rocky, sandstone landscapes of Okonjima, which once resonated with the lowing of cattle, was now slowly transforming to include the sounds of wilder creatures. The change was not just physical, but represented a paradigm shift in the family's ethos.

They had managed to seamlessly blend the traditional with the modern while embracing the winds of change that swept across Namibia during the country's rebirth in 1990.

Valdemar James (VJ) Hanssen, the patriarch of the family, was a man of vision. With weathered hands and a heart connected deeply to the land, he had seen the necessity for change. His wife Edith Rose (nee: Bagot-Smith) and children, Tammy, Wayne, Donna and Rosalea, shared his passion for Mother Nature, and together they championed a cause that went far beyond the boundaries of their ranch.



Val, with his eldest daughter Tammy



Rose the farmer



Val the horseman





## CHAPTER 1

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, THE HANSSEN FAMILY & HOW IT ALL STARTED

The Hanssen family, rooted in a generations-old tradition of cattle farming, found themselves compelled to explore new avenues for survival. The rugged, mountainous terrain, while picturesque, also harboured its challenges, among others, the elusive leopard, despised by farmers for their predation on livestock, thrived in these protective heights, leading to significant livestock losses for the Hanssens.

Confronted with this challenge, and driven by a collective dedication to end trophy hunting, the family chose to shift their focus and take a different path towards wildlife conservation and land preservation.

In a departure from the historical norm during which cattle farming and hunting were the predominant choices for farmers, the Hanssens opted to break away from this dichotomy. It was a bold decision, a divergence from the well-trodden and more familiar paths of the past.

The high density of leopard on their land became a catalyst for change. Rather than seeing these majestic creatures as adversaries, the family sought ways to coexist harmoniously with the wildlife that also called their farm home. It was a shift in perspective that mirrored a broader transformation which was taking place in Namibia.

Visitors from across the globe had eagerly started flocking to Africa's newest nation, drawn by the prospect of an authentic African safari experience. Exploring this country promised more than encounters with the renowned wildlife that neighbouring South Africa was celebrated for; it also offered access to awe-inspiring desert vistas and rich, distinctive cultures.

Embracing the momentum of this evolving landscape, the family set out on a journey to transform their farm into a haven, not just for cattle, but for the flourishing wildlife as well. The decision coincided with a changing world, in which conservation and sustainability were gaining prominence.



1970 -1992

### GEOGRAPHY

The Okonjima farm boundary traces a central plateau, at an altitude of 1 700 meters, surrounded by the Omboroko Mountains (where remnants of Etjo Sandstone are evident).

Highest point: altitude 1 900m • Vegetation: Tree-and-shrub savannah, interspersed with Yellow Wood (*Terminalia sericea*) and a number of acacia species. Average annual rainfall: approx. 450 mm.



### TARA & GREY HEIGHTS

Approx 7000 commercial farms within Namibia pre-independence







## 1. HOW IT ALL STARTED

### CHALLENGES OF CATTLE FARMING AND PREDATOR INTERACTION AT OKONJIMA

Amid a prolonged drought in the 'Khomas Hochland' region, located southwest of Windhoek, the Hanssen family faced the imperative to part with their family farm, Grey Heights (Karlsruhe) and Tara (Friedrichsruhe).

Seeking a break from dry terrain, they turned to Okonjima, located in north-central Namibia, due to its robust subterranean water resources.

1970 - The Brahman cattle, symbolic of the Zebu/Indicus heritage, embarked on a 250km train journey from Windhoek to Otjiwarongo, marking their relocation to their new dwelling at Okonjima farm.

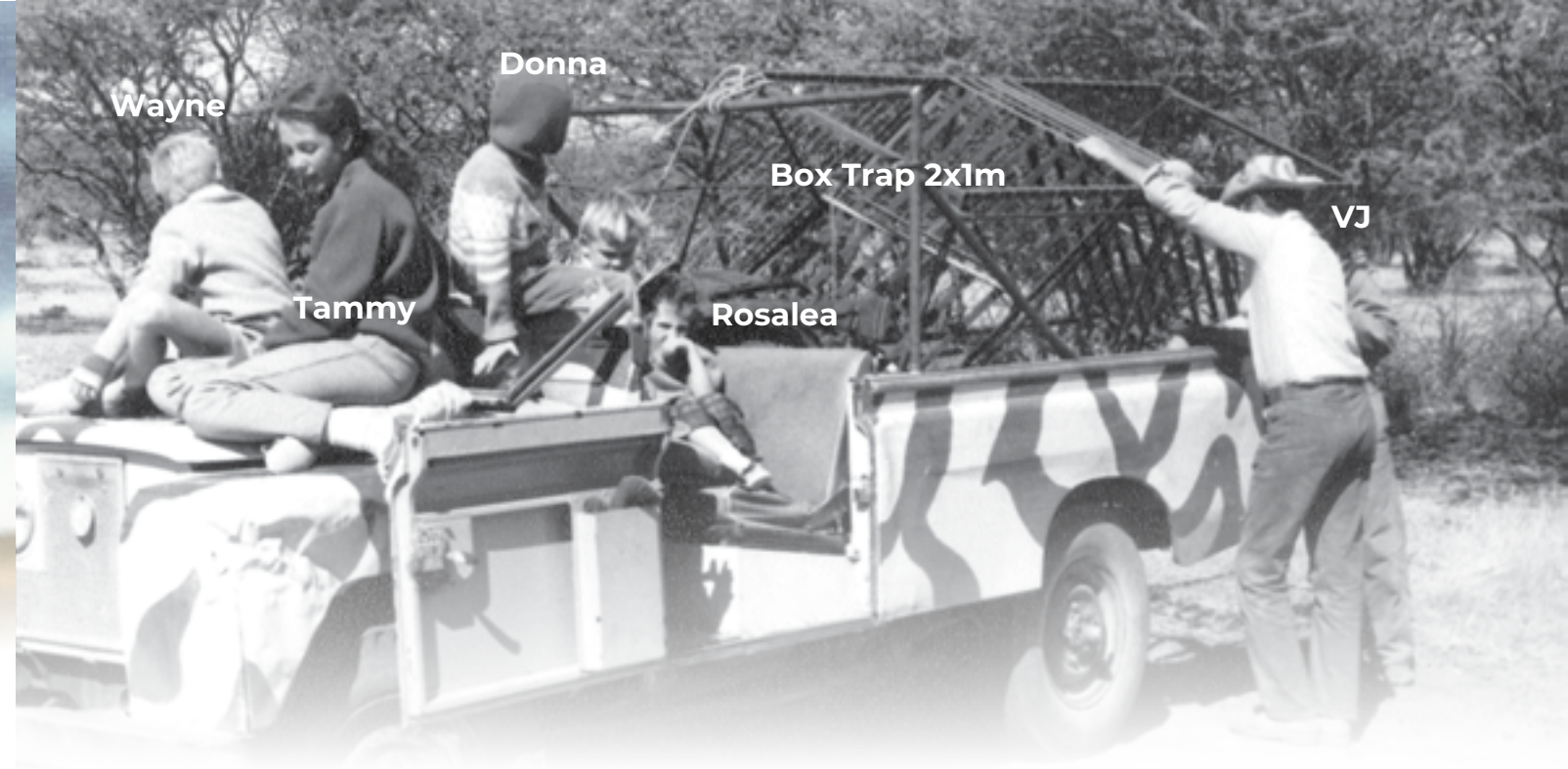
The Hanssen children, Tammy (10 yrs old), Wayne (6 yrs old), Donna (4 yrs old), and Rosalea (2 yrs old), – joined the long journey to their new home, Okonjima.



Stock footage of cattle farming in Namibia S.W.A | The Brahman Breed of Cattle

From the outset, the Brahman cattle adapted favourably to their new surroundings. However, the elation of the initial successful calving season was short-lived as calves between birth and six months old began to vanish mysteriously. Investigation into these disappearances unravelled the distinctive traces of leopard tracks and discernible drag marks which eventually led to the remains of the missing calves and foals ...

The Hanssen family had begun to confront challenges similar to those faced by previous landowners



who, succumbing to the burden of significant stock losses, mainly attributed to leopard, eventually relinquished their farming endeavours.

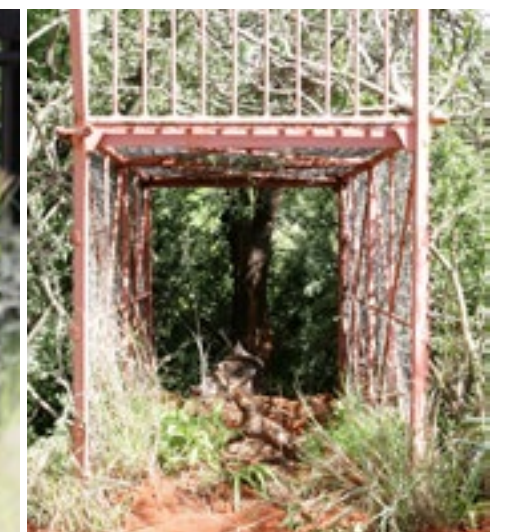
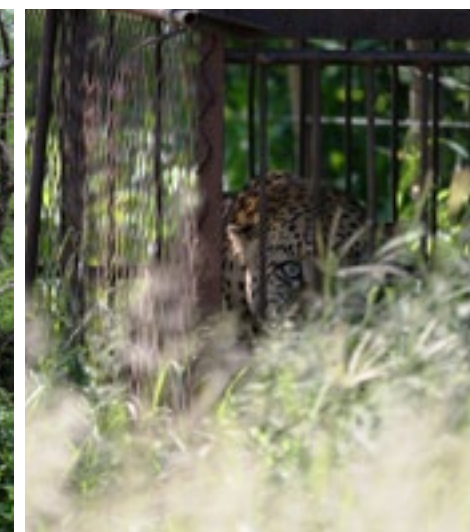
The annual toll of 20 to 30 calf losses to these prevailing predators was unsustainable and posed a looming financial threat to the family's financial viability.

Resolute action was embarked upon through the deployment of gin and box traps. Strategically positioned near the calf carcasses, these traps were aimed at 'snaring' the predators responsible. The effectiveness of these traps was unmistakable: they successfully captured leopard, which were then expediently dispatched/shot to alleviate the problem.

Notably, the leopard inhabiting Okonjima were of substantial size. Capitalizing on this resource, the proposition of offering them to trophy hunters emerged as a dual solution: addressing the predator issue while generating revenue to bolster the modest income of the farm.

But cattle farming at Okonjima suffered another setback when the calving percentage plummeted to an unusually low 48% for these adaptable animals.

In-depth nutritional investigations, conducted by Dr. Rina Grant between 1981 and 1983, unveiled a deficiency of phosphate in the grazing lands. Consequently, a regimen of mineral supplementation was introduced to address this issue. Once the deficiency was identified and corrective measures taken, the subsequent season witnessed a remarkable surge in the calving percentage, reaching an impressive 98%.







Over a span of twenty years, active efforts in leopard trapping, shooting, and hunting persisted on Okonjima.

During the 1980s, son Wayne took over the responsibility of leopard hunting from his father. The Omboroko Mountains of Okonjima had emerged as a sanctuary for both leopard and kudu, presenting these two species as coveted trophy offerings.

From 1970 to 1990, an average of three leopard were culled annually on Okonjima in an endeavour to curtail livestock losses. Insights from previous proprietors showed a recurring pattern: despite the leopard kills, the livestock losses during this period exhibited no significant reduction. The toll remained consistent at 20 to 30 calf losses each year. Val and Rose reached a realization that proved counterintuitive: the more leopard they eradicated, the higher their livestock losses escalated ... This realisation had a profound impact on carnivore conservation, once again altering Okonjima's trajectory.



## CHAPTER 2

### IMPLEMENTATION OF IMPROVED FARMING STRATEGIES

As the financial feasibility of livestock farming on Okonjima faced challenges due to leopard, poor grazing conditions and inflation added to the problems, and the need for urgent intervention became evident.

Calf (predator-proof) holding-pens were erected at the watering corrals, serving as a vital solution. During calving season, pregnant cows were confined within these enclosures, or close to the homestead, ensuring a secure environment for giving birth and shielding the newborn calves from predation. While the cows were allowed to graze in proximity during the daytime, the calves remained within the enclosures, nursing and drinking upon their mothers' return. As the calves matured and their dietary needs changed, they were provided with hay and at times additional stock-feed. However, they continued to be housed in this protective arrangement until they reached approximately four months of age.

Subsequently, once the calves gained strength and independence, they were better able to accompany their mothers while grazing. The Brahmans, inherently protective of their young, contributed to safeguarding them from all potential predators. (These cows are renowned for their aggression when they have offspring.)

Mules and/or donkeys were added to the cattle herds as an additional protection against leopard and the occasional cheetah that passed through Okonjima. Mules and donkeys can become excellent livestock guardians since they despise anything small and on four legs. However, caution is needed with newborn calves or foals, as mules might mistake these unsteady newborns for small predators.

The outcome of these additional measures was remarkable: annual livestock losses were reduced from 20 to 30 animals per year to three or fewer.





Feeding table



Bait alarm-clock fishline camera

## EARLY LEOPARD RESEARCH ENDEAVOURS

Recognising the limitations of shooting and hunting as means of managing the resilient leopard population, Val and Wayne Hanssen embarked on a journey to deepen their understanding of these predators and their behaviours. They undertook extensive exploration of dirt roads and game trails, seeking out pugmarks (tracks) left by leopard. Moreover, they strategically set bait traps composed of kudu, gemsbok, and warthog meat at various areas across the farm.

Notably, the leopard exhibited swift interest in these baited offerings which prompted Wayne to commence night time observations. Initially, the leopard remained highly wary and cautious due to their history of persecution over the years. However, with time, their apprehension diminished, allowing for nocturnal observation under red-filtered light. Interestingly, the bait sites also attracted honey badgers, leading to competitive interactions for this easily accessible food source.

Devising an inventive response to the dilemma of luring leopard for observational study without forfeiting their meal to honey badgers, Wayne constructed a distinctive plan. He raised feeding tables on a single, metal leg that catered to the specific needs of leopard observation, ensuring the animals' engagement while preventing honey badgers from snatching their treats.

Due to time limitations, Wayne couldn't dedicate every night to leopard observation. To overcome this, he devised a method of monitoring their feeding schedules. He attached the bait to an alarm clock battery, and when a leopard tugged on the bait, the battery dislodged, causing the clock to stop. This technique piqued his curiosity and prompted the deployment of a homemade trip camera near the table.

Utilising an infra-red beam, a mousetrap was rigged to activate an old camera's shutter, positioned strategically on the feeding table. The outcome was remarkable: the leopard unwittingly triggered candid self-portraits while indulging in their meals.



## EARLY DAYS: THE SHIFT FROM CATTLE FARMING TO TOURISM

The successful tourism business that drives Okonjima today had humble beginnings in 1986. Dennis Rundle, who had started 'Namib Wilderness Safaris' (part of Wilderness Safaris - SA), required overnight accommodation for his guests travelling from Windhoek to Etosha National Park.

Donna Hanssen, fresh out of school and planning a backpacking trip across Europe that would begin with volunteering on a kibbutz in Israel, met with Ros Rundle, Dennis's wife and Managing Director of the 'Namib Travel Shop'. Being a farm girl with no travel experience, Donna sought Ros' advice on planning her trip. This meeting led to discussions about potential places for Dennis's clients to stay around the Waterberg area.

Ros, in search of a "birder's paradise" near Otjiwarongo for their clients who were avid birders, found a promising option when Donna mentioned that her mother, Rose Hanssen, had extensive knowledge of the birds. Subsequently, Rose and Val Hanssen were approached to offer Okonjima as a campsite and simple guest accommodation for the safaris.



Rose Teaching the Namibian public about medicinal and edible herbs



Rose and Val Hanssen





The family managed everything from the initial booking via farmline hand-dialed telephone to check-in, guiding, cooking, farming, maintenance, and development, among many other regular chores

The Hanssen family vacated their rooms to make way for the guests. This marked the beginning of a significant transformation. Tourists, initially staying for just one night, were offered a basic lunch upon arrival and guided walks in the veld during the afternoon. The following morning, Rose, an enthusiastic birder involved in the annual Bird Atlas Projects, would showcase the endemic Damara Rock Runner and near-endemics like the White-Tailed Shrike, Hartlaub's Francolin, and more. Rose's culinary skills, combined with her expertise in medicinal and edible herbs, made guests feel as if they had come 'home' for the holidays.

Okonjima quickly became a regular stop-over on the 'Namib Wilderness Safari' route. The additional income enabled Val and Rose to build two bungalows in the garden for guest accommodation, allowing the family to move back into the old farmhouse. While the old hunter's rooms also provided guest accommodation, the family occasionally still had to vacate their bedrooms when groups were too large.



Rose & Val and the rest of the family: Hussy the fox terrier; Benny the honeybadger; Chinga the cheetah; Elvis the baboon in the garden that later became Main Camp



Val & Elvis; Rose & Benny; Wayne & Chinga



Another unique attraction, which was simply part of the Hanssen's everyday life, was their close coexistence with a variety of wild animals. The family shared their house and daily routines with a cheetah named Chinga, a baboon named Elvis, two warthogs named Nympho and Schizo, a honey badger named Benny, and a monitor lizard named T4 - that roamed freely around the farmyard and surrounding wilderness.

This modest beginning set the stage for what would become a thriving tourism business, showcasing Okonjima's unique blend of hospitality, wildlife, and conservation efforts.



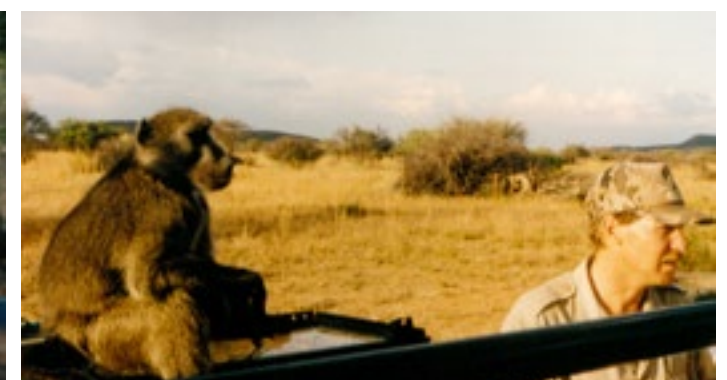
Piggy the warthog



Chinga the cheetah playing with Wayne



Elvis and the Family dogs accompanied the Family on all drives around Okonjima







Wayne showing the first Okonjima guests his bush skills



Wayne and Elvis guiding the Bushman Trail

Wayne, the only son, had joined the family business full-time in 1989 after completing his military service and studies in electrical engineering in South Africa, followed by a stint working for SWABC/NBC (the local broadcasting corporation).

One of his responsibilities was to help manage the farm and assist Rose in entertaining the guests. Having grown up with a Bushman and a Himba man as his caretakers and farm guardians, Wayne had learned invaluable survival skills from them, such as identifying edible plants, concealing water underground, and setting humane traps. Recognizing that guests would appreciate this cultural experience, he established the very popular Bushman Trail, which remains one of the most popular attractions on Okonjima today. (Off The Beaten Track)

He also decided to experiment with leopard baiting as an activity for tourists. With little regard for safety back then, guests would sit on rock ledges under the cover of darkness and wait for the leopard. Although some nights were disappointing, the leopard viewing was mostly successful, and this activity quickly became popular at Okonjima.

Another important event happened in 1989 when a cheetah cub named Chinga came to live at Okonjima. Val Hanssen had attended an auction organized to raise funds for a political party (DTA) just before Namibian Independence from South Africa. Among the chairs, tables, pots, pans, meat, eggs, and 'biltong' was a cheetah cub in a cage. No one was interested in the cheetah cub, and out of pity, Val bought her for R200-00 (N\$).

Initially, Chinga was extremely wild, but slowly became accustomed to people. She roamed freely around the garden and the surrounding veld, visible to the guests. Little did the family suspect that Chinga and the leopard-viewing activities would lead them into an active role in carnivore conservation in Namibia. .



Wayne with Wahu the leopard – rescued as a cub



Fooling around with Elvis the chacma baboon who lived with the family for 11 years



Tourism continued to grow, and Okonjima became increasingly popular. During their university holidays, Wayne's sisters, Rosalea and Donna, assisted with the hospitality business.

Eventually, Rosalea Hanssen moved back to Okonjima permanently to contribute full-time to the family enterprise in 1991, leaving her teaching career in sports and sports management behind her.

Tourists visiting this newly independent African country started picking up in numbers, but there were not many private destinations—only government facilities built by the South African administration. Quickly, Okonjima, a family-run guest farm en route to Etosha National Park, became a sought-after stopover. The activities expanded from birding and guided walking trails to include a 2½-hour Bushman Trail. Leopard viewing from a hide, with the once-considered 'pest' now a popular tourist attraction, further enhanced its appeal.

Meanwhile, Tammy Hanssen had married Uwe Hoth and moved north to settle on her husband's family farm. Some of the Brahman stud cattle became part of Tammy's inheritance, as she chose not to join her siblings in taking over Okonjima.

Shortly afterward, Wayne met his future wife, Lise Conradie, who had arrived as a guest from Cape Town with one of the Wilderness Safaris tours passing by Okonjima.



Wayne and Lise and Chinga the cheetah







One of Okonjima's first game-drive vehicles



Okonjima farm house gets a make-over in 1992 and is renamed Main Camp

As word of Okonjima's success with cheetah and leopard spread, it wasn't long before the family were approached by numerous farmers seeking help for cheetah and leopard which they had trapped on their farms to mitigate livestock losses.

This marked the beginning of The AfriCat Welfare Programme.

Sadly, after the unexpected passing of Rose in (1936 - 1992), the Hanssens decided to sell their herds of Brahman and Jersey cattle, bringing to an end the historical family tradition of cattle farming. And as it was peak guest season when Rose died, Donna stepped in to help fill the void, giving up her career as a TV producer at NBC. The family had united to support the transition from cattle farming post independence.



## CHAPTER 3

### FROM FARMHOUSE TO FOUNDATION: THE FAMILY MOVES OUT OF THE FARMHOUSE & THE BIRTH OF AFRICAT

The old farmhouse was renovated with a thatched roof to enhance its tourist appeal, transforming it from a rundown farmhouse to a welcoming homestead.

By this time, hunting had ceased altogether on Okonjima, and the family's interests had shifted to developing the guest farm into an active conservation project and lodge. They were extremely short on manpower: Donna and Rosalea, along with Wayne and his new wife Lise Conradie, managed the lodge, cooked, helped clean the rooms, guided, and entertained the guests. Despite already full schedules, they were also rescuing distressed leopard and cheetah from all over Namibia.

With its registered status, the Foundation began its mission of rescuing unwanted cheetah and leopard from commercial farmers - who either no longer wanted them as pets or saw them as pests and vermin - traversing the nation to protect these magnificent creatures.

Cheetah and leopard rescues were purely welfare exercises, but this led to more ambitious carnivore projects in the future. Soon, Okonjima was caring for a large number of orphaned cheetah and leopard and struggling to house them all. This prompted their first fundraising venture to build a large enclosure





for some of the cheetahs. In response to the call, guests Diane and Richard Reynolds-Hale offered their support, and became AfriCat's first donors. Within a few months, a 25-hectare area had been fenced and cleared and this was the start of the Cheetah Project.

Orphaned and wild cheetah and leopard continued to arrive at an alarming rate, and the cost of feeding them was covered by Okonjima Lodge. It was decided at this stage to take guests to visit the cheetah so that they could learn more about these specialised predators. In turn, these captive cheetah generated so much interest that their upkeep began to be supported by donations.



### THE EVOLUTION OF THE NEXT CHAPTER: AFRICAT'S SMALL BEGINNINGS. . .

Despite the enthusiasm of visitors to see the cheetah and leopard at Okonjima, the rising expenses, including vehicles, fuel, veterinary fees, and food, became too burdensome for Okonjima to manage alone. Around this time, Wayne and Lise had the opportunity to attend a tourism show in London, the World Travel Market. They were also invited to participate in a fair at the Islington Exhibition Centre, where Wayne delivered a talk on the 'Big Cats of Okonjima'.

This presented an ideal opportunity to start fundraising. However, complications arose when it became evident that Wayne and Lise did not represent a registered charity. Consequently, it was decided to establish a foundation dedicated to the conservation of large carnivores.

A Namibian lawyer drafted the legal constitution, and in 1993, The AfriCat Foundation was officially established as a **non-profit organisation** / No: T48/93.

From this moment onward, The AfriCat Foundation operated as a distinct entity separate from Okonjima Lodge, even though AfriCat remained based on the Okonjima farm.

- All carnivore conservation efforts on Okonjima were conducted under the auspices of AfriCat.
- AfriCat provided humane housing, treatment, and care for orphaned and injured animals, as well as the rescue, rehabilitation, and release of large carnivores.
- Guests were now able to observe rescued cheetah and leopard cared for by AfriCat, learning about their natural history and the broader Namibian narrative.
- Concerned guests pledged donations that supported AfriCat's evolution from animal welfare to a comprehensive conservation organisation.



- AfriCat introduced the environmental education and awareness programme. Educating the next generation about carnivore conservation and its role in maintaining the balance of nature.
- AfriCat focused on farmer-predator conflict resolutions, which included creating awareness and promoting the tolerance of large carnivores among the farming community by assisting farmers in effective management and improving livestock protection.
- In conjunction with veterinarians across the globe, AfriCat started with large carnivore research and monitoring, initiating and supporting essential carnivore research.
- Okonjima continued to pay monthly royalties to AfriCat, and every tourist staying there automatically contributed as a donor through their accommodation fees.
- The two organisations were marketed together, with Okonjima recognised as "The Home of the AfriCat Foundation."



The AfriCat Foundation was established with careful consideration and planning, aiming to assist farmers while also supporting carnivore conservation. Upon achieving registered status as a non-profit organisation (NGO), AfriCat's mission pivoted towards safeguarding and ensuring the enduring preservation of all significant carnivores in Namibia. This commitment led AfriCat to crisscross the Namibian landscape, actively rescuing unwanted or "problem" predators such as cheetahs, caracals, hyenas, and leopard from commercial farmers who perceived them as vermin. The Foundation quickly became a refuge for carnivores caught in conflicts with livestock farmers.





Donna guiding guests on the Cheetah Trail

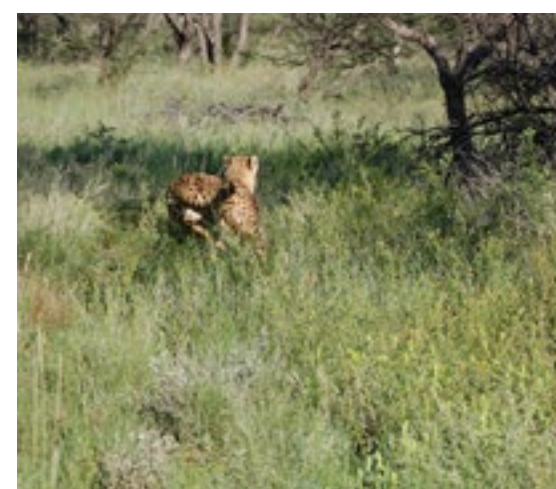
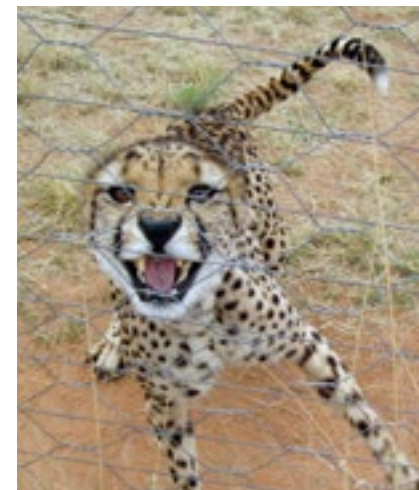
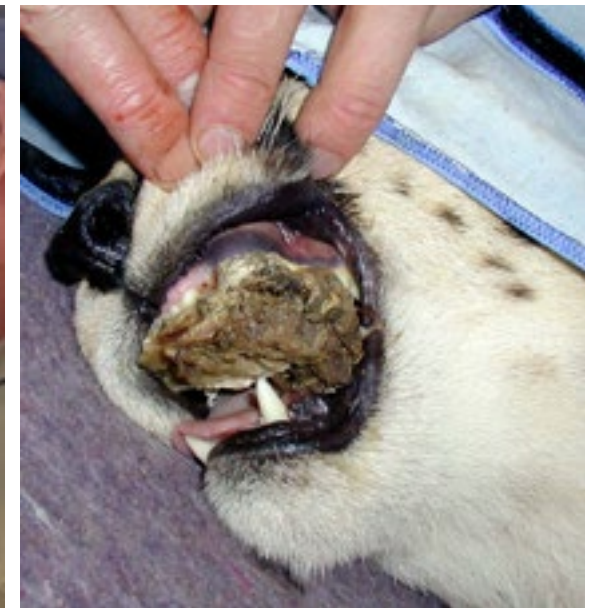
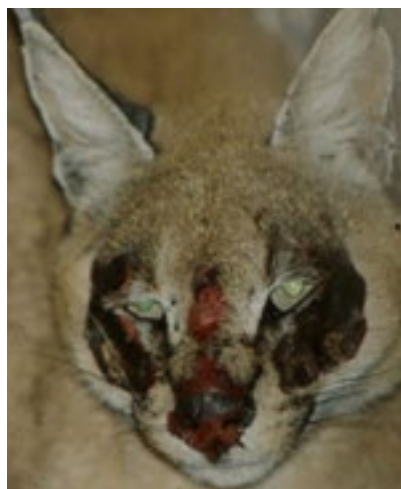


Rosalea guiding guests on the Bushman Trail

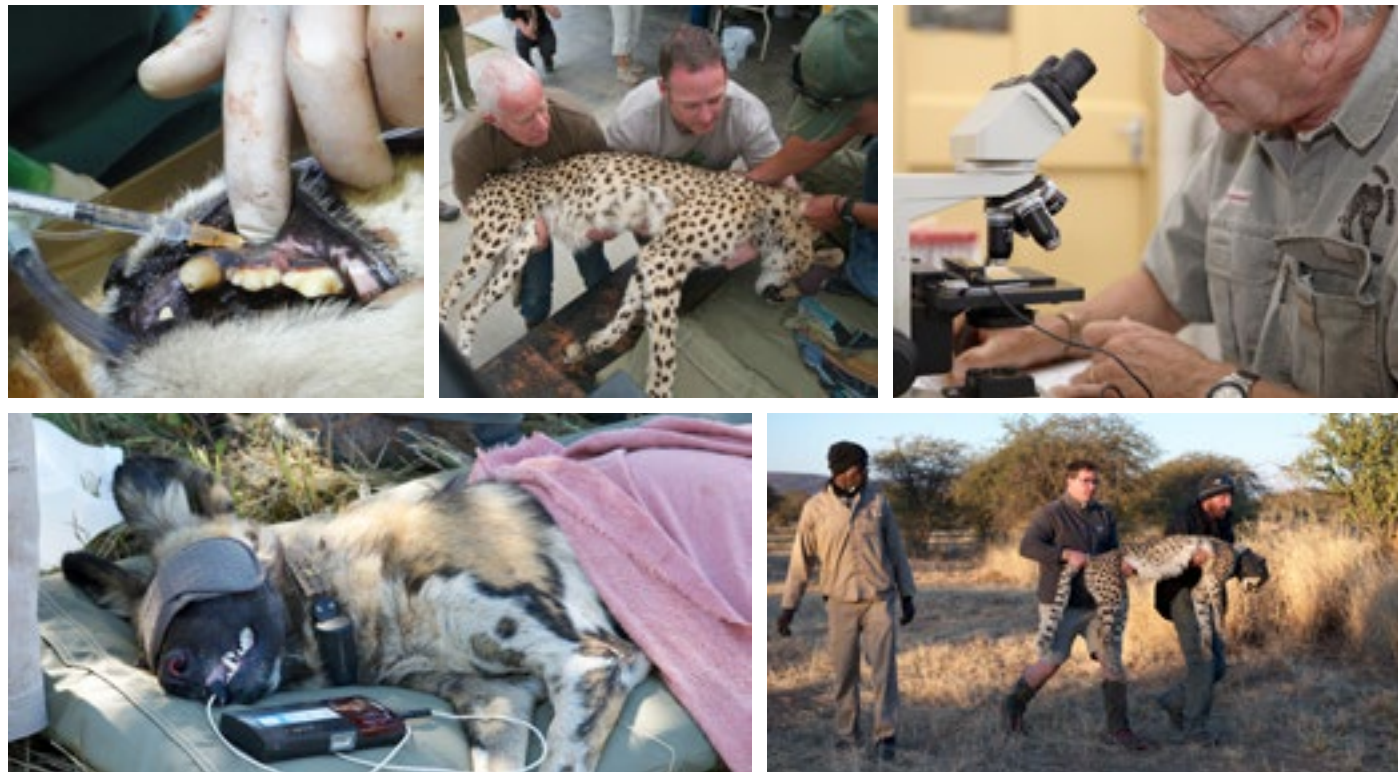
Throughout this time, Wayne and Lise Conradie-Hanssen dedicated themselves to leopard research, working tirelessly to understand the behaviour and needs of this elusive predator, while Rosalea and Donna focused on running the guest-farm and guiding the guests on the Bantu, Bushman, Cheetah and Leopard trails.

Wayne's extensive knowledge, gained from years of monitoring, studying, and living in leopard habitats, not only shaped Okonjima's current focus, but also provided valuable guidance to cattle farmers throughout the region. Meanwhile, Lise committed her efforts to understanding the cheetah.

AfriCat evolved into a sanctuary, offering shelter, sustenance, and care for young, orphaned, or injured cheetahs, leopard, and other carnivores, aiding in their rehabilitation until they could be successfully reintegrated into their natural habitats.







Between 1993 and 2010, AfriCat rescued a total of 1,042 cheetah and leopard, of which 875 were successfully released back into the wild (84% release rate). More specifically, 676 cheetah were rescued, with 534 (79%) being released. For the remaining animals, 113 cheetah (17%) remained in captivity, while 29 (4%) died or were euthanised.

366 leopard were rescued and 340 (93%) were released. Only 10 leopards went into captivity. Some were euthanised due to bad health; others stayed with AfriCat until they died of old age. Those that went into captivity were usually formerly captured, injured or too young to be released. 42% of the animals captured had been previously caught, sometimes on the same farm and sometimes on other farms, demonstrating that they survived after the initial release and benefitted from the 'second chance' often for long enough to have at least one litter to add to the Namibian leopard population.



## CHAPTER 4

### THE AFRICAT FOUNDATION – OBJECTIVES

Approximately 50% of Namibia consists of livestock farms. Commercial or free-hold farmers own their land and run livestock operations commercially, while communal farmers typically engage in subsistence farming. Having also farmed livestock on Okonjima, the Hanssen Family and the AfriCat team were well-positioned to provide correct and effective advice for improved livestock protection from predators. Their approach involved offering valuable information and practical advice to livestock farmers, encouraging them to take responsibility for their livestock's protection and recognise the economic advantages of improved management practices.

After traversing thousands of kilometres across the dusty plains and acacia thickets of Namibia's farmlands, the Hanssens soon realized that farmers face many challenges. Both commercial and communal farmers often struggled with effective livestock management. Common issues included having two calving seasons per year and providing inadequate protection for young calves, sheep, and goats.

The family shared advice with every farmer who had the time and willingness to interact with them. They understood that learning new methods could be sensitive, as they often differed from traditional practices passed down from grandfathers and fathers. Despite being more labour-intensive, these methods proved to be more practical in the harsher environmental conditions of low rainfall, expansive farms covering thousands of hectares, and high predation rates.

By addressing these issues and offering practical, albeit unconventional, solutions, the Hanssens aimed to help farmers protect their livestock more effectively and adapt to the challenging environment.







### ADVICE AND TECHNIQUES

- **Calving Seasons:** Introducing controlled calving seasons to manage the timing of births, as some farmers left bulls with the herds year-round, resulting in continuous reproduction.
- **Predator-Proof Enclosures:** In high predator density areas, introducing enclosures that could protect livestock from predators.
- **Grazing Practices:** Recognising the need to sometimes allow calves to graze with their mothers to prevent loss of body mass due to extended separation.
- **Herdsmen:** Encouraging the use of herdsmen to accompany the herd, providing better protection for young calves. Uplifting the status and training of herdsmen.
- **Long-Horned Bulls and Aggressive Breeds:** Using long-horned bulls with cow/calf herds and, in extreme predator situations, introducing more aggressive breeds like the Brahman.
- **Effective management techniques** must be cost-effective; expenditures should not exceed livestock losses and should only be introduced when losses surpass a sustainable limit.



### MANAGEMENT OF LEOPARD POPULATIONS IN NAMIBIA

Managing leopard populations in Namibia poses unique challenges due to their shy and solitary nature, making accurate population estimates nearly impossible. Unlike other species, one cannot simply extrapolate their numbers from known density estimates in study areas, as factors like rainfall and available resources significantly influence their numbers.

Carnivore management in Namibia is particularly complex, because these animals do not always respond predictably to interventions. For example, attempts to control the lion population in Etosha National Park through contraception had no effect on the number of vagrant lion shot on neighbouring farms. This unpredictability extends to leopard as well. Despite efforts to cull and hunt leopard at Okonjima, these practices did not reduce their numbers but merely created space for migrants from other areas to move in.

Farmers frequently report continuous leopard killings in an attempt to mitigate livestock predation, but these efforts are often futile. The only effective way to manage a carnivore population is by understanding the dynamics driving these populations and adapting farming methods accordingly.







Culling, rather than reducing populations, can actually stimulate them. It allows more sub-adults to survive and replace older animals, resulting in a higher turnover rate without a corresponding decrease in overall population. In some cases, culling can inadvertently benefit these populations instead of achieving the intended reduction.

To improve carnivore management in Namibia, it is crucial to initiate more research projects. These studies would provide a better understanding of the animals and help guide conservation strategies in the right direction. By gaining deeper insights into the ecological and behavioural dynamics of leopard, we can develop more effective management practices that balance the needs of wildlife conservation and livestock protection.



## LOCAL COMMUNITY IMPLICATIONS

Local communities often harbour animosity toward leopard, primarily due to a lack of understanding of their behaviour. This misunderstanding has led to some neighbouring farmers accusing the Hanssen family of being responsible for an increase in leopard in the area surrounding Okonjima. However, it is ecologically impossible for there to be more leopard in an area than the environment can support, making these accusations unfounded.

To address and counteract this negativity, the Hanssen family decided to actively involve their neighbours in leopard research. By including the local community in conservation efforts, they aimed to foster a sense of participation and shared responsibility. This inclusive approach not only helps in demystifying leopard behaviour, but also promotes a cooperative relationship between the farmers and conservationists. Engaging the community in research activities provides them with firsthand knowledge and experience, which can help reduce fear and misconceptions about leopard. This collaborative effort is crucial in building a more harmonious coexistence between humans and wildlife, but is not always a success story.

During our leopard research project between 1998-2001, and to our knowledge, none of the radio-collared leopard have been involved in any conflicts on farms with neighbouring farms at Okonjima. One



immediate neighbour did lose a foal to a leopard, although none of our collared leopard were present in the vicinity at that specific time. Recognising the need for proactive measures, this neighbour agreed to collaborate with us by baiting the leopard responsible and allowing us to radio-collar it. This initiative aimed to monitor its movements closely, providing valuable insights into managing livestock effectively in leopard-prone areas.

Through this collaborative effort, we successfully captured and radio-collared a leopard in the neighbour's vicinity. Over the course of the three-year project, we meticulously monitored this leopard's movements. The introduction of radio-collaring proved particularly intriguing for local farmers, who previously had limited knowledge about leopard behaviour and movements in their areas. Now equipped with this information, they could track and understand the dynamics of leopard presence more comprehensively, fostering increased interest and engagement in wildlife conservation efforts.

This initiative exemplifies our commitment to bridging the gap between conservation research and practical, on-the-ground solutions, ultimately promoting peaceful coexistence between farmers and leopard in the region.



## DISTRIBUTION AND DENSITY

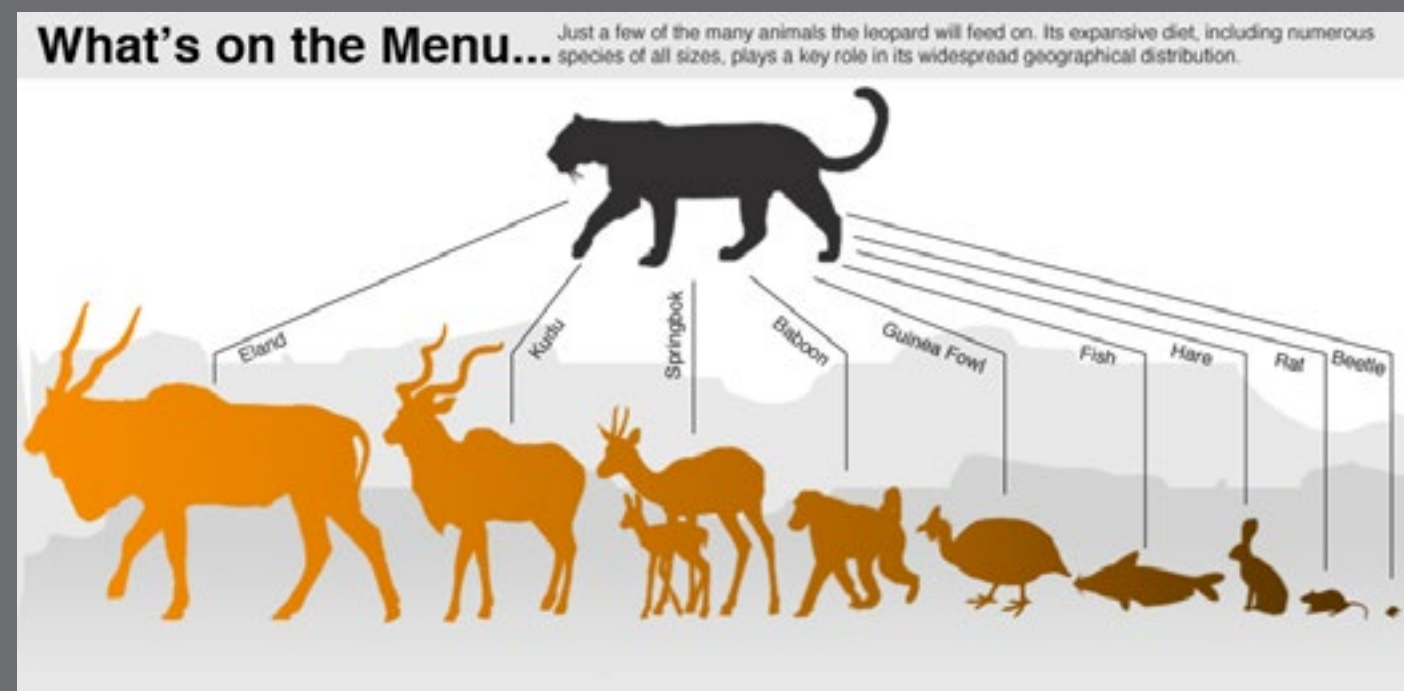
Leopard are found throughout Namibia, with the exception of the true desert in the west where the prey base is insufficient to support their population. They are also absent from areas with dense human habitation, such as the capital city of Windhoek, though they can be found on the outskirts. Population density figures are available only for small, specific areas in Namibia, and these figures vary according to prey availability, which in turn is influenced by rainfall. Consequently, it is not possible to extrapolate accurate population figures from the limited data available.





## STATUS

Leopard are listed on CITES Appendix I, which includes species that are the most endangered among CITES-listed animals and plants. These species are at risk of extinction and are protected in most of their natural range. In Namibia, leopard may be killed if they pose a threat to livestock, provided that such actions are reported to the Ministry of Environment and Tourism. Additionally, limited trophy hunting of leopard is permitted in Namibia, regulated through a strict permit system to ensure sustainability and control.



## HABITS

Leopard are normally nocturnal mammals. They are extremely shy and secretive; this could be because they are actively persecuted on most farms. They tend to hunt animals that are the most abundant within their territory. Although leopard are found in state protected areas such as the Etosha National Park in the north, Khaudom National Park in the north east and the Namib Naukluft Park in the south west, a higher density of leopard are found on communal and free-hold farms as these state-protected areas only cover an approx. 13.8% of Namibia.

There are no reliable population figures for leopard in Namibia, but livestock farmers regularly complain about livestock losses to leopard and regularly catch, poison and shoot them to prevent further losses. Judging by conflict reports by farmers and leopard tracks seen on roads and game paths, the leopard population in most areas in Namibia appears to be stable. Because of their unknown status in Namibia and their vulnerability to habitat loss, conservation of this species is imperative.



## OKONJIMA – FIRST LEOPARD STUDY

In 1997, the Minister of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT) approached AfriCat to initiate Namibia's first collaborative carnivore research study. They had been relocating trapped leopard to 'leopard-friendly' areas and actively baiting leopard for tourism viewing without fully understanding the long-term effects of these actions. But given their involvement in predator conservation and our capacity to raise funds for projects, Okonjima was deemed an ideal site for such a study.

After consulting with Dr. Flip Stander, the then carnivore coordinator for MEFT, the Leopard Study commenced in June 1998. The primary aim of the project was to establish the true density of the leopard population on Okonjima farm. This study marked a significant step towards understanding and managing leopard populations more effectively in Namibia.







### CAPTURE OF WILD LEOPARD ON OKONJIMA

To attract resident leopard, baiting efforts were intensified on Okonjima. Once leopard began taking the bait, strategically placed box-traps disguised as natural tunnels through the vegetation were set up at these sites.

Within just one month of baiting, four leopard were successfully captured: three males aged between 2.5 and 6 years, and a lactating female also 2.5 years old. These leopard were promptly fitted with radio collars and released back into their habitat. Monitoring efforts were rigorous, with Lise tracking their movements daily on foot, and Dr. Flip Stander from MEFT conducting aerial surveys twice monthly.

Four months into the tracking routine, one male leopard was tragically killed on a farm 11 kilometres away. Remarkably, within a week, a younger leopard had already taken over his territory, underscoring the fact that removal of leopard does not ensure a leopard-free area. Months later, another unidentified leopard was successfully trapped. Like the others, he was fitted with a radio collar and closely monitored alongside the rest of the study group.

This intensive tracking and monitoring initiative provided crucial insights into leopard behaviour and movement patterns, contributing significantly to both understanding and conserving leopard in Namibia.

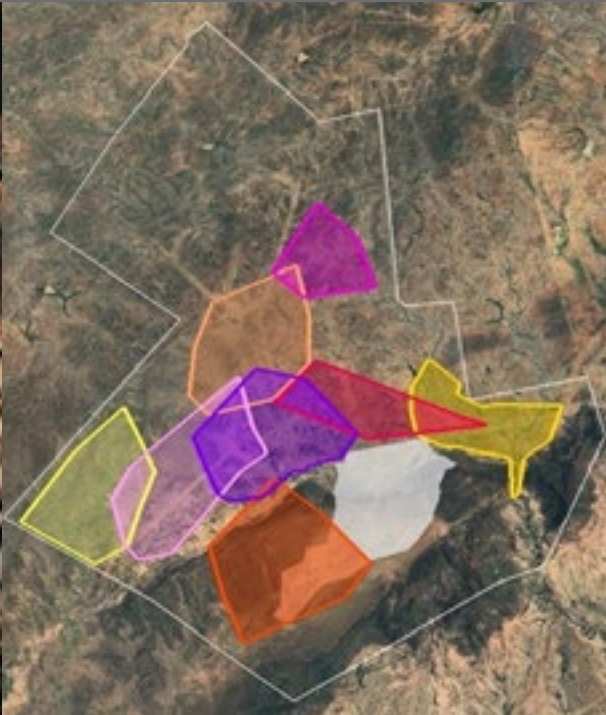


### LEOPARD HOME RANGES

The radio-telemetry study spanned nearly three years, during which they meticulously gathered reliable data on leopard home ranges. This information was pivotal as efforts were transitioned to the new Okonjima Private Nature Reserve. Here, the aim was to further refine their understanding by comparing the territories of collared leopard inside the reserve to those outside.

Unlike previous findings that suggest carnivores typically maintain exclusive territories, the study revealed a surprising level of tolerance among the leopard. Notably, two of the collared leopard exhibited nearly overlapping home ranges. This remarkable tolerance is likely facilitated by the abundant prey available in the area, which supports multiple leopard without triggering aggressive territorial behaviour. This insight challenges conventional wisdom and underscores the complexity of carnivore behaviour in diverse ecosystems like Okonjima. During the 3-year Project, there were eight leopard using Okonjima farm as part of their home range.

As research continues, these findings will guide conservation strategies to ensure the sustainable coexistence of leopard and other wildlife in Namibia.







## CHALLENGES OF IDENTIFYING LEOPARD KILLS

Locating leopard kills poses significant challenges due to their secretive nature and their ability to conceal their prey effectively. Approach to these sites requires caution, as leopard may remain in the vicinity for extended periods (up to 5 days), guarding their kills.

Identifying a leopard kill typically involves monitoring the leopard's movements over several days. Suspicion arises when a leopard consistently remains in a specific area, suggesting it may have made a kill nearby.

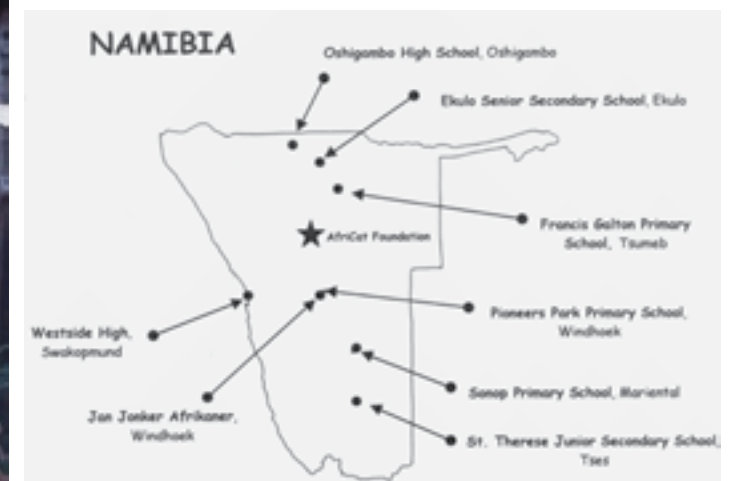
According to observations, most kills involved kudu calves aged between 8 and 12 months. Occasionally, remnants of warthogs were discovered hidden in rocky outcrops. Given the abundance of kudu in the area, it's logical that they constitute the primary prey species for leopard here, aligning with findings from other carnivore studies.

These insights into leopard predation behaviour underscore the importance of ongoing monitoring and research to better understand predator-prey dynamics and support effective conservation strategies.



## CHAPTER 5

### AFRICAT'S NEXT FOCUS



1998 – the Opening of AfriCat's Environmental Education Centre sponsored by W.S.P.A  
Schools from across the country spent time at our EE Centre

Environmental Education (EE) is a process through which individuals gain awareness of their environment, acquire knowledge, skills, values, and determination to act, both individually and collectively, to address present and future environmental challenges.

In 1998, AfriCat launched its environmental education programme to address a critical need among Namibia's youth and farming communities. This initiative aimed to promote greater tolerance towards carnivores, acknowledging the challenges faced by those living alongside wildlife.





Students of all ages and educators from various local and international schools and universities were invited to participate in three- or five-day EE programmes tailored to different age groups. These programmes focused on carnivore conservation and general environmental awareness. Initially operating from the AfriCat Environmental Education Centre (sponsored by W.S.P.A. World Society for the Protection of Animals) and later from the campsite PAWS. (People And Wildlife Solutions). The programmes were co-sponsored by Okonjima Lodge, AfriCat Donors and TUSK UK.

Key elements of the Environmental Education Programmes included:

- Initiatives aimed at raising awareness about environmental issues and fostering understanding of the delicate balance within ecosystems, including the role of carnivores.
- Mitigating Farmer-Predator Conflict: AfriCat worked on reducing conflicts between farmers and predators by implementing improved livestock protection methods, promoting more harmonious coexistence.
- Carnivore Research Significance: Recognising the critical importance of carnivore research, AfriCat emphasised comprehensive studies to develop effective management strategies. This research formed the basis for sustainable conservation efforts for each carnivore species.

Through these initiatives, AfriCat demonstrated its dedication not only to safeguarding carnivores but also to promoting mutual understanding, collaboration, and sustainable practices among diverse stakeholders.



## SHIFTING GEAR: REHABILITATING CAPTIVE-RAISED CHEETAH BACK INTO THE WILD:

Okonjima farm is a mere 5 400 hectares (ha). During the development of the Okonjima Nature Reserve, 4 additional farms, i.e. Ombujongwe – 7 500ha, Joubira – 4 000ha & Marathon – 4 500ha, were included to create the 22 000 ha (55 000 acres – 220 km<sup>2</sup>).



Building upon the promising outcomes of AfriCat's Rehabilitation programme that started in 2000, the next endeavour involved identifying suitable captive cheetah at AfriCat's Carnivore Care Centre and releasing them into the enlarged 16 000ha ONR and also to find other protected Reserves where these cheetah could find a permanent home.

This process of relocation demanded careful expertise in management and ongoing monitoring. The aspiration was that this renewed emphasis would have offered a chance for many cheetah that were currently in captive facilities, to experience a safeguarded, yet untamed existence in their natural habitat. The cheetah, leopard and lion at AfriCat's Carnivore Care Centre that were unable to return to the wild continued to receive dedicated care from the AfriCat team. Sponsorship from donors remained vital for these exquisite creatures, who served as ambassadors for their species.

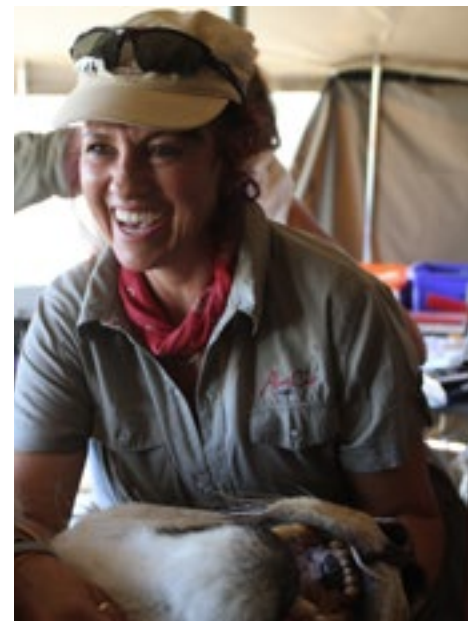
The Okonjima AfriCat Story told by Wayne Hanssen





## CHAPTER 6

### AFRICAT JOINS FORCES WITH THE AFRI-LEO FOUNDATION



#### TAMMY HOTH-HANSSEN

#### DEDICATION TO LION CONSERVATION

Tammy is the eldest sibling of the Hanssen family. She holds a BSc degree in Botany, Zoology, and Geography from the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, as well as a Higher Diploma in Education from the University of Namibia. As soon as Tammy completed her studies, she set her sights on carnivore conservation, with a particular focus on the threatened Namibian lion.

The Hoth family business, a free-hold livestock farm since 1953 and started by her father-in-law Manfred Hoth, now included Tammy and her husband Uwe Hoth. Over time it evolved from sheep and cattle farming, using tried-and-tested mitigation methods to reduce predation - into a tourism venture and nature reserve.

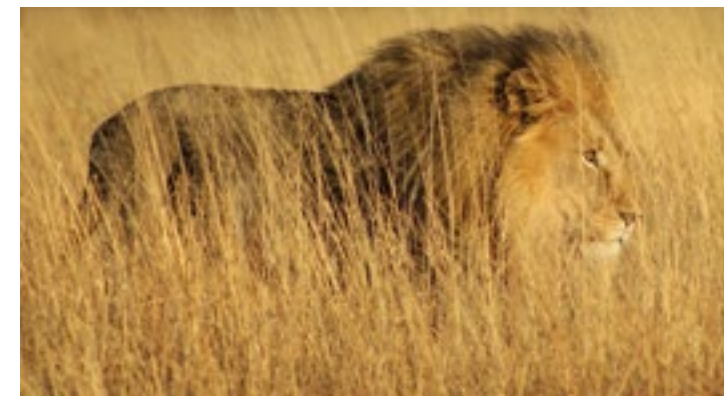
Driven by her desire to make a meaningful impact, Tammy recognised the need to establish a significant presence on farmland and in wilderness areas to protect lions. Her mission included addressing lion-farmer conflict, mentoring farmers in predator-friendly practices, and educating the youth. This vision



led to the creation of the Afri-Leo Foundation in 1997 on Farm Kaross, which borders the southwestern Etosha National Park.

For many years, similar aspirations and a family-bond, brought Tammy into the AfriCat Foundation fold as AfriCat North, primarily the field-base for lion research, human-wildlife conflict mitigation and community support in the Kunene Region.

Largely due to the changing face of wildlife conservation closely linked to human need and increasing operational and project costs, a decision was made to re-brand and to begin a new chapter in Large Carnivore Conservation in the north-west, with emphasis on the Lion (*Panthera leo*).



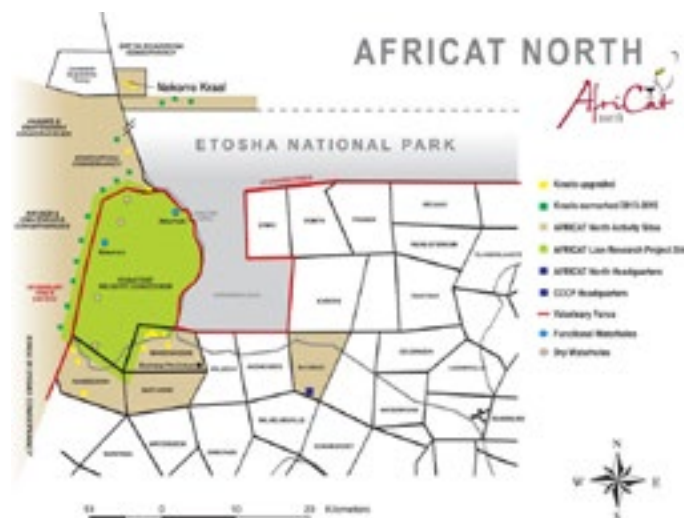
#### AFRI-LEO – AFRICAT NORTH – NAMIBIAN LION TRUST:

2010 The AfriCat Foundation joined forces with the Afri-Leo Foundation, led by Tammy Hoth-Hanssen, to address the critical situation of the Namibian lion. Afri-Leo was subsequently rebranded as AfriCat North.

The central operations of The AfriCat Foundation were always situated within the expansive 220km<sup>2</sup> Okonjima Nature Reserve. At that time 2010-2019, the initiative in the northern region, known as the AfriCat North Programme, was situated along the south-western border of the Etosha National Park.

AfriCat North's mission was to develop and implement solutions to the farmer-lion conflict. Through Conservation Education, they encouraged both young and old to step back and appreciate the privilege of living in the vast, natural world that is Namibia, and to learn to value the pristine wilderness that still exists.





AfriCat North constructed secure enclosures/lion-proof livestock bomas/kraals to protect livestock from lion attacks, significantly reducing livestock losses and human-wildlife conflict.

Mobile 'bomas' were supplied to safeguard livestock that must overnight in the field, offering flexible protection and enabling safer grazing practices, and 'arid-adaptive' farming methods are encouraged. These farming techniques improved upon outdated traditional methods to enhance livestock resilience and reduce dependency on vulnerable practices.

Two other projects Tammy developed, ie. monitoring lion movement with GPS-Satellite collars and the 'Lion Guard Programme'.

By tracking lion movements using GPS collars, AfriCat North gathered critical data to understand lion behaviour, mitigate conflicts, and enhance conservation strategies. These programmes supported both lion and farmers, fostering coexistence through community engagement, education, and practical solutions to reduce human-lion conflicts.

Sadly, AfriCat ended the partnership with its northern branch due to financial constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, the entity formerly known as AfriCat North has evolved into the Namibian Lion Trust, maintaining an unwavering commitment to conserving the Namibian lion. This dedication extends to comprehensive research and safeguarding efforts for the Namibian lion, as well as addressing and managing instances of Human-Wildlife Conflict across communal and freehold farmlands.







## CHAPTER 7

### PERIVOLI OKONJIMA COUNTRY SCHOOL (POCS)

The Perivoli Okonjima Country School (POCS) was established in 2010 through a collaborative effort between Okonjima and James Alexandroff, head of the Perivoli Trusts from the UK. Initially accommodating 20 learners, the school expanded to 70 students from kindergarten to Grade 5. POCS was a pivotal part of Okonjima's contribution to fostering a harmonious relationship and a structured home environment for the children of the Okonjima employees. Our collective passion and understanding for education and conservation were pivotal in the school's creation and ongoing success.

The day started at 7 a.m. with breakfast and lunch provided by Okonjima, allowing children to stay at school while their parents worked. After lunch, students engaged in homework and sporting activities at school. POCS emphasized environmental education and physical fitness, instilling a deep appreciation for nature in its students.

A few unique school attendees joined POCS. Hiccup, an orphaned warthog, and Jima, a Border Collie, were not just pets, but integral parts of the school community. They contributed to the children's education, nurturing a connection with wildlife and animals. As children grew and gained knowledge about animals and their behaviour, they developed self-confidence to handle an animal's unpredictable nature and learn not to fear them, counteracting the behaviour and habits instilled by their parents.

AfriCat's PAWS and Okonjima's POCS aimed to cultivate a lifelong commitment to conservation among its students. By integrating conservation practices into daily activities and education, the school strived to empower children to become advocates for environmental sustainability. The hope was that these young learners would influence older generations to embrace conservation practices, contributing to



broader community awareness and action.

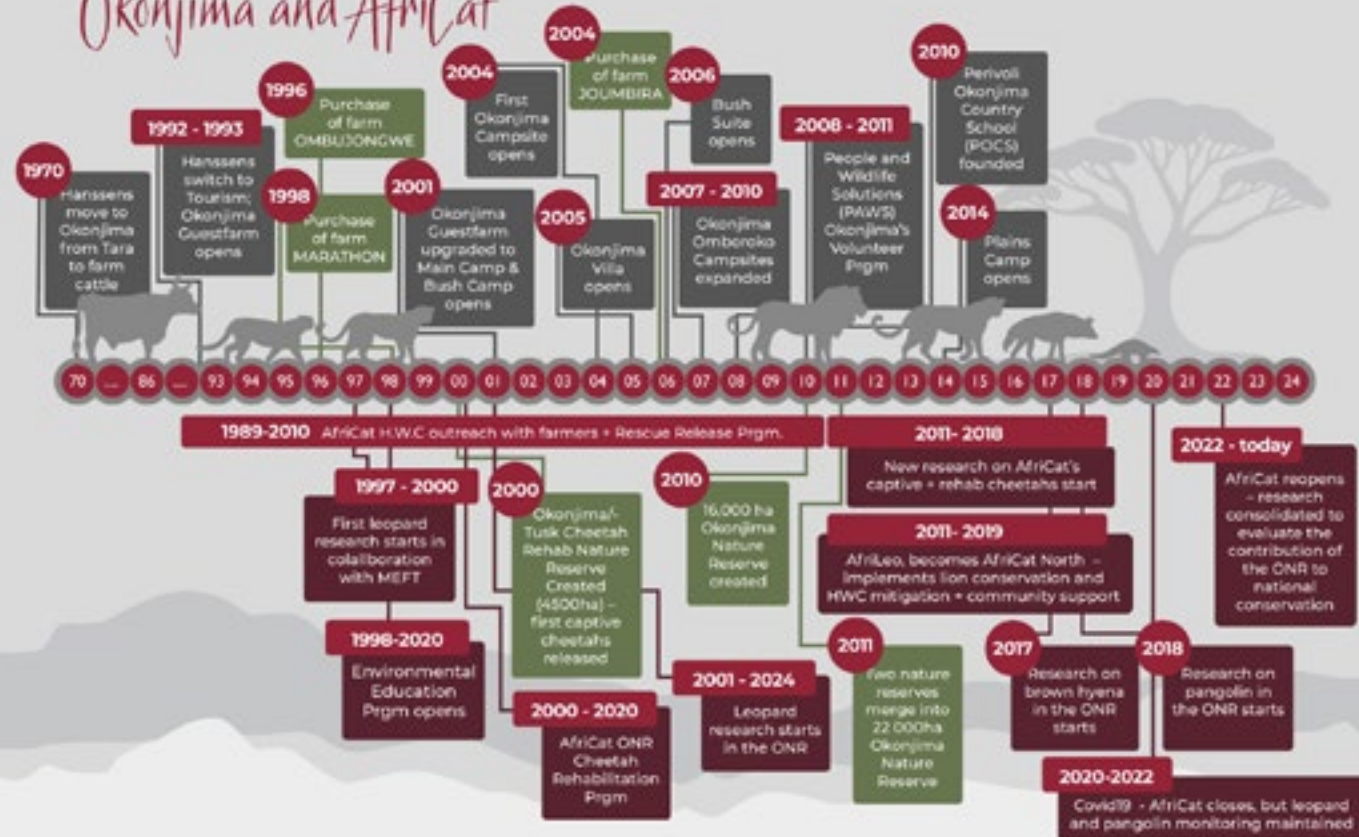
Perivoli Okonjima Country School stood as a testament to Okonjima's commitment to education, conservation, and community engagement. Through its holistic approach to learning and environmental stewardship, POCS played a crucial role in shaping future generations of conservationists, fostering a sustainable relationship between young children and the natural world.

Regrettably, after 10 years of love, laughter, and connection, POCS closed its doors due to COVID-19 and the retrenchment of 180 Okonjima employees.





## THE EVOLUTION OF *Okonjima and AfriCat*



## CHAPTER 8

### GROWTH AND EVOLUTION OF OKONJIMA LODGE

Okonjima Lodge has undergone significant expansions and developments over the years, transforming from a guest farm into a premier lodge and conservation hub in Namibia.



#### EXPANSION TIMELINE:

2001: Bush Camp was completed, enhancing the lodge's accommodation options. 2004: The first campsite was established, offering a rustic outdoor experience.

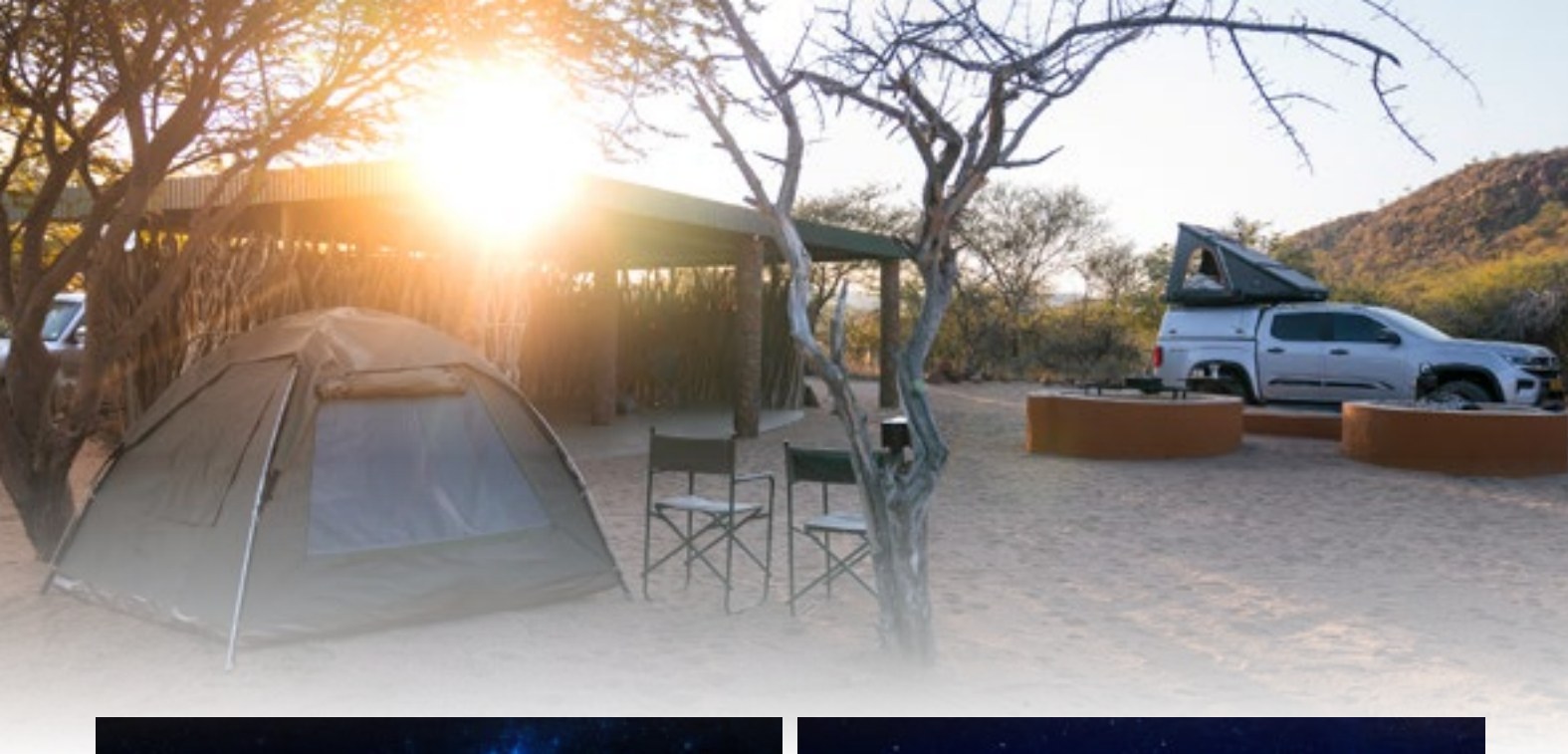
2005: The exclusive Villa was built, becoming the first and only lodge within the Okonjima Nature Reserve.

2006: The luxurious Bush Suite opened its doors to guests.

2007 - 2010: Three additional campsites were constructed, catering to diverse traveller preferences.

2008 - 2011: Between 2002 and the end of 2011, AfriCat ran a volunteer programme called 'People and Wildlife Solutions' (PAWS). During this time, young, fit, and adventurous individuals from around the world volunteered their time with AfriCat. Their main support was to help with invader bush clearing, the removal of internal fences, and cleaning the enclosures of the captive carnivores.





2010: Perivoli Okonjima Country School (POCS) was founded through a collaborative effort between Okonjima and James Alexandroff, head of the Perivoli Trusts from Britain. Initially accommodating 20 learners, the school expanded to accommodate 70 students ranging from kindergarten to Grade 5.

2011: Okonjima merged two reserves totaling 22,000 hectares, creating a larger and integrated conservation area (20 000ha). A rehabilitation safe area was established around the lodges, campsites, and the environmental school (2000ha).

2014: Main Camp was replaced by Plains Camp, reflecting continuous upgrades and improvements.



Guests visiting Okonjima Lodge enjoy exceptional hospitality, including delightful meals, excellent service, and opportunities to gain insights into carnivore conservation efforts. The lodge's commitment to providing up-to-date information enhances the visitor experience.

Okonjima's extensive publicity efforts and stellar reputation have positioned it as one of the most sought-after destinations along Namibia's tourism route. While precise occupancy figures are only available from 1994 onwards, the data clearly indicates a steady increase in visitor numbers since Okonjima's transition from a guest farm to a lodge.

This growth underscores Okonjima's success in balancing conservation efforts with high-quality tourism experiences, contributing significantly to wildlife preservation and local community engagement in Namibia.







## CHAPTER 9

### WHAT DID WE LEARN?

After years of dedicated work in Namibia aimed at safeguarding large carnivores, the realisation hit home by 2011, that:

The survival of all carnivore species on Namibian farmland and across the globe - hinges on the willingness of farmers to coexist with them.

Let's revisit the inception of the Hanssen's Okonjima - 1970 to 1992.

Through hands-on experimentation and simple bush trials, it was discovered that in prime leopard territory like Okonjima, effective livestock management necessitated strategies such as safeguarding young calves from the wild and protecting small livestock like sheep and goats using herdsmen and guard dogs. The most crucial lesson learned over time was the importance of not removing predators, as this disruption upset the ecological balance and led to increased carnivore populations in vacant areas. Thus, AfriCat was established to raise funds for sharing our successful farming methods with Namibian farmers.

Fast forward until today, and the question needs to be asked as to whether the majority of Namibia's farmers have adopted practices that embrace coexistence with wildlife? Unfortunately, the answer is a resounding NO. A significant portion of farmers globally lack environmental consciousness, and many fail to grasp the concept of a harmonious ecosystem. Saving another 10,000 individual carnivores in the future will not rectify this issue. Only comprehensive environmental education, focusing on the broader scope rather than specific species—coupled with global governmental legislation changes and stricter wildlife protection measures can bring about a meaningful transformation.





Carnivores are just one link in the intricate environmental chain. Only by imparting this holistic understanding to those who hold the future of Namibia's farmland in their hands can we make a difference.

Now, the spotlight should shift from individual animals and current farmers to the "next generation farmer." They need to be enabled to recognise their pivotal role in restoring equilibrium to Namibia's delicate ecosystem. These future farmers are integral to the long-term vision of conservation. Only when they comprehend the interconnections within nature, the fragility of the balance, and the far-reaching consequences, will carnivores on Namibia's farmlands stand a chance.

The ultimate goal is to foster an awareness that everything in nature is intricately linked, and this realisation will be the key to securing the coexistence of carnivores and other wildlife.



## CHAPTER 10

### WHO IS WAYNE HANSSEN?

#### CO-FOUNDER OF AFRICAT AND THE ONLY SON OF VAL & ROSE HANSSEN

Born in 1964, Wayne Hanssen's journey began here, where he grew up in the heart of the African bushveld. His formative years were spent with a rifle, a hunting dog, and a local tracker, learning the survival skills of the Bushmen/San, who once roamed this land. By the age of 15, Wayne had hunted his first leopard, an accomplishment that was once seen as a measure of manhood.

Looking back, Wayne realises his perspective has evolved. Yet, the opportunity to grow up with the wilderness as his teacher was an experience that defined his childhood.

One pivotal moment altered his course forever. While tracking a leopard during a hunt, Wayne witnessed a profound sight: the leopard and a magnificent black eagle locked eyes. It was a moment







of majesty and power, an encounter that forever changed his perception. A client's impulsive shot that followed the sighting extinguished the eagle's life, prompting Wayne to rethink his path.

As a result, Wayne and his family made a vow: to save the lives of a hundred animals for each one they had hunted. This pledge laid the foundation for The AfriCat Foundation's inception in 1992. Fast forward to 2023, and Okonjima Farm can proudly proclaim that they have achieved their goal. They epitomise the saying that, "the finest conservationists are often those who once walked the path of hunters".

Today, Wayne Hanssen, along with his siblings Donna and Rosalea, leads Okonjima & AfriCat in a tourism venture that blends authenticity with luxury. Their endeavours fund conservation efforts, environmental education, carnivore research and social responsibility.

Their passion lies in the environment, animals, and grassland science. Their dream is to restore Okonjima's 55,000 acres of Nature Reserve to its former glory before human activity altered it. Their wish centers on the next generation, who hold the fate of this land in their hands—to learn from the past and be the change they envision for Namibia.

Okonjima Lodge and Nature Reserve stands as a dynamic conservation project that truly makes a difference. It serves as The AfriCat Foundation's principal sponsor, covering an impressive 94% of the Foundation's costs.

Tourists who journey responsibly, contribute to this endeavour through their accommodation fees at Okonjima Lodge. Guests come to experience AfriCat's work, and Okonjima provides not only accommodation and service, but also a genuine connection to the Foundation's efforts. A remarkable 94% of the entire project's funding is driven by Okonjima, while AfriCat shoulders the responsibility of animal welfare, contributing 6% through donations.

In sum, this story reflects an evolution from hunting to conservation, driven by a vision to restore balance, educate, and secure a vibrant future for Namibia's wilderness.

Their passion, their dream and their wish are sentiments deeply rooted in their connection to the land they call home: Okonjima in Namibia, Africa.



## CHAPTER 11

### 2020 AND BEYOND . . .

#### FOCUSING CARNIVORE CONSERVATION EFFORTS FOR IMPACTFUL CHANGE

For 27 years, the AfriCat Foundation has embraced the challenge of carnivore conservation from numerous angles. As natural landscapes face fragmentation and gradual reduction, the pressing necessity to examine swiftly emerging 'island-bound'/enclosed habitats and their inhabitants has come into focus. The scarcity of knowledge concerning habitat fragmentation underscores the crucial role AfriCat and the Okonjima Nature Reserve can play in safeguarding species survival.

AfriCat is committing its resources to extensive and enduring research endeavours focused on understanding habitat fragmentation. This effort extends not only to critically endangered species like leopard, rhino, and pangolin, but also to lesser-studied creatures such as brown hyaena, porcupine, armadillo, and honey badger.

Sharing these discoveries stands at the forefront of AfriCat's mission, as we integrate them into our environmental and wildlife research programmes. The intention is to disseminate these findings—our research results—across academia and to impart essential insights to future generations and visitors to our project.

AfriCat aspires to assume a pivotal role in combating habitat and wildlife degradation caused by human intervention and encroachment.







**2022** On March 1, 2022, AfriCat officially resumed its operations following the aftermath of the Covid-19 Pandemic. The organisation had experienced a significant loss of staff, including all researchers, and had to temporarily suspend its activities due to the pandemic's impact. Seizing this moment as an opportunity for reflection and strategic revitalisation, AfriCat collaborated with the Hanssen family, who are both the founders of AfriCat and the custodians of the Okonjima Nature Reserve and together they charted a new course for AfriCat, focusing its future endeavours on research in the realm of conservation.

The aim was twofold: first, to derive insights from past challenges in order to devise sustainable and efficacious resolutions for the ongoing human-wildlife conflict; second, to leverage the advantages of the location within the ONR to expand upon the conservation strategy that involves the establishment and management of protected wildlife areas. Consequently, the chosen avenue of pursuit entailed conducting research into the ecological dynamics of the flora and fauna within the confines of the ONR, a designated and enclosed protected zone. This research aimed to yield valuable lessons applicable to the effective management and augmentation of similar areas dedicated to conservation efforts.

With this defined objective guiding their actions, a comprehensive transformation of the AfriCat team ensued.

Karen Codling assumed the role of the new Director and 2022-2023 was spent re-establishing operational systems, crafting a clear focus for our initiatives, fostering partnerships, procuring advanced research equipment, and meticulously overseeing our financial allocations.

The collaboration involving Okonjima Lodges, the Okonjima Nature Reserve, and the AfriCat Foundation exemplifies the harmonious relationship between conservation and tourism.

Through research conducted by the AfriCat Foundation, it has been established that the Okonjima Nature Reserve provides an optimal ecosystem for pangolin, leopard and brown hyaena. Consequently, the reserve stands as one of the premier locations in the country to observe these typically elusive nocturnal creatures. However, AfriCat's research has also unveiled how the dynamics of species within a protected enclosure undergo changes – with higher population densities, smaller home ranges, and behavioural adaptations due to reduced migration opportunities.

Hence, AfriCat's investigative efforts are centered on comprehending the transformations in the ecology of crucial species within the reserve, encompassing their interactions with the environment. This knowledge plays a pivotal role in the management of enclosed protected regions and informs the formulation of national policies concerning the establishment and maintenance of such areas, aligning with the broader conservation strategy of the nation.

Notably, AfriCat boasts one of the longest-running leopard monitoring projects in Namibia, and their Pangolin Research Project is among the few initiatives worldwide dedicated to the study of free-roaming pangolin.

Conservation is a multifaceted and complex endeavour. When wildlife and humans contend for resources, the solutions rarely offer straightforward paths. As understanding deepens, the strategies must also adapt and develop. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), governmental bodies, conservancies, and the general public all play crucial roles in advancing the cause of preserving the habitats and populations of large carnivores.



## CONCLUSION

Conservation and tourism are probably the most compatible activities in a country like Namibia. Many tourists only take photographs, but still contribute financially to the welfare of the country.

In communal farming areas, now largely grouped into so-called 'conservancies', consumptive (hunting for meat and trophies) and non-consumptive (photographic and game capture) utilisation of wildlife is effectively contributing to poverty reduction, at the same time, ensuring a balanced, sustainable ecosystem.

Importantly, however, the impact of over-utilisation of this natural resource and mass tourism on these extremely sensitive eco-systems, should be effectively monitored, in order to prevent destruction of that which supports communities and attracts our valuable tourist trade.

The symbiotic relationship which exists between the AfriCat Foundation and Okonjima Lodge is imperative to the continued survival of both – without education and research, the essential conservation of large carnivores would falter ... and without the substantial financial support offered by foreign visitors who stay in the Okonjima lodges, neither would survive!

The role of the Hanssen Family on Okonjima and within the business remains inclusive and hands-on.

Okonjima remains a family-owned and operated enterprise. From the inception of the guest farm from 1986, the Hanssen family has been deeply involved in every aspect of daily management, including reservations, check-ins, guiding, cooking, and farm oversight.

Today, they continue to oversee operations, with all senior management reporting directly to the family as the company's directors.

The Hanssens still reside on Okonjima, maintaining their hands-on approach and ensuring the legacy and vision of their business and conservation efforts endure.





## CHAPTER 12

### NOT THE END – BUT THE BEGINNING OF A NEW CHAPTER! THE FAMILY TODAY -2024

#### OKONJIMA AND THE AFRICAT FOUNDATION LEADERSHIP AND SHAREHOLDERS

##### WAYNE HANSSEN

- Co-owner of Okonjima Lodge and Okonjima farm and Nature Reserve
- Founder and Trustee of the AfriCat Foundation
- Director of Park operations and financial Lodge and park management. Responsible for overseeing all aspects of Park logistics and wildlife management, including land sales, taxes, expansions, financial decision-making, game-capture and overall planning.
- Ensures financial planning aligns with the organisation's strategic objectives and operational needs.
- Works closely with accountants and financial analysts to develop and monitor spending plans for large projects.
- Makes strategic financial decisions to ensure the long-term sustainability and growth of the Park. Wayne has always been a strategic thinker with a deep understanding of financial management, logistics, and operational excellence.

##### DONNA HANSSEN

- Co-owner of Okonjima Lodge and Okonjima farm and Nature Reserve
- Trustee of the AfriCat Foundation
- Oversees lodge operations, including interior aesthetics/decor, trail design and the overall guest experience.
- Together with Tyla Hoth (Tammy Hoth-Hanssen's daughter), Donna oversees Okonjima and AfriCat online marketing focussing on social media, web marketing, optimising content and website structure for search engines

##### ROSALEA HANSSEN

- Co-owner of Okonjima Lodge and Okonjima farm and Nature Reserve
- Trustee of the AfriCat Foundation
- Oversees lodge operations, including reservations and overall guest experience
- Responsible for the selection of merchandise for the curio shop that aligns with the lodge, sourcing unique and locally crafted items, managing inventory, pricing and profitability and ensuring the curio shop offers a diverse and appealing range of products to guests and visitors
- Home maker and mother and responsible for the next Okonjima generation

##### LUIGI BASSI

- Shareholder in Okonjima Lodge
- Husband of Rosalea Hanssen
- Okonjima's Bee-keeper and with his degree in agriculture, responsible for overseeing all aspects of irrigation systems for food crop cultivation. Luigi has a good comprehensive understanding of agricultural practices with a strong knowledge of irrigation systems and sustainable agricultural practices, contributing to the overall success and sustainability of the organisation
- Home maker and father of the next Okonjima generation.

##### YOLANDI ROOS

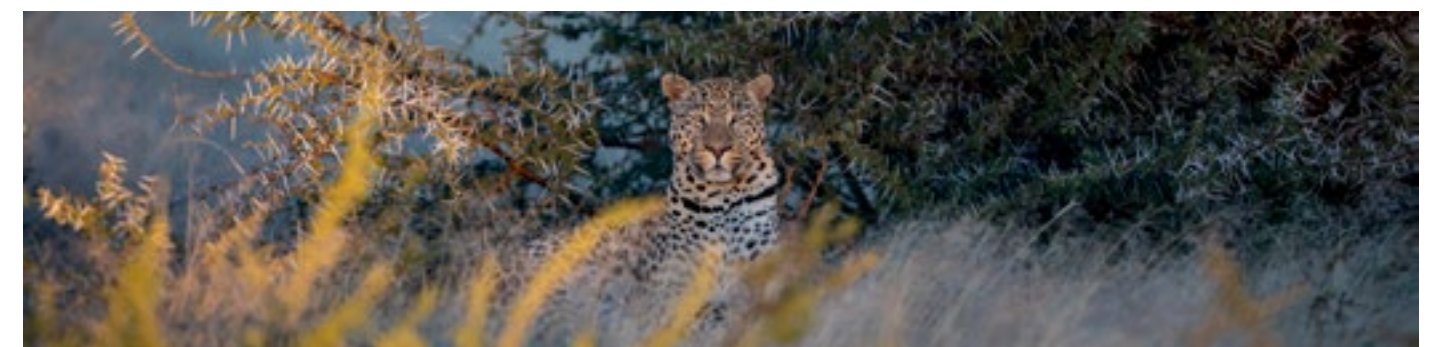
- Shareholder in Okonjima Lodge
- Life partner of Wayne Hanssen
- Supervises all Lodge gardens
- Oversees the family finances, monitors cashflow, including debt collection and credit control for the lodge
- Takes on the role as Okonjima's Mother Teresa – keeps the balance and peace in the Valley

##### TRISTAN BOEHME

- Shareholder in Okonjima Lodge
- Joined the family in 1999
- Oversees lodge operations and in-house training, including interior aesthetics and decor and the overall guest experience
- Travel Trade and Relations Marketing Manager. This includes: Manages relationships with travel agents and tour operators. Showcases the lodge's products and services to the travel industry. Develops and implements marketing strategies aimed at travel trade partners
- Coordinates group marketing efforts and promotes the lodge within the travel trade sector. Organises familiarisation trips and presentations to increase awareness and bookings and represents the lodge at industry events, trade shows, and networking

##### TAMMY HOTH-HANSSEN

- Director of Namibian Lion Trust
- Heads the Okonjima Guide-Training Programme







### THE NEXT GENERATION:

- **Keanu Bassi-Hanssen** (born 2003) currently studying International Business in Holland
- **Jayd Bassi-Hanssen** (born 2004) starting her studies in Business and Hospitality Management in Holland, and
- **Kayden Bassi-Hanssen** (born 2006) completing his final year of high/secondary school at Bridge House College, SA.
- All directing their love of the land and wildlife, as well as their studies, towards taking Okonjima to the next level.
- **Janek Hoth**, the son of Tammy and Uwe Hoth, spent some time on Okonjima after completing his B.Com in Financial Investment Management at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. From 2011 until 2017, Janek's responsibilities at Okonjima included park management, flying, game capture, financial budgeting and assisting Wayne with business planning. Additionally, Janek holds a commercial helicopter license.
- **Tyla Hoth**, is the daughter to Tammy & Uwe Hoth, finished up High School in Bridge House College in South Africa after which she completed her bachelor's degree in Digital Marketing in Cape Town in 2014. She started working on a freelance basis for Okonjima in 2015. Over the last decade she has grown her clientele within the digital marketing portfolio with Okonjima being one of her main clients.
- **Shanna Groenewald-Hoth**: Shanna Hoth (wife of Janek Hoth) joined Okonjima from 2013 to 2017. Her role encompassed overseeing the lodge teams, from gardens to guides and bar-men, as well as assisting managers in their roles and with training. Shanna also interacted with guests, ensuring a memorable experience. "During my time at Okonjima, I discovered my passion for working with people and upskilling, matching the right individuals to the perfect roles across our lodge group."



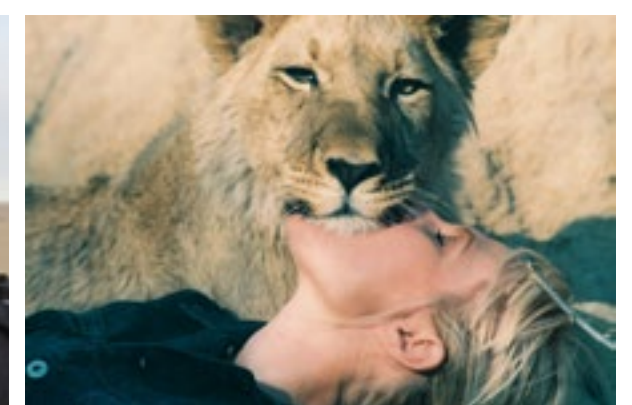
The winds of change blow through the desert plains, rocky outcrops and acacia thornveld of Namibia, and with it has come an expanding interest in Namibia as a tourist destination. No longer confined to the limited options of cattle farming or hunting, the Hanssens recognised an opportunity to redefine their relationship with the land.

Okonjima, once a humble cattle farm, now stands as a testament to the Hanssen family's commitment to preserving the intricate tapestry of Namibia's ecosystems.

As the sun sets over the savannah, casting hues of orange and pink across the horizon, the Hanssen family gather around a fire, the crackling flames mirroring the warmth in their hearts towards the environment they love. The legacy they have built is not just about preserving the wild; it is about forging a connection between generations, between the past and the future, and between humans and the majestic carnivores that roam freely in the land they call home. . . Okonjima – home of AfriCat.









# NATURE RESERVE

