

# Beyond the Scenery : MEFT Unveils Upgraded Roads Infrastructure and Intensified Rhino Conservation Efforts within Etosha National Park.

—Nrupesh Soni - Namibia Travel & Tourism Forum

Embarking on a comprehensive journey into the heart of one of Africa's oldest and most renowned National Parks, the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT) Namibia recently invited media and journalists on a three-day tour of Etosha National Park (ENP). This meticulously curated trip spotlighted the Ministry's innovative infrastructure enhancements and robust conservation strategies, revealing a transformed vision of sustainable tourism and wildlife protection in Namibia.

High-profile officials from the Ministry, including Hon. Pohamba Shifeta, the Minister of MEFT, Mr. Colgar Sikopo, the Deputy Executive Director of the Department of Natural Resources, and Mr. Boas Erkki, the Director of Planning and Technical Services, were key figures on the tour. Their presentations and interactive discussions offered insights into the symbiotic relationship between conservation, infrastructure, and tourism, and emphasized the Ministry's dedication to creating a future where these elements coexist in harmony.

Hon. Minister Shifeta took the opportunity to engage in open dialogue with the media, addressing concerns related to the park's management and the larger conservation narrative in Namibia. A fervent advocate for collaborative conservation, the Minister stressed the importance of collective action involving stakeholders, public engagement, and constructive discourse rather than criticism.

Split across three days, the tour took the media on a deep dive into various facets of Etosha's transformation, featuring an exclusive rhino dehorning session, a detailed inspection of the park's upgraded tourist roads, and elaborate presentations on the Ministry's ongoing and future projects.

As we explore the expedition further, the recurring theme becomes clear: an unwavering commitment to balance development and conservation while fostering an environment that promotes ecological well-being and sustainable growth in the tourism sector.

## Proactive Stance on Rhino Protection: A Look at the Science, Necessity, and Impact of Dehorning

During our immersive tour of the Etosha National Park, one experience that undeniably stood out was our first hand encounter with rhino dehorning, a critical conservation effort spearheaded by the Ministry of Environment, Forestry, and Tourism (MEFT).

At the forefront of these efforts, Hon. Pohamba Shifeta, the Minister of MEFT, highlighted the significance of rhino dehorning as a measure to safeguard Namibia's rhino population as he personally partook in the dehorning of a rhino during our expedition. The Minister's active participation served as a powerful statement of his commitment and the Ministry's dedication to preserving Namibia's precious wildlife heritage. This dehorning operation, although expensive, costing between US\$1500 - US\$2000 per rhino, is a necessary investment in the conservation of these majestic creatures. Since 2017, Namibia has remarkably dehorned over 2000 rhinos, thereby protecting them from poachers and reducing injuries due to

infighting within the herds. On a day blessed with optimal weather conditions, a diligent team could dehorn up to 15-20 rhinos, reflecting the intensity of these conservation efforts.

However, rhino dehorning is not exclusive to Namibia. It's a global strategy adopted in various countries, particularly where rhino populations face severe threats from poaching. South Africa, housing the world's largest rhino population, has extensively employed dehorning, resulting in noticeable decreases in poaching rates. Zimbabwe, too, observed significant reductions in rhino poaching in the 1990s due to its successful dehorning strategy.

Despite its success, it's important to recognize that dehorning is just one piece of the larger conservation puzzle. Although a dehorned rhino is less likely to be poached, it is not immune to the threat. Tragically, there have been instances where dehorned rhinos were killed by poachers to avoid tracking the same animal again. This underscores the necessity of coupling dehorning with robust anti-poaching measures such as enhanced security and vigilant surveillance.

The horn plays a vital role in a rhino's day-to-day behavior, including digging for water and defending territories. While dehorning could potentially affect these behaviors, the negative impacts are considered less severe than the risks posed by poaching. Additionally, while the lack of a horn could make calves more vulnerable to predation, evidence suggests that the survival rates of calves in dehorned populations do not significantly differ from horned populations.

Without a doubt, the most significant challenge of dehorning is its cost. But as shown by Namibia and other nations, the long-term survival and sustainability of rhino populations justify this investment. In conclusion, rhino dehorning is a potent conservation tool that can significantly reduce poaching rates. However, to achieve its full potential, it should be augmented by other initiatives, like strengthening law enforcement, raising public awareness, and engaging communities in conservation efforts.

## Driving Progress: The Interplay of Tourism, Infrastructure Upgrades, and Challenges on Etosha's Roads

The tour moved into its next phase with a spotlight on Etosha National Park's infrastructure upgrades, primarily the road network. Mr. Boas Erkki, Director of Planning and Technical Services at MEFT, underlined how these improvements enrich visitor experiences and simplify park management tasks.

Etosha National Park's expansive road network spans about 1260km, segmented into primary, secondary, and tertiary roads. This comprehensive system connects the park's stunning terrains and wildlife habitats, making the exploration of its treasures a smoother affair.

Maintenance of such an extensive network is a formidable task, as weather conditions and regular use take a toll. Recognizing past instances of road disrepair causing distress to tourists and tour operators, MEFT committed to continual upgrades.

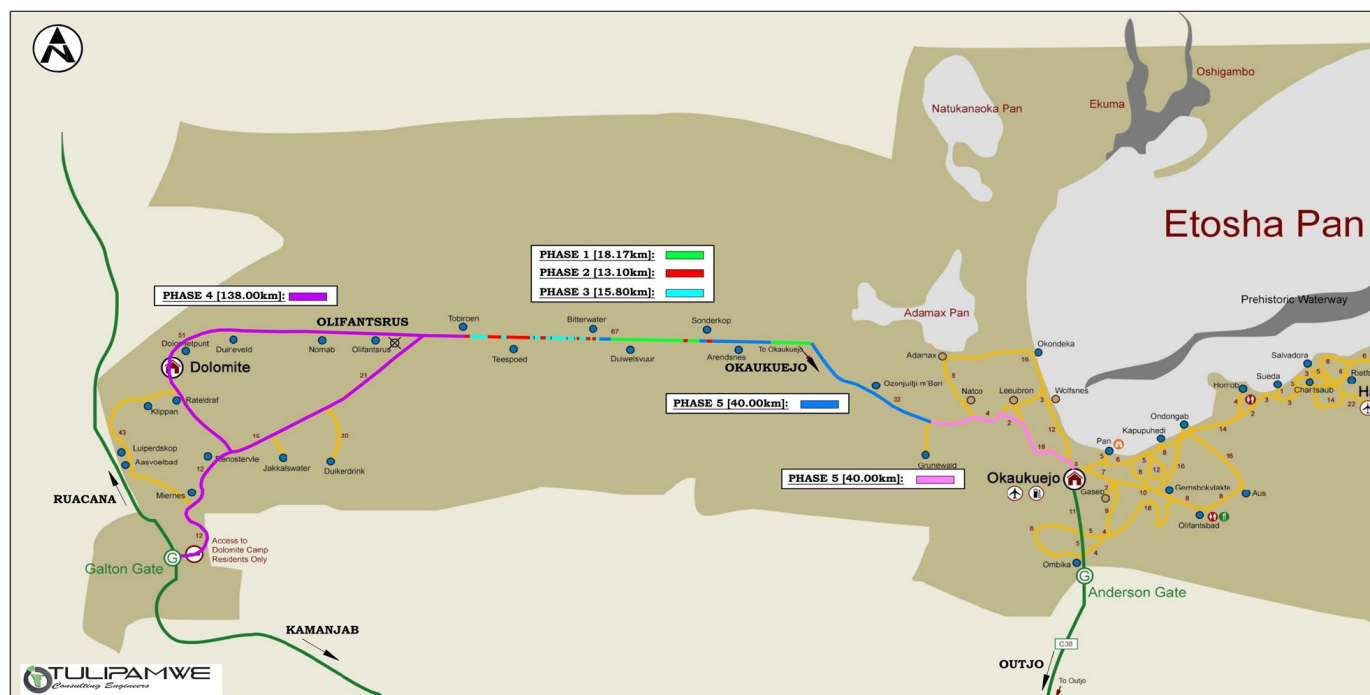
An initiative to upgrade tourist roads within the park commenced in 2009 and went on till 2017, prioritizing the central and eastern sections of the park. A significant 282.1km of the road network underwent an upgrade, vastly enhancing accessibility and driving comfort. Building on this success, another wave of upgrades has been in action since 2018, concentrating on the unrestricted western part of the park.

Financial support from the Road Fund Administration (RFA) played a pivotal role in these upgrades of more than N\$160,249,316.94 million (phase 4 (N\$100,249,316.94) and (phase 5 N\$60million). MEFT, however, underscores the need for long-term solutions that encompass securing ample funding through annual budget allocations and the institution of Conservation fees. This funding is earmarked for consistent infrastructure maintenance within the park, equipment replacement, and the execution of infrastructure maintenance plans.

Enhanced roads in Etosha National Park signal MEFT's unwavering dedication to conserving and showcasing Namibia's wildlife and natural beauty. These roads, by offering seamless access and a comfortable journey, invite tourists and locals to engage more deeply with Namibia's rich natural heritage. The roads within Etosha National Park serve as much more than mere transportation paths; they're gateways to a world that deserves our admiration, respect, and relentless preservation efforts.

Below is the outline of the recent work done on the roads construction/upgrades :

PHASE	LENGTH (km)	APPROVED CONTRACT AMOUNT (N\$)	ACTUAL EXPENDITURE (N\$)	COMMENCEMENT DATE	COMPLETION DATE
Phase 1	18.17	12,237,207.40	12,217,285.33	1-Feb-2019	21-Aug-2019
Phase 2	13.10	8,034,890.71	8,055,058.02	1-Feb-2020	29-Sep-2020
Phase 3	15.80	11,849,358.11	11,824,168.29	4-Aug-2020	11-Feb-2021
Phase 4	142.50	100,000,000.00	100,249,316.94	4-Aug-2020	31-Dec-2022
Phase 5	86.00	71,303,734.74	31,470,988.18	14-Feb-2022	12-May-2023 August 2023
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>275.57</b>	<b>203,425,190.96</b>	<b>163,816,816.76</b>		



Phases 1-4 are now already completed and MEFT Plans to complete the 5th Phase by end of July 2023

# Unifying Vision: MEFT's Strategic Commitment to Etosha National Park and Broader Conservation Efforts

The Minister of Environment, Forestry and Tourism, Hon. Pohamba Shifeta, during the media discussion, shared his insights and articulated the overarching vision of the Ministry. Hon. Shifeta emphasized the need for a shared responsibility and understanding, underlining that continuous conservation efforts and the growth of the tourism sector is a collective endeavor.

The comprehensive presentations given by Mr. Colgar Sikopo, the Deputy Executive Director of the Department of Natural Resources at MEFT, and Mr. Boas Erkki, Director of Planning and Technical Services at MEFT, built upon this message. The presentations offered a holistic view of the challenges and triumphs in protected areas and conservation in Namibia, with a particular focus on Etosha National Park.

MEFT's conservation strategy, derived from Namibia's constitution, aims to maintain ecosystems, essential ecological processes, and biodiversity for the benefit of all Namibians - both present and future generations. This strategy has seen the creation of 20 national parks, comprising 17% of the land surface, and 86 communal area conservancies, adding another 18%. These conservancies act as stepping stones for wildlife, providing passage between parks, further ensuring the safety and free movement of animals.

Etosha National Park, covering 22,270 km<sup>2</sup>, is home to 114 mammal, 380 bird, and 110 reptile species. While it celebrated its centennial milestone a few years back, its continuous evolution demonstrates MEFT's commitment to sustainable development and conservation. The park, once bereft of some of the world's most threatened species like the black rhino, white rhino, and elephant, now boasts significant populations of these species - a testament to the success of the MEFT's dedicated efforts.

Shifeta stressed the symbiotic relationship between sustainable tourism and conservation. As the third biggest industry in Namibia, tourism significantly contributes to GDP, poverty reduction, and economic development. Importantly, tourism provides an opportunity for people to appreciate, understand, and protect the unique biodiversity of Etosha National Park.

The ongoing infrastructure improvements at Etosha, including the upgrading of tourist roads, reflect MEFT's integrated approach to conservation and tourism. By enhancing visitor experience and improving accessibility, these improvements not only make the park more appealing to tourists but also support the broader conservation mission.

Ultimately, the MEFT is working towards a future where Namibia's 'natural capital' is developed and utilized sustainably, benefitting the country's social, economic, and ecological well-being. It's a vision that requires the active participation of all stakeholders, including the public, who were called upon to work alongside MEFT, rather than against it.

Our exploration of Etosha National Park underscored the significance of this unity. As we stood together, witnessing the strategic efforts being undertaken in the park, we were reminded that this vast, beautiful landscape is indeed ours to share, to protect, and to cherish.

## Charting the Future: Conservation, Tourism, and National Parks

Reflecting on the trip, a striking aspect was the emphasis on education and the passing on of a legacy. The MEFT, recognizing the transformative power of knowledge, is keen on educating both tourists and the

youth about the value of parks and wildlife. This fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of these natural spaces, instilling a sense of responsibility and ownership in people.

An intriguing element of the future plans for Etosha is the exploration of reopening traditional wildlife migration routes, specifically the link between Etosha National Park and Skeleton Coast Park. This ambitious project encapsulates the MEFT's innovative and proactive approach towards conservation.

These three days offered us a glimpse into the intense behind-the-scenes work being carried out by the MEFT. This immersive journey into the heart of Etosha National Park shed light on the rigorous efforts to preserve the integrity of this ecosystem while balancing the demands of tourism. The MEFT's ambitious vision for Etosha is a beacon for conservation efforts worldwide, setting an inspiring precedent.

As we conclude our tour, we carry forward a deeper appreciation of Namibia's commitment to conservation, the intricacies of managing a national park, and the value of preserving these precious ecosystems for future generations. The enduring impression is a recognition of the interconnectedness of all elements in this grand scheme - the wildlife, the people, the land, the tourists, and the roads that link us all. It is indeed an intricate web, beautifully woven by the relentless efforts of the MEFT and the people of Namibia. It is a story that is still being written, and one that we are all a part of.

## Seeing Beyond the Critiques: The Hidden Labours of Conservation and Tourism

Following our exploration of Etosha National Park, it was profoundly evident just how much diligent work, strategic planning, and thoughtful decision-making go into the upkeep of such a precious resource. The balance struck between enhancing infrastructure for tourism and protecting delicate ecosystems is a testament to the dedicated professionals who tirelessly work behind the scenes.

Despite these monumental efforts, there is a persistent chorus of critics quick to point out perceived shortcomings or delays. This criticism, often devoid of the understanding of the complex realities of park management, does little to advance the cause that we all hold dear – the protection and sustainability of our natural heritage.

Managing a national park is a multifaceted endeavour, a balance of logistics, economics, and ecological principles. It is a delicate high-wire act that requires extensive knowledge, passion, and resilience. However, the individuals and teams involved in this invaluable work often go unrecognized, their efforts obscured by the complexities of their tasks.

While constructive criticism can indeed be a powerful tool for improvement, it's crucial to recognise the importance of understanding and empathy. We must strive to appreciate the breadth and depth of the challenges faced by those working tirelessly to maintain this precious balance between human needs and natural preservation.

Our ultimate goal should be fostering awareness and promoting transparency. To truly grasp the intricate balancing act of managing a national park, one must go beyond surface-level issues and understand the underlying trends and nuances. A single negative incident, while unfortunate, should not overshadow the multitude of positive developments and continuous progress being made.

Let's strive to understand the many complexities involved in managing our natural resources, and to appreciate the effort and dedication it takes to juggle the various needs of conservation, tourism, and local communities. It's time to shift our focus from individual criticisms and to a broader understanding. This way, we can play our part in supporting the incredible work being done to protect and enhance our nation's precious natural heritage.