

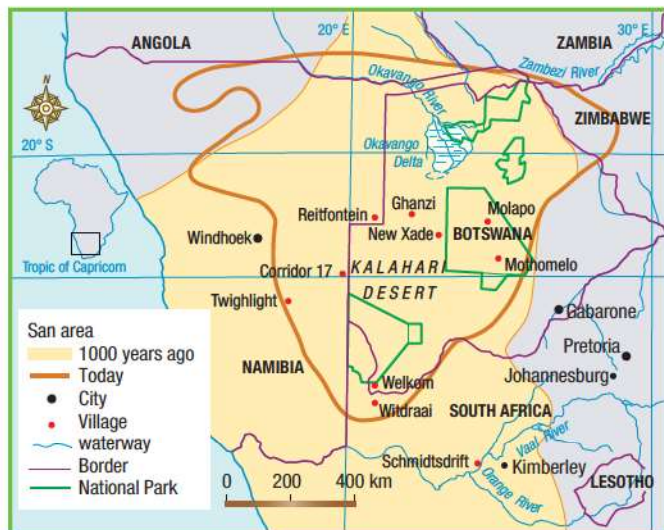
A desert community— the San of the Kalahari

About 4 per cent of the world's people live in deserts. Many of these people are nomadic such as the San (also known as the !Kung) of the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa. There are about 85 000 San living today in the remote reaches of the desert. The San way of life had not changed for thousands of years, but recently their culture has come under threat as a result of landlessness and dispossession. A minority of San people still live the traditional, nomadic lifestyle but many now live in cities or work on farms.

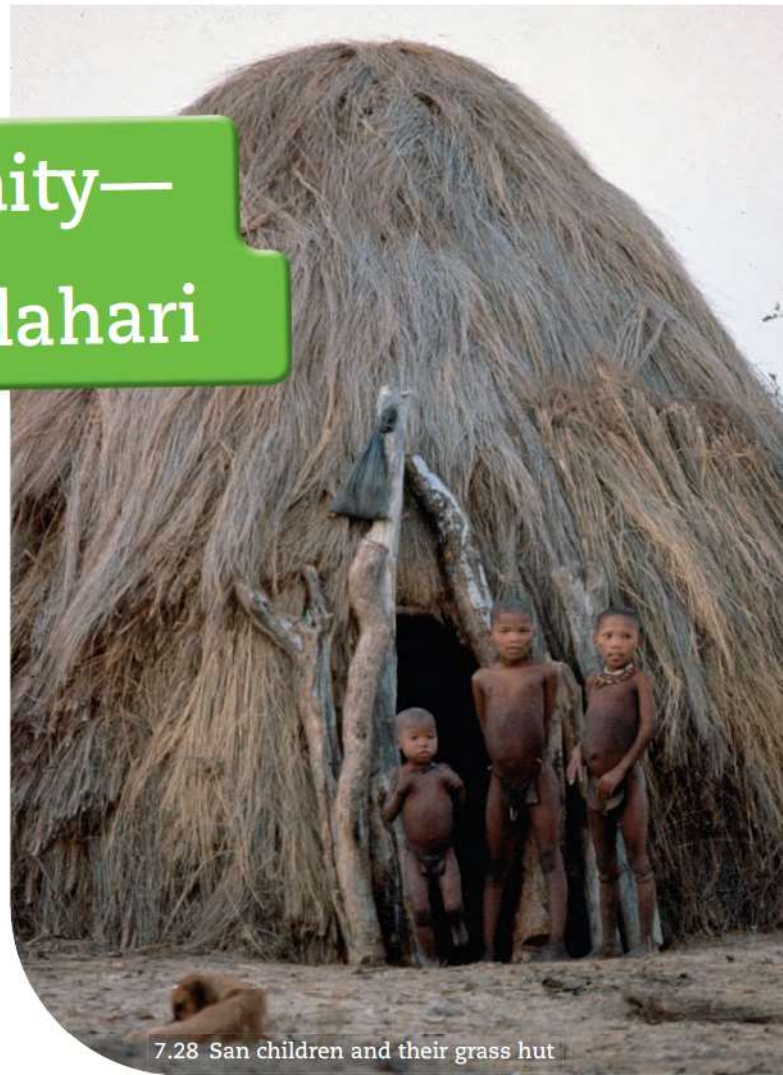
LOCATION AND GEOGRAPHY OF THE KALAHARI

The Kalahari is an arid to semi-arid desert located in the countries of Botswana, Namibia, Angola, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

7.29 Location of the Kalahari in southern Africa



The Kalahari is a hot, dry desert that experiences some reliable rainfall in a summer monsoon season. (See the climatic data for Mariental on page 175.) This allows people, plants and animals to store water during the wet season for use during the dry. The Kalahari is known for its wide variety of animals such as the meerkats, lions, ostriches, oryx and springboks.



7.28 San children and their grass hut

HOUSING

The traditional San live in small villages of a number of families, each family with their own grass hut. The huts are made from a dome of light sticks, thatched with grass and twigs. The hut is used for sleeping, shade and storage.



7.30 The Kalahari is a habitat for the meerkat.



7.31 San men hunt with bows and arrows dipped in poison.

SAN ADAPTATION TO THE KALAHARI

Traditionally the San are hunter-gatherers and do not keep animals. They are nomadic and until recently they collected everything they needed from the desert by hunting and foraging. San people are quite short but can eat enormous amounts, storing excess body fat in their stomachs and buttocks. This serves as a source of energy in drought when there is little food available. They have strong legs and lungs, giving them endurance and the ability to run fast.

GEOGRAPHY FOCUS

The San speak a language of strange clicking sounds. These different clicks are written as !, / and // which are basically just letters in the San alphabet. The clicks are made with the tongue.

CENTRAL KALAHARI GAME RESERVE

The Central Kalahari Game Reserve covers an area of 60 000 square kilometres—about the size of Tasmania. It was established in 1961 to protect the natural environment from human development and exploitation. It is the world's second largest conservation park.

The park sustains a great biodiversity of animals. Herds of springbok and gemsbok, blue wildebeest, eland, red hartebeest—animals that are well adapted to the very dry conditions—roam freely. The movements of the herds are determined by the rare rains and the rush of short-lived grasses they bring. Many of these animals also extract water from the dew-covered nighttime plants, deep-rooted succulents, the wild cucumber and the tamma melon. In turn, the antelopes provide food for the carnivores of the desert—cheetah, lion, leopard, hyena and wild dog.

There are also populations of giraffe, ostrich, meerkat, bat-eared fox, honey badger, jackal and many other species. As in most desert biomes, there are snakes and other reptiles but also a great diversity of bird species.

San interaction with the environment

San people have an uncanny ability of knowing where to find water and food in their harsh environment. They take only what they need, leaving the rest to regenerate or for another time. This is a sustainable way of life.

Men and women have different roles. Women gather roots, berries, grubs, insects and small animals such as tortoises, frogs and lizards for food, as well as collecting firewood and water. Men hunt with poison-tipped spears, and bows and arrows for larger game. The poison comes from snakes, scorpions and spiders, and causes paralysis in animals.

Water is the most important element to the San. Only in drought do they live close to a reliable water source. At other times they suck up water flowing under the soil through straws made from hollow reeds. In the wetter months they collect water in ostrich eggshells and bury it underground for use in dry times.



7.32 A San girl drinks water from an ostrich eggshell. This water is collected in the wet season and stored underground for the dry.

HOW THE RELATIONSHIP IS CHANGING

San people can survive without obvious surface water. This allowed them to live for a long time where other people could not. In the 1950s water wells were introduced to the Kalahari. This meant that other people such as farmers were able to move into and fence off traditional San lands. The San were dispossessed and left without land and animals for hunting.

Today many San have adopted the customs and lifestyles of the western world and have begun to lose their traditional culture. They have moved into cities and are learning to read and write so they can get jobs. Many have work on the farms, mines or game reserves that now take up their traditional land. Most wear western clothing.

The San are responding to these changes

Increasing tourism in the Kalahari Desert is providing some hope for San people. The erection of replica villages and traditional San activities for tourists to participate in can bring a steady income. But there are problems for the San. Intu Afrika—a white-owned game reserve—features a San community, but most profits remain with the Intu Afrika business.

Many San have moved to the outskirts of cities where there is the promise of schools, fresh water and health facilities. Many depend on government relief and cash

from the sale of crafts and souvenirs. Today only a small part of the population still depends on the traditional hunt and produce from gardens and gathering.

GEOGRAPHY FOCUS

The San are thought to be the oldest culture in the world, dating back over 100 000 years. Now only 3000 San follow the hunter/gatherer lifestyle.

SAN SURVIVAL

Today San people live on:

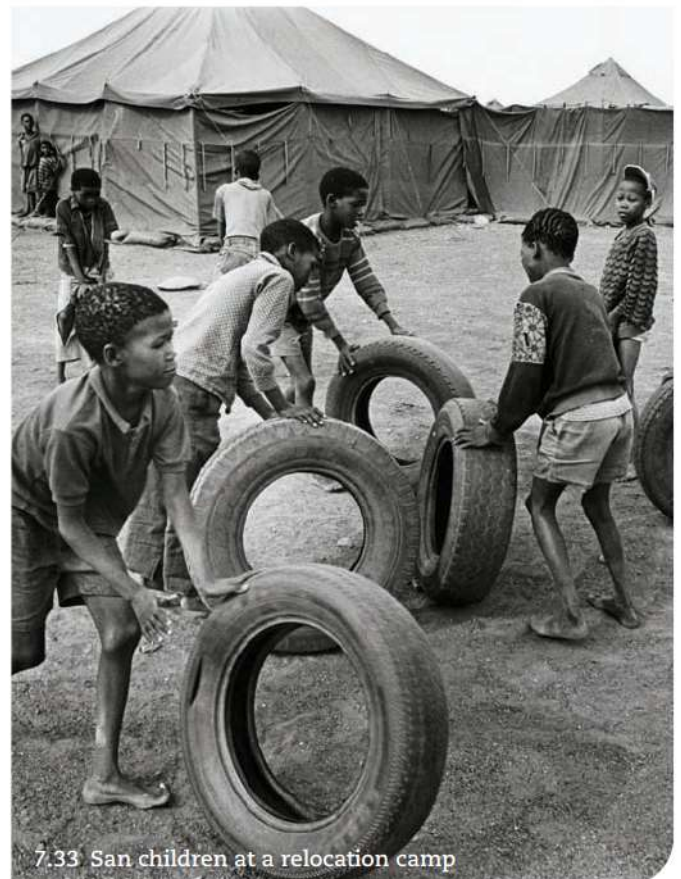
- 40% from government food relief
- 30% from cash from craft sales, pensions and wages
- 20% from traditional hunting
- 10% from gardens and gathering.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEMS: INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS AND GOVERNMENTS

Some governments, such as the government in Botswana, have encouraged the San to move into permanent villages where there is artesian water, schools and houses and a government resettlement bonus of five cows and 15 goats per person. The government provides food and pensions to the San and encourages children to go to schools by serving them food if they attend classes. Government officials call it progress, but many San say that resettlement threatens their culture.

Several groups have been formed to improve the quality of life for the San and to preserve their traditions. The Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa tries to negotiate deals between the San and tourist operators. Another organisation—First People of the Kalahari—campaigns for the San's rights to the Central Kalahari Game Reserve in Botswana (see page 173).

In South Africa the South African San Institute (SASI) is attempting to reclaim tracts of land in Northern Cape Province and helps to elect and guide the San community leaders in managing the land. In 2000 SASI was instrumental in the South African government handing over a parcel of land to San community leaders.



7.33 San children at a relocation camp