

Zambezi River: Wilderness and Tourism Research Into Visitor Perceptions About Wilderness and Its Value

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Abstract—This paper outlines the findings of questionnaire research undertaken by a conservation nongovernment organization (NGO), the Zambezi Society, to capture perceptions about wilderness and its values from people visiting four Zambezi River tourism destinations in Zimbabwe. The research was conducted during a tourism boom in the area when the Society was receiving complaints that the wild values of the river were being eroded by tourism malpractice.

The research produced a visitor-generated definition of “wilderness” in the Zambezi River context; a list of the attributes that make a place wild; an indication of the high value of a wilderness experience to Zambezi visitors; a list of factors that detract from people’s enjoyment of a wilderness experience; a list of the wild areas most valued by visitors to the Zambezi; and some detailed observations about the Zambezi tourism experience, including problems at Victoria Falls.

The Zambezi Society recognizes the vital role that tourism must play in ensuring the survival of wild areas in developing Africa. Its research suggests that because such high value is placed on the Zambezi’s wild nature by surveyed visitors, wilderness tourism should be promoted as the most appropriate and sustainable option for the area. However, this cannot take place without wilderness sensitivity being incorporated into Zambezi Valley tourism planning, management, and practice. The Society proposes a series of wilderness training workshops for the natural resource and tourism sectors in order to create awareness and establish guidelines for wilderness-sensitive planning, management, and practice at all levels. The Zambezi Society is seeking sponsorship to implement this plan.

Introduction

The Zambezi Society is a Zimbabwe-based nongovernmental (NGO) membership organization devoted to conserving the biodiversity and wilderness values of the Zambezi River in Central and Southern Africa, and to encouraging people to find ways of benefiting from the river’s resources without destroying 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 Zambezi River’s wilderness values. The reports were wide ranging: unchecked commercialization, *ad hoc* development, tree cutting, border violations, unauthorized road and camp building, noise pollution, littering and abuse of camping sites, illicit tour and guiding activities, and so on. The overriding tenor was that the special “wilderness value” of the Zambezi River was being eroded by inappropriate tourism behavior and development.

To provide a balanced response, the Society embarked on a research project in 1998 aimed at capturing peoples’ perceptions about wilderness in the Zambezi context, as well as providing a workable definition of the term “wilderness,” its “values,” and its importance to visitors to the Zambezi.

It was hoped that this information might also help The Zambezi Society to make a meaningful and practical contribution toward conserving Zambezi wild areas by influencing management authorities and tourism practice.

Methodology

Research was conducted by questionnaire interview in four main Zambezi Valley tourism destinations on the Zimbabwean side of the river: (1) Victoria Falls (fig. 1), (2) Kariba/Matusadona National Park, (3) Mana Pools National Park, and (4) Kanyemba/Mavuradonha Wilderness Area. Members of the Zambezi Society were also asked to complete a postal questionnaire.

A total of 1,524 people were interviewed via 633 questionnaires. A wide variety of visitor types were chosen, encompassing those staying in hotels, safari lodges/safari camps, self-catering/National Park lodges, on houseboats, and canoeing and camping.

Of visitors interviewed, 44 percent were of local/regional origin, and 56 percent were international. Zambezi Society members interviewed were mainly local.

Main Findings

Visitors to the Zambezi Value Wilderness Highly

- Ninety-eight percent of those interviewed felt it to be important that wilderness exists.
- Eighty-four percent said they value wilderness personally.
- Seventy-seven percent said they came to the Zambezi Valley for a wilderness experience.

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Figure 1—The Zambezi River at Victoria Falls (courtesy of The Zambezi Society).

Responses to the Questionnaire Provided a Fairly Comprehensive Definition of the Term “Wilderness”

This may be summarized as:

...a natural, undeveloped and unpopulated landscape, which is scenically attractive or unusual, contains indigenous species, and induces an emotional state of mind in which the visitor may feel any or all of the following: in harmony with nature, freed from “civilization,” inspired, refreshed, invigorated, challenged, stimulated, humbled, or spiritually fulfilled.

A detailed breakdown of responses to this question is provided in table 1. The definition had two basic components: physical values and nonphysical values.

Physical Values of Zambezi Wilderness

These appear to be especially valued by international visitors interviewed and include:

- Natural/unspoiled landscapes—wide open spaces, and a feeling that little has changed. (This is a fallacy, as nature is always in a state of flux, but nonetheless, the illusion is a powerful draw for wilderness appreciators.)

- Wild species—animals roaming free, indigenous plants.
- Lack of people—including the signs of their existence, for example, pollution, litter, vehicles, noise.
- Lack of development—wilderness is seen as an escape from/in direct contrast to urban civilization.
- Lack of commercialization—commercial tourism development/activities, and so forth, seem to be considered inappropriate to wilderness areas, whereas low-impact structures/activities in harmony with nature are considered appropriate

Nonphysical Values of Zambezi Wilderness

These are often neglected in tourism planning, but are particularly important to local/regional visitors for whom wildlife is less of a novelty, and for Zambezi Society members. They include:

- Peace.
- Solitude.
- Isolation.
- A feeling of harmony with nature.
- Spiritual feelings.
- Challenge.
- Adventure.

Areas of the Zambezi River Considered by Visitors To Be Most Important for Wilderness Appreciation

These include:

- Mana Pools National Park (fig. 2)/Chewore Safari Area — includes the Sapi Safari Area and Middle Zambezi (very high wilderness satisfaction level).
- Lake Kariba/Matusadona National Park—especially away from Kariba town (high wilderness satisfaction).
- Chizarira National Park/Mavuradonha Wilderness Area—Zambezi escarpment mountainous terrain, different from the Valley as such. Especially popular with local visitors (good wilderness satisfaction).
- Victoria Falls/Chirundu/Kanyemba—relatively settled/urbanized, but with pockets of important wilderness nearby (for example, Zambezi National Park near Victoria Falls). (Wilderness satisfaction is lower here than in other areas possibly due to the impacts of settlement and developmental infrastructure.)

Tourism Choices That Offer High Wilderness Value

These include:

- Canoeing.
- Boating on Lake Kariba.
- Safari lodges/bush camps, which offer guided walks and “close encounter” bush experiences.

Table 1—Visitor responses to question: What makes a place truly wild?

"Truly wild" values	Visitors interviewed in each location who cited each value						Overall (n = 435)	Communal lands Percent	Zambezi Society Members (n = 160)
	Victoria Falls	Kariba	Mana Pools	Communal lands	Overall	Zambezi Society Members			
Natural values									
Presence of/proximity to wild fauna and flora	85	96	95	100	93	97			
Animals roaming free/in natural state	40	41	44	57	42	32			
Unspoiled, natural ecosystems/in "original state"	11	18	18	0	15	12			
Scenic/landscape beauty	24	30	27	23	27	43			
Large scale/size landscapes/open spaces	11	4	3	14	6	4			
	0	4	3	5	3	6			
Undeveloped values									
Lack of development/infrastructure/settlement	46	44	60	43	48	66			
Undeveloped areas deliberately set aside	20	19	28	19	21	38			
Nature-sensitive/simple/noncommercial development only	2	2	2	0	2	0			
Lack of fences/roads/electricity, and so forth	16	16	19	19	17	14			
	7	7	11	5	8	14			
Uncrowded values									
Few/no people/tourists	38	40	73	52	49	96			
Limited access (for example, vehicle restrictions/by foot only)	15	17	35	19	20	46			
Lack of human activity (vehicles/pollution/litter)	2	3	7	0	3	3			
Lack of human interference (controls/rules/signs)	3	12	19	19	12	34			
Animals and people separated (guided tours only)	15	9	12	14	12	12			
Small groups of visitors only	3	0	0	0	1	0			
	1	0	0	0	.5	1			
Emotional/spiritual values									
Silence (natural sounds only)	17	23	25	29	21	60			
Feeling of being "at one with/in harmony with nature"	7	7	9	19	8	25			
Peace/serenity	2	1	2	0	1	3			
Solitude/seclusion	2	3	1	5	2	5			
Remoteness/isolation	3	6	6	5	5	13			
Feeling of mankind's insignificance	3	6	5	0	5	8			
	0	0	0	0	0	6			
Challenge/adventure values									
Presence of danger/feelings of fear	3	4	6	10	5	6			
Rugged experience/sleeping rough/fending for oneself	2	1	3	0	2	1			
Unpredictability/encountering the unexpected	1	1	1	5	1	3			
		2	2	5	2	2			
Cultural encounter values									
Opportunity to interact with local peoples/traditions	4	1	0	0	2	2			
	4	1	0	0	2	2			
Management values									
Efficient but unobtrusive management	3	2	3	0	4	3			
High standards of guiding	2	1	3	0	2	3			
Good standards of comfort/safety	1	0	0	0	1	0			
	1	1	0	0	1	0			



Figure 2—Elephants at Mana Pools National Park (taken by Dick Pitman of The Zambezi Society).

Tourism Activities and Their Impacts on Wilderness

The survey asked people to indicate what activities they had undertaken in their visit to the Zambezi. Depending on their perceived impact on wilderness, these activities were categorized into three groups (low/medium/high). Among the 10 most popular activities undertaken by visitors interviewed, seven fall within the low-impact category. They include: birdwatching, walking, photography, fishing (from land), swimming/sunbathing, and picnicking. The remaining three—sightseeing, gameviewing, and camping—are categorized as having medium impact. High-impact activities are mainly undertaken by visitors to Victoria Falls, Lake Kariba, and Kanyemba. None of the most popular visitor activities, nor those that are special to Mana Pools National Park (fig. 3), fall within the intrusive category. This



Figure 3—The Zambezi River at Mana Pools (courtesy of The Zambezi Society).

may partly explain the reason for Mana receiving high ratings for wilderness experience.

Main Factors That Detract From a Wilderness Experience

These were identified in visitor responses to the survey. Table 2 details an outline broken down by areas of interest. To summarize, the main detractors are:

- Too many people—pollution/litter, unruly/insensitive behavior (such as harassing wildlife with too many tour vehicles), drunken/noisy behavior on river cruises, and harassment by vendors/dealers.
- Noise—human-generated (for example, loud radios/music in campsites), unnatural, mechanical noise (for example, generators near lodges/camps, motorboats/motorbikes/trucks/aeroplanes). Natural sounds appear to be quite acceptable.
- Overdevelopment—too much infrastructure, too many roads, lights, too many regulations. People appear to seek wilderness to get away from the hustle and bustle of urban civilization/development. Civilization detracts from wilderness.
- Commercial tourism—There is a strong feeling from visitors that low-key/low-impact infrastructure/activities designed to be nature sensitive are acceptable in wilderness areas. It is felt that commercial tourism is not, for example, big/luxury/high-rise hotels; insensitive architecture; advertising billboards on the edge of a World Heritage Site; inappropriate activities, for example, commercial sales outlets at the entrance to the “rainforest” at the Falls; and “tame” wildlife. Exploitation/extortion and harassment by vendors and dealers is seen as detracting from wilderness quality. These problems were of particular concern to visitors interviewed in Victoria Falls.
- Impacts on nature—damage to ecosystems, tree cutting/poaching, and presence of exotic species.

Some Hotels and Tour Operators May Be Contributing to the Erosion of Wilderness Quality—This was noted in highly commercialized tourism areas, such as Victoria Falls and Kariba town, where some tourism operations offer choices of activities as part of package tours that have high impacts on wilderness. Such activities include: scenic flights, river cruises, motorboating, golf, casinos, and tourist “traps” (for example, moneymaking activities considered inappropriate and insensitive to wilderness). Motorboating on the Zambian side of the river opposite Mana Pools National Park, for example, is mentioned as a considerable detraction to the wilderness experience of visitors staying at Mana. The presence of houseboats and the noise of their engines and generators are mentioned as detracting from the wilderness quality of the Matusadona National Park, especially in the Kariba Eastern Basin.

Wilderness Satisfaction Is Lower in Victoria Falls Than in Other Areas of the Zambezi River Used in the Survey—Sixty-nine percent of visitors interviewed in Victoria Falls were satisfied with the quality of their wilderness experience (as opposed to 92 percent in Mana Pools). It is possible that the quality of the wilderness experience in

Table 2—Visitor responses to question: What detracts from a place feeling truly wild?

Detractions from “truly wild” feeling	Percentage of visitors interviewed in each location who cited each factor detracting from the “truly wild” feeling					Overall (n = 420)	Zambezi Society members (n = 160)
	Victoria Falls	Kariba	Mana Pools	Communal lands	Overall		
People/human activities	61	66	88	43	70	98	
Too many people/mass tourism	38	34	46	43	38	40	
Too many vehicles	8	10	13	0	10	17	
Pollution/litter	7	13	13	0	11	21	
Harassment by curio sellers/vendors/currency dealers	3	1	0	0	1	1	
Unruly/insensitive visitors	3	4	9	0	5	11	
Unruly/too many operators	2	4	7	0	4	8	
Presence of security guards	1	0	0	0	1	0	
Noise	31	29	57	43	37	69	
General noise (unspecified)	4	10	14	5	9	29	
Aircraft (including helicopters and microlights)	13	5	7	0	7	6	
Motorboats/boats/kapenta rigs	3	8	15	0	7	10	
Cars/buses	7	3	7	14	6	11	
Trains	2	0	0	0	1	0	
Music/radios	1	3	7	24	5	9	
Generators	0	0	6	0	1	5	
Construction companies	3	1	0	0	1	0	
Development (general)	38	46	62	57	48	72	
Too much development/infrastructure/settlement	23	30	33	43	29	39	
Roads (especially tarred)	8	7	14	10	9	17	
Fences	3	2	4	0	3	4	
Lights/electricity pylons	2	3	6	5	4	7	
Signs	2	2	1	0	1	1	
Rules and regulations/restrictions/lack of spontaneity	1	3	4	0	2	4	
Commercial tourism	38	37	34	10	36	58	
Commercialization/big hotels/luxury lodges/tourist traps	26	27	26	10	26	36	
Inappropriate/insensitive development/architecture	5	5	3	0	5	10	
Inappropriate activities (for example, discos/casinos/video games)	4	2	1	0	2	8	
Presence of “tame wildlife”/feeding of animals	2	2	3	0	2	3	
Exploitation/extortion	1	1	0	0	1	1	
Impacts on nature	9	7	13	14	13	27	
Ecosystem damage/tree cutting /off-road driving/etc.	4	1	6	10	3	15	
Presence of exotic species	1	0	1	0	1	1	
Lack of wild fauna and flora	3	3	3	0	3	4	
Harassment of wild animals (for example, spotlights/radio collars)	3	0	1	0	1	2	
Lack of environmental protection/management	0	1	0	0	1	4	
Poaching	0	1	0	5	1	1	
Animals suffering (starvation, etc.)	0	1	0	0	1	0	
Burning	0	1	0	0	1	0	
People walking about unrestricted	0	0	1	0	1	0	
Other detractors	2	4	0	0	2	6	
Poor management of tourism facilities	2	2	0	0	1	1	
Presence of domestic animals	0	1	0	0	1	4	
Lack of knowledgeable guides	0	0	0	0	0	1	

the Falls is being eroded by some of the detractors identified by interviewees, in other words, commercialization, people, and overdevelopment.

Of People Interviewed in Victoria Falls, 58 Percent Were Visiting No Other Destination in the Zambezi Valley—The Zambezi Society believes that by experiencing a much-impacted wilderness, visitors to the Zambezi who only visit the Falls may be missing out on the true wilderness value of the River. This has implications for tourism marketing.

Provision of Tourism Information or Interpretative Material Is Inadequate—Visitors interviewed expressed this opinion, especially in Mana Pools and Kariba/Matusadona National Park.

People Visiting the Wilder Areas of the Zambezi River Expressed Themselves More Ready to Contribute Toward Wilderness Conservation Than Those Visiting More Heavily Developed or Impacted Areas—While less than half the visitors interviewed in Victoria Falls and 55 percent of those interviewed in Kariba were prepared in principle to contribute financially to maintaining wilderness areas, 70 percent of those interviewed in Mana Pools National Park and in Zambezi Valley communal lands expressed themselves willing to do so.

The Zambezi River Is Visited by a Significant Proportion of Independent Travelers (in other words, people traveling without a tour operator or guide). This Tourism Category Has No Current Representative Voice—Most people interviewed (73 percent) were visiting the Zambezi independently. Only 27 percent of visitors interviewed in all areas were accompanied on their holiday by a tour operator or guide. Although there are tour operator and professional guiding associations through which the interests of some Zambezi users might be represented, there is currently no association or organization representing the views of the independent visitor to the Zambezi.

Some Observations on Research Findings

The Zambezi Society survey clearly confirms the importance of “a wilderness experience” to people visiting the Zambezi. In view of the economic and investment benefits that international tourism brings to the region, this would seem to underline the need to ensure that the river’s wild values are conserved and to promote wilderness-sensitive tourism in preference to other Zambezi tourism options.

However, there is a perception that setting aside wild places for the enjoyment of a few tourists and wilderness enthusiasts is a luxury that Africans can ill afford. Current land use pressures and other development priorities tend to push wilderness awareness, conservation, and management very low down on the planning agenda, and a tendency to maximize on short-term revenues at the expense of long-term sustainability is a problem becoming all too evident in tourism “hot-spots” like Victoria Falls.

This shows a singular lack of understanding, not only of the vital link between tourism and development, but of the true value of Africa’s wild areas to the Continent’s people.

The developed world’s astonishing record of environmental destruction now makes Africa’s “pristine” wildernesses global assets of great value—both biologically and in terms of their economic potential from sustainable tourism. 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 like the Congo, the Zambezi is an attractive tourism destination, being relatively accessible and safe.

Governments of developing nations are not unaware of this. The collapse of Zimbabwe’s tourism industry as a result of recent political and economic turmoil has been a bitter pill to swallow. Its ripple effects have been felt throughout the Southern African region. In its efforts to recover, the industry is now considering new options, and is undergoing a process of creative planning and review that might not otherwise have occurred in the bustle of a thriving tourism marketplace. The Zambezi Society believes that its research on wilderness is well timed to take advantage of the current climate of review.

Recommendations

The Zambezi Society’s recommendations resulting from the research, therefore, have two main messages:

1. Market wilderness and promote Zambezi Valley wilderness tourism.
2. Safeguard wilderness by incorporating wilderness sensitivity into all tourism planning, management, and practice for the Zambezi Valley.

Marketing Wilderness

Specific recommendations for wilderness marketing include:

1. Recognize the importance of wilderness and promote it.
2. Market a “Zambezi wilderness experience” and specific, low-impact wilderness activities to selected tourism markets.
3. Target tourism markets that specifically appreciate wilderness.
4. Provide more information/interpretation for visitors on the Zambezi River and its wilderness (preferably available free of charge).

Safeguarding Wilderness Through Sensitive Planning, Management, and Practice

Specific recommendations include:

1. Incorporate “the wilderness experience” into tourism planning.
2. Safeguard wilderness quality by developing wilderness-sensitive guidelines for conservation and tourism.
3. Ensure that tourism activities and facilities in priority wilderness areas are appropriate and wilderness sensitive.
4. Monitor effectiveness of and compliance with guidelines and visitor satisfaction with the wilderness experience.

5. Improve the quality of the wilderness experience at Victoria Falls.
6. Encourage wilderness visitors to contribute to maintaining wilderness areas.
7. Establish an association/organization to represent the interests of independent visitors to the Zambezi.

Followup

The Zambezi Society recently presented the findings of its research on wilderness values to Zimbabwean tourism policymakers, planners, and operators, as well as to the planning authorities, custodians, and managers of wild places along the Zambezi River. The Society pointed out the potential for wilderness-focused and wilderness-sensitive tourism all along the Zambezi Valley as being the most suitable, low-impact, sustainable option for Zambezi wild areas, and urged the authorities to incorporate this into their marketing strategies. However, the Society also underlined that such promotion will destroy the river's unique wilderness qualities unless wilderness-sensitivity is incorporated into the planning, management, and practice of all existing and future Zambezi Valley tourism.

The research findings were well received, and much interest has been generated. The Zambezi Society has been invited to contribute to the development process of Zimbabwe's Tourism Master Plan, which is currently under discussion. The Society attended the 7th World Wilderness Congress in South Africa in November 2001, sponsored by the WILD Foundation, and through this same sponsor was able to send the Acting Chief Warden of Zimbabwe's National Park's Department to the week-long, pre-Congress Wilderness Management Training Program. The Society specifically chose a candidate who would be in a position to influence

future policy on wilderness management and tourism within this Parks Department, which is the statutory custodian of many of the Zambezi River's wild areas. As a result of the valuable learning experience afforded to its Chief Warden and through contacts made at the Congress, the Department has lent its full support to The Zambezi Society's efforts to develop its own program of wilderness management training for Zambezi wilderness custodians and managers in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Zambia.

The Way Forward: Training and Practical Guidelines

The Zambezi Society is now seeking urgent funding to hold a series of preliminary practical training programs and workshops with custodians, managers, and tourism practitioners operating in Zambezi Valley wild areas. The objective would be:

1. To underscore the significance and value of the Zambezi's wilderness areas.
2. To reexamine existing conservation and tourism policies in light of The Zambezi Society research.
3. To examine some examples of wilderness conservation and management from other parts of the world and assess to what extent these might be applicable in the Zambezi context.
4. To develop some practical ways of encouraging wilderness-sensitive management and tourism in Zambezi wild areas in the immediate future. (The Zambezi Society would, for example, like to publish a series of Guidelines or Codes of Conduct for management and tourism practitioners, which would be widely distributed throughout the tourism and resource management sectors.)