

PRESS RELEASE

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German Colonial Genocide in Namibia: Infrastructure of Genocide Shark Island

Forensis and Forensic Architecture (FA) release their latest investigation into German colonial genocide in today's Namibia. The research, a collaboration with Nama and Ovaherero leadership groups, reconstructs a notorious colonial concentration camp at Shark Island, identifies new potential mass grave sites, and reveals how plans by the Namibian government for the expansion of a nearby seaport will erase parts of the camp, and with them vital traces of colonial history.

[Investigation page](#) / [Vimeo](#) / [Press pack](#) / [Methodology Report](#)

Findings

- Modern infrastructure, including tourist facilities, monuments to German colonists, roads, and commercial infrastructure have been built over the former concentration camp, compromising its historical significance and permanently removing vital material traces of its very existence.
- The proposed extension of the Lüderitz Port in Robert Harbour poses further imminent risk to the site. The proposed port expansion will not only affect Shark Island but also disturb the resting place of many Nama and Ovaherero who died there, and whose bodies were thrown into the water. This rushed expansion is fuelled in part by the urgency of German 'green energy' demands.
- The outskirts of Lüderitz are scattered with numerous grave sites that are very likely the interments of deceased former inmates of Shark Island.
- According to Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) scans, at least one of these grave sites is likely to contain mass graves.

Background

Since 2022, Forensics and FA have collaborated with the Ovaherero Traditional Authority (OTA) and the Nama Traditional Leadership Association (NTLA) on research into the German colonial era genocide between 1904-1908 in present-day Namibia.

The project investigates the concentration camp of Shark Island in the town of Lüderitz, which was in operation between 1905 and 1908, during the genocidal campaign waged by German colonists against the Nama and Ovaherero. The investigation brings together oral history, archival material, 3D digital modelling, and cutting-edge archaeological analysis to reconstruct the layout and operation of the camp in unprecedented detail, and to reveal its relationship to the area's contemporary landscape.

The project also brought a research team from the world-leading Centre of Archaeology at the University of Staffordshire to Lüderitz, to conduct the first GPR scan of burial sites associated with the genocide, uncovering likely locations of mass grave sites previously known only to local oral historians. Initial processes for the preservation of cultural heritage were initiated with the Namibian Heritage Council.

Threats to critical cultural heritage

The integrity of the archaeological record at Shark Island is doubly threatened. The site of the camp where between 1000–3000 Herero and Nama prisoners died has been a campsite for many years, and key parts of the camp's topography have been built over by tourist facilities.

Further, a proposed development by the Namibian Ports Authority (Namport), slated to begin in late 2024, will expand the existing port in Lüderitz. Amongst other needs the expansion is supposed to support the country's burgeoning energy industry, including an urgent major 'green hydrogen' project officially supported by the German government as a 'strategic foreign project'. In the latter context, the port expansion is to provide a temporary dock before a new, larger port facility at a different location is completed. Our analysis shows that this port expansion will erase archaeological traces of the historical concentration camp, where prisoners were held and executed, while the identified mass

graves are feared to be in the path of new infrastructure for a major green hydrogen project, proposed by [Hyphen](#), whose majority shareholder is the German company Enertrag SE.

“Shark Island epitomises a landscape and a history of immeasurable human suffering. It must be recognised as a place of world heritage, evidence of the cruel and methodical denial of the human dignity of the Nama and Ovaherero people during Germany’s first genocide. Any further interference with this landscape is a continued and calculated denial of our humanity. As descendants of the deceased, we demand that all further industrial or leisure activities around Shark Island be stopped immediately. We demand that the relevant authorities work with us to protect the sanctity of Shark Island at any cost.”

Ovaherero Traditional Authority and
Nama Traditional Leaders Association



Analysis by FA/Forensis shows how tourist facilities have erased traces of the area's colonial history, and how proposed economic developments threaten to continue that erasure.

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About Forensic Architecture

Forensic Architecture is an interdisciplinary research agency based at Goldsmiths, University of London. We undertake spatial and media analysis for international prosecutors, human rights groups and NGOs. Our research is presented in political and legal forums, truth commissions, courts, and human rights reports, as well as in exhibitions and public events.

About Forensis

Founded in 2021 in Berlin as a non-governmental, not-for-profit association (e.V.), Forensis works for and in collaboration with individuals and communities affected by state and corporate violence, to support their demands for justice, reparations, and accountability. Drawing on techniques and methodologies developed by Forensic Architecture (FA), we produce evidence for presentation in national and international courts, human rights forums, parliamentary inquiries, truth commissions and people's tribunals, as well as cultural and media institutions.

Project partners and collaborators:

Forensis

Forensic
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