

THE ZAMBEZI SOCIETY

BULLETIN

DECEMBER 2001

**THE ZAMBEZI SOCIETY WISHES ITS
MEMBERS, FRIENDS AND ASSOCIATES
A HAPPY CHRISTMAS AND A
PEACEFUL AND PROSPEROUS
NEW YEAR**

WILDERNESS CONGRESS & FOLLOW-UP

Sponsorship from the US-based WILD Foundation enabled Society Information Officer, Sally Wynn, and Director, Dick Pitman, to attend and present a poster at the Seventh World Wilderness Congress held in Port Elizabeth, South Africa in November, an event attended by some 700 delegates. Much interest was shown in the Society's research on visitor perceptions about Zambezi wilderness, and some useful contacts were made. The project is now being developed further and in 2002 the Society will be seeking funding to:-

- extend its research to capture the perceptions of local Zambezi communities in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique about wilderness and its values
- establish a wilderness management training programme for field officers, rangers and guides
- develop a set of wilderness-sensitive guidelines for tour operators and their clients
- help establish community-based wilderness areas to provide opportunities for local revenue generation through carefully-managed, sustainable tourism initiatives
- promote wilderness and its values among the tourism industry and the general public
- establish a Zambezi Society "Wilderness Stewardship Award" to be presented annually to the staff of any National Park, Safari Area or Community Wildlife Area within the Zambezi region where visitors consider wilderness values are being most effectively safeguarded .

The WILD Foundation also provided The Society with the opportunity to select a candidate to attend a week-long Wilderness Management training course prior to the World Wilderness Congress. The Society wishes to thank the Director of Zimbabwe's Department of National Parks for agreeing to release Mr Lovemore Mungwashu, his Acting Chief Warden from a busy schedule to attend. Mr Mungwashu found the course enlightening and extremely valuable, and we hope that his enthusiasm and the aforementioned Award scheme will help foster a culture of wilderness-sensitivity in the Department at all levels.

CAMPS & COLLABORATIONS

Your Society is, we think, being instrumental in opening up a whole new world of conservation-travel opportunities across some vast expanses of magnificently wild countryside in northern Zimbabwe and western Mozambique.

Firstly, the new tourism camps in Guruve and Muzarabani - for which, if you recall, we located the funding earlier this year - are being built. Construction of the upgraded Mavuradonha headquarters accommodation is underway, and the new Guruve camp, near the Gonono Sand Ridge, has virtually been completed. This lies within the expanse of bush, populated by elephants and other species, that stretches across the Mozambique border as far as the Cabora Bassa lakeshore. The Masoka camp, close to such attractions as the pools on the river at Mana-Angwa, has been handed over to the District Council and will be refurbished

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soon and a new camp is to be built near Mkanga Bridge, providing a handy stopover for people travelling to or from Mana Pools and other Zambezi Valley areas.

It will therefore be possible to take a leisurely tour starting at Mavuradonha and ending at Mana (or vice versa), and staying at comfortable bush-camps every step of the way, with attractions such as sport fishing, birdwatching, fossil forests and dinosaur footprints, all at reasonable costs, and with the knowledge that your accommodation fees are contributing to the welfare of some of Zimbabwe's poorest communities.

The next step - hopefully soon to become a reality - is to link this route into some huge - and hitherto completely undeveloped - wilderness areas identified by the ZAMSOC/BFA study in Tete province around Lake Cabora Bassa. The Tete authorities are in the process of planning for ecotourism in these areas and we will keep you abreast of developments.

BLACK RHINOS

The really big news on black rhinos is that Chisipite Junior School in Harare has done it again. In spite of declining dollars, newspaper doom and gloom and economic mayhem, the girls of Grade VI presented us with **Z\$126 000** for the Tashinga rhino calves in early December - once again showing that "we can do it" even if the rest of the world doesn't want to help.

Meanwhile, members will recall that in our last Bulletin we said we were going to do an aerial reconnaissance of the IPZ in October and - if the results were encouraging - go ahead with the radiocollaring and earnotching project that was postponed from August.

Unfortunately, the results were *not* encouraging. Instead, the reconnaissance highlighted the enormous difficulties involved in the aerial location of a relatively small number of animals, across a large expanse of extraordinarily difficult country, without good prior ground information. We must emphasise that we believe these animals are in fact there but, rather than spend donor dollars to little effect, we decided to postpone the project until more intensive Parks patrols could provide better "on the ground" information.

The problem is that the move to allow Parks to retain its tourism and hunting earnings independently from central Treasury, has rebounded, for obvious reasons and with disastrous effect. Stations are undermanned, vacant posts have been frozen, budgets have been squeezed to the limit and beyond. There's little funding for field patrolling, and virtually none for research.

Some members have voiced the view that this situation will never be put right as long as societies such as ours are prepared bail the Department out. But the other side of the coin is that withdrawing assistance seems likely to achieve no change, but will have a serious impact on rhinos and other deserving causes.

We are, in fact, therefore planning to increase our support to the Matusadona IPZ very significantly, with funds provided by the Zambezi Society (UK), and to help with the financing of extra patrols, rhino monitoring, and several other crucial activities.

At the same time - and digressing slightly from black rhino - we are maintaining, and again increasing, our support to the Mana Pools research facility, where a range of important topics such as *Albida* regeneration and predator numbers are being researched.

DRY FORESTS

One of the longstanding myths about Mana Pools is that the extensive and dense *jesse* bush - visible for several kilometres along the sandy stretches of the main access road - used to be fully-developed forest but has been trashed by an oversupply of elephants.

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The term “jesse” hides many subtleties that are being revealed through the Society’s research in 2001. The common factor is that this habitat type occurs on “lenses” of deep, unconsolidated red sands. However, its ultimate structure and composition varies depending on depth of sand and moisture availability etc.

“*Jesse*” therefore represents a continuum from fully-developed closed-canopy forests, as found in the Dande Safari area close to the Mozambique border, to thicket. Intermediate types are characterised by varying numbers of “emergents” - that is, large trees with canopies extending above thicket.

The Society’s research suggests that “while elephants have changed and continue to change the structure of this vegetation, it is thicket with emergents, rather than dry forest, that has been lost in Mana Pools.”

If this sounds like scientific nit-picking, we should point out that not only are the “dry forests” of the Zambezi Valley of very high regional biodiversity importance and merit considerable research; but also that effective conservation actions should rely on sound biological information and not supposition.

Broadly, the research shows that human impacts on dry forests have been generally low, partly because their sands are not favoured for agriculture. But this could change rapidly as resources diminish elsewhere. The study confirms that “the Zambezi Valley dry forests have particular conservation significance in southern Africa, and pre-emptive strategies for their conservation should be identified urgently”.

But we cannot exonerate either elephants or humans completely. The “Tashinga *jesse*” in Matusadona has been heavily trashed by elephants in the last year or so. Meanwhile, browse-cutting for the hand-reared black rhino calves is making things even worse. This doesn’t need research - just some management action.

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