

Words  
Linda Pfothenauer  
Images  
Courtesy of Grassland  
Safari Lodge

# Central Kalahari Game Reserve

A sea of emerald green grasses rolls over the endless Kalahari Basin; the stunted trees and dwarfed bushes are swallowed by its abundance.

A cool, early morning breeze kicks up from behind the hill, causing these uncountable miniature masterpieces to stir in deep swells. Pretty tufts of grasses assume random poses – some are flattened east, others west, others north and south, against the thorny acacias and brown-black rocks dotting the vast expanse. Others stand waist high to meet the cobalt blue horizon.

Tens of thousands of wildflowers – in gorgeous shades of pinks, purples and yellows – open to meet the new day's sun.

In the distance, gemsbok graze – their beautiful coats of dramatically contrasting greys, whites and blacks streak across their sleek bodies. Two steenbok – paired for life – nibble at tree branches, and for once, don't run at the first sound of us. A pair of jackal – also coupled for life – dig in the sand for mice, lizards and frogs.

Two Secretary Birds – a third species we see that pairs for life – take to the air together, their massive wingspans resembling a 747 jumbo jet, or rather that should be stated the other way around.

A still and secret silence fills my ears. A fresh and earthy odour fills my nostrils. There is a purity about the Earth, Sky and Heavens that is totally uplifting. Everything is perfect, and my body is completely relaxed and in harmony with the natural world around me.

Standing on a hill that surveys this unimaginably immense reserve, I can feel – and even see – the round shape of the Earth, picturing its rotation on its axis in outer space, and the universe beyond.

This is the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR), the second largest reserve in the world, and part of the largest contiguous area of sand on Earth, the Kalahari (Kgalagadi) Desert.

We have driven from the Grassland Safari Lodge in a private concession in central Ghanzi District, in the extreme northwest of the country, through what is called 'No Man's Land' – a 58-kilometre wide buffer zone between the many cattle farms in the district and the CKGR, then we have entered the western boundaries of the reserve.

About 100 kilometres down the cutline, we come to Tsau Gate, one of three main gates through which you enter the CKGR, the others being

Xade a few hundred kilometres away and the northeastern Matswere Gate, clear on the other side of the reserve.

All along the cutline, wildlife abounds – springbok, wildebeest, ostrich, steenbok, duiker, gemsbok, jackal and lion. And combined with the concession – itself full of wildlife – red hartebeest, wildebeest, giraffe, kudu, eland, and accompanying predators, there are indeed memorable game drives.

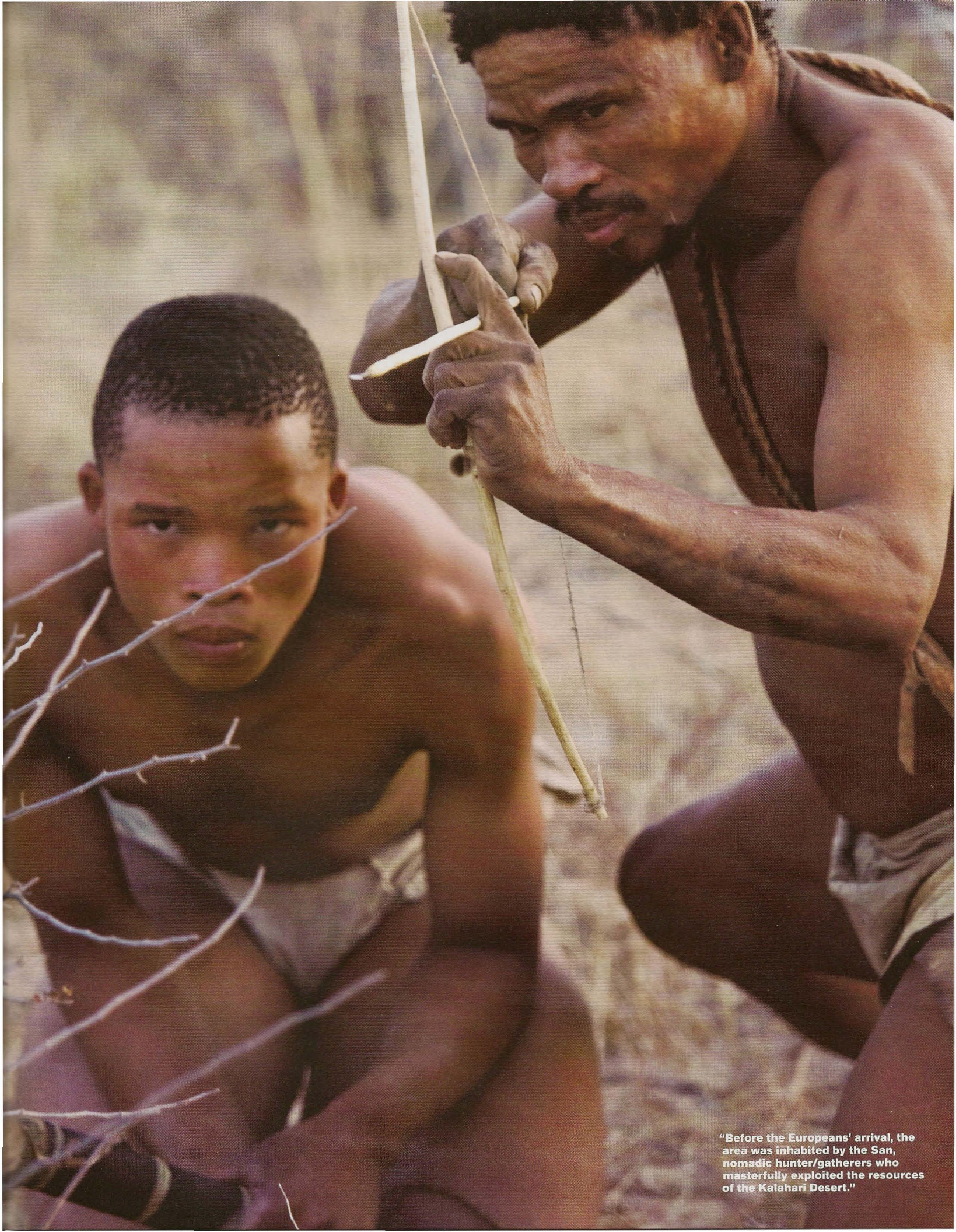
Yet, nearly on all sides of the reserve lie extensive cattle farms. Indeed, Ghanzi is the capital of Botswana's beef industry, the country's third largest economic contributor. It is regarded as one of the best cattle ranging areas in the world, renowned for the high quality, free roaming beef it produces. In fact, Ghanzi farmers provide 75 percent of the beef that the Botswana Meat Commission (BMC) exports, primarily to the United Kingdom and the European Union.

Many Ghanzi farming families have been here for generations. My hostesses, Grassland Safari Lodge managers and guides, Neeltjie Bower and Maryke de Graaff, are fifth generation Ghanzi citizens. Their great-great-grandparents came to colonial Bechuanaland during the German War in Namibia. They had been allocated large farms by Cecil Rhodes who hoped that their presence would stop the Germans from settling further north in the Victoria Falls area in the then British colony of Rhodesia, Rhodes' namesake.

Before their arrival, of course, the area was inhabited by the San (Bushmen), nomadic hunter/gatherers who masterfully exploited the resources of the Kalahari Desert.

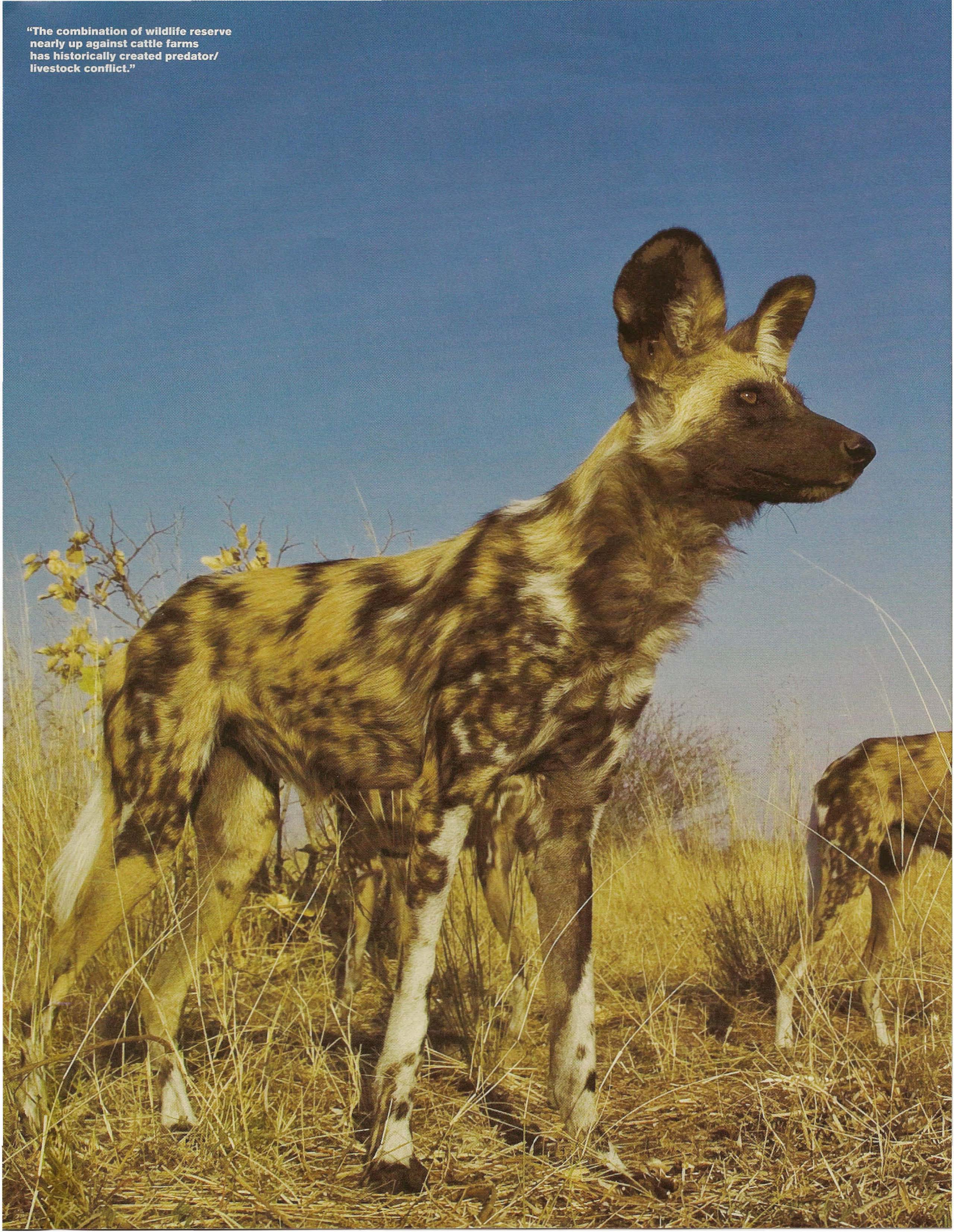
Today the descendants of the Kalahari's original peoples usually work at the district's cattle and livestock farms, but are increasingly becoming involved in the tourism industry. Some are engaged in community based tourism projects, others prefer to produce their unique arts and crafts for sale to tourists.

There are a number of farms in the area that offer cultural tours with the San – learning how they source wild fruits and vegetables in the desert, find traditional remedies, make fire, and play and dance. None other than Grassland Safari Lodge, however, has the unbeatable combination of San cultural tours, a wildlife concession and excursions to CKGR.



**"Before the Europeans' arrival, the area was inhabited by the San, nomadic hunter/gatherers who masterfully exploited the resources of the Kalahari Desert."**

**"The combination of wildlife reserve nearly up against cattle farms has historically created predator/livestock conflict."**





## Of Crying Babies & Fire Sticks

The babies were crying. The parents were trying to do their work – execute a tour encompassing many aspects of the San way of life. The men knelt at one side of a clearing, trying to make fire with their traditional ‘fire sticks’ – rubbing them together to produce a spark. The women sat at the other side, striking flints – also to get a spark. And the babies kept on crying.

The parents became distracted, and were unable to carry on, until they had tended to their children. A few more minutes of insistent cries that left everyone irritated and at a loss as to what to do, and I took out a bag of sweets – the beloved ‘Jelly Tots.’ I handed them to one mother, who began distributing them to the children. They immediately stopped crying and began to settle down – the wondrous effects sugar has on children.

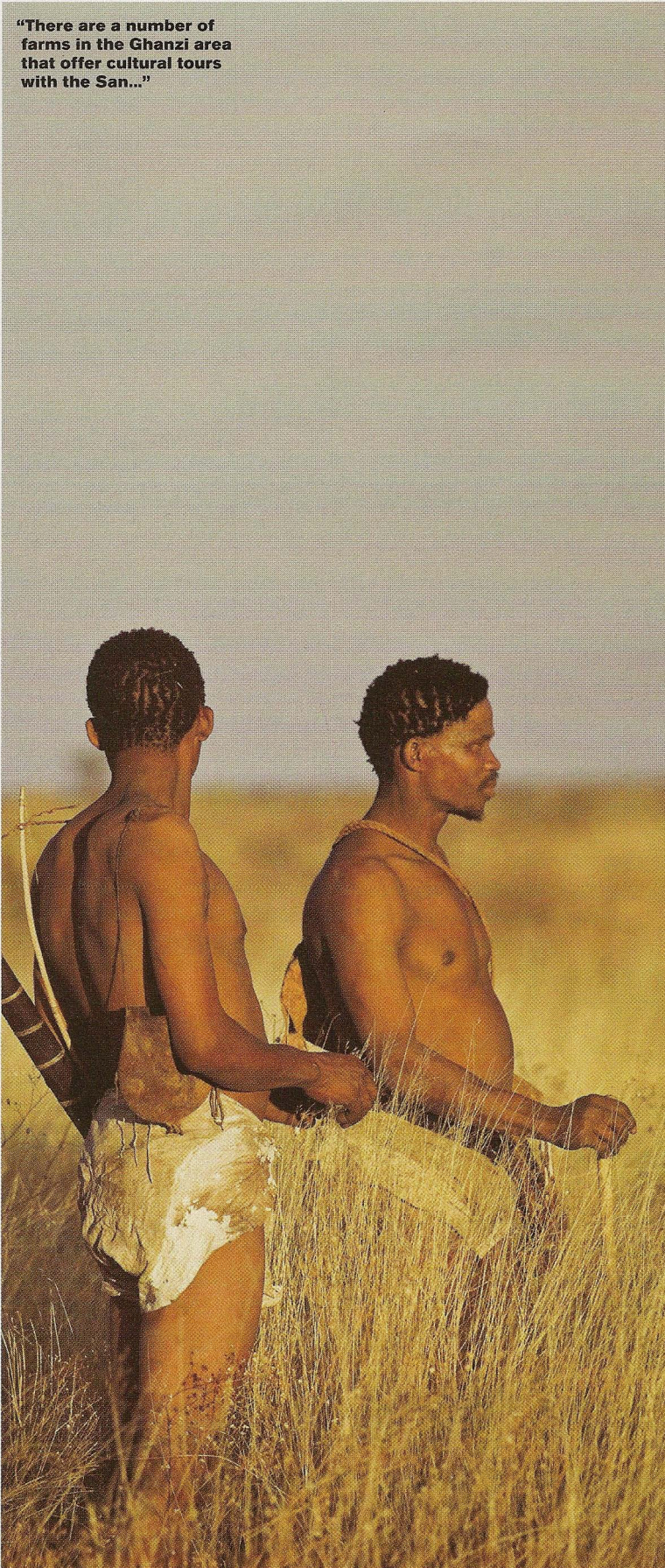
Now the spark appeared, through the friction of two sticks rubbed together, then smoke, and then, after vigorous blowing, a few flames began to burn the dried grass.

And voila! Obtained in such a way, fire seemed such an amazing miracle!

Now the group sat together on a blanket, golden grasses – and the silence of pleasurable eating – surrounding them. Yet what was most noticeable was the way in which these San children treated their unexpected gift. They all seemed to be continually thinking of others around them, examining each and every treasured sweet, then passing some to brothers, sisters, cousins and friends.

The crying had stopped. And we had experienced first-hand the San concept of sharing, that no one in the band should own more than another, that no one should act in a stingy way. This was such an intrinsic part of their culture that even two-year olds automatically shared, taking their precious sugar-coated gifts, and giving to others.

**“There are a number of farms in the Ghanzi area that offer cultural tours with the San...”**



Another perk – Botswana’s tourism capital, and gateway to the Okavango, Maun – is a mere five-hour drive away, on a sealed tarmac road.

But perhaps most fascinating, and enlightening, is the Kalahari Predator/Livestock Conflict Project, initiated and wholly sponsored by lodge owner and prominent cattle farmer, Mr. Willie de Graaff. It is a ground-breaking conservation programme that puts the tourist at the heart of intensifying wildlife issues taking place virtually around the world.

The combination of wildlife reserve nearly up against cattle farms has historically created predator/livestock conflict. Lions, wild dogs, cheetah and leopards come from the reserve to hunt cattle and other domestic animals – surely an easy catch for them. Despite the fencing between the buffer zone ‘No Man’s Land’ and the farms, the animals simply dig under the fence, and get into the farms to feast on livestock there.

Farmers, feeling their livelihood at risk, often resort to killing the ‘problem’ animals. Last year alone, Ghanzi district farmers lost approximately 500 head of cattle to predator attacks, about US\$200,000 worth of damage. And the country’s predator population suffered a great loss, with 54 lions and other predators shot by farmers in defence of their livestock.

The conservation project captures animals found attacking livestock, places them in enclosures on the Grassland Safari Lodge concession, then, through the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP), reintroduces some of them back into the reserve.

The project has been running for about five years, but until August of 2008 had not met with much success. Most re-introduced predators simply came back to the cattle farms to hunt again.

A chance visit with wildlife biologist Mr. Bill Given who had worked with wolf/livestock conflict in North America gave the project just the solution it needed. The Conditioned Taste Aversion (CTA) is a process whereby an aversion agent is mixed with a food source, in this case beef, causing the animal to experience a mild illness that lasts for about 30 minutes.

This aversion leads the animal to associate the illness with that source of prey, in this case cattle. It taps into an ancient evolutionary pathway intended to protect animals from the thousands of poisonous plant and animal sources on Earth. And, significantly, it has been demonstrated to work with a wide range of species – from invertebrates to wolves to bears.

Following a successful captive study with CTA, proving that an aversion to beef can be instilled in African predators, the project will begin to capture animals brought to the Grassland Safari Lodge and apply the CTA method. Experience shows that in some cases, the aversion will be strong enough to make the animal entirely avoid live cattle as prey; in other cases, predatory instincts will lead to one or two kills, but after that the animal won’t be able to eat the kill, due to the aversion, and then will learn not to waste energy killing an animal it can’t eat.

Satellite collars and expert San trackers will be used to monitor the released animals. The programme is expected to begin in earnest once its research license is approved.