

Torra Conservancy pays dividends to members

LINDA BAKER at BERGSIG

MEMBERS of the Torra Conservancy in Kunene Region received a welcome cash boost during the first week of January as a reward for caring for their natural resources.

About 300 members of Namibia's flagship Conservancy were given a dividend of N\$630 each, out of a total of N\$200 000.

This is less than a third of profits received by the Conservancy last year.

Chairman of Torra Conservancy, Jantjie Rhyn, described the payment as an historic event in the Conservancy's timeline.

"The dividend pay-out is the first cash benefit that individual members have received in recognition of their commitment to conserving wildlife," he said.

Hard work by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), local NGOs, traditional authorities and local residents has led to increases of up to tenfold in wildlife numbers in the area.

The dividend was paid out of revenue earned from a joint venture with Wilderness Safaris, the sale of about 500 springbok to Seeis Commercial Conservancy and from trophy hunting revenue received from Savanna Safaris.

Headman Jakob Basson and his son, local businessman Kobie Basson, described the event as "a dream come true".

"For many years we have heard promises of improved living standards as a result of our Conservancy's work, and today that promise is starting to come true," the headman said.

The first people to receive their dividend were residents of the remote Melkbosrand farm about 120 km west of Khorixas.

A jubilant resident, the wheelchair-bound Josef Someb, could not contain his joy over the surprise gift from the Conservancy.

For security reasons, the pay-out was not advertised before the event.

"Now we understand more about our Conservancy and the importance of conserving our wildlife," he explained.

"In future, we will take even greater care of our precious animals."

Members over the age of 60 also received a Christmas package from the Conservancy.

Each senior citizen received a blanket, while men received socks, wallets and hats, and women received handbags and scarves.

Rhyn pointed out that residents had already benefited from the Conservancy in

several ways.

These included increased employment as a result of an upsurge in tourism, the receipt of meat from trophy hunting and an own-use quota that is carefully determined by MET.

The community has also benefited as a result of the Conservancy's donations of N\$20 000 and a photocopier machine to the school at Bergsig and a gift of N\$10 000 for the establishment of a kindergarten.

Earlier last year, Torra conducted a visioning process to plot the course of the Conservancy and to define goals and activities for the next five years.

High on the agenda of most members was a wish to be provided with more information about the Conservancy and better communications.

Caring for the elderly, better natural resource management, more training and education opportunities and benefits distribution were also highlighted.

The dividend payment was the first step in implementing the vision.

During the pay-out, members also received a copy of the Conservancy's first newsletter, which will in future be published three times a year.

The newsletter aims at closing the information gap between members and their committee, while providing information about the local school, clinic, and various Government departments such as the Namibian Police, Agriculture and Water.

The Namibian Police helped with security during the week-long pay-out.

They accompanied committee members to farms in the Conservancy.

All members were required to sign for their pay-out and to produce suitable identification documents.

Torra Conservancy was gazetted in 1998 in accordance with legislation tabled in 1996 that enables registered conservancies to become custodians of their wildlife.

The name Torra refers to the rocks found in the area.

One resident said that the rocks have become the diamonds of the Conservancy as they attract tourists and create spin-off activities for members.

In 2000, Torra became the first of the 15 gazetted conservancies to take over its own running costs, including salaries, vehicle maintenance and office management.

Prior to that, it was supported by the award-winning non-governmental organisation, Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC).

IRDNC supports about 35 established and emerging conservancies in Kunene and Caprivi Regions.