

THE ZAMBEZI SOCIETY

BULLETIN

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ZAMBEZI VALLEY IRRIGATION

The suggestion that much of the Zimbabwean Parks' estate's Middle Zambezi frontage was slated for a major irrigation project roused – rightly – a tremendous amount of concern among Society members, both locally and overseas. It was, in a word, unthinkable.

We contacted the Parks Board and PWMA as soon as the idea was first flighted because they and their parent ministry are, in our view, responsible for maintaining the integrity of the Parks estate. They confirmed that such a proposal was indeed made, that they shared our concern, and that they and their parent Ministry were dealing with it in an appropriate manner. Shortly thereafter they indicated to us that the proposal was, in their own words, a “non-starter” and had rapidly become a “non-issue.” This is where matters now stand.

We are indebted to Dr John Fulton and Mr Johnny Rodriguez of the Zimbabwe Conservation Task Force for raising the initial alarm over this scheme, and – regardless of its apparent abandonment – believe we would be wise not to drop our guard. Apart from anything else, the present slump in tourism makes the Parks Estate an easy target for proposals involving other, apparently more immediately profitable, forms of land use.

Aesthetics and wilderness values have an immense appeal to conservationists, but not – sadly – to most potential developers. The immediate arguments against such schemes lie in the income being generated from sport hunting in the Zambezi Valley and the plentiful availability of irrigable land elsewhere, particularly now that this land has effectively been nationalised but not, as yet, fully utilised.

However, we do not expect the tourism slump to last for ever. As and when the industry revives, high-quality tourism sites on the Zambezi are likely to be at a premium. During the last few years, at least 20 new tourist facilities have been established on the Zambian side of the river, and their popularity can be gauged by the constant stream of Cessna Caravans in and out of airstrips such as Chongwe, opposite Mana Pools, and the boat traffic along the Zambian frontage. Degazetting large parts of the Parks Estate by the requisite Act of Parliament and turning them over to agriculture – or any other form of land use – would not only be a wildlife catastrophe. It would be crassly shortsighted in economic terms.

8th WORLD WILDERNESS CONGRESS

After negotiating a bureaucratic maze of Byzantine complexity, The Zambezi Society was finally able to send a delegation of four to the 8th World Wilderness Congress in Anchorage, Alaska between 22nd September and 7th October, with funding from the American WILD Foundation. Society Assistant Director, Duncan Purchase enjoyed sub-zero Alaskan temperatures for two weeks accompanied by three community and government officials from Tete Province, Mozambique. The Mozambicans were chosen by the Society to benefit from this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity because of the importance to the Zambezi basin of the land in western Tete Province surrounding Lake Cabora Bassa.

Apart from the networking and exposure offered in such an international arena, our delegates were able to benefit from a number of Congress-related activities, notably a week-long Pre-Congress training course in International Wilderness Concepts and Practice. They joined other groups of indigenous representatives from all over the world at a “Tribal Wilderness Council” at which they outlined their plans for establishing a community-managed Biosphere Reserve in the Cabora Bassa area, (see below) and for developing wilderness tourism as an alternative to other land uses. Duncan Purchase was able to draw attention to the Zambezi Society's programme to promote the Zambezi's wilderness values and develop appropriate management and stewardship guidelines, and also to assist in the formation of a wilderness and indigenous people working group in which African perspectives about wilderness can be better promoted in the international arena.

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TETE BIOSPHERE RESERVE

Members will recall that a few years ago, the Society and its partners, the Biodiversity Foundation for Africa, undertook an evaluation of the biodiversity and wilderness values of the land around Lake Cabora Bassa. This information has now been taken up and developed by the Tete Provincial authorities, local communities and funders, notably the Ford Foundation, to form the basis of an ambitious “Biosphere” land-planning mechanism for the area.

The plan is to create a Biosphere Reserve, which will cover the Cabora Bassa basin, an area of nearly 5 million hectares. This concept is new to the region. Instead of a game reserve where wildlife is separated from people and conserved at the expense of livelihoods, a Biosphere Reserve is an area where people and biodiversity co-exist – a concept designed to enhance the current opportunities that the area supplies, limit the negative impacts of current land use patterns and direct future development.

The Zambezi Society’s research has helped in the delimitation of four different land use zones within the Biosphere Reserve.

- Core conservation areas (high biodiversity/high protection)
- Buffer/wildlife use zones (adjacent to the core conservation areas)
- Transition Zones (agricultural/mining land use)
- Intensive Use Zones (urban land)

Livelihoods around Lake Cabora Bassa have traditionally focused on subsistence agriculture, hunting and fishing. The community natural resource management project known as “Tchuma Tchato” (Our Wealth), which started in the area in the 1990s, is extending its influence and a major thrust of the Biosphere plan is to develop wilderness tourism opportunities for adventure-seeking visitors. The Ford Foundation has assisted with developing a strategy for the project and consultations are underway with communities and government stakeholders. However, there are major challenges. This is an extremely remote area with a harsh climate and very little infrastructure. There are issues of land tenure which have to be resolved and the investment environment needs to be made more secure and investor-friendly.

Apart from seeking to influence three key Mozambican decision-makers through exposure at the World Wilderness Congress, The Zambezi Society continues to be a major stakeholder in the Tete Biosphere Reserve and is set to meet with the Mozambicans and their funders later in the year to discuss practical inputs.

WILDERNESS MOU

The Society has recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the South-African-based Wilderness Action Group which, over the past few years, has provided University of Kwazulu-Natal-accredited training courses in wilderness awareness and management to which the Society has so far sent 14 candidates. We believe the working alliance that results will strengthen the Society’s ability to promote the conservation of Zambezi wilderness values and influence legislation, management and behaviour in our key areas of interest. Our first joint venture will be a wilderness training course for about 20 public and private-sector wildlife managers in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique, to be held next September in the Zambezi valley.

CHEETAH PROJECT

The fieldwork component for the Matusadona cheetah project sponsored by our Fauna and Flora International (FFI) partners has come to an end. Preliminary analysis of the data suggests that the re-introduced cheetah population has persisted from when it was first introduced over 10 years ago. The spoor survey carried out gives an estimate of 20 adult cheetahs which is slightly more than the number of cheetahs introduced and the number estimated in 1998. However, most, if not all of the individuals in the Park now would have been born in Matusadona. The cheetahs are predominantly using the eastern area of the park, and appear to have always favoured this side. Other predators are still present, but lion numbers have declined dramatically since the cheetahs were first introduced. A questionnaire survey of the surrounding Omay communal land found that very few cheetahs are seen in this area, and none were reported as problem animals. This suggests that the re-introduced cheetahs have either remained within the park boundary, or feed on wild prey when they leave the park. Impala are still the most abundant prey species, concentrated on the foreshore of the Park. In conclusion, it

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can be said that a population of cheetahs has successfully been established within Matusadona as a result of the translocation, and that the surrounding communities have not suffered any adverse effects.

TRANSBOUNDARY CONSERVATION IN MANA POOLS/LOWER ZAMBEZI

The Society was recently approached by the Zimbabwe TFCA Conservation and Veterinary Subcommittee to submit arguments for the development of a transfrontier conservation area incorporating Mana Pools National Park and the Lower Zambezi National Park in Zambia. The Society has submitted its thoughts and is waiting to see what happens with regard to the development of this TFCA. If progress is made, the Society hopes to be involved with the research needed to make cross-border management of the area effective.

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