



Sperrgebiet National Park

Wildlife wonders in the Sperrgebiet National Park

Conservation scientists have proclaimed the Sperrgebiet one of the world's top 34 biodiversity hotspots, an honour earned principally by the unique and superabundant species of succulents found in the area, 234 of which are endemic and 284 of which are Red Data listed. The Sperrgebiet is the most biodiverse region in Namibia and the Succulent Karoo biome, of which it is part, supports more species of succulents than any other place on earth. The horseshoe-shaped inselbergs provide shelter from the wind and are particularly rich. Aurusberg, for example, has 80 plant species, some found nowhere else on earth. After spring rains, literally millions of succulents flower, carpeting the normally bleak landscape in a fiery blaze of colour.

Historical information shows that large mammals such as hippos, elephants and lions occurred in this area. Though they are no longer found in the Sperrgebiet, the park has still has populations of gemsbok, springbok, grey rhebok,

leopard, aardwolf, brown and spotted hyaena, and cheetah, as well as smaller mammal species such as African wild cat, bat-eared fox and the Cape clawless otter.

Off-shore, 35 species of whales and dolphins have been recorded. Oceanic and deep-sea species are temporary visitors ('vagrants') but the Benguela dolphins are loyal coastal inhabitants. They are one of the world's rarest dolphin species, occurring only in south-west African waters, the bulk of the global population favouring Namibia.

All the islands, which have been proclaimed as a marine-protected area by the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources, are havens for breeding seabirds. Ichaboe Island is a crucial African penguin habitat.

On the beach

The Sperrgebiet National Park hosts two seal species. The southern elephant seal, which often weighs over a ton,



puts in occasional appearances. Roughly half of Namibia's Cape fur seal population (500 000 or so, although numbers fluctuate) has established colonies in the Sperrgebiet. Their principal predators, brown hyaena and jackal, orbit the seal colonies and utilise shipwrecks, caves and tunnels as lairs, leaving spectacular trails of footprints in the sand.

Thanks to the nutrient-rich Benguela Current, seaweed growth rates off the Sperrgebiet coast are some of the highest in the world. Harvested further north for agar, used in brewing and scientific work, washed-up seaweed in the Sperrgebiet sustains small crustaceans, while the living seaweed forests act as fish nurseries.

At least 190 species of spider occur in the Sperrgebiet, including the seashore spider which makes its home in mussel shells. At high tide it shelters under the shell. To prevent it from being washed away, it spins an anchor out of web. Fine body hairs store air and act as aqualungs enabling the spiders to breathe when submerged.

The total number of seabirds and wetland birds in the Sperrgebiet is close to half a million. African Penguins suffered a serious population collapse when guano scrapers destroyed their island habitats. Over-fishing has also dealt them a blow, but their numbers are slowly increasing. Other charismatic bird species include greater and lesser flamingo, Cape gannets, sacred ibis, martial eagle, African fish-eagle, Damara tern, goliath heron, Cape eagle-owl, Maccua duck and cormorants.

Numerous semi-intact shipwrecks line the Sperrgebiet National Park coast, serving as roosts for seabirds and shelters for seals. Seals are not always good neighbours and have been recorded eating seabirds, particularly penguins.

On the plains

Even when you explore a tiny fraction of the more than 26 000 square kilometres that comprise the Sperrgebiet, there appears an endless field of succulent plants and colour. Pink flowers emerge on top of the spiky stems, yellow and white petals emerge from thick, fleshy stems, and the bulb-like tubes of the Bushman's candle, a plant that, when burned, emits a strong incense, cover the plains.

Over millions of years succulents have proved themselves perfectly capable of adapting to the harsh conditions that characterise the Sperrgebiet. Occurring in areas that would kill most plants in minutes rather than hours they have evolved to beat drought, heat, frost and strong winds. Their tough skins and stems insulate the plants from climatic extremes. Their fleshy leaves act as botanical 'vacuum flasks', retaining precious rainwater on the rare occasions that it is available, storing fog moisture and resisting evaporation when temperatures soar. To thwart attack they have come up with numerous strategies; bitter sap, poisons, spikes, hooks, and in the case of stone plants, extremely convincing camouflage.

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Environmental Care Code

Please adhere to the following:

- Only enter the park with Ministry of Environment and Tourism concessionaires.
- Keep to existing roads and tracks.
- Do not litter.
- Do not remove any plant or animal material or artifacts from the park.
- Follow the rules and regulations on your park permit.

Enjoy the magic that is the Sperrgebiet National Park!

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