

# Desert elephant eco-tourism by the Himba tribe, Namibia (desert example)

## Introduction

We illustrate another example of a village of the nomadic Himba tribe in the desert region of northern Namibia, who in the face of their declining way of life, have found a new livelihood providing eco-tourism via desert elephant <sup>(1)</sup>. Subsisting from floodplain forests around seasonal rivers – oases, one might call them – they have begun to offer eco-tourism services based around the desert elephants also living there. Under tough dry-season conditions, they have traded their livelihood for market economics, providing us with another research case of how the region’s natural environment has offered a new way of life.



## Geographical position and the natural environment

The Namibian climate features increasing rainfall from the coastal region through to the north-east, and changing landscape from desert through to steps and savannah. The insufficient rainfall in the Namib desert region on the coast makes agriculture impossible. In the region with average yearly rainfall less than 250mm, there are only sparse grasses and shrubs; goats and sheep are raised there. The region with 250-400mm rainfall per year sees a shift from farming of small animals to cattle <sup>(2)</sup>. The area covered by this study is located around the seasonal Hoarusib river in the Kunene region of north-western Namibia, settled by the Himba tribe.



The floodplain forest of Hoarusib river  
From Mifuyu Yoshida “Himba and Desert elephant”<sup>(1)</sup>

This is situated in the north Namibian desert, with an annual rainfall of 50mm. The people make a scant living by livestock farming.

A seasonal river is one in which water only flows at certain times, during the wet season. The banks of the Hoarusib are dominated by riverside acacias, making it home

to desert elephants, lions, giraffes, springboks and other wild animals. Virtually no plants are grown in the surrounding desert region.

### **Involvement in eco-tourism**

The Himba first began a permanent settlement here in the 1980s, on a site previously used for temporary camps driving cattle along the Hoarusib river. Once settled, an NGO began a tourism development plan based around the desert elephants; in the 1990s a tourist trade involving the native people sprung up. This led to the settlement continuing, the focus shifting from stock farming to tourism. In 1995, tourists come from 30 countries came to the newly-opened village-run campsite. The running of the camp is guided by an NGO, with the villagers distributing the profits amongst themselves. 21 villagers are employed full time, with 5% of profits from the lodge going to the village community.

### **Lifestyle**

The Himba usually eat a cornflower-based gruel; meat such as beef, goat and springbok is eaten around once every 2 weeks. Despite the income derived from tourism, there have been no major changes. After pension costs, the campsite and other sources related to tourism comprises nearly 80% of income to average households. Corn flour, the basic foodstuff, is bought with cash; other daily necessities such as school fees, clothes etc. are also largely dependent on cash. It can be said that the people of the region today have built their livelihoods on desert elephant eco-tourism.

### **Support of the riverside by the Himba and the future of the desert elephants**

Conversation with the inhabitants indicates that damage to the riverside environment by the elephants has increased rapidly over the last 10 years. The study area is also visited by elephants coming in from the national park. Destruction of trees by elephants and development of the area for tourism is jeopardizing the survival of the riverside area. Deterioration of the riverside will cause a drop in the incidence of elephants visiting the area, which will have a resultant effect on tourism.

From the authors' experience living with the Himba in the area, it appears that with the current dwindling of stock farming, the Himba will not be able to easily change their cash-dependent way of life. In order for the Himba of the village to continue living on eco-tourism from the desert elephants, they need to maintain the land around the seasonal rivers.

In this desert region example, the natural environment in which the people live is extremely harsh. There, the livelihood based on continuous use of resources is in decline. This is markedly different from the case of Japanese Satoyama in terms of both environment and appearance. However, to continue their own way of life, the need to protect the underlying natural environment is essentially the same in these extremely harsh environments.

- (1) Mifuyu Yoshida "Himba and Desert elephant" *Geography*, October, Vol. 52, p92-97, 2007,[in Japanese]
- (2) Kazuharu Mizuno "Africa where coexistence of various nature, races, languages, and cultures in one country" *Geography*, October, Vol. 52, p58-65, 2007,[in Japanese]