

THE ZAMBEZI SOCIETY

BULLETIN

JULY 2002

VICTORIA FALLS

Funding for developing the long-overdue Combination Master Plan for Victoria Falls has been “suspended indefinitely” by the Canadian government. The official reason is that “as of March 19th, the Government of Canada suspended all development cooperation activities with the Government of Zimbabwe”. These include the Master Plan.

The Zambezi Society views this with extreme dismay. We have made our feelings clear, in a strongly-worded appeal to both the Canadian High Commission and the two Ministries involved: Environment and Tourism and Local Government & National Housing.

For more than ten years now, this Society, together with The World Conservation Union (IUCN), and Environment Africa has lobbied constantly for the *ad hoc* development at Victoria Falls to be brought under better planning control (even to be halted until proper planning is in place). It seems that the solution, so long in arriving, has been swept from under our noses.

The consequences of this decision will be more far-reaching than merely delaying an already long-drawn-out process. In spite of the general downturn in tourism, the Falls remains one of the country’s few ready sources of foreign currency. The resulting “gold-rush”-type scramble by some developers and operators to maximise on short-term tourism potential regardless of long-term environmental and social responsibilities is not difficult to predict. Regular reports from the Falls of environmental abuses, land degradation and erosion of wilderness values reaching The Zambezi Society offices confirm this.

Several carefully-formulated sets of recommendations for conserving the priceless geological, ecological and aesthetic values that make this magnificent area deserving of its status as a global asset and a World Heritage Site, have been produced by experts at vast expense over the past six years. The Zambezi Society contributed to all of these. But it appears that they will now lie idle on the planning shelf and go out of date very soon. Meantime, opportunity-seekers will continue to have a free rein to exploit every US\$-earning capability that the Falls can possibly produce.

The Society has appealed to the Canadian Government to consider the impacts of its actions in general on global biological and similar assets, and to reconsider its decision in respect of the Victoria Falls Environment Capacity and Master Plan project in particular. In the meantime, we have asked both Ministries to seek urgent ways of introducing interim, emergency planning in Victoria Falls, based on the existing Combination Master Plan documents, and the series of recommendations received so far, until such time as the Master Plan can be completed and implemented.

MATUSADONA RHINOS

As noted in previous Bulletins, the level of monitoring of black rhinos in parts of the Matusadona Intensive Protection Zone (IPZ) is inadequate because of staff shortages within the Department of National Parks.

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The Society is to assist with three areas of IPZ management. These are:

- The monitoring of the IPZ black rhino population;
- Ear-notching and radiocollaring of selected animals;
- The juvenile hand-rearing programme.

The hand-rearing programme is of course ongoing, and has been for several years, and a significant number of young black rhinos have already been released into the IPZ as a result.

Earnotching and collaring, however, are dependent on the existence of a suitable monitoring programme, both before and after the exercise. After discussion with the Department, we have agreed to finance additional Park staff, dedicated solely to rhino monitoring, for a limited period. This programme will be established in collaboration with the SADC Black Rhino Co-ordination Unit and the Marwell Trust, who have set up a black rhino databasing system at Tashinga.

We have contracted Duncan Purchase, who formerly supervised the black rhino handrearing programme at Tashinga, to supervise the logistics of locating suitable monitors, establishing a *modus operandi* with the Department, evaluating various monitoring techniques, and liaising with the Tashinga database.

COMMUNITY FOREST CONSERVATION

Society Executive Officer Fanuel Mugadza has held three important community meetings to discuss forest conservation in Muzarabani District, Northern Zimbabwe. In explaining the principles of sustainable forest management, he emphasised the need for local people to be aware of the values of their own natural resources and to benefit from opportunities provided by them before they are exploited by outsiders. He urged them to take their responsibility as custodians of these important regional forest resources seriously and to initiate local management policies which are sustainable and beneficial to the community as a whole. He emphasised that the Zambezi Society's role would be only as a facilitating partner, providing specialist information, financial support and advice if and where necessary.

In discussion, the people of Gutsa Ward have agreed to come up with a management plan for three sites of botanical interest in their area. In Chadereka Ward, progress has been slower, but kraal heads and other community leaders visited a forest site and agreed to bring the villagers living nearby together to discuss management issues. In Kapembere, which contains the important Rikonde Forest, the villagers were divided between those supporting the Headman who values the forest as a sacred site and those who have reservations about losing their rights of access to the forest. Those in support have already submitted a forest management proposal which includes an income-generating cultural tourism project.

PROJECTS AND PROMISES

If all the project proposals recently written by the Society are successful in attracting funding, then we will be taxed to the limit to implement them. They include -

- Transboundary elephant and habitat management in Guruve, Muzarabani and Magoe districts;
- Dry forest conservation throughout the Mid-Zambezi Valley;
- Biodiversity and interpretive components of the African Wildlife Foundation Four Corners project;

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- Biodiversity and interpretive components of the GEF Drylands Biodiversity Project;
- Elephant and habitat surveys in southern Zambia;
- Full implementation of the Zambezi Basin Initiative in both the transboundary pilot area and across the remainder of the basin.
- Evaluation of the perceptions of local communities about wilderness values and associated tourism activities in their areas
- Wilderness management training for 15-20 Zambezi-based custodians and managers from Protected and Community wildlife areas in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique.

On the other hand, of course, pigs might fly. Major donors aren't saying no - in fact many of them are making encouraging noises - but they aren't saying yes, either. In other words we are sitting in limbo while a whole range of processes - political, social, economic - slowly grind along, with no real outcome in sight.

Absurdities are creeping in, such as saying, in effect, "we'll gladly fund your transboundary project *as long as it doesn't involve Zimbabwe*. Since the project immediately ceases to be transboundary, it then moves out of one of the donor's "strategic areas of interest" and into another, and the whole process begins again.

One can only deplore, once again, the intrusion of politics into the conservation of what are - and should be considered as - global assets. The abrupt termination of Canadian assistance for the Victoria Falls Master Plan is, of course, a prime example. One day, no doubt, and after letting them collapse for political reasons, the same donors will step in and claim the kudos for "saving" them again.

CD-ROMS FOR SALE

The Society now has two of its major reports available in easy-to-read CD-ROM format. Contact our Harare Office for copies of :-

- *Biodiversity and Wilderness Around Lake Cabora Bassa* and
- *Biodiversity of the Zambezi Basin Wetlands*

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