



Opportunities, Optimism and Hope for the Children of Namibia.

The last week has been a memorable one for thirty campers of Children in the Wilderness Namibia who returned to camp for the second time. The children were selected from over one hundred applicants who previously completed one of the sixteen educational camps at the lodges of Wilderness Safari in Namibia. This older group of children was purposefully chosen to participate in this camp, which has been specifically focused on job opportunities and preparation for some of the challenges they face when they leave school.

The follow-up programme of Children in the Wilderness Namibia has been designed to build on the learning experience of our educational camps and to continue supporting the children to achieve the programme goals. We aim to increase the resilience and opportunities of the children not only to cope with their difficult circumstances but to rise above it. The challenge now is to create a range of incentives for the children that assist them in creating productive and joyful lives and contributing to conservation of our unique environment

Children in the Wilderness is a joint venture with Wilderness Safaris and aims to restore a sense of hope, purpose and the possibility of a bright future to orphaned and vulnerable Namibian children. The organisation is registered as an Incorporated Association-Not-For-Gain (Registration # 21/2004/487) and managed by a Board of Directors. Madame T.K. Angula is the Patron of the programme.

The programme is dedicated to helping children whose normal childhoods have been interrupted or disrupted by poor health, poverty and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The programme aims to increase the capacity of young Namibians to cope with life's challenges and to educate, empower and inspire them to actualize their greatest potential and to contribute to a legacy of conservation.

Children in the Wilderness was initiated after a visit by the actor Paul Newman, to Botswana in 2001. His organisation, the Association of Hole in the Wall Gang Camps, is dedicated to offering educational and recreational camps for children with life threatening conditions in America and Europe. With their inspiration, Wilderness Safaris developed a similar programme in Southern Africa, with activities focusing on orphaned and vulnerable children in rural environments.

The programme started in Botswana in 2001 and has been has been successfully implemented in the other southern African countries where Wilderness Safaris operates including Malawi and South Africa and here in Namibia. Children in the Wilderness Namibia conducted their first camps in 2002. Namibia has to date, coordinated 16 camps and taken over 400 children through the programme.

It was very difficult to select the thirty campers for the first follow up camp from all over Namibia. Finally, participants from schools and organisations in Onyeka, Omungwelune Shituwa, Tsumeb, Divindu, Tsumkwe, Arandis, Windhoek, Khorixas, Okahandja, Rehoboth and Keetmanshoop arrived tired and dusty, but excited for their second Children in the Wilderness experience.

This follow up camp conducted from 24 to 29 May involves children and staff who have participated in the previous Children in the Wilderness camps. The children were between 16 and 19 years old and have shown a consistent and strong interest and commitment to the programme. During the six-day interactive programme we engage an ethnically diverse group of children in a range of activities at Rhino Tented Camp in the Palmwag area.

This was the historic first follow up camp and while we preserved many of the traditions that make our programme unique, we also succeeded in introducing a wider range of new topics including eco-challenges, income-generating craft projects, vocational counseling and more in-depth conservation projects.

During the first day we re-enacted some favourite old activities like tent building, but with additional challenges like having teammates that are 'blind' or 'deaf' and the team had to learn to communicate and cooperate to complete the task. In another activity Kapoi Kasaona one of the passionate and committed Wilderness Safaris guides who assists with the programme gave the children a short introduction to basic car mechanics.

Groups of children circled the local Euphorbia Damarana in the treasure hunt to identify plants and learn the skills of mapping while they matched animal footprints, and dung, with interesting facts in the animal jumble. These activities are all designed to encourage children to actively develop skills and confidence whilst cultivating their new knowledge of the environment.

During our regular sporting event the focus was also on job opportunities. Staff members dressed up as famous sport heroes and facilitated a range of new games such as hockey, badminton, French cricket and frisbee golf. Crafts also focused on recycling and taught the kids the art of paper mache and how to make beautiful photo albums from recycled CD cases.

During the HIV/Aids activities, conducted by a VSO volunteer doctor, the origin, causes and spread of the virus were explored in an informative scientific discussion that also allowed time for personal questions from the kids. We also dedicated time to focus on basic information about healthy positive lifestyles, hygiene and nutrition, with the help of the five super heroes: Captain Carbohydrate, Fabulous Fibre, Super Protein, Wonder Water and Vital Vitamins.

On the penultimate day all the experiences of the previous activities were pulled together in a job workshop where the kids brainstormed ideas and 'visualized' their ideal job. During the camp fire evening, staff conducted an entertaining drama to demonstrate good practice and useful tips in job finding and acted out interviews to give the kids a better chance to prepare for their future.

With the realization that space in follow-up camps may be limited and that there may also be children who become isolated and unable to participate in camps we will work to develop innovative ways to involve these children. We will continue to maintain strong links with social welfare departments and organizations and aim to arrange interventions for the most vulnerable children. Along with the help of cooperating organizations, the following is a list of some of the interventions we hope to implement:

- reduced school fees,
- participation in hobbies,
- study bursaries,
- gap year work at the lodges and research projects,
- volunteer work with other conservation organizations,
- visits to other educational projects and centres,

- educational resources,
- HIV/AIDS counseling,
- additional arts and craft classes,
- peer exchange projects with camps in other countries

As we pursue these exciting and ambitious opportunities, we hope to continue to rely on our current group of generous donors, while we explore additional partnerships that will make these programmes sustainable. We believe that the context in which we are operating makes such initiatives an imperative.

We are grateful for all the support we have received and believe that our reputation, our management, financial competencies and transparency qualify us to continue to make a success of these programmes.

We are in debt to the following companies and organizations for their unfailing support and kind contributions to Children in the Wilderness Namibia:

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