

A digest of information on key aspects of Karas and Hardap's geography

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Namibia has four very large and arid regions which set them apart in various ways from the rest of the country: Kunene and Erongo in the west and Karas and Hardap in the south. Rainfall in Karas and Hardap is usually both low ([average_rainfall.jpg](#)) and extremely variable ([rainfall_variation.jpg](#)) which means that years of abundant rain are often followed by extreme dry conditions. As a result of low rainfall, vegetation is generally sparse, with few trees and a thin covering of grass ([vegetation_types.jpg](#)). Plant cover varies in relation to rainfall, and so the northern areas of Hardap have more trees and grass than the western, coastal areas.

Most summer rains in the south fall in late summer, mainly in February, March and April, but the extreme south-western areas of Karas receive occasional winter rain. These winter rains and the generally arid conditions help contribute to the formation of the Succulent Shrubland, also known as the Succulent Karoo in South Africa. This vegetation type is unique to southern Africa and has special value because of the high number of endemic species found in the Succulent Shrubland ([plant_endemism.jpg](#)). Endemics are organisms that occur no where else in the world, and everyone in Namibia - especially in Karas and Hardap - therefore has a responsibility to protect these endemic species.

Grass production is highly dependant on rainfall, and so livestock and other animals suffer when rains fail. Farming is thus a difficult enterprise and livestock densities are low throughout both regions as a result of the low vegetation cover and productivity of farm land ([carrying_capacity.jpg](#)). Farming with mutton sheep predominates, while goats are also fairly abundant in the communal farmlands ([farming_systems.jpg](#) and [livestock_densities.jpg](#)). Farmers in Karas and Hardap previously earned much of income from karakul, but demands and prices for karakul pelts fell dramatically over the past 15 years; there are now promising signs that prices are recovering. It is widely agreed that many farms, especially in the eastern areas of Hardap and Karas have been severely overstocked with sheep, and this has led to degradation of pastures and bush encroachment, notably in the form in driedoring *Rhigozum trischotomum*.

While much of Hardap and Karas is fairly flat ([topography.jpg](#)), there is also much scenic beauty to be admired, especially along the escarpment, the coast, in the Namib, the Karas Mountains and, of course, the famous Fish River canyon and the Orange River. The absence of people ([density_of_people.jpg](#)) adds more to the wilderness value of many areas, since the majority and a growing proportion of people live in towns. Although much has been done to emphasize and promote the idea of rural development, it is a simple fact the low rainfall, poor soils and absence of markets and infrastructure make rural life particularly harsh. The low carrying capacities of the vegetation also mean that farms have to be extremely large to carry enough livestock to make farming economically viable. The only exceptions to this are the intensive, high production grape, date and other crop farms in places where there is abundant water for irrigation: for example, at Stampriet, below Hardap Dam, Naute and

along the Orange River. The harsh nature of rural life is a fact, and it is important that members of the Communal Land Board have a full appreciation of this constraint. Land should be used according to its potential and not in compliance with policies that simply maintain poverty.

Tourism has been booming in Namibia in recent years, but development of the industry has focused much more on north-western Namibia, Etosha and Caprivi than on the two southern regions. The greatest paradox is that while much of the Namib Desert, which is world-renowned, spectacular and unusual, lies in Hardap and Karas there are very few places for tourists to visit and stay at in this Desert. Much more could therefore be done to promote tourism and open up the Namib to unlock its economic potential with respect to tourism. There is also much potential for tourism elsewhere in Hardap and Karas. For example, much could be gained by opening the gate into the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park.

One major recent development to have contributed to the growth of the tourism industry elsewhere in Namibia is the establishment of conservancies on communal land. There are now four such conservancies in Hardap and Karas ([landuses.jpg](#)). The development of communal conservancies followed that of conservancies on freehold farms during the 1970s when new legislation then allowed freehold farmers to make commercial use of wildlife. The same rights were extended to communal areas when legislation was changed with the passing of the Nature Conservation Amendment Act in 1996.

What is of key importance is that conservancies give local residents **rights** over wildlife resources. Given the low productivity of farmland generally in Hardap and Karas, there is also a need to give residents of communal land full rights to all resources, including land! Indeed, the whole concept of communal land must be re-evaluated. Such residents have no possibility of having legally secure rights to land, they cannot use the land as collateral, and they are denied the right to develop and invest in land as a capital asset; the idea of having land as a capital asset is one that almost everyone takes for granted in freehold areas and in towns. Moreover, wealthy and powerful individuals are able to disproportionately exploit communal land, for example by having large flocks of sheep and goats, which then over-graze pastures at the expense of both natural vegetation and poorer people who depend much more on income from livestock. This is known as the 'tragedy of the commons' and it is a tragic condition that plays itself out very clearly in what used to be Namaland and in other communal areas in Karas and Hardap. Both the land and people of the two regions could be much healthier and wealthier if emphasis was placed on the best use of land rather than land tenure and ownership preoccupations.









