

IMPACT STORY

Working with the Topnaar
to Protect Human Rights and
Revive Ocean Culture





Lena Kasper-Bees and her grandson Michael Kasper are part of the Topnaar community. Photo: Nessim Stevenson

Topnaar people were the first inhabitants documented as settling in Walvis Bay along the central Namib coast. For several centuries, their cultural livelihoods depended heavily on ocean resources. During colonial rule they were forcibly displaced from their coastal dwelling places, with their access to coastal marine resources and fishing grounds restricted. In contemporary Namibia, the Topnaar continue to be excluded from decision-making on the ocean. Hub researchers in Namibia are working to shape policy and law that will acknowledge the cultural and human rights of the Topnaar people.

The Khoe-speaking Topnaar people (≠Aonin) were the first inhabitants documented as settling in Walvis Bay along the central Namib coast and !Khuseb river in what is now Namibia. For several centuries, their cultural livelihoods depended heavily on ocean resources, together with livestock and the harvesting of the !nara melon which is endemic to the Namib desert. They were forcibly displaced from their coastal dwelling places, with their access to coastal marine resources and fishing grounds restricted

through legal and historical processes of exclusion during colonial rule. They continue to be excluded from decision-making on the ocean in contemporary Namibia. The community now primarily resides in 14 farm settlements along the lower valley of the !Khuseb river and in coastal urban centres.

For the past three years, the Hub has been working with the Topnaar community. Our work has focused on facilitating connections – connections outside of the community, so they can be recognised as stakeholders in ocean governance processes, as well as connections within, so that the Topnaar’s own cultural memories and knowledge practices can be revived. Such connections take time to nurture; this impact case study details some of the work already accomplished and describes plans still in process.

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A Hub workshop was one of the few times that a Topnaar representative could directly articulate to the Namibian Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources their knowledge, needs, and rights related to the ocean.

Connecting to the outside: informing ocean governance

Initial contacts between the Topnaar and the Hub were brokered by the team at the University of Namibia (UNAM) in late 2020 and early 2021. Despite their historical cultural



and economic connections to the ocean, the Topnaar had only limited involvement in consultations on the blue economy prior to the Hub's support.

The first step to connect the Topnaar to ocean governance processes was to bring **Glenn Kasper**, a Junior Councillor in the Topnaar Traditional Council, to a regional workshop with the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the Namibian Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources (MFMR) in April 2021. This was one of the few times that a Topnaar representative had direct access to the MFMR and could articulate to decision-makers their knowledge, needs, and rights related to the ocean. Mr. Kasper provided input on the ongoing connections between his people and the ocean and their customary rules for fishing.

This paved the way for deeper collaboration between the UNAM team and the MFMR. In June 2021, the Hub co-organised a webinar series with the FAO, "Namibia's Experience on Implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines on Small-Scale Fisheries." Prof. **Alex Kanyimba** spoke on the need to establish a policy and regulatory framework more responsive to small-scale fishers' (SSFs) needs. Hub director Prof. **Elisa Morgera** stressed the government's role in ensuring that fisheries policy was developed with the contributions of SSFs and communities displaced from the coast, such as the Topnaar. The workshop helped develop Namibia's National Plan of Action (NPOA) for Small-Scale Fisheries.

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After the successful launch of the NPOA in June 2022, the Hub is working towards recognition of SSFs in Namibia's legislation. The MFMR has requested that UNAM researchers bring their expertise to review existing legislation and help develop a consolidated law. Legal scholar Dr. **Tapiwa Warikandwa** is exploring what legal reforms are needed to fully recognise Namibia's SSF sector and effectively support fair and equitable benefit-sharing in fisheries.

Since then, relationships between the UNAM Hub team and Namibian governmental offices have further developed. UNAM is currently finalising a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Office of the Ombudsman, an independent and

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*Professor Alex Kanyimba
University of Namibia*



The community primarily resides in 14 farm settlements along the lower valley of the Ikhuisseb river and in coastal urban centres.
Photos: Nessim Stevenson

impartial public officer who raises people’s concerns relating to violations of human rights and protection of the environment. In a meeting with the Ombudsman, the UNAM team has already raised the need to recognise the rights of marginalised communities, such as the Topnaar, in Namibia’s regulatory framework. Once the MOU is in effect, UNAM research will be used to inform the Ombudsman’s work. Additionally, the UNAM team will raise awareness among coastal and ocean-dependent communities of opportunities to directly share their concerns with the Ombudsman office, helping connect communities with a potentially powerful process to hold institutions and individuals to account.

The UNAM team continues to connect the perspectives, expertise, and goals of marginalised groups such as the Topnaar and SSFs with government processes. In September 2023, they will hold a workshop on marine spatial planning (MSP) with SSF and marginalised communities such as the Topnaar.

The workshop will seek to help participants understand MSP and solicit their views on how effective MSP has been in their communities. Has it helped to empower SSF, or is it further marginalising them? What space exists for communities such as the Topnaar to participate in the MSP agenda? The UNAM team will then bring the workshop’s findings to their next meeting with policy-makers in Windhoek.

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Connecting within: revitalising cultural memories

In November 2021, the UNAM team and Topnaar community held a workshop. In a roundtable format, community members spoke about how their ancestors connected to the ocean and the ways they still connect to it today, although no longer benefiting from activities related to the ocean economy. They called for changes in ocean laws and policies to include coastal communities such as theirs, bringing an end to their exclusion from decision-making.

After this workshop, the UNAM team hired three Topnaar youth, including Glenn Kasper, as research assistants to advance their understanding of the Topnaar’s socio-cultural connections to the ocean. This work helped to clarify the Topnaar’s priorities for the collaboration. The Chief noted his appreciation, saying, “The Topnaar have never before been engaged on ocean-related issues.”

From this research experience, Mr. Kasper developed a new project with support from the UNAM researchers. The project, “Hurinin: Sea People of the Namibian Coast,” was finalised in January 2023 at a workshop that also brought in Hub researchers from Strathclyde University in Scotland and from Rhodes University and Cape Town University in South Africa. The workshop was organised in partnership with the Gobabeb Namib Research Institute, one of Africa’s leading institutes for desert research



and a research partner of the Hub. The Centre is situated in the Namib Naukluft Park, where some of the Topnaar settlements are located. Gobabeb initially contributed to the scoping phase of Hub research in Namibia, providing literature on the Topnaar, their history, and their concepts of the blue economy. They are now administratively supporting the Hurinin project and, in turn, being exposed to novel approaches to fair partnerships and art-based research methods.

Led by Mr. Kasper, the Hurinin project will collect Topnaar elders' living memories of their people's intangible cultural heritage and connections to the ocean. Songs and dances specifically related to fishing and the ocean were once an integral part of Topnaar culture. Before fishing, they would recite a poem to the ocean and only then start to fish. After fishing, they would celebrate through dancing. Story collection and traditional dances worked hand in hand.

Today, these poems, songs, and dances celebrating their former marine culture survive in the memory of very few Topnaar elders. The Hurinin project seeks to revive and pass on these cultural memories and knowledge practices through a series of fire events that include sharing stories, music, and dances focused on their ocean heritage.

Thus far, two fire events have been held in August 2023. These initial events served to build relationships within the community, including between the elders and youth. The events took place underneath the Lidia Tree in Iduseb village, where elders used to gather to discuss community affairs. Under this tree, traditional chiefs have been inaugurated and ceremonies are held upon their death. It has also served as a rest camp to communities travelling through with their ox wagons.

In this place of rich history, community members gathered in a circle at dusk. The fire events started with a church elder providing a blessing with a traditional fire ceremony. Then, late into the night, elders shared stories. They spoke of where their people used to live, some of the origins and migration histories of the different subclans of the ǀAonin (Topnaar), the different fish they used to catch, and uses of seaweed for traditional medicine. In reflecting on the events, Mr. Kasper said, "One story that stood out for me was when the meaning of the word !Gomen (subclan of ǀAonin) was explained in detail. The elders helped each other to get the main and right meaning of the word – !Gomen – which is connected to the sound of the whale's tail as it hits the water."

The youth present at the event were eager to participate and learn of their historical heritage. They volunteered and supported the task team with lighting the fire and cooking horse mackerel, angel, and snoek fish as a stew, served with maize meal porridge. The sharing of food was a very

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*Glenn Kasper
Junior Councillor in the Topnaar Traditional
Council and Hub researcher*



Many in the Topnaar community hold histories of structural marginalisation and have been granted limited participation in decision-making. Photos: Nessim Stevenson

positive experience. “It has been a very long time that I had eaten fish,” one elder said. A challenge across Namibia’s coast is how expensive seafood is for local communities.

The elders encouraged the youth to continue holding fire events to revive the ǀAonin culture that has been lost. One elder said, “I’m very glad to be part of this fire event, it shows that you recognised me as an elder and not only recognise me when I die.” **Frederika Kham**, one of the youth volunteers, also expressed enthusiasm: “We sat around the fire till late and just had general discussions and laughter. It was really what I needed and missed. It’s an opportunity we are not getting in the urban towns.”

The next event will be more of a festival, focusing specifically on ocean heritage and for the ǀAonin community. It will be organised at the compound of the traditional authority and chief where there is a community hall and a place to build a fire. It is hoped that this event will continue to build bridges within the ǀAonin community and between generations.

After this, three more fire events will be organised to which youth and community members from three other coastal towns will be invited. These events will be focused on sharing histories and stories relating to coastal places and the ocean, with performance of songs, dances, instrumental accompaniment, and poetry. In addition, a documentary of the Hurinin project is being planned with a UNAM-based filmmaker. Through these events for outside communities and

the documentary, project organisers hope to surface their region’s hidden histories and build a national awareness of their rich ocean and coastal heritage.

Weaving a web of connections

Many in the Topnaar community hold histories of structural marginalisation and have been granted limited participation in decision-making. The UNAM team is working to shape policy and law that will acknowledge the cultural and human rights of such communities. At the same time, Mr. Kasper and his team are working to create spaces of inter-generational learning where cultural memories can resurface and connections be rediscovered between their community and the ocean. As their stories travel, they may resonate with other Namibians, leading to yet more rediscoveries and connections.

With the Hub’s support for this work in Namibia, we hope to see an expansion of who participates in coastal economies and governance and who can access the ocean’s benefits, so that the Topnaar can once again participate in shaping their coast’s development trajectories.

