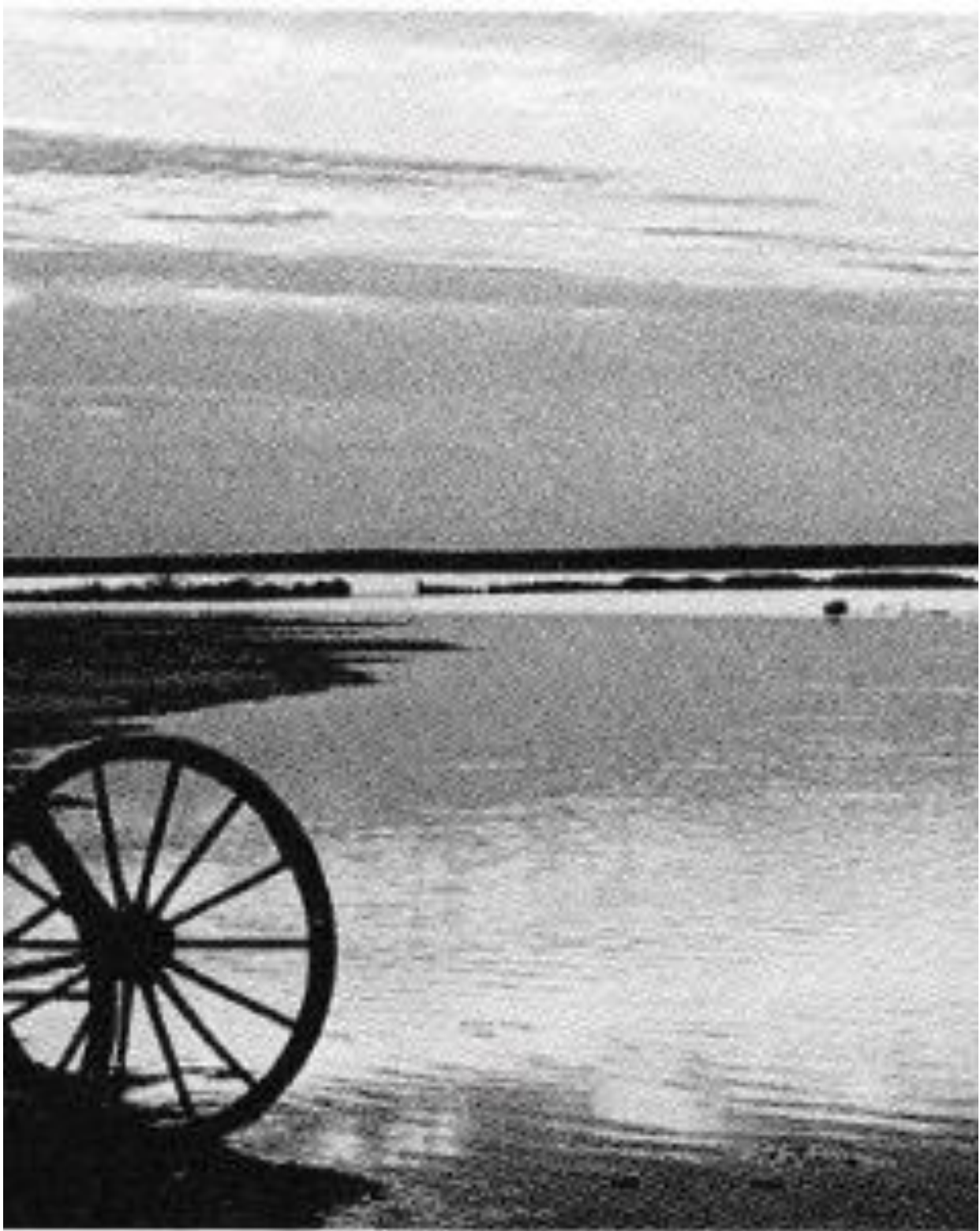


N. DE HOOP VLEI GORGE

Desk Note N8c1. Hydrology – De Hoop Vlei - 1957 flash flood



The area west of De Hoop vlei, one year after the flash flood.

N. DE HOOP VLEI GORGE

Desk Note N8c1. Hydrology – De Hoop Vlei - 1957 flash flood

The only information we have about the 1957 flash flood is from the article “The 1957 flood at De Hoop” by an anonymous author, published in the African Wildlife 37(1) p 11. The article is brought here verbatim:

THE 1957 FLOOD AT DE HOOP

Question: How often does a fifty-year flood occur?

Statistically correct answer: Every fifty years on average.

Ecologist's answer: Insure your carpets and buy a rowing-boat.

The ecologist may seem to some to be a pessimist but he believes himself to be a realist. When “the coldest winter for 80 years” or “the wettest summer in recorded history” occurs, or when “the longest drought” or “the deepest snow” is experienced, the mass media tend to leap into print with bizarre explanations ranging from weather modification by Communist Russia to retributive acts of God. The ecologist rejects such fancies.

In 79 A.D. the towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum were devastated by an unexpected eruption of the volcano Vesuvius. Present-day Naples, with a population of just over two million, stands beside Herculaneum, which falls within its suburbs. Do the people of Naples believe that no similar catastrophe will overtake them? The American Will Durant's dictum, “Civilisation exists by geological consent, sub-

ject to change without notice”, surely applies.

Laingsburg in the arid Karoo was built on the wide banks of the Buffels River, but as no flood of modern times approached the height of the “ancient” river-bank, the inhabitants of Laingsburg built some houses on the upper slopes of the “ancient” river-bed. This was all very satisfactory until a not-so-ancient flood came roaring down the ancient river-bed in January 1981 and swept part of the town away to ruin and destruction.

“... There is no new thing under the sun” said the writer of Ecclesiastes, and as far as natural phenomena, climatic or geological, are concerned, this is completely true. What happened before can happen again.

In the winter of 1957, the rains fell with unusual persistence over the Bredasdorp district. The De Hoop Vlei gradually filled up, and in September there was an overflow at two points on the west bank of the vlei on to adjacent land on the farms Melkkamer and Reimerskraal (see map).

The water flooded westwards and eventually inundated most of the lower half of the farms of Melkkamer and



12 months after the flood. Looking north-west on Reimerskraal.

photo: C. J. Uys



Matjiesfontein and three-quarters of Reimerskraal. As Uys and Macleod (see reference p. 8) described it, "A sheet of water lying parallel with the coast and covering approximately 4 000 morgen was consequently formed almost overnight." (4 000 morgen = 3 426 ha).

The maximum depth of the water was recorded in places as about 20 feet (6 metres) although most water was no more than "a few feet in depth". The inundation persisted for approximately 1½ to 2 years.

For a further two to three years the water receded partially through seepage and evaporation and a series of pans resulted. The whole affair lasted for several years.

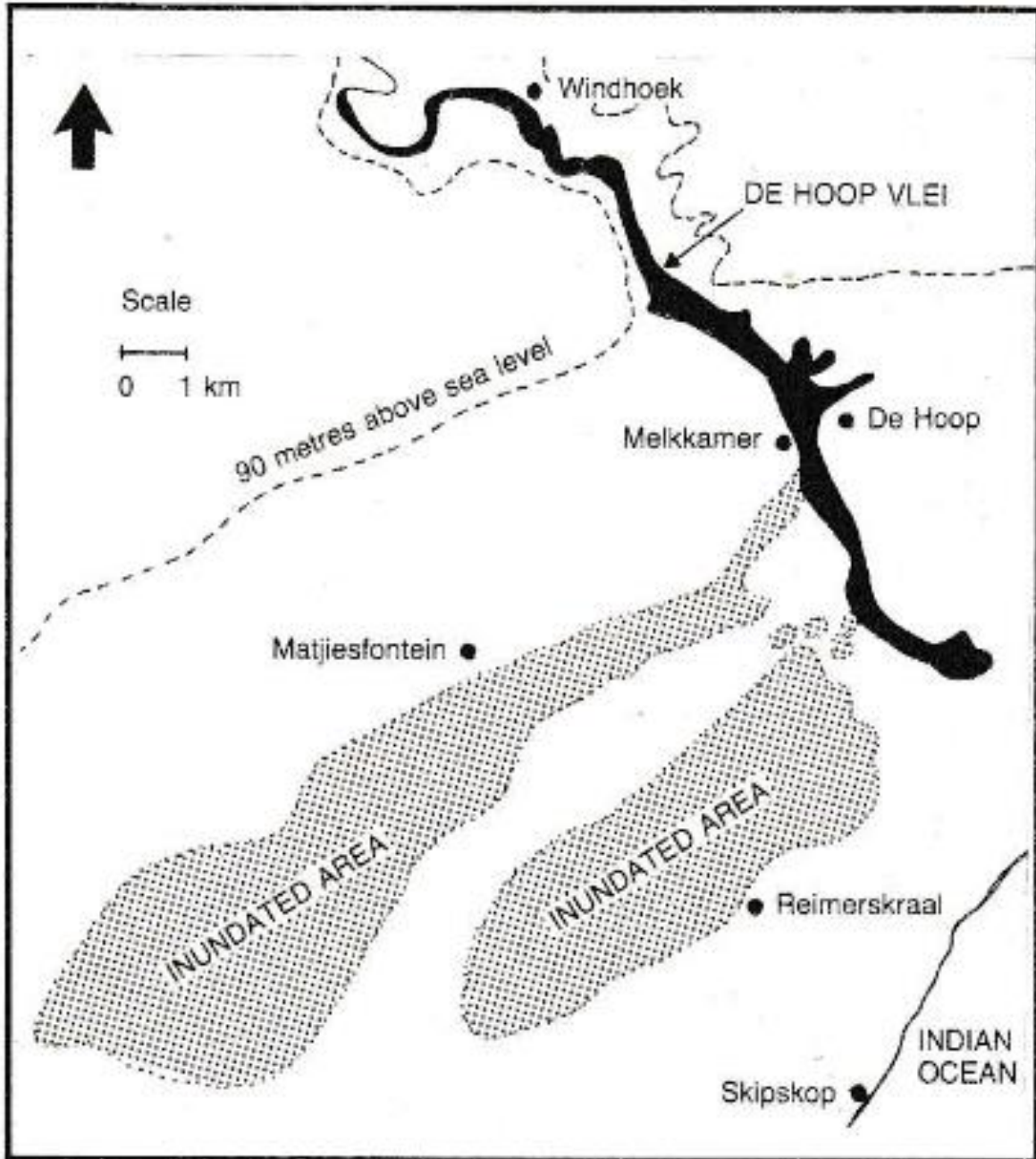
In view of the fact that Armscor plans are said to include the construction of an airfield capable of handling Mirage jets and the lumbering C130 (Hercules) transports, and that the site for this airfield has been suggested variously as Melkkamer, Reimerskraal and Moerasfontein, we feel that the authorities should be made aware of the fickleness of nature as far as floods are concerned. They should consider siting their airfield on higher ground nearer Bredasdorp.

On the other hand, Armscor could back off gracefully, win the thanks of the people of this country, and withdraw from this magnificent natural area altogether.

The Laws of Phenomenal Ecology may appear at first sight to be ridiculous, but they aren't. One of these laws states that "a fifty-year flood shall occur on occasion at yearly intervals to confuse the ecologically illiterate".

An updated version of this law which takes man's deforestation and denudation of the environment into account, states that "a two-hundred year flood will occur more frequently than a fifty-year flood if the authorities continue to turn a blind eye to farmers' infringements of the Soil Conservation Act (1969)."

Have you ever seen a Mirage on a sheet of water?



The extent of the 1957 flood.

adapted from a map in *The Ostrich* Vol. 38 No. 4

Author's notes:

Whereas the above article was written some 25 years after the flood, and may not constitute an accurate account of that flood (the map, taken from another source is also inaccurate), it gives the reader a sense of the enormity of that flood.