

Zambezi Wilderness

Meeting the Challenges

BY SALLY WYNN

Introduction

This article describes the success of a first training course in wilderness concepts and practice held in 2006 in the Zambezi region of south-central Africa (see figure 1), where wilderness values are little acknowledged or understood. Participants were drawn from Parks and Wildlife Authorities responsible for managing large and valuable wildernesses under state protection but with inadequate capacity and funding. The results of this first course are encouraging for wilderness conservation in the region, but since the area is vast, a lot more work needs to be done, in both protected and settled lands where African communities face many challenges.

Background

Africa's fourth largest river basin, the Zambezi, covers a vast 1.2 million sq. km (3.1 million sq. miles) of south-central Africa. Famous for its "big game," including elephants, hippos, crocodiles, and the superb fighting tigerfish, this river system provides water and biological resources to millions of people. It is also one of the region's major tourism destinations, attracting visitors from all over the world for its wild nature, scenic beauty, tropical climate, and relative accessibility and safety. It is most famous for the Victoria Falls, a World Heritage Site shared between Zimbabwe and Zambia—often marketed as one of the "Seven Natural Wonders of the World"—and two hydroelectric impoundments, Lake Kariba (shared by Zambia and Zimbabwe) and Lake Cabora Bassa (in Mozambique), which provide major recreational opportunities.

A total of 36% of the basin's area is classified formally as "state protected," including another World Heritage Site, the Mana Pools/Sapi/Chewore complex in Zimbabwe, and several large national parks, which are rich in biological

diversity, with forests, wetlands, and other complex ecosystems supporting abundant wildlife. These protected areas contain magnificent wilderness landscapes of exceptional value, which are not specifically safeguarded or managed as "wilderness" and are only loosely classified as "wilderness zones" within existing protected area legislation.

Outside these state-run protected areas, the Zambezi valley's wild and rugged terrain, coupled with its harsh and arid climate, is a challenge to human livelihoods and, where settlement does occur, people are forced to exist on subsistence agriculture. An expanding population, together with limited land availability and poor soils, makes this form of land use unsustainable. Alternative sustainable income-generating options such as wildlife production and ecotourism are urgently being explored. But so far, little of the revenue generated from these initiatives trickles down to communities, and Zambezi valley lands outside protected areas have attracted scant interest from investors.

The Zambezi's valuable wilderness resource faces many threats:

- Unwillingness by governments to devolve management of natural resources to local communities, or involve them in meaningful comanagement agreements for protected areas and wilderness.
- Lack of government funding and inadequate capacity



Sally Wynn. Photo by Dick Pitman.



Figure 1—Location map of Zambezi region in southern Africa. Courtesy of The Zambezi Society.

for effective protected area and wilderness area management.

- Poverty, which forces people into poaching important Zambezi species, such as the black rhino and elephant, or unsustainable harvesting of forests and fish.
- Development needs often prioritize high-impact agriculture, mining, energy generation, and water extraction over the low-impact retention of wildlands for tourism, hunting, or conservation.

parks that impact negatively on biodiversity and wilderness character.

- Lack of information: Local communities are seldom properly informed or consulted, and although conservation biologists and ecologists may draw the attention of their peers to the global significance of the Zambezi basin's wilderness and biodiversity values, communities, local authorities, planners, and even policy makers in the area lack access to this type of information.
- Increasing alien invasions of plants, animals, and diseases to indigenous wildlife that are not being controlled.

Wilderness Organizations in the Zambezi Region

The Zambezi Society (www.zamsoc.org) is a nonprofit conservation organization that focuses on the Zambezi River and its basin. Established in 1982, it works primarily in Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Mozambique, providing practical, local solutions for conservation challenges in both the protected and settled areas of the Zambezi

aimed at increasing awareness, informing management and stewardship, and influencing behavior in wild areas within the Zambezi River region. The program incorporates training, advocacy, research, planning, incentives, and monitoring activities for the conservation, protection, and management of wildernesses in the region's protected areas and settled lands.

The Wilderness Action Group (www.wilderness.org.za) is a nonprofit South African-based organization that promotes the concept of wilderness in an African context. It provides advice on conserving, protecting, and managing wilderness areas; makes submissions to promote the development of appropriate wilderness legislation and policy; offers professional training courses and awareness seminars to bridge knowledge and information gaps in wilderness conservation, protection, and management; monitors existing wilderness areas; and promotes the designation of new wilderness areas.

Zambezi Wilderness Training

The first in a series of training courses in Wilderness Concepts and Practice aimed at increasing awareness about wilderness and its values in the Zambezi region took place in September 2006. It was particularly successful, and as a result, there are signs that a positive new perspective on wilderness conservation in park management for this wilderness-rich region has taken root.

The training was run jointly by the African-based nonprofit organizations The Zambezi Society and the Wilderness Action Group, and was held at the Rifa Educational Camp near the border town of Chirundu on the Zambezi River between

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- Lack of cohesive or holistic regional land-use planning in the eight Zambezi region countries. Uninformed and inappropriate planning in the upper catchment area can have drastic environmental consequences on people and wildlife far downstream.
- Inappropriate development of infrastructure and facilities in region. One of its major objectives is to conserve the wilderness areas of the Zambezi and promote recognition of their values. Using the findings of research work it carried out into perceptions about the Zambezi's wilderness values from visitors, local communities, and conservationists, The Zambezi Society has developed a Wilderness Conservation Program

Zimbabwe and Zambia (see figure 2). Funding was provided through The WILD Foundation in the United States.

Twenty senior policy makers, managers, and field officers from the Wildlife Management Authorities of Zimbabwe and Zambia attended the training. Many of the Zambezi region's most important wildernesses fall within historically designated state protected areas administered by these authorities, and the participants were carefully chosen for their potentially key roles in protecting these wild areas in the face of huge challenges—not the least of which is woefully inadequate state funding (see figure 3).

However, because the colonial designation of national parks and protected areas in the Zambezi basin region excluded local communities from settlement in these areas or any involvement in their management, these authorities have traditionally focused on wildlife protection, antipoaching, and law enforcement.

The concept of wilderness, its values to people and tourism, and the need for its conservation is little acknowledged and even less understood here. Its Western origins are treated with suspicion; it is often misunderstood as being exclusionist, and its benefits regarded, erroneously, as irrelevant to developing societies.

The Zambezi Society, which lobbies for wilderness conservation and promotes recognition of wilderness values, wants to change all this. Acknowledging that education is key to influencing attitudes and management, it joined forces with training experts from the Wilderness Action Group to develop and run this first 10-day course.

As expected, the 20 park professionals who participated in the



Figure 2—The Zambezi River between Zambia and Zimbabwe. Photo by Dick Pitman.

course had little previous knowledge or experience of the concept of wilderness or its potential application in their area of interest (despite the existence of wilderness zones in some of their park management plans).

The course gave them a greater understanding of the values and benefits of wilderness for biodiversity conservation and people in the Zambezi region and, through relevant case studies and practical work, provided ideas and inspiration for application of this understanding in park planning.

Important Ideas Shared

The training course also provided an opportunity for The Zambezi Society

and the Wilderness Action Group to share ideas and discuss important wider issues about the management and planning of protected and wilderness areas in the Zambezi region with this influential group.

There is a growing realization (acknowledged in the resolutions of the Fifth World Parks Congress held in Durban, South Africa, in September 2003) that the policies and practice of “preservation” and “conservation” of protected areas and wilderness areas for biodiversity conservation and tourism objectives to the exclusion of people no longer work nor are they relevant. In this part of Africa, where some of the world's poorest people live in and



Figure 3—Wilderness training course participants. Photo by Drummond Densham.



Figure 4—Wilderness training course group at work. Photo by Sally Wynn.

the complexities of protected area planning and management on a regional scale that goes beyond park boundaries. It will require building relationships and trust with communities that have been marginalized, and, through an environment of learning, developing partnerships and mechanisms for shared management. This

The course is essential for protected area managers and policy makers in the region. Wilderness management should be a component of ALL protected areas and regional planning in modern landscape management.

The course has a lot for protected area managers more specially in southern Africa. These kinds of short courses in wilderness management must be encouraged at all costs. As this is beneficial for both our biodiversity and communities.

This short course in wilderness management has been an eye-opener to protected area managers in southern Africa, particularly in Zimbabwe and Zambia. I recommend that more managers should join the Wilderness Action Group to have these concepts strengthened in our respective countries.

I liked the course. It is to a greater extent helpful to protected area managers in general and protected area planners and researchers also. It made me understand the challenges facing the entire Zambezi valley and how we can develop our own definitions and management plans for different land uses to satisfy different stakeholders as well as the environment itself.

Positive Outcomes

There have been some particularly interesting initial outcomes of this training: As part of their course group work, Zimbabwean and Zambian participants responsible for protected areas on both sides of the Zambezi River, including at the world famous Victoria Falls, worked together to develop the start of an integrated

around some of the world's wildest lands, rifts were created between the haves and have-nots that cannot continue if the poverty in rural communities is to be meaningfully addressed.

New models that involve stakeholders in the management of protected areas and natural resources and see the flow of benefits to people, particularly those living in poverty on the boundaries of protected areas, are needed for the continued existence of protected areas, wilderness, and natural resources.

Furthermore, the resources of the Zambezi valley are shared between several countries. Planning and management of protected areas in this region cannot therefore be done in isolation but must be part of a regional initiative whereby resources can be sustainably utilized by people, and development is planned to protect national parks and the wilderness character of the Zambezi region while bringing much-needed growth to address the poverty that exists in the surrounding rural communities.

This will require sound leadership that is willing to grapple with

holistic approach to protected area and wilderness area management and planning was shared with the participants of this first Zambezi wilderness course and was well received by them.

Encouraging Response

The responses to the course were universally positive. Most found it to be extremely valuable, practical, and applicable to their work; many were inspired to incorporate the concepts into their future management planning and to encourage their superiors to embrace wilderness management principles and training in all aspects of Parks Authority work. A selection of their comments follows:

The whole course was overwhelming and very educative and I look forward to more courses of this nature. The idea is very encouraging and valuable.

The wilderness management course has enhanced knowledge of the vital concepts of the subject. This information is going to be used to redo our park plan.

transboundary zoning plan (see figure 4). During the course, concern was expressed about the impact on wilderness values of a vast and very controversial hotel and golf course development proposed on the Zambian side of the Zambezi River at Victoria Falls. The authorities in Zambia have subsequently had a change of heart and, although the development has not been stopped outright, it has now been severely restricted in scope. Of course, such a decision cannot be directly attributed to the influence of the wilderness training on Zambian park management authorities; however, it is possible that lessons learned may have assisted in adding fuel to the fire of the debate.

More recently, a group of senior staff from the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority who took part in the wilderness training course have lobbied to incorporate wilderness concepts into the syllabus for a national diploma in Wildlife Management currently being developed by the authority. Their suggestions have been accepted.

Also, The Zambezi Society has been asked to assist the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority to develop a Management Plan for the Matusadona National Park and Black Rhino Intensive Protection Zone. Apart from being a sanctuary for one of Africa's highly endangered species, this park, which straddles the Zambezi escarpment-type mountains south of Lake Kariba, contains some extremely important wilderness areas. The society intends to make the most of this opportunity for wilderness conservation.

Wilderness Training for Communities

In the three years that it took to achieve the substantial funding

needed to run this first Zambezi wilderness training course, The Zambezi Society prepared the ground by identifying key individuals in the public, private, and community sectors with direct influence over the future of the Zambezi's wild areas. As

peoples. After some debate, the resolution was accepted.

Future Plans

The Zambezi Society and the Wilderness Action Group are collaborating on another Zimbabwe/Zambia

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an interim step, nine people were sent for wilderness training to the Wilderness Action Group in South Africa. Six of these were representatives from important Zambezi valley communities in northern Zimbabwe, among them a traditional chief and a headman.

In 2005, with sponsorship from The WILD Foundation, The Zambezi Society attended the 8th World Wilderness Congress in Alaska with a delegation of three Zambezi community representatives from the area around Lake Cabora Bassa in Mozambique. This group benefited from the pre-Congress certificated international wilderness training given by the Wilderness Action Group and the Centre for Environment, Agriculture and Development of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. It participated in the Native Lands and Wilderness Council, outlining the challenges facing communities and wild areas and shared experiences with indigenous peoples from other lands. At this Congress, The Zambezi Society drew attention to wilderness in an African context by proposing a resolution to form a wilderness and indigenous peoples working group to review the international definitions of wilderness with respect to indigenous

wilderness training course for protected area managers in 2007 and hope to extend this training to Mozambique and to Zambezi valley communities thereafter. They will also be working with Zambezi government authorities to develop policy statements for wilderness conservation, protection, and management in the region. In the meantime, The Zambezi Society hopes to produce a series of wilderness awareness education materials and to collaborate with the relevant management authorities in developing a Zambezi Wilderness Code of Conduct for visitors, developers, and operators in an attempt to influence tourism attitudes and behavior in sensitive wild areas.

Challenges

Significantly, introducing wilderness awareness to park management authorities and communities in the Zambezi region through training and exposure at the World Wilderness Congresses has served to highlight some of the challenges faced by wilderness conservationists, protected area managers, and communities in this African region:

- There is a huge knowledge gap about wilderness and the benefits

of its conservation, and an urgent need for further education in wilderness concepts and practice at many different levels throughout the region.

- The lack of any existing wilderness policy in an area where poverty levels are high and development is a priority renders these extremely valuable wild areas vulnerable. Consideration needs to be given to developing wilderness conservation policies that can be incorporated into existing legislation for protected area management, transfrontier conservation areas, tourism, and community welfare.
- Wilderness conservation can benefit from the Zambezi's extremely important regional tourism industry if it is carefully marketed and its effects carefully monitored. However, much preparatory work needs to be

done in creating awareness and sensitivity, undertaking careful planning and zonation and developing guidelines and Codes of Conduct for developers and tour operators.

- In places like Africa, where many people live in wildlands, deriving benefits from their wilderness and its values could help communities make their livelihoods more sustainable and encourage them to look after their wild resources in the long term. However, the concept of people inhabiting wilderness does not currently sit easily with international wilderness conservation policies.
- The vast scale of wilderness in places like the Zambezi basin and the economic constraints placed on managers of African wild areas mean that existing wilderness management principles (adopted largely for First World applica-


tion) will need to be adjusted in order to be relevant.

Given the size of Africa, protecting its valuable wilderness areas will require boundless patience, considerable resources, and a great deal of goodwill. It will also require political commitment and the cooperation of governments. The Zambezi Society and the Wilderness Action Group are committed to addressing these challenges in the coming years and are seeking the funding and implementing partners to assist them in doing so.

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Dogsledding in the Denali Wilderness; an area managed by the National Park Service (Alaska). Photo by B. Waddington.