

The Zambezi River

Wilderness and Tourism

BY SALLY WYNN

Introduction

The Zambezi Society is a Zimbabwe-based nongovernmental membership organization devoted to conserving the biodiversity and wilderness values of the Zambezi River in central-southern Africa, and to encouraging people to find ways of benefiting from the river's resources without destroy-



Sally Wynn on Lake Kariba. Photo by Dick Pitman.

ing them. During the latter half of the 1990s, the society began to receive numerous complaints and concerns from various sources, implying that tourism was having a negative impact on the wilderness values of the Zambezi River. The reports were wide-ranging, including unchecked commercialization, ad hoc devel-

opment, tree cutting, border violations, unauthorized road and camp building, noise pollution, littering and abuse of camping sites, and illicit tour and guide activities.

The overall concern was that the special "wilderness value" of the Zambezi River was being eroded by inappropriate visitor behavior and tourism development. In order to provide visitor input, the society embarked in 1998 on a survey project aimed at reporting visitors' perceptions about wilderness values and importance in the Zambezi context as well as providing a visitor-based definition of the term *wilderness*.

Methodology

Visitor data collection was conducted using an on-site questionnaire approach in four main Zambezi valley tourism destinations on the Zimbabwean side of the river: Victoria Falls, Kariba/Matusadona National Park, Mana Pools National Park, and Kanyemba/Mavuradonha Wilderness Area.

The visitor survey sample was selected to proportionally represent the range of tourism accommodation and activity choices in each location, and included people staying in hotels, safari lodges and camps, self-catering-national parks lodges, and on houseboats, or canoeing and camping.

Members of the Zambezi Society were asked to complete a questionnaire that they received by mail with no follow-up reminders.

Respondents for both surveys either completed a questionnaire individually or in a group response recorded on one survey. Both close-ended and open-ended questions were used to ensure that survey information was complete for each concept.

Study Results

A total of 473 surveys was completed by 1,209 visitors to the Zambezi River area. Of visitors surveyed, 44% of respondents were from Zimbabwe or the Zambezi region and 56% were international.

A total of 650 surveys were sent to Zambezi Society members and 160 questionnaires were completed and returned for a 25% response rate. Respondent surveys included input from 315 Zambezi Society members. Survey respondents were mainly (94%) from Zimbabwe.

Respondents to both surveys value Zambezi wilderness highly. The majority of visitor respondents reported that they felt it important that wilderness exists (98%), they valued wilderness personally (84%), and they came to the Zambezi valley for a wilderness experience (77%).

The responses to an open-ended question in both surveys provided a fairly comprehensive definition of the term *wilderness*. This was summarized from both surveys as a natural, undeveloped, and unpopulated landscape, which is scenically attractive or unusual, containing indigenous species, and inducing an emotional state of mind in which the visitor may

feel one or more of the following: in harmony with nature, freed from “civilization,” inspired, refreshed, invigorated, challenged, stimulated, humbled, or spiritually fulfilled. A detailed list of the

responses for this question on wilderness values is shown in Table 1.

The physical values of Zambezi wilderness reported as highly valued by respondents include:

- **natural/unspoiled landscapes**—includes wide open spaces and a feeling that little has changed in the landscape.
- **wild species**—animals roaming free and indigenous plants.
- **lack of people**—including the signs of their existence, such as pollution, litter, vehicles, and noise.
- **lack of development**—wilderness is seen as an escape from and a direct contrast to urban civilization.
- **lack of commercialization**—commercial tourism development and activities seem to be considered inappropriate to wilderness areas, whereas low-impact structures and activities are felt to be appropriate.

The nonphysical values of Zambezi wilderness, often neglected in tourism planning but particularly important to local and regional visitors and Zambezi Society members for whom wildlife is less of a novelty, include: peace, solitude, isolation, a feeling of harmony with nature, spiritual feelings, challenge, and adventure.

Eleven areas of the Zambezi River were identified by respondents as being important for wilderness appreciation. Relative satisfaction with the visitor experience in each area was expressed by respondents on a five-point scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree. The four areas given the highest satisfaction ratings by respondents were:

- **Mana Pools National Park/Chewore Safari Area** (includes the Sapi Safari Area and Middle Zambezi).
- **Lake Kariba/Matusadona National Park** (away from Kariba town).
- **Chizarira National Park/Mavuradonha Wilderness Area/Zambezi** escarpment mountainous

Table 1—Respondents Reported Values for What Makes a Place Truly Wild

Values of a Truly Wild Place	Visitor Survey (n=435)	ZS Members (n=160)
NATURAL VALUES	93%	97%
Presence of/proximity to wild fauna and flora	42%	32%
Animals roaming free/in natural state	15%	12%
Unspoiled, natural ecosystems/in “original state”	27%	43%
Scenic/landscape beauty	6%	4%
Large scale/size landscapes/open spaces	3%	6%
UNDEVELOPED VALUES	48%	66%
Lack of development/infrastructure/settlement	21%	38%
Undeveloped areas deliberately set aside	2%	0%
Nature-sensitive/simple/uncommercial development only	17%	14%
Lack of fences/roads/electricity etc.	8%	14%
UNCROWDED VALUES	49%	96%
Few/no people/tourists	20%	46%
Limited access (e.g.vehicle restrictions/by foot only)	3%	3%
Lack of human activity (vehicles/pollution/litter)	12%	34%
Lack of human interference (controls/rules/signs)	12%	12%
Animals and people separated (guided tours only)	1%	0%
Small groups of visitors only	1%	1%
EMOTIONAL/SPIRITUAL VALUES	21%	60%
Silence (natural sounds only)	8%	25%
Feeling of being “at one with/in harmony with nature”	1%	3%
Peace/serenity	2%	5%
Solitude/seclusion	5%	13%
Remoteness/isolation	5%	8%
Feeling of humankind’s insignificance	0%	6%
CHALLENGE/ADVENTURE VALUES	5%	6%
Presence of danger/feelings of fear	2%	1%
Rugged experience/sleeping rough/fending for oneself	1%	3%
Unpredictability/encountering the unexpected	2%	2%
CULTURAL ENCOUNTER VALUES	2%	2%
Opportunity to interact with local peoples/traditions	2%	2%
MANAGEMENT VALUES	4%	3%
Efficient, but unobtrusive management	2%	3%
High standards of guiding	1%	0%
Good standards of comfort/safety	1%	0%

Table 2—Respondents Reported What Detracts from a Place Feeling Truly Wild

From “Truly Wild”	Visitor Survey (n=420)	ZS Members (n=160)
PEOPLE/HUMAN ACTIVITIES	70%	98%
Too many people/mass tourism	38%	40%
Too many vehicles	10%	17%
Pollution/litter	11%	21%
Harassment by curio sellers/vendors/currency dealers	1%	1%
Unruly/insensitive visitors	5%	11%
Unruly/too many operators	4%	8%
Presence of security guards	1%	0%
NOISE	37%	69%
General noise (unspecified)	9%	29%
Aircraft (including helicopters & microlights)	7%	6%
Motorboats/boats/kapenta rigs	7%	10%
Cars/buses	6%	11%
Trains	1%	0%
Music/radios	5%	9%
Generators	1%	5%
Construction companies	1%	0%
DEVELOPMENT (GENERAL)	48%	72%
Too much development/infrastructure/settlement	29%	39%
Roads (especially tarred)	9%	17%
Fences	3%	4%
Lights/electricity pylons	4%	7%
Signs	1%	1%
Rules and regulations/restrictions/lack of spontaneity	2%	4%
COMMERCIAL TOURISM	36%	58%
Commercialization/big hotels/luxury lodges/tourist traps	26%	36%
Inappropriate/insensitive development/architecture	5%	10%
Inappropriate activities (e.g. discos/casinos/video games)	2%	8%
Presence of “tame wildlife”/feeding of animals	2%	3%
Exploitation/extortion	1%	1%
IMPACTS ON NATURE	10%	27%
Ecosystem damage/tree cutting /off-road driving, etc.	3%	15%
Presence of exotic species	1%	1%
Lack of wild fauna and flora	3%	4%
Harassment of wild animals (e.g. spotlights/radio collars)	1%	2%
Lack of environmental protection/management	1%	4%
Poaching	1%	1%
OTHER DETRACTIONS	2%	6%
Poor management of tourism facilities	1%	1%
Presence of domestic animals	1%	4%
Lack of knowledgeable guides	0%	1%

terrain (different from the valley); this area is especially popular with local visitors.

- **Victoria Falls/Chirundu/Kanyemba** are relatively settled and urbanized areas, but have important wilderness areas nearby (e.g., Zambezi National Park near Victoria Falls).

Tourism activity choices that respondents reported as offering high wilderness value include: canoeing, boating on Lake Kariba, and safari lodges/bush camps that offer guided walks and “close encounter” bush experiences.

The visitor survey asked respondents to indicate from a checklist what activities they had undertaken in their visit to the Zambezi. The responses (and any additional activities added by respondents) were categorized into three groups, depending on their degree of impact on the environment: low, medium, and high. Of the 10 most popular activities undertaken by respondents, 7 fall within the low-impact category: bird-watching, walking, photography, fishing (from land), swimming/sunbathing, and picnicking. The remaining three most popular activities—sightseeing, game viewing, and camping—were in the medium category. High-impact activities such as motorboating, golf, river/lake cruises, and air flights were most often listed by visitors to Victoria Falls, Lake Kariba, and Kanyemba. None of the visitor activities that are special to Mana Pools National Park fall within the high-impact category and may partially explain why Mana received the highest satisfaction ratings from respondents for their wilderness experience.

The five main factors that respondents to both surveys reported detracted from their wilderness experience (Table 2) were:

- Too many people—unruly and insensitive behavior such as harassing wildlife with too many tour vehicles or noisy visitor behavior on river cruises and human-generated pollution and litter.
- Noise—human-generated sounds that are unnatural for the setting such as loud radios and music in campsites or mechanical noise such as fuel-powered electrical generators at lodges and camps, and motorized vehicles such as motorboats, motorbikes, trucks, and airplanes.
- Over development—respondents want to get away from the hustle and bustle of urban civilization and development, and they report some development detracts from the wilderness experience: too much infrastructure, too many roads, too many lights, and too many regulations.
- Commercial tourism—respondents report that low-key/low-impact infrastructure and activities designed to be nature-sensitive were acceptable in wilderness areas; however, some commercial tourism detracts from wilderness quality such as luxury high-rise hotels, insensitive architecture, advertising billboards on the edge of a World Heritage Site, commercial sales outlets at the entrance to the “rain forest” at Victoria Falls, “tame” wildlife, and exploitation and harassment by vendors and dealers.
- Impacts on nature—damage or alterations to ecosystems such as tree cutting, wildlife poaching, and the presence of nonnative species.

Respondents reported numerous specific detractions in certain areas as being particularly noticeable. For example, highly commercialized tourism areas such as Victoria Falls offer activities as part of package tours that



Map of Zambezi River Wilderness Area and tourism visitor survey areas.

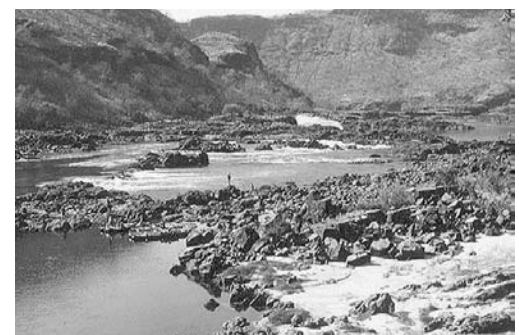
have high impacts on wilderness (e.g., scenic flights, river cruises, motorboats, golf, and gambling casinos), and respondents reported these as detracting from the wilderness experience. Wilderness visitor satisfaction is lower in Victoria Falls than in other Zambezi River areas surveyed. Motorboating on the Zambian side of the river opposite Mana Pools National Park was mentioned by respondents as a detraction to the wilderness experience of visitors staying at Mana. The presence of houseboats and the noise of their engines and generators was mentioned as detracting from the wilderness quality of the Matusadona National Park, especially in the Kariba Eastern Basin.

Tourism information and interpretative materials were reported as inadequate by respondents to the visitor survey. Most respondents (73%) were visiting the Zambezi River area independently and only 27% reported they were accompanied, on their trip, by a tour operator or guide. Some of those visiting the Zambezi River may only experience a very limited area, such as the 58% of respondents surveyed in Victoria Falls who were visiting no other destination. In the absence of educational information on wilderness, visitors to these areas may be missing the wilderness value that the Zambezi River offers.

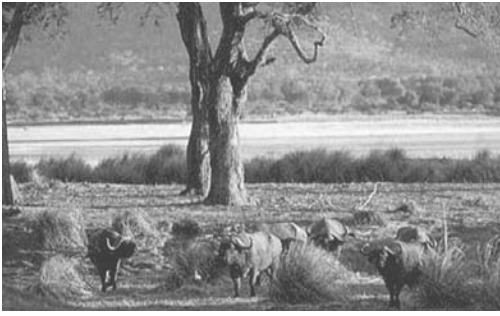
Respondents visiting the wilder areas of the Zambezi River reported they were more ready to contribute toward wilderness conservation than those visiting more heavily developed and impacted areas. While less than half the respondents surveyed in Victoria Falls and 55% of those in Kariba were prepared, in principle, to contribute financially to maintaining wilderness areas, some 70% of respondents in Mana Pools National Park and in Zambezi Valley communal lands reported they were willing to make a financial contribution.

Discussion

These survey results highlight the importance of a “wilderness experience” to people visiting the Zambezi. This information supports the need to ensure that the river’s wild values are conserved and to promote wilderness-sensitive tourism, especially in view of



Batoka Gorge. Photo by Dick Pitman.



Buffalo at Mana Pools. Photo by Dick Pitman.

the economic and investment benefits that international tourism brings to the region. However, these study results may be contrary to a general public perception in Africa that setting aside wild places for the enjoyment of tourists and wilderness enthusiasts is a luxury that Africans can ill afford. Current land use pressures and other development priorities tend to put wilderness awareness, conservation, and management very low on the public planning agenda and attempt to maximize short-term revenues at the expense of long-term sustainability.

The information from this study shows the need for an understanding of the vital link between wilderness-based tourism and Africa's wild areas. The Zambezi River with its tropical diversity, forests, birds, and large mammals has wilderness qualities that are unique in the southern African region and, unlike other wild tropical rivers in the world, the Zambezi is an attractive tourism destination, being relatively accessible and safe.

The decline of Zimbabwe's tourism industry as a result of recent political and economic turmoil has been a difficult situation with secondary economic effects in the southern region of Africa. In its efforts to recover, the tourism industry is now considering new approaches and undergoing a process of creative planning and review that might not otherwise have occurred in the bustle of a thriving tourism marketplace based on devel-

opment. The Zambezi Society believes that this visitor research on wilderness is well timed to take advantage of the current climate of review.

Recommendations for Tourism

These study results, along with input from the Zambezi Society, suggest two general recommendations about marketing wilderness experiences and wilderness stewardship.

1. Market wilderness and promote Zambezi valley wilderness-based tourism by:
 - recognizing the importance of wilderness as a destination;
 - marketing a "Zambezi wilderness experience" with specific wilderness activities that have low environmental impacts;
 - targeting markets that specifically appreciate and value wilderness and wilderness experiences; and
 - providing more information and interpretation for visitors on the Zambezi and its wilderness ecosystem.
2. Safeguard wilderness by incorporating wilderness awareness and

stewardship into all tourism planning and management in the Zambezi valley through:

- incorporating consideration for the visitor's "wilderness experience" into tourism planning;
- safeguarding wilderness quality by developing wilderness-sensitive guidelines for conservation and tourism practices;
- ensuring that tourism activities and facilities in wilderness areas are appropriate and wilderness-sensitive;
- establishing mechanisms for managing tourism development in wilderness areas through further research into acceptable/unacceptable visitor numbers and impacts;
- monitoring of visitor satisfaction with the wilderness experience and compliance with wilderness stewardship guidelines;
- improving the quality of the wilderness experience and conditions at more highly developed areas like Victoria Falls;
- encouraging wilderness visitors to financially contribute to maintaining wilderness areas; and



The Zambezi River at Mana Pools. Photo by Sally Wynn.



Musengezi River, Mavuradonha Wilderness Area. Photo by Jane Hunt.

- establishing an association or organization to represent the interests of independent wilderness visitors (i.e., not on organized tours) to the Zambezi.


Study Utilization

The Zambezi Society recently presented these study findings on wilderness values to Zimbabwean tourism policy makers, planners, and operators, as well as to planning authorities, custodians, and managers of wild places along the Zambezi River. The potential for wilderness-focused and wilderness-sensitive tourism was highlighted for the Zambezi valley by suggesting that it is the most suitable, low-impact, sustainable option for Zambezi wild areas and that such a message be incorporated into related marketing strategies. However, the Zambezi Society expressed concern that inappropriate promotion could contribute to destroying the Zambezi River's unique wilderness qualities unless wilderness-sensitivity was incorporated into tourism planning, management, and practice of current and future Zambezi valley tourism.

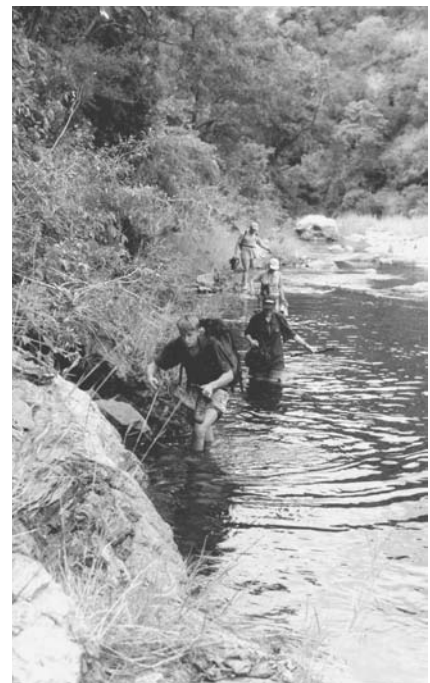
The Zambezi Society was invited to contribute to the process of developing

Zimbabwe's Tourism Master Plan, and they have provided input regarding wilderness values into the Canadian-funded Master Plan for Victoria Falls. Additionally, members of the Zambezi Society were sponsored by the WILD Foundation to attend and present a paper at the 7th World Wilderness Congress (WWC) in South Africa in November 2001, and a society-nominated candidate from Zimbabwe's National Parks Department was sponsored by the WILD Foundation to attend a weeklong Wilderness Management Training Program prior to the WWC.

The Zambezi Society is now developing a comprehensive wilderness management and stewardship program for the Zambezi River. The initiative promotes a transboundary approach between Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique by (1) extending research on perceptions about wilderness to local communities living in or adjacent to Zambezi tourism areas and to Zambezi visitors and communities in Zambia and Mozambique; (2) promoting Zambezi wilderness and educating visitors and communities about its values; (3) reinforcing

wilderness management through the establishment of a wilderness management training program for managers, field officers, rangers, and guides in public, private, and community wildlands in the Zambezi region; (4) influencing tourism policy, management, and practice to take account of wilderness values by developing a set of guidelines for wilderness-sensitive management and tourism practice through a series of workshops with custodians, managers, and tourism practitioners operating in Zambezi valley wild areas; and (5) helping to establish more community-based wilderness areas to provide opportunities for local revenue generation through carefully managed, sustainable tourism initiatives. 

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Exploring the Makarodzi River, Mavuradonha Wilderness Area. Photo by Jane Hunt.