

A short guide to the long history

Contradictions in the literature abound, so would you please settle the question – after the Grand Canyon in the USA, is the Fish River Canyon the second-largest canyon in the world? The answer is that it depends on how you define large. At about 1 000 metres deep, Ethiopia's Blue Nile Gorge is considered to be Africa's largest canyon, but it is also narrower (about 20 km wide at its widest) than the Fish River Canyon, and probably shorter too. (The Fish River Canyon is 160 km long, up to 27 km wide, and almost 550 metres at its deepest.) So which is Africa's largest canyon? Toss a coin, or visit both gorges, then you may be able to answer the question for yourself.

How could such a long, thin river create such an enormous gorge?

Local folklore tells of a giant snake that preyed on the livestock of ancient herders in the region. Finally subdued by the arrows of the tribe's bravest warriors, the monster's death throes tore giant furrows in the earth, creating the mightiest natural canyon in the southern hemisphere.

This evocative answer is countered by a more basic one – massive geological shifts, and time, lots and lots of time. It began about 1 800 million years ago when shale, sandstone and lava were deposited on the floor of the Fish River Canyon. Between 300 and 800 million years later, these were heated and compressed to form a metamorphic rock complex, which includes granites and, later, the dolerite dykes.

Then water played its role in this spectacular formation. After a period of erosion, a vast shallow sea covered the area and most of what is now southern Namibia. Sediments and limestones were deposited on the sea floor from about 650 to 500 million years ago. At this stage there was a major plate movement that created a natural crack in the earth, the first process in the formation of the Fish River Canyon. For millions of years, the process was compounded by faults and more erosion, creating canyons within canyons. Then, just 50 million years ago, the Fish River started to cut its meandering way along the floor of the most recent valley.

A biome. Sounds impressive, but what is it?

biome (n.) A large, distinctive complex of plant communities created and maintained by climate. The /Ai-/Ais Richtersveld Transfrontier Park is characterised by two biomes – the Nama Karoo, which is east of the Fish River, and the Succulent Karoo, which lies to the west of the river. The Succulent Karoo area extending to the Sperrgebiet National Park is recognised as one of the world's biological 'hot spots' with the highest species-rich desert ecological system in the world (over 1 600 different plant species) and a high endemic rate (these are plants that occur here and nowhere else) and climates (extreme aridity, low winter rainfall) defining them.

From the point of view of plant conservation, one of the greatest challenges is how climate change may affect



plant biodiversity 'hot spots'. Plants living in the Succulent Karoo Biome, which has the richest succulent flora in the world, are poised on the edge of survival, dependent on low but fairly reliable winter rainfall. If the climate of this region becomes any drier or wetter, the effects on the entire biome will be devastating.

So far we've seen lots of stunning landscapes, but few animals. What should we look out for?

In the park there are several species of mammals, including springbok, mountain zebra, gemsbok, kudu and steenbok. Klipspringer (Afrikaans for 'rock jumper') and a small relic population of grey rhebok are special sightings. Predators include leopard, brown hyaena, jackal and bat-eared fox.

Reptiles and insects are in abundance and you may come across huge leguans or monitor lizards, and snakes such as the highly poisonous Cape cobra, black spitting cobra, puff adder and horned adder. The Nama padloper, a tortoise, occurs here and nowhere else in the world.

In the natural pools of the Fish River there are fish, such as sharptoothed catfish and yellow fish. And don't forget the birds. There is an interesting variety, including olive thrush, African black duck, Cape robin-chat, African fish-eagle, hamerkop, martial eagle and rock kestrel.

This area seems a pretty tough place for anything to survive, including humans. What is its human history?

Fortunately, early man left behind evidence of his existence in the area, including ancient rock tools used by *Homo erectus* between 0.5 and 2 million years ago. People were also here during the Stone Ages. Numerous sites dating from as early as 50 000 years ago have been found within the park. Namibia's oldest rock paintings are found at the Apollo 11 cave. Rock engravings, crafted by the ancestors of Khoi people, who lived in the area about 2 000 years ago, are found in the park.

At the beginning of the century, German troops used the /Ai-/Ais area as a base during the war against the Namas. Today hikers pass by the grave of a German soldier while following the Fish River Canyon hiking trail.

How many transfrontier parks are there in Namibia?

One, and this is it! Although progress is being made towards developing the KaZa initiative in the Caprivi Region – a conservation plan that would link protected areas in Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Angola and Botswana – and a second co-operative agreement that would tie the Skeleton Coast Park to the Iona National Park in Angola, currently the /Ai-/Ais Richtersveld Transfrontier Park is the only park in Namibia with a signed, internationally recognised transfrontier treaty. Namibia's first President, Dr Sam Nujoma, and the President of the Republic of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, signed the treaty officially designating the park on 1 August 2003.

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Environmental Care Code

Please adhere to the following:

- **Stay on existing roads and tracks.**
- **Do not remove any plants or animals from the park.**
- **Make sure that what you take into the park, you take out.**
- **Follow the rules and regulations listed on your permit.**
- **Report to the Ministry of Environment and Tourism office at Hobas before beginning the Fish River Canyon Trail.**

Enjoy the challenge and be inspired!

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