

Twenty-five Years of Namib Research: A Personal Perspective

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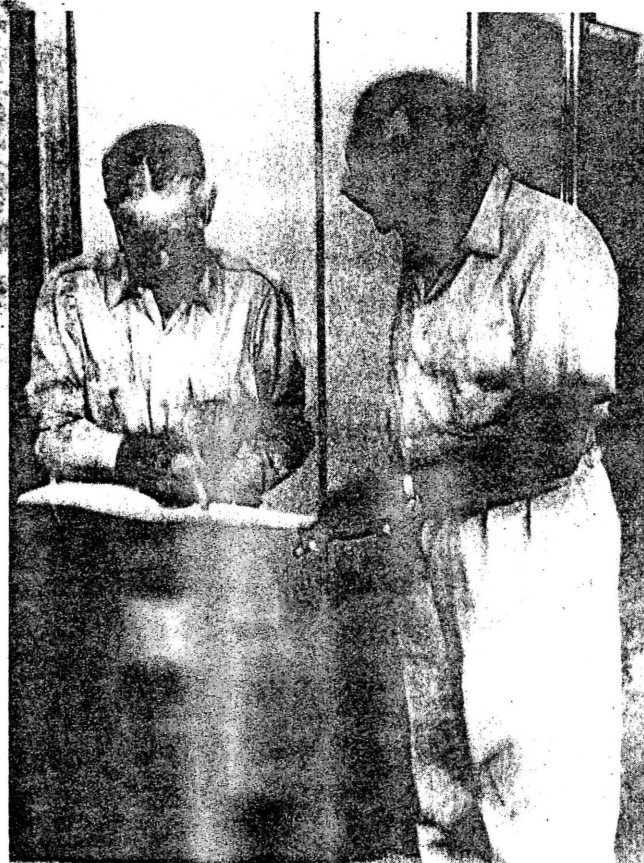
The influence of the Namib in the lives of susceptible people is very great. In some strange way the vast emptiness of this desert, its silence and simplicity have the power to restore the spirits of those grown weary of overloaded living. As if by healing, new enthusiasms spring from a balance regained.

In the present narrative, the Namib's influence on Charles Koch, or Charlie as he was known to me, was of cardinal significance. It obsessed him, drawing him back repeatedly to establish the foundation on which the scientific effort of subsequent years has been built. Born in Vienna in 1904, Charlie graduated there in law at the age of 25 before turning his attention to entomology, a passion which remained with him for the rest of his life and in which he was granted doctorates from the Universities of Munich in 1942 and Vienna in 1957. Before the First World War he worked in Italy, first at the entomological museum of Count Rossi of Trieste and thereafter in the Natural History Museum of Milan. The war itself saw him conscripted into the German army in Russia from which he returned to an entomological post in Munich.

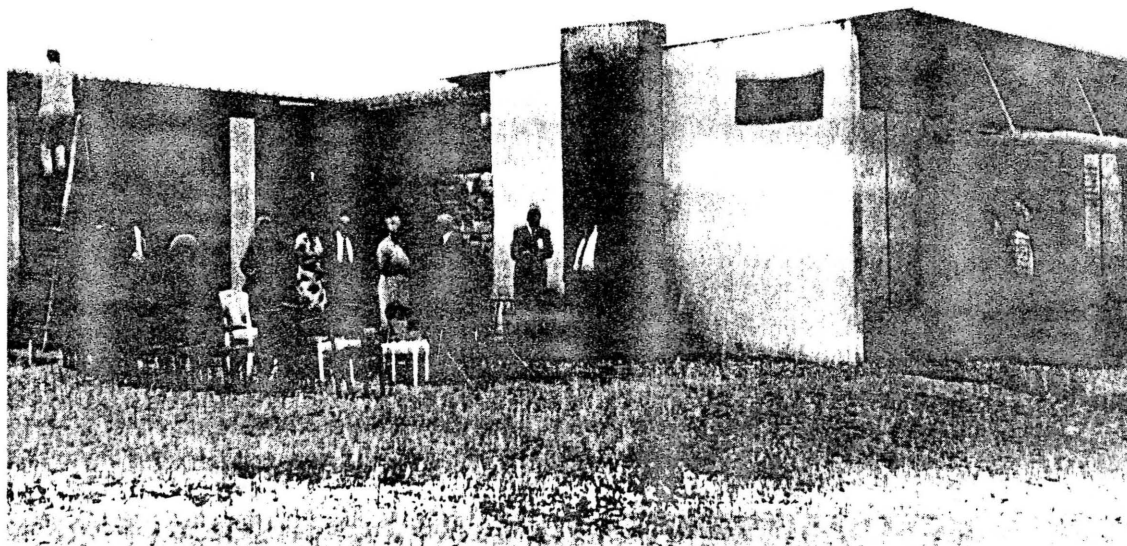
For Charlie, 1948 was a turning point as it brought him to southern Africa as an entomologist with the University of California's Africa Expedition. He established links then with the Transvaal Museum, working on C.S.I.R. research grants before becoming Curator of Coleoptera in 1953. It was during these years that Charlie made acquaintance with the insect fauna of southern Africa's arid western areas and when he fell first under the compulsive spell of the Namib. Many of the expeditions of that time were organized and sponsored by Bernard Carp, a Cape Town businessman and succulent plant specialist. His generosity and enthusiasm took Charlie and myself, together with colleagues from our own and other institutions, into remote regions that would otherwise have remained beyond our reach. At that time I came to know Charlie as a gentle man of highly infectious enthusiasm who was able to find good in almost any situation. On one of those early travels we spent a night in an outhouse attached to a rudimentary hotel at Van Zylsrus, on that long, rough road to the southern Kalahari. Shaking around in the old brown panel van the following morning, complaints were voiced about the inedible food and the bugs that sucked our blood in the night. Charlie listened with quiet amusement and then said: 'that's true, but the gin – the gin was wonderful!'. As indeed it had been.

In Vivian FitzSimons, then Director of the Transvaal Museum, Charlie found a sympathetic ally. He too had spent some of his scientific youth in the desert, pioneering the study of reptiles there. So when Charlie expressed his desire to start a field station in the Namib, the idea was supported with alacrity. Together they worked out a plan: an expedition spon-

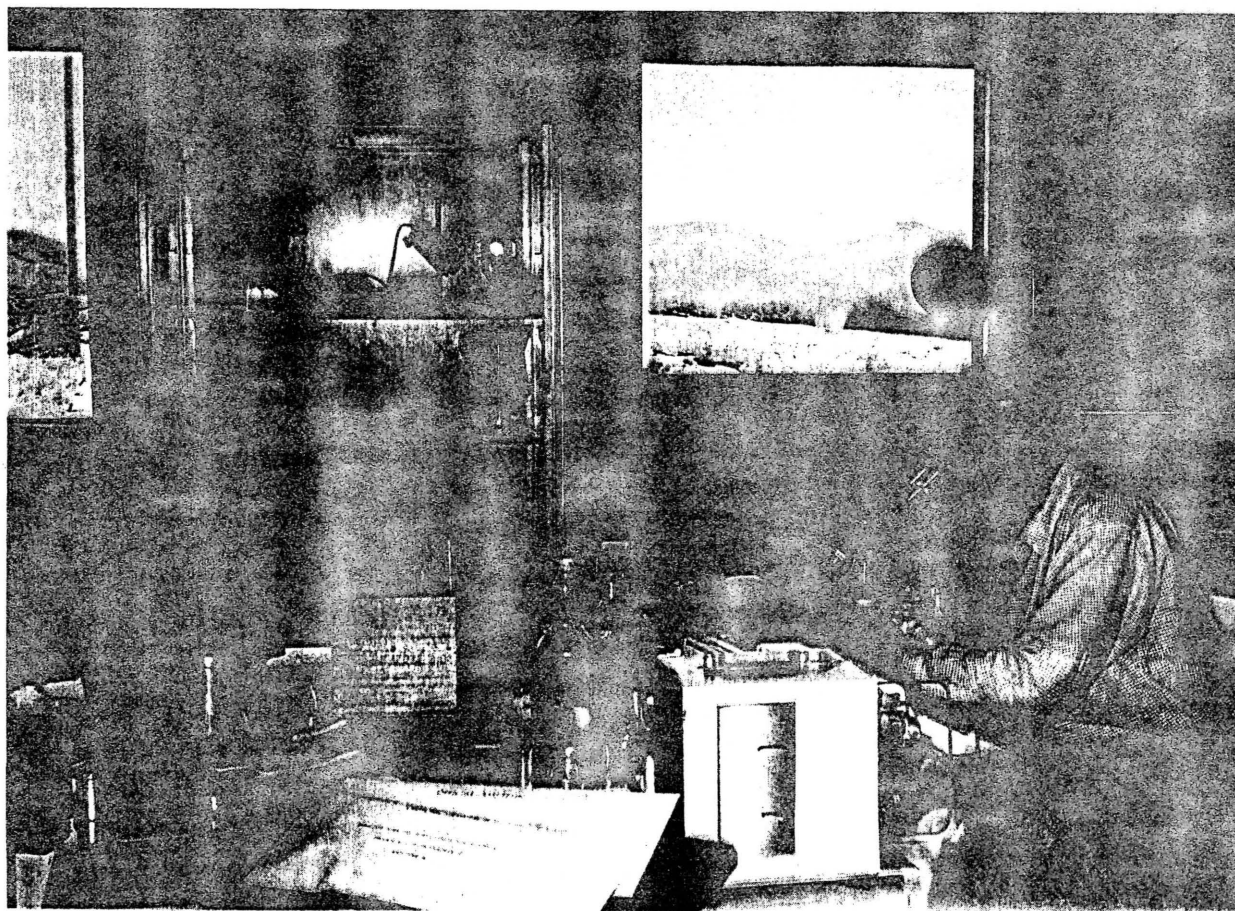
sored by Bernard Carp and Volkswagen Ltd would take a group of 12 of us to the central Namib in May 1959 to select a site for the proposed station. The convoy of eight vehicles, carrying scientists from six nations, left Windhoek in the early morning and wound its way down the precarious Gamsberg pass, as it then was, under the watchful eye of our guide Atilla Port. By nightfall we had reached Djab, where we camped around the hospitable homestead, departing again at dawn to reach the Kuiseb River at Gobabeb at nightfall. The place was marked by a small Topnaar village, a well in the riverbed and a swarming herd of goats. To the south the high dunes of brick-red sand stretched away into the distance; to the north the pale gravel plains were boundless and bare. Camp was made as the chill of the winter's night settled over the riverbed and barking geckos called from the distant plain.



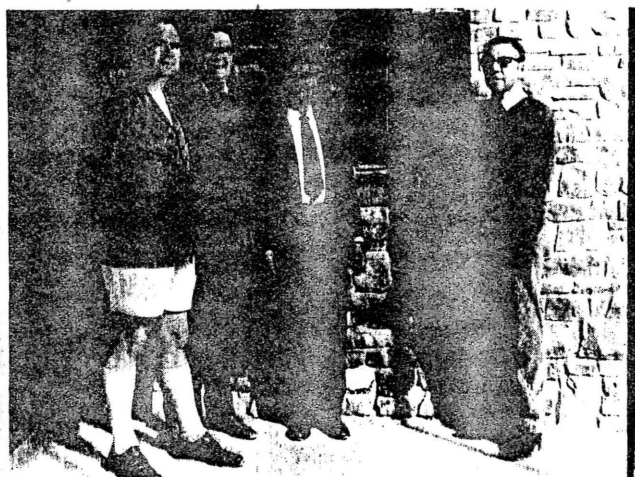
Dr V. FitzSimons and Dr C. Koch discussing plans of the newly constructed Desert Research Station at Gobabeb in 1963.



The Desert Research Station at Gobabeb on the occasion of its inauguration in August 1963.



Dr Koch at work in his Gobabeb laboratory soon after the building of the station. (Photo: Dr L. Prozesky-Schulze).



Prof. F. C. Eloff (right), Chairman of the Transvaal Museum Board, unveiled a plaque in memory of Dr Charles Koch at Gobabeb, June 1971. Also in the picture are, left to right, Mr Bernabe de la Bat, Director of Nature Conservation in South West Africa, Dr C. van der M. Brink, President of the C.S.I.R. and Prof. C. A. du Toit, Chairman of the DERU. Steering Committee. The inscription on the Koch plaque reads: *His love of the Namib led to the establishment of this station.*

My preoccupation in those days was with reptiles and I was curious to see what creatures were moving that evening at an air temperature of 3 °C. My friend and field companion Proz Prozesky offered to accompany me on a walk that we remember to this day. We lit two paraffin lamps and set off to the north, keeping the tracks of our incoming vehicles on our right, imagining that with this precaution it would be impossible to lose our way. We had walked a mile or two when we encountered a very remarkable gecko standing motionless on the gravel surface. Ghostly white with transverse bands on its back, it was clearly a *Ptenopus*, or barking gecko, but of a species new to science. As we walked further, forgetting the cold and our fatigue, more and more of those enchanting animals came our way and we collected several, on which my description of a new species, *Ptenopus carpi* was subsequently based. At midnight we started to retrace our steps, once again keeping the vehicle tracks at our side. We walked and walked, till our lamps sputtered and died, without the slightest sign of camp. In the pale starlight we estimated where the Kuiseb riverbed must lie and struck south towards it. Shortly before dawn we reached the riverbed, being then uncertain whether we should turn left or right to find the camp. We turned left and quickened our pace when we realized that a spotted hyaena was following us. Within an hour we smelt woodsmoke, drifting down the riverbed from our smouldering camp fire. As dawn broke we crept into our tent, thankful for brandy in lieu of breakfast. With daylight, the reason for our navigational error was clear. We had followed the vehicle tracks to beyond the point where one of the trucks had swung off to the west on its way directly to Walvis Bay. Had we walked far enough, we too would have reached the coast. But a strange feature of that night was that, although I have since walked the gravel plains on many occasions, I have never seen another *Ptenopus carpi*.

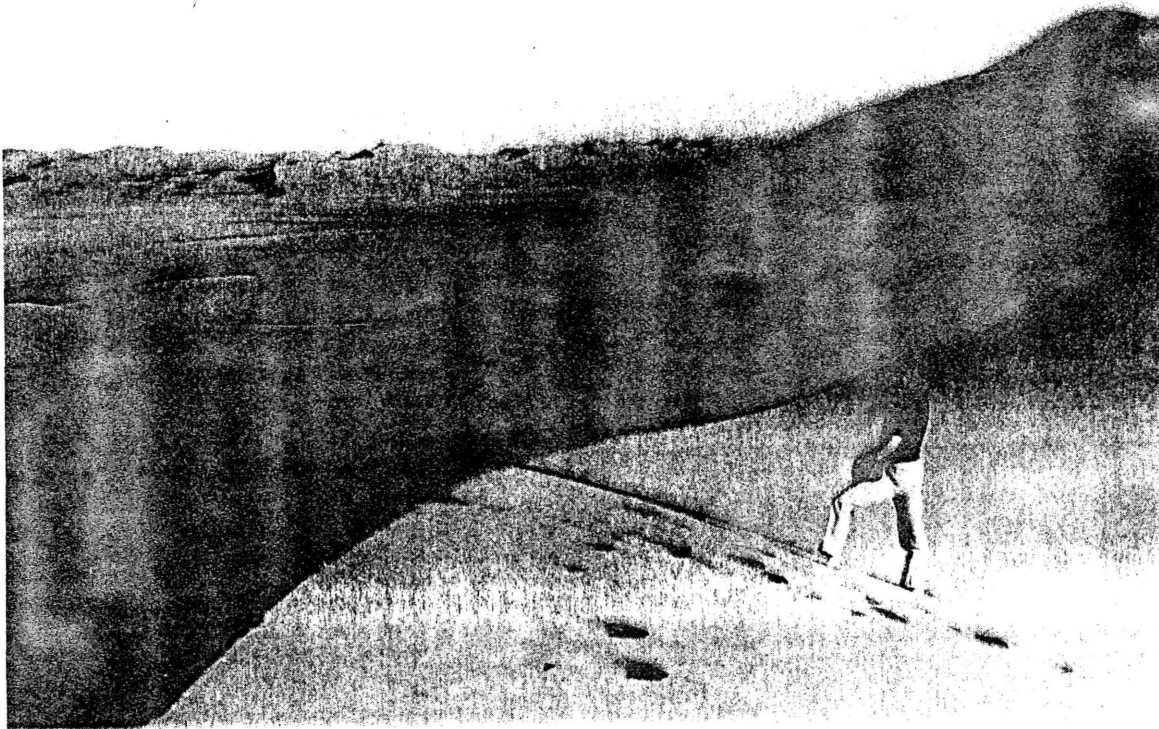
Following that 1959 expedition, the construction of a field



Shortly after her appointment as DERU Director, Dr Mary Seely shown here with Mr W. J. Weideman, Head of the University Research Division of the C.S.I.R.

station at Gobabeb proceeded apace. The Namib Desert Research Association was formed to collect the required funds and a lease was granted by the South West African Administration for the land. In 1963 the station was inaugurated with its laboratory, water supply and a lookout tower built into the roof, to which Charlie retired at evening with a dry martini watch the setting of the sun over the dunes. Two years later the C.S.I.R. established a Desert Ecological Research Unit administered by the Transvaal Museum and with Charlie as first Director, who was actively supported by Lilo Schulze.

In establishing the Namib Desert Research station, Charlie had two motives which, initially, he did not perceive as mutually exclusive. He longed for a personal retreat in the desert where he could, in the company of his wife René, study his favourite beetles in peace and solitude. But he also hoped that the place would become one of international scientific activity, drawing people of diverse interests from many parts of the world.



Admiring her new domain, Mary Seely in 1972.

Initially, both ambitions developed harmoniously and Charlie blossomed in the excitement of the venture. The station grew steadily to accommodate the increasing staff numbers and a stream of visiting scientists. Almost imperceptibly, more and more of Charlie's time and energy went into organizational problems and financial concerns till the peace of mind, for which he had gone to the desert in the first place, started to elude him. Ironically, the success of one of his ambitions had caused the failure of the other. Charlie and René moved from Gobabeb to Swakopmund, leaving the day-to-day running of the station to their colleagues, and particularly to a young American researcher, Mary Seely, who was working there.

In February 1970 Charlie suffered a heart attack and died in Windhoek a few days later – a most disturbing event, both in personal terms and because the Desert Ecological Research Unit had been built around this remarkable man. Fortunately, no doubt existed that the work so successfully fostered in the Namib should continue, and it seemed that this could appropriately be done under the guidance of Mary, whom Charlie had come to depend on. He had recognized in her a sensitivity to the desert's calling, a dedication to its ecology and a restless energy. She had come with a biochemical training from California, but clearly had far wider interests in natural science than her specialization demanded. In the Namib these interests, and those of the Research Unit, could flower as the desert does after rain, but not without potential hazards.

The Namib research enterprise has, as I see it, passed through two bottlenecks or times of potential danger to its existence. The first was in the early 1970s, shortly after Mary's appointment, and the second twenty years later. The initial

danger was posed by the divergent interests within the consortium of involved institutions. No longer was this a simple Transvaal Museum venture backed by the C.S.I.R. The research station, which housed the C.S.I.R./Transvaal Museum Unit, was now owned by the South West African Administration through its Department of Nature Conservation, here represented by Bernabe de la Bat, while the State Museum in Windhoek headed by Neels Coetzee and other scientific



The caravans on the Kuiseb River bank have long been a centre of social activity at Gobabeb. In one of them DERU assistants Kate O'Brien, Jane Lewis and Angela Suttle are shown here with Mary Seely, and John Ward in the foreground, March 1979.



DERU Steering Committee meetings at Gobabeb usually provided an opportunity for a trip into the dunes. This one was in July 1981.

bodies were also deeply involved. Would conflicting interests jeopardize the burgeoning success of the Desert Ecological Research Unit? They might well do. The fact that this danger was averted was a triumph for the generous spirit of the people who were drawn together by their genuine concern for the Namib and an understanding of its many facets.

For two decades Mary has devoted her life to the understanding, in scientific terms, of the Namib. She has spent endless hours on the promotion of other peoples' research, helping the hundreds of visiting scientists who come to Gobabeb from all parts of the world, as well as carrying out her own investigations, often in collaboration with colleagues with similar interests. The result is that the central Namib desert has become better known scientifically than any other equivalent area of Africa. This fact is a tribute to the Desert Ecological Research Unit of Namibia and its Director Mary Seely.

Throughout these productive years, Mary has had the unwavering support of many people: of Eckart Pfeifer for whom nothing seems too much trouble when it comes to Namib science; of the C.S.I.R. and F.R.D. top executives like Dr C. v.d. M. Brink, Dr C. F. Garbers and Dr Rein Arndt; of Willie Weideman who lived for his Gobabeb visits, Kuiseb River braais and volleyball matches; of Gudrun Schirge and F.R.D. staff members; of those of us at the Transvaal Museum for whom the Namib is a very special place; of Gideon Louw,

Duncan Mitchell, Liz McClain, John Ward, Shirley Hanrahan, Wulf Haacke, Erik Holm and a host of other dedicated researchers, some like Bill Hamilton and Cliff Crawford from overseas; of interested friends in Namibia like Christine Marais, Koen and Ingrid van Graan; of the loyal Gobabeb staff like François and Linda Malan, and Magda Nel, as well as helpful colleagues in Nature Conservation and the State Museum. All these people have contributed to an era of unprecedented scientific activity in the Namib, to which the contents of the present monograph bear testimony. The fact that I have been associated with this activity, has been one of the particular pleasures of my life.

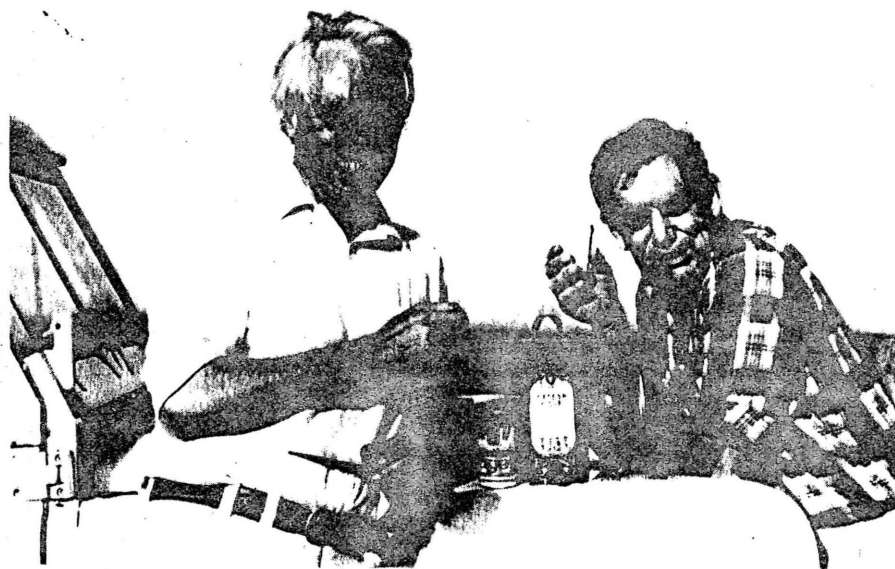
Remote as it might be, the Namib is not immune to political changes affecting the fortunes of the country as a whole. So it was in 1990, when Namibia emerged as an independent nation, that the Desert Ecological Research Unit passed through its second phase of potential hazard. Could a Unit, funded and administered from a neighbouring country, continue as a viable entity in the new and radically changed political circumstances? Once again the wisdom and dedication of the people involved carried the day. It was resolved that the Desert Ecological Research Unit of Namibia should be administered by a Namibian foundation, and that the financial subsidy of the F.R.D., together with the Gobabeb-based assets of the Transvaal Museum, should be donated to this new

Desert Research Foundation of Namibia. In addition the emphasis of the Unit's work would be modified to make it appropriate to the needs of a new Namibia.

The future is bright. I believe that the Namib will always

possess its chosen people and that its spirit of silence and solitude will continue to raise them above petty self-interest and into their true humanity.

Mary Seely and Gideon Louw at the launching of their book *Ecology of Desert Organisms* in Swakopmund, July 1982.



Water balance is always an issue in the desert. Here Gideon Louw and Willie Weideman attend to the matter, July 1982.



The Gobabeb-based children's book *Leonard the Land Rover* was launched in Swakopmund during November 1984. Here authors Ginny Brain (now Watson) and Liz McClain with artist Christine Marais enjoy the occasion.

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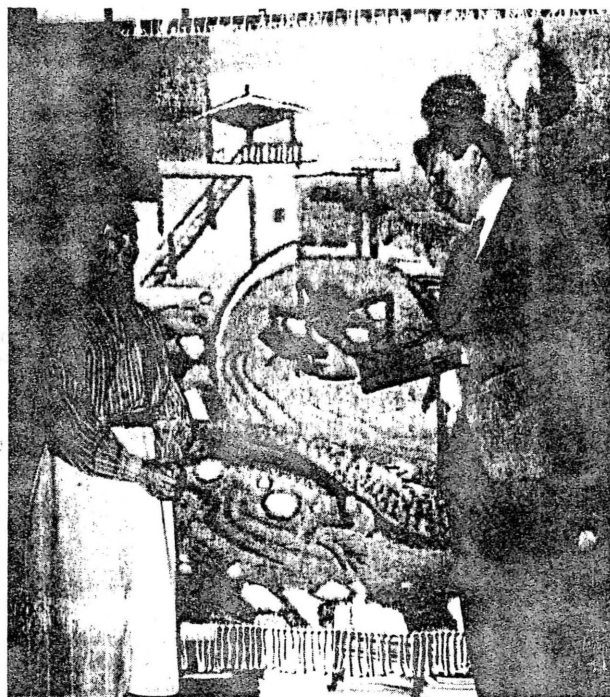
Kuiseb Riverbed braais were always a highlight of DERU Steering Committee visits to Gobabeb. Here Eckart Pfeifer and Willie Weideman attend to the cooking.



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The F.R.D. Advisory Committee for DERU in August 1988. Standing left to right: Dave Boyer, Neels Coetzee, Willie Weideman, Mary Seely, Gideon Louw (Chairman), Duncan Mitchell, Bob Brain; sitting: Eugene Joubert, Gudrun Schirge and Gerhard Prinsloo.



A karakul wool wall-hanging with a Gobabeb motif, designed by Christine Marais, being presented to Dr R. R. Arndt, Group Executive of the F.R.D., by Mary Seely in March 1989. Dr Koch's lookout tower is featured above the beetle and the hanging is now on display in the new F.R.D. building.



Office-bearers of the new *Desert Research Foundation of Namibia* at its inaugural meeting in Windhoek, February 1990: The Hon. Mr Justice H. Berker (Chairman), Dr M. K. Seely, Mr J. A. Brückner, and Mr E. H. Pfeifer.



Participants in the last F.R.D. Advisory Committee meeting held at Gobabeb, July 1989. Standing left to right: Mr H. Schraeder, Prof. C. S. Crawford, Dr R. R. Arndt (Chairman in place of Dr G. N. Louw), Mr W. J. Weideman, Dr M. K. Seely, Prof. T. Erasmus, Prof. P. D. Tyson; sitting: Miss A. Rädcl, Mr C. G. Coetzee, Dr H. Berry, and Dr C. K. Brain.