



NAMIBIA WILD HORSES FOUNDATION



# Introduction

The Namib's (Horses of the Namib Desert) origins are shrouded in mystery and they have held a powerful fascination for lovers of all things wild and free for over a century. Yet, while they may live lives of relative freedom, their desert home is no paradise.



# The mystery of their origins

One source of the origin of the Namib's is that the herd stems from the bombing of the Union of South Africa Troops stationed at Garub. From 1915 - 1925, during World War I, reports reference 10 000 soldiers with 6 000 horses stationed at Garub. At the same time, a German base, entrenched in the hills some 25 km east of Aus, intermittently bombed the Union camp. The last attack - to cover their retreat from the area - occurred on 27th March 1915. A German report stated: "In the morning of 27 March the indefatigable pilot officer Fiedler flew to Garub and caused great bewilderment by successfully dropping bombs onto the enemy camp and among about 1 700 grazing cavalry horses" (Hans von Oelhafen, Der Feldzug in Sudwest 1915/15, Berlin 1923).

**Image below at Kubub, Emil Keplins stud near Garub**



The second theory sites the remarkable similarities in conformation and markings of horses from Emil Kreplin's stud farm at Kubub, just south of Aus. Kreplin bred horses for both racing and work on the diamond mines in Luderitz Bay where he was mayor for a time. The similarities between the Kubub horses and the present-day Namib's show traces of Hackney, Trakehner and Shagya Arab breeds.

**Image above Emil Kreplin and his wife**

# Namibia Wild Horses Foundation background

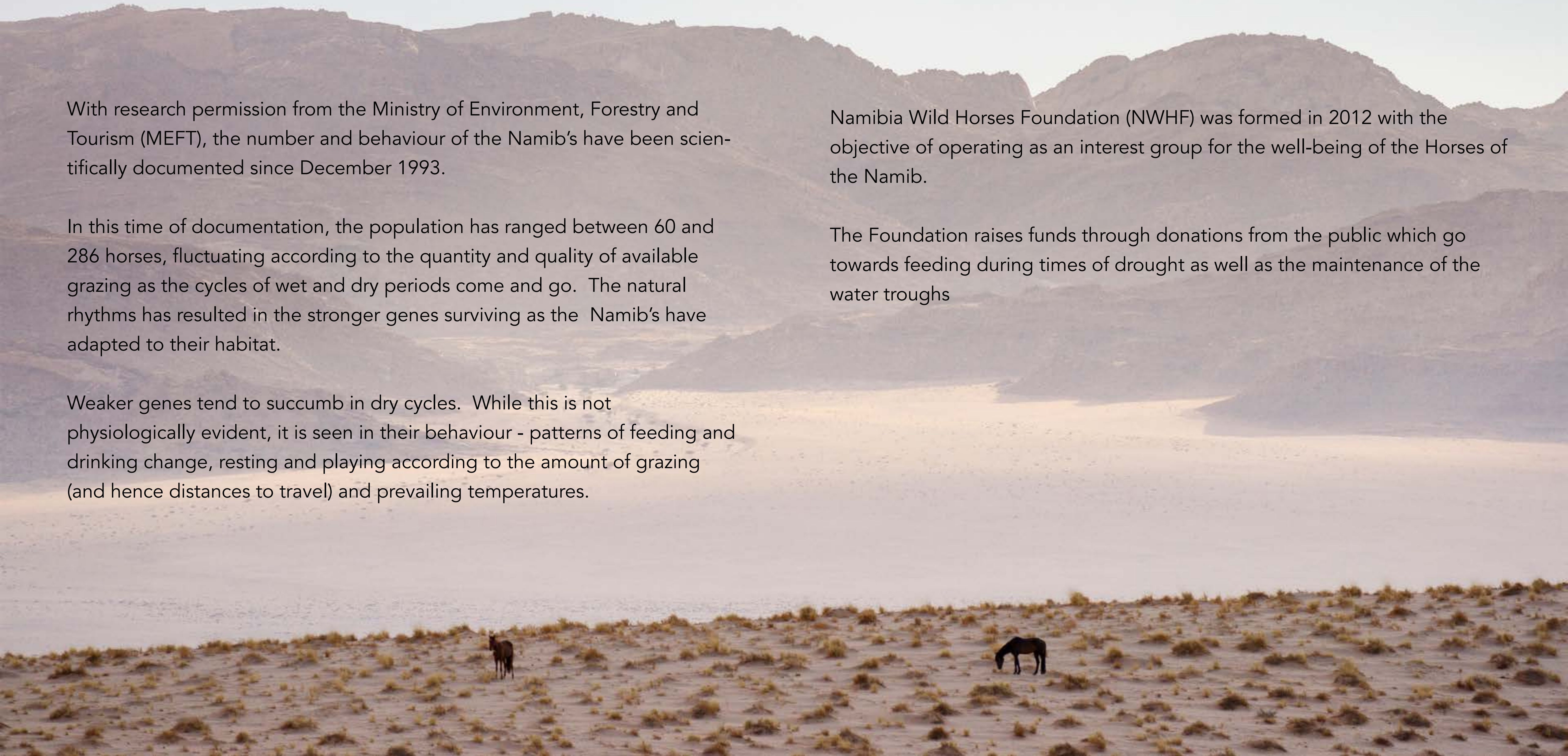
With research permission from the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT), the number and behaviour of the Namib's have been scientifically documented since December 1993.

In this time of documentation, the population has ranged between 60 and 286 horses, fluctuating according to the quantity and quality of available grazing as the cycles of wet and dry periods come and go. The natural rhythms has resulted in the stronger genes surviving as the Namib's have adapted to their habitat.

Weaker genes tend to succumb in dry cycles. While this is not physiologically evident, it is seen in their behaviour - patterns of feeding and drinking change, resting and playing according to the amount of grazing (and hence distances to travel) and prevailing temperatures.

Namibia Wild Horses Foundation (NWHF) was formed in 2012 with the objective of operating as an interest group for the well-being of the Horses of the Namib.

The Foundation raises funds through donations from the public which go towards feeding during times of drought as well as the maintenance of the water troughs



# Objectives of the Foundation

1. To operate as an interest group for the wellbeing of the Wild Horses of Namibia and any related activities;
2. To receive and administer funds for use to the benefit of the wild horses. This may include equipment necessary for maintenance of the water supply as well as population monitoring, nutritional supplements and fodder in severe droughts;
3. To hold, sponsor or otherwise assist, exhibitions, demonstrations or lectures for the purpose of furthering the objects of the Foundation as set out above;
4. To educate the public in general with regard to the difficulties and realities of living in natural conditions;
5. To do all such lawful things as are incidental or conducive to the attainment of the above objects, or any one of them.



# Putting concerns to rest

Despite the fascination and enthusiasm, the existence of the Namib's - essentially classified as feral horses despite a century of living naturally - has resulted in many heated debates over the years.

Questions regarding what the presence of the Namib's within the boundaries of a park means in terms of a management plan for the national park? Are the horses treated as game and left to their own devices during dry cycles? Should there be some intervention, and if so, what form it should take?

The area around Garub is situated on the eastern fringe of the most arid part of the Namib Desert and being confined within the park boundary fence, the horses cannot migrate to better grazing during dry cycles. While rainfall here is rare and unpredictable – often just enough for succulents, prickly shrubs and annual grasses - yet the horses have remained against all odds.

Much was learned during the dry cycles in the 1990's and again in 2016/7 as varying attempts to alleviate the horses suffering were implemented and refined over the years.

With the generous outpouring of concern (and funds) by the public - both in Namibia and across the world - a successful feeding programme was actioned in the 2016/7

dry cycle resulting in most of the horses surviving.

Research indicates that, when administered, assistance must be applied in a timely manner and with the appropriate quality and quantity of fodder. It was found that catching and removing horses from the area is mostly unsuccessful as they easily succumb to the stress of domestication.

It must be understood that animals under stress at times choose to die and there is little anyone can do prevent that occurring. Public outcry about the extreme condition of the horses during dry times is often emotionally driven, lacking a deeper understanding of how horses respond to natural cycles.

Another area of concern touches upon nature conservation and the possibility of the horses being a disruptive element to the environment. The area around Aus is seen as a biological hotspot with more than 500 plant species, some of them endemic. The horses mostly live within this biome and the task of nature conservation is to protect the indigenous flora and fauna of the area.

Biologist, Telané Greyling, has dealt with these and other issues in her Doctoral thesis on the Namib's and has spent two decades studying the horses and their environment. The results of Dr Greyling's extensive research revealed no indication that the horses have displaced or impacted the indigenous flora or fauna in any negative way.



# The Hyena Saga + feeding intervention

The 2000 - 2010 wet cycle had a huge influence on the game numbers resulting in a reciprocal increase in predator numbers. The size of the hyena clans increased to the extent that some had to disperse to new areas such as Garub where game, water and breeding shelters were available.

In 2012 NWHF was founded as the situation for the horses had become dire. That year 49 foals were born providing easy prey for the hyena. Within a year they had learned how to set up an ambush and bring down adult horses.

By October 2015 (another dry cycle) grazing had become critical and of low nutritional value resulted in a drop in condition of the horses. Permission was given by the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT) to feed the horses.

This was accomplished by overwhelming support and public donations.

Predation by hyena however increased during 2016 to the extent they were catching 3 - 6 horses a month. The Foundation again approached MET regarding the un-sustainability of the situation - by April permission was given to start feeding the hyena as a short-term solution.

Public outcry however resulted in a crisis-management plan by the Ministry for the hyena which unfortunately culminated in most of the Garub clan being eliminated rather than relocated.



Since 2019 some foals have survived, the oldest being Zohra, born on St. Valentines Day 2019. Zohra, like a symbol of hope, carries the expectations of the whole herd on her shoulders as she enters her productive years, bringing new blood to the plains of Garub.

The Garub area, having had several consecutive years of low rainfall, received a respite in the beginning of 2018. Average rains in 2020 and 2021/2 were followed by good rains in 2023 and Garub, and the horses condition, revived.

Cycles of good and below average rains, winds, sandstorms and even snow come and go at Garub and the horses weather the conditions - as do all wild animals. Adaptation is the Namib's speciality and it is left to us to celebrate their tenacious spirit and marvel at their tolerance.

There is much to learn here still...

Visit [www.wild-horses-namibia.com](http://www.wild-horses-namibia.com) for more information on their social structures and behaviour



**Main Image: Zohra in 2019. Insert Image: Zohra in December 2022**

