

THE ZAMBEZI SOCIETY'S HISTORICAL SERIES. EPISODE 7: CONSERVING THE ZAMBEZI'S WILDERNESS VALUES

March 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 7: CONSERVING THE ZAMBEZI'S WILDERNESS VALUES

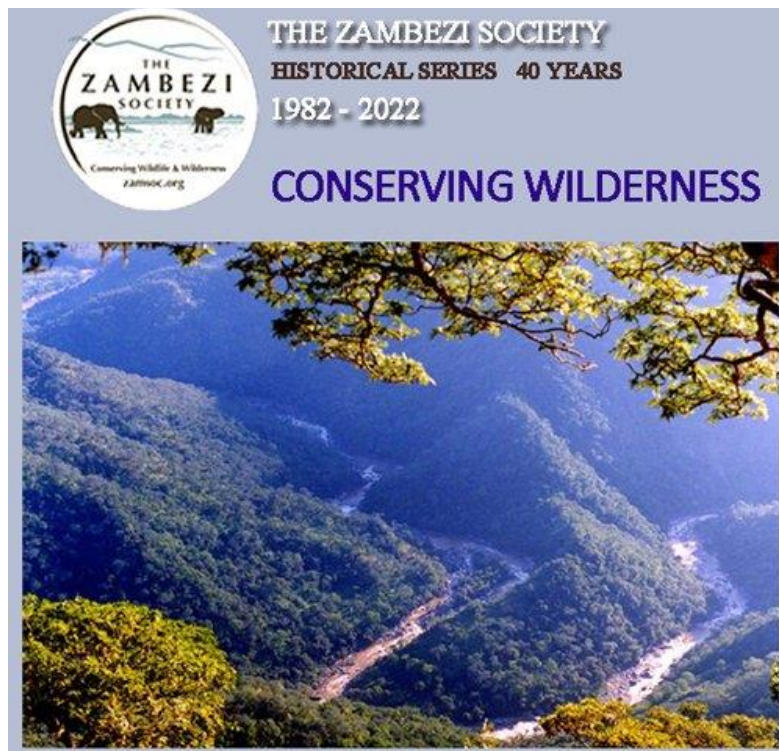


Image shows Mavuradonha – Zimbabwe's first community based Wilderness Area

As Zimbabwe's post-independence development grew apace in the 1980s and 1990s, the Zambezi Valley areas were faced with some new conservation challenges.

In Africa, where some of the world's poorest people live in or adjacent to some of the world's wildest lands, practical solutions are needed to reconcile local development needs with the global goals of retaining biodiversity, conserving wilderness for future generations, and providing recreation for visitors seeking a wilderness experience that has long since disappeared from their own developed countries. Setting aside land exclusively for conservation and tourism (unless it provides tangible benefits to rural communities) is an unpopular solution.

At the same time, tourism to the Zambezi River's wild places grew exponentially in the 1990s, and suddenly there were signs of a proliferation of unplanned tourism developments (on both the Zimbabwean and Zambian sides of the river), of increased tourism pressure and insensitive tourism behaviour. The Zambezi Society became concerned about the impact of all of this on the wild areas of the Zambezi River and its wilderness value.

How to address these challenges?

ZAMSOC'S WILDERNESS PROGRAMME

Zamsoc embarked on a programme aimed at conserving the Zambezi's wild lands and maintaining their wilderness values while at the same time educating decision-makers, land managers, tourism operators and communities about why this is important for future generations.



CREATION OF THE MAVURADONHA WILDERNESS AREA

In the late 1980s, The Zambezi Society joined with other conservation NGOs, community leaders, rural district councillors, private landowners and tourism operators in assisting the people of Muzarabani District to create (and manage) the first community-based area set aside for wilderness tourism – the Mavuradonha Wilderness Area – a rugged 600 sq km area of Zambezi Escarpment mountains (pictured above). This was Zamsoc's first venture into community conservation and led on to more than two decades of involvement in conservation work with rural communities in the area.

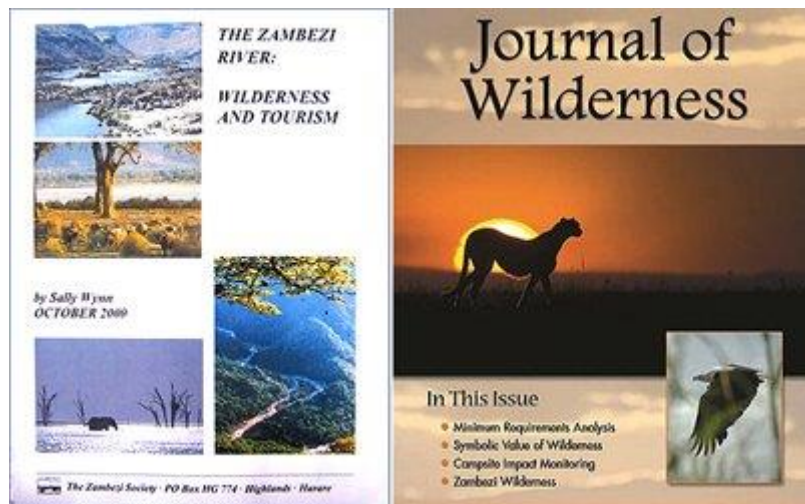
WILDERNESS SURVEYS

As tourism to the Zambezi reached a high point in the 1990s, Zamsoc set about researching **Visitor Perceptions** about Zambezi wilderness and its values. A total of 1369 local, regional and international visitors to the Zambezi were surveyed in 633 interviews conducted at four Zambezi valley tourism destinations, three of which were in or adjacent to National Parks (Victoria Falls, Kariba/Matusadona, Mana Pools) and two in settled lands at Mavuradonha and Kanyemba.

The Zambezi Society published the findings of this research in October 2000 in a report entitled **The Zambezi River: Wilderness and Tourism**. The research established that people

visiting the Zambezi River attach very high value to the “wild” nature of their tourism experience. (84% of visitors surveyed declared that they value wilderness highly on a personal level. 77% said that the possibility of “a wilderness experience” had affected their decision to come to the Zambezi.) Responses to the questionnaires provided a specific set of values attached to Zambezi wilderness by visitors, and a specific set of factors that detract from enjoyment of their experience, as well as some detailed observations about the Zambezi tourism experience including problems at Victoria Falls.

The report concluded that tourism can play a vital role in ensuring the survival of wild areas in developing Africa, and that wilderness tourism should be promoted as the most appropriate and sustainable option for the Zambezi areas. However, in order for this type of tourism to be sustainable, wilderness-sensitivity must underpin all Zambezi Valley tourism planning, management and practice.



The findings of this research were presented at a series of seminars and meetings for public and private-sector stakeholders in the tourism and natural resource management sectors in Harare in 2001. The Zambezi Society also attended the 7th World Wilderness Conference – held at Port Elizabeth, South Africa in November 2001, to present this research work which was summarised in the following publications:-

- [Research into Visitor Perceptions about Zambezi Wilderness and its Value](#) (S Wynn, Zambezi Society, in *Science & Stewardship to Protect and Sustain Wilderness Values, Symposium of the 7th World Wilderness Congress - November 2001*)
- [The Zambezi River: Wilderness and Tourism - perceptions & recommendations](#) (S Wynn, Zambezi Society, in *International Journal of Wilderness Vol 8 No 1 - April 2002*)

Next, we set out to find out to find out about **Community Perceptions** to ascertain what values and uses are attached to wilderness areas by local communities living in the settled lands of the Zambezi valley. An MSc student attached to Zamsoc carried out exploratory research in 2002 on the meaning of the Zambezi wild areas and wilderness values to local Zambezi valley communities in Muzarabani District. This identified an urgent need for training in wilderness awareness and stewardship in both settled lands and protected areas.

WILDERNESS TRAINING

In 2001, The Zambezi Society signed an MOU with the South African **Wilderness Action Group** (WAG) which provided training in wilderness awareness and management affiliated to the University of Kwa-Zulu-Natal.

Between 2002 and 2005, Zamsoc and WAG facilitated the training of 13 Zimbabweans from both the public and private sectors in wilderness awareness and management, including National Park officers, traditional chiefs, community resource managers and tour operators. The training took place in South Africa.

In 2006, The Zambezi Society secured funding from the **WILD Foundation**, (a USA-based organisation which runs the World Wilderness Congress every four years) to host a training course in Wilderness Concepts and Practice in the Zambezi Valley, led by two facilitators from the **Wilderness Action Group**.



Twenty Parks Authority officers at Principal/Senior and Warden level from both sides of the Zambezi River (Zambia and Zimbabwe) attended the 10-day wilderness training course, held at RIFA Education Camp near Chirundu in September 2006. The aim was to encourage and strengthen the capacity of these senior officers to provide better stewardship and conservation of the Zambezi River's wild areas through improved awareness of wilderness value and application of appropriate, practical management concepts. We summarized the importance of this course in the International Journal of Wilderness in April 2007 - see this link: [Zambezi Wilderness: Meeting the challenges.](#)



Wilderness training course participants – RIFA Education Camp, Chirundu, Sept 2006
Further wilderness training seminars were planned, with the intention, ultimately, of building a team to initiate a wide-ranging wilderness management programme in Zimbabwe and to establish a Zambezi Valley Wilderness School, where the knowledge gained about different cultural perceptions of wilderness could be integrated with sound science and experience gained elsewhere in the world, and a specific set of Zambezi valley wilderness management and stewardship principles established.

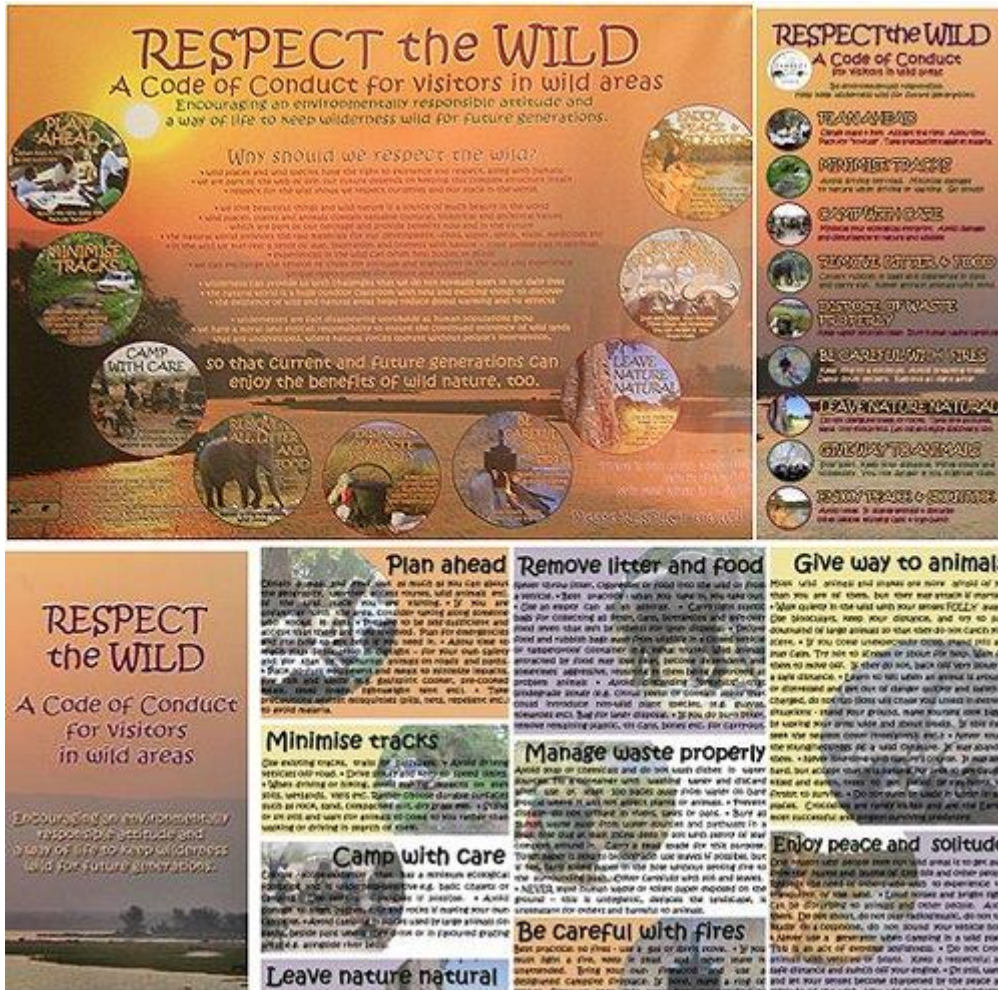
However, sadly Zamsoc's wilderness training programme was put on hold from 2007 onwards as Zimbabwe's economic and political challenges made it difficult to access funding channels.

WILDERNESS AWARENESS AND INFLUENCING BEHAVIOUR

Meanwhile, The Zambezi Society channelled its efforts into creating greater public awareness about the importance and value of the Zambezi's wildernesses and influencing behaviour through the production and distribution of educational materials.

Posters & leaflets

Zamsoc designed and produced a **RESPECT THE WILD** series of printed posters and leaflets which were distributed to schools in both urban and rural areas throughout Zimbabwe, at National Park facilities in the Zambezi Valley areas and to the general public. A summary of the content of the poster & leaflet can be seen on the Wild Zambezi website [HERE](#) and copies of the poster are still available from the Zambezi Society on request.



Codes of Conduct for Visitors Behaviour in Mana Pools/Chitake

In 2015, in order to address growing concerns about the erosion of wilderness values in tourism hot-spots of the Zambezi Valley like Mana Pools, the Zambezi Society in collaboration with its supporters, with ZimParks and with the Lower Zambezi Tour Operators Association, compiled two sets of wilderness and wildlife-sensitive guidelines for the general public entitled **CODE OF CONDUCT FOR VISITOR BEHAVIOUR** - one for Mana Pools National Park and another for Chitake Spring. These are downloadable as PDFs from the Zamsoc website [HERE](#):



WILDERNESS ADVOCACY & PLANNING

Since early beginnings, The Zambezi Society has sought to ensure that the priceless wilderness qualities of the Zambezi River, which attract visitors from all over the world, are taken into account in all planning and development decisions throughout the region, and has advocated for suitable areas (where possible) to be set aside as no-development Wilderness Zones in order to ensure that wilderness values are preserved. We have done this by consistently raising the issue of wilderness conservation in Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) for developments within the Zambezi Valley areas, and in the Management Planning processes for Mana Pools (in 2008) and for the Mid-Zambezi Biosphere Reserve (in 2021-2022).

We will continue to do so into the future.

IF YOU ARE ENJOYING READING OUR ZAMBEZI SOCIETY HISTORICAL SERIES, AND WOULD LIKE TO MAKE A CONTRIBUTION TO HELP US ACHIEVE MORE IN OUR NEXT 40 YEARS, PLEASE MAKE A DONATION VIA THIS LINK:-

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