

Forgotten family 'owns' Sandwich Harbour skeletons

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DESCENDANTS ... Christof von Broen and his wife, Johanna, at their home Narraville, Walvis Bay.

THE Von Bröen family of Walvis Bay claim that the human remains at Sandwich Harbour belong to their family and that the bones bear witness to their claim to the area, which they claim was robbed from them.

On 3 May *The Namibian* carried a photo taken by Matthew Gowaseb on the front page of human remains on a popular tourist route towards Sandwich Harbour. According to tour guides in the area, the remains were a “major tourist attraction”.

“When I see the skeleton in the newspaper, or when I hear tour companies make money showing the remains to tourists, I get a sad feeling inside of me because those bones belong to my mother, brothers and sisters,” said Christof von Bröen (70).

Five people were buried there, four Von Bröens and one from the Bauer family, which is the surname of one of Christof’s married sisters, who also lived there.

The story dates back 131 years when Christof’s grandfather, Eugene von Bröen, left Germany to come to southwestern Africa to set up a meat cannery at Sandwich Harbour, from where he traded along the central coast. He married Katriena Gertse, a

woman of colour, and they had six children. Although the cannery did not work out due to environmental factors – “everything, even the cans, was full of sand” – the family remained there and built up a little community that survived on fishing, meat and vegetable farming, Inarras and flowers.

“Money did not mean much to us then. We had everything we needed,” he said.

One of the children, Hans von Broen, married a Topnaar woman, Anna Tseises, in 1939, and they had 16 children of which Christof was one. She died of kidney failure after the birth of the last child in 1956.

The Sandwich Harbour community consisted of two families at the oasis situated between the Namib Desert and the icy Atlantic Ocean. They lived there for 82 years, trading with other communities along the coast while minding their own business. Hans von Bröen was also an honorary nature warden. Anna Tseises and four of her children were buried there in a small cemetery.

“That is why it is so strange to see the bones in the newspapers,” Christof told The Namibian.

The Von Bröens' idyllic life came to an abrupt end on 25 September 1969 when South African soldiers forced them onto military trucks, with just some bare belongings, and dropped them off at the coloured location of Walvis Bay.

“We had to leave everything. Houses, gardens, animals, boats, everything, cars, and we still don't know what happened to everything,” Christof said.

“It has been a struggle since. If we had not been removed, we would still have been there.”

A boundary was even erected around the area to keep people out, so there was no going back, and today there are just ruins and bones.

Christof and Johanna have been married for 41 years, and the past 15 years they have pleaded with the government to restore the area to the descendants of the late Hans von Broen, whom they claim was the last official inhabitant of Sandwich Harbour. The Von Bröens are now spread all over Namibia and South Africa and they are also appealing to the government to allow them to erect a family memorial, but have not received permission yet.

“We appeal for restoration and restitution from the Namibian government for the injustices that we suffered at the hands of the former colonial apartheid regime.

“We have suffered immensely and continue to do so in the new democratic dispensation because of the unjust and inhumane policies and practices of the former regime meted out to us as a family. At present, we still feel that our constitutional rights are being violated,” they claim.

The family claims to have been awarded the right to live at Sandwich Harbour, but that this was never registered and never officially communicated to them. They are requesting the right to restore their family graves and be granted concession rights to Sandwich Harbour – as well as a fish quota for Von Bröen descendants. This appeal was made to the Office of the

Ombudsman.

Ombudsman John Walters confirmed their appeal years ago and that all he could do was direct them to the Ministry of Environment and Tourism to apply for a concession.

"They claimed their birthright, but our laws do not deal with birthright in such matters," Walters said.

Calls to MET's concessions department went unanswered on several occasions. Tour guides working in the area also told *The Namibian* that it would be challenging for one family to claim bones as "the whole desert is full of skulls and bones", which are exposed along the tourist routes.

According to some of the guides, skulls were discovered far from the graveyard, and there were also other people who lived, worked and moved along the coastline.

"It is true that there were other people, but we can prove that we lived there," said Christof von Broen.