

THE ZAMBEZI SOCIETY'S HISTORICAL SERIES.

EPISODE 9: ELEPHANTS, LAND & PEOPLE

July 2022

In 2022, The Zambezi Society (Zamsoc) celebrates 40 years of conserving the precious wilderness and wildlife resources of the Zambezi River.

To mark this important milestone in our history, our series of historical features highlights significant events and conservation achievements that we're proud of, spanning the four decades since the Society's formation in 1982. We are sharing these on our Social Media Instagram and Facebook platforms, with videos on You Tube, on our website and in a special Historical Series of Bulletin mailouts.

EPISODE 9: ELEPHANTS, LAND & PEOPLE – COMMUNITY CONSERVATION & TRANSBOUNDARY COLLABORATION IN MUZARABANI, GURUVE & MOZAMBIQUE (1988 – 2002)

In 1998, approximately 600 sq kms of wild and rugged country in the Zambezi Escarpment mountains of Northern Zimbabwe was declared a protected area by the Muzarabani Rural District Council in recognition of its scenic beauty and conservation value.



THE MAVURADONHA WILDERNESS AREA

The Zambezi Society was invited to attend an inaugural stakeholders meeting to establish a management committee for the newly designated Mavuradonha Wilderness Area. We were elected onto the committee and so began our first real engagement with rural communities living close to a protected wildlife area.

Our collaboration with the traditional leaders, rural councillors and the people of Muzarabani continued for more than a decade, expanding into neighbouring Guruve District in 1994 and later, in 1996, across the border into Magoe District in Mozambique south of Lake Cahora Bassa.

Initially, Zamsoc's role included funding a Manager for the Mavuradonha Wilderness Area and assisting with the establishment of its first tourism facilities. But regular management committee meetings soon brought to light the issue of human-wildlife conflict.

MUZARABANI – HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICT

While the commercial farmers to the south of the Mavuradonha set about establishing a fence to keep crop-raiding elephants out, rural community farmers in the Muzarabani area to the north had no such luxury, and villagers complained regularly of crop damage and the occasional fatal encounter with wild animals. Clearly this required attention.



A rural village in Muzarabani District 1997

In the mid-1990s, Zamsoc joined forces with the Mid-Zambezi Elephant Project (MZEP), which at the time was working with rural communities in Muzarabani, experimenting with new crops, including chilli, which was proving to be a powerful deterrent to crop-raiding wildlife, especially elephants. A problem elephant reporting scheme was initiated in Muzarabani district, which involved the training, employment and supervision of 15 local enumerators.

RESEARCH

At the same time, The Zambezi Society embarked on a several research projects focused on gathering information to assist local authorities in Muzarabani and Guruve districts (Zimbabwe) and Magoe district (across the border in Tete province, Mozambique) to formulate strategies for managing elephants and their habitats sustainably.

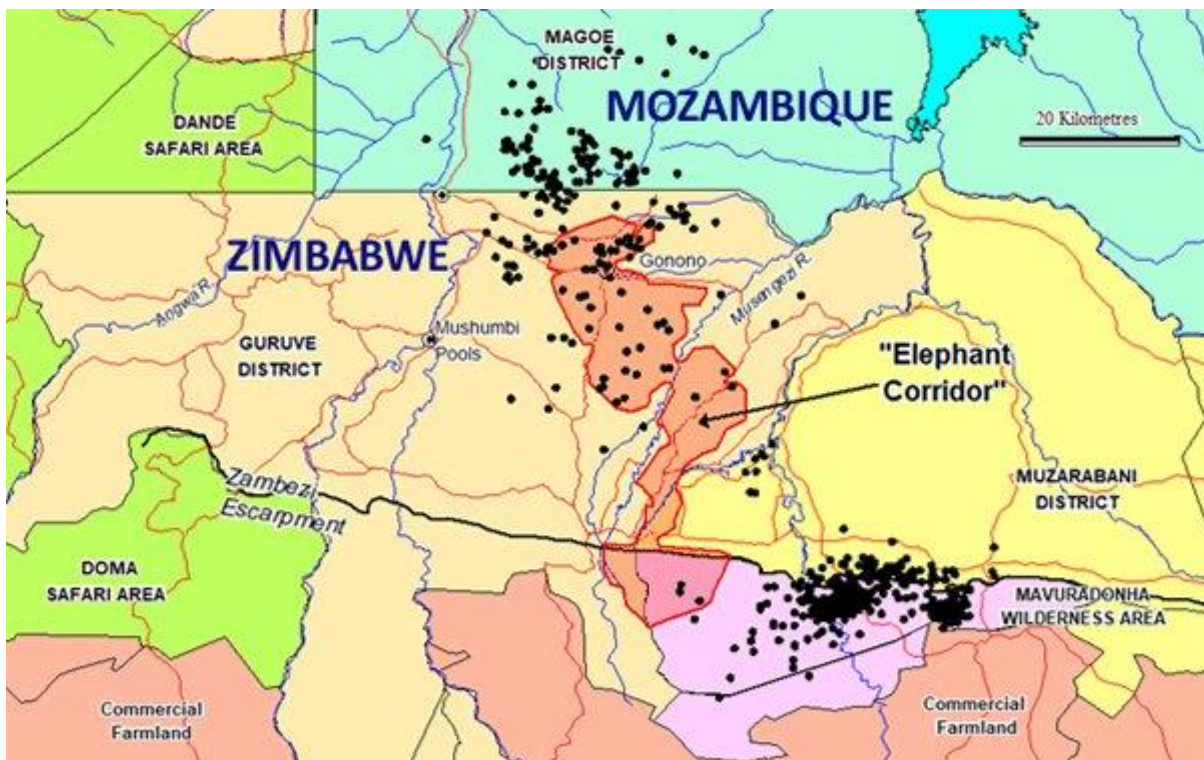
Monitoring of elephant movement – With funding from the Royal Netherlands Government, Zamsoc and MZEP teams fitted radio tracking collars on a sample of 11 elephants (9 bulls and 2 cows) in the Mavuradonha/Muzarabani area between November 1997 and August 1998. The animals were tracked either by vehicle from the ground or by air, using the Zambezi Society's SuperCub aircraft. It soon became apparent that some of the collared elephant bulls were routinely moving into neighbouring Guruve District to the west and north-west, so the project was extended into Guruve, and 7 more animals, both bulls and cows, were radio-collared in March 1999 near Gonono on the border between Zimbabwe and Mozambique.



A tranquilised elephant is fitted with a radio collar and subsequently tracked from the air from

Zamsoc's Supercub aircraft

The movements of these 18 collared animals were monitored regularly over a period of three years. Some (mostly cows) remained resident either within the Mavuradonha Wilderness Area or on the Zambezi Valley floor and moved only locally within their home ranges. Others made short range crop-raiding "excursions" out of the Mavuradonha into Zambezi Valley community areas. A few (mostly elephant bulls) undertook long range movements to and from the Mavuradonha Wilderness Area across the Zambezi Valley floor, using a distinct "corridor" along river lines through settled agricultural land to areas as far afield as the Mozambique border. (see map)



Map showing the locations (black dots) of selected elephants monitored by Zamsoc between 1997 and 2000. This clearly shows movement across district and international boundaries. Note the position of the proposed "elephant corridor" between Muzarabani (in Zimbabwe) and Magoe (in Mozambique).

The research recommended that a) the elephant movement corridor between the Mavuradonha Wilderness Area and Guruve district should be demarcated and maintained and b) elephant management strategies between Muzarabani and Guruve Rural District Councils and Tete province in Mozambique should be developed and implemented.

For more detail see: [Elephant research & management in Muzarabani District and the mid-Zambezi Valley](#)

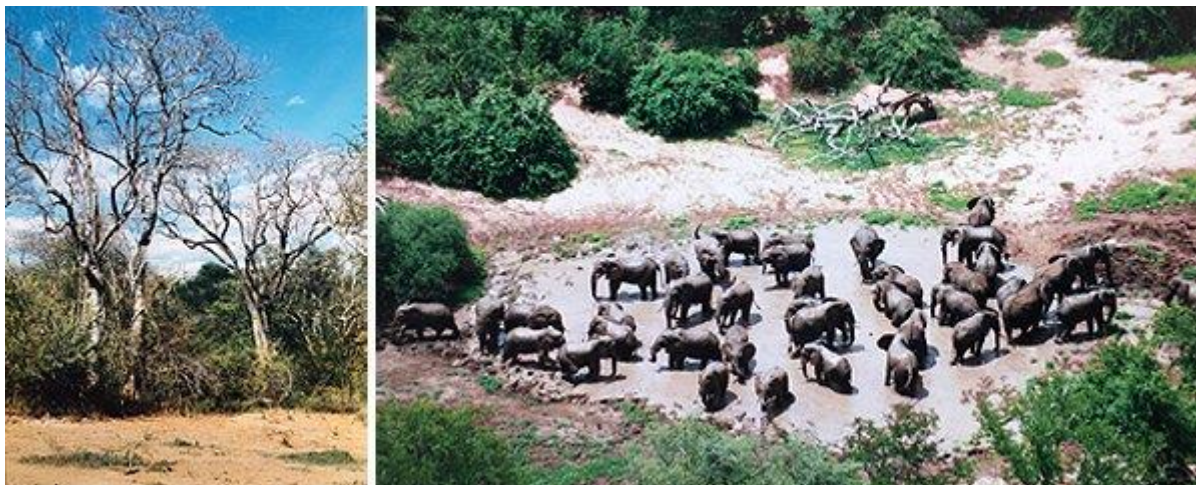
One significant finding of the research showed that elephants moving through the settled parts of the Zambezi Valley were making use of isolated patches of “dry deciduous forest” as refuges during the day and emerging to raid villagers’ crops at night. These forest patches (some of which had been set aside by local communities as traditional burial grounds, and therefore remained undisturbed) contained tree species endemic to the Zambezi Valley and had previously been identified as sites of important botanical and conservation interest by researchers from Zamsoc partners, The Biodiversity Foundation for Africa (BFA) in 1996.



Map showing the sites of high botanical importance identified by the Biodiversity Foundation for Africa (BFA) and Zamsoc in Guruve, Muzarabani and Magoe Districts. It was discovered, that these sites were used by elephants as refuges in the settled lands of the Zambezi Valley.

Forest research

The discovery that they were being used by elephants moving through the settled areas of the Zambezi Valley, made the existence of these biologically-valuable forests even more important. Clearly they should be regarded as critical habitats for elephant conservation. Their condition and extent needed to be examined in more detail. With further project funding from the Royal Netherlands Government, Zamsoc gathered a team of research experts to take a close look at the Zambezi Valley’s “dry forests”, to improve knowledge of their biodiversity, to identify indicators of forest condition and to evaluate conservation issues associated with them, including the effects of disturbance by humans and wildlife. In the Muzarabani-Guruve area, the most significant examples included the Rikonde forest (below left) on the Musengezi river near Muzarabani growth point and the Gonono sand ridge along the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border (below right).



The research confirmed that these dry forests are globally significant as rare and threatened habitats which are poorly represented in protected areas. They have particular conservation significance in the Zambezi Valley.

For more detail see: [Sites of Interest for Botanical Conservation in the Communal Areas of the Zambezi Valley](#) and [Structure and Condition of Zambezi Valley Dry forests and thickets](#)

DIVERSIFYING COMMUNITY LIVELIHOODS

As a follow up to the elephant and forest research, The Zambezi Society obtained funding from the Global Environment Fund (GEF) to employ a local Community Liaison Officer to work with community leaders in Muzarabani and Guruve Districts to identify and develop small-scale community projects aimed at encouraging villagers to appreciate the benefits of their natural forests and elephant resources without destroying them. Building on work already achieved by MZEP, sustainable projects like bee-keeping, based on natural resources, were introduced, crop fencing experiments were undertaken, and suitable small-scale, community-based, tourism sites adjacent to the forest areas in Muzarabani and Guruve, including the Gonono border area, were identified for development as part of a proposed self-drive wilderness tourism route through this section of the Zambezi Valley.



Zamsoc's Community Liaison Officer accompanies Guruve District Council officials on a site visit to the dry forest area of Gonono near the Mozambique border.

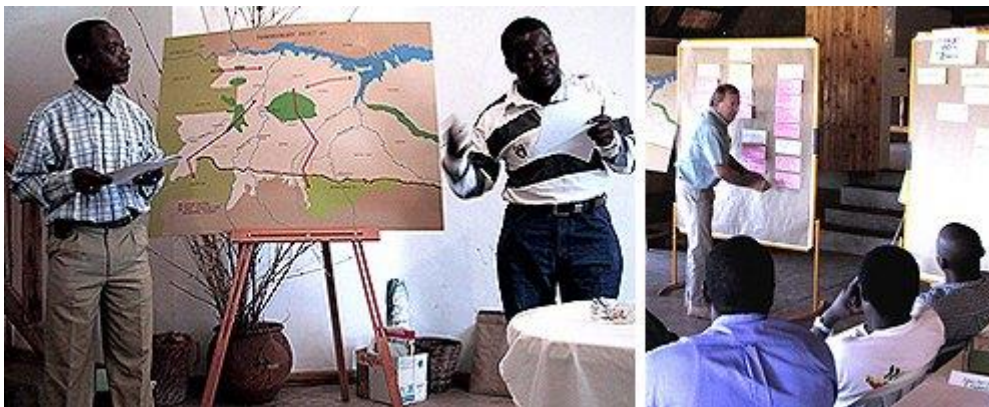
Similar community initiatives were being developed over the border in Magoe District, by Mozambique's Tchuma Tchato community based natural resource management project. At the same time, at the request of the Tete Provincial Department for Agriculture and Fisheries (DPAP), Zamsoc and its partners the Biodiversity Foundation for Africa (BFA) embarked on a biodiversity and wilderness survey for the area, funded by the Ford Foundation as part of its wider support to Tchuma Tchato. See: [Biodiversity & Wilderness around Lake Cahora Bassa](#)

TRANSBOUNDARY COLLABORATION

Zamsoc's various research and community initiatives in this Zimbabwe/Mozambique boundary area served to raise important issues relating not only to the transboundary management of the area's elephant population, but also the issue of transboundary land planning for biodiversity/habitat conservation and natural resource management in general.

The Zambezi Society therefore convened a transboundary meeting of senior officials from the three local authorities at Kanyemba on the Zambezi River in July 2001 with the objective: "To develop and plan a collaborative elephant management framework and strategy for Magoe, Guruve and Muzarabani districts in Mozambique and Zimbabwe."

The workshop was attended by a total of 47 delegates. These included eight councillors and officials from Guruve district, seven from Muzarabani district, 14 representatives from the Tete provincial authorities, the Zimbabwean Deputy Minister of Environment, the Member of Parliament for Guruve North, and representatives from IUCN ROSA and WWF Harare.



Presentations and collaborative planning at the transboundary workshop held in Kanyemba in July 2001

From this workshop, a set of objectives and actions was developed to promote the establishment of a collaborative elephant management framework and strategy as follows:-

1. To identify and implement collaborative land planning, wildlife management and biodiversity maintenance options (including a proposed new Wilderness Area in western Magoe District, Tete Province, Mozambique (provisionally named the Panhame Wilderness Area) which could be linked through to the Mavuradonha Wilderness Area via the elephant movement corridor across the Zambezi Valley identified by Zambezi Society research.)
2. To develop and implement activities designed to improve agricultural productivity and land use, and to reduce conflict between humans and wildlife
3. To improve the biological knowledge base for sustainable management of natural resources, biodiversity and wildlife.

The Zambezi Society was tasked with facilitating the implementation of these outputs, and to attract funding for this purpose.

For more details see: [Transboundary Workshop Proceedings, Kanyemba, Zambezi Valley, July 2001](#)

Shortly after the Kanyemba transboundary workshop had taken place, political and economic turmoil in Zimbabwe made fieldwork in these areas virtually impossible. The country's political scenario also resulted in a near-total withdrawal of international funding for Zimbabwean projects. Zamsoc and MZEP were forced to withdraw their researchers and terminate their community work. However, the data acquired may prove useful as a "baseline" should the Society be in a position to resume work in this area in the future.

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