

ZAMSOC INTRODUCES VIRTUAL REALITY TO TEACH KIDS ABOUT CONSERVATION

THE ZAMBEZI SOCIETY - September 2022

The Zambezi Society has embarked on a very exciting new programme to introduce interesting, emotive, wildlife-positive Virtual Reality (VR) videos to school children who are currently only experiencing negative wildlife interactions.

This project is an addition to our Human-Wildlife Co-existence programme, and targets a different age-group, with the same ultimate aim of creating long-term behavioural changes that will benefit rural communities living adjacent to wildlife areas.

With funding from the [Zambezi Elephant Fund](#), and from private donations made directly to Zamsoc, we purchased state-of-the-art VR headsets and a 360° film camera (pictured below).



Our work on Human Wildlife Co-Existence (HWC) with communities in the Gache Gache Communal area (which forms an important wildlife corridor linking the Matusadona National Park with the Charara Safari Area and the rest of the Middle Zambezi Valley) provides a perfect testing ground for piloting this brand new educational methodology. Zamsoc's Human Wildlife Co-Existence Officers (HWCOs) working in the area, are being taught how to use the VR equipment for one lesson a week with school children and teachers.

Since the equipment arrived in July, we have set about developing a few trial VR videos and testing the equipment out in the fairly harsh environment of the Zambezi Valley. We started with a simple video about elephants and their characteristics, and introduced this to primary and secondary schoolchildren in the Gache Gache communal land SE of Lake Kariba, where headmasters had expressed enthusiasm for the project. The feedback that we received from this baseline experiment was vital.



The reactions of the children were interestingly different, depending on their age. The older kids were generally more animated and interactive than the younger (3rd & 4th grade) kids who were either more scared or less interested.



The children were then asked to “write a letter to Elephants” in order for us to try and gauge their general sentiment towards elephants. Predictably, the children echoed the attitude of most of the communities living adjacent to wildlife areas, and expressed their fears around crop loss and loss of life. Rumbi, our Human Wildlife Coexistence Officer (HWCO) in charge of the project noted that the kids in Gache Gache are less interested in elephants than other animals, since many see elephants on a fairly regular basis.

Based on the feedback in Gache Gache we have now embarked on varying the footage to make it more interesting and relatable for the kids.

Ignatius Mabasa, an African Storyteller and academic at the University of Zimbabwe, is helping us to construct wildlife story videos age-appropriate to the children, that are more interesting, exciting and varied than our baseline attempt, and will hopefully be more relevant to rural children.

All the stories will be in the local Shona language and will feature people that rural children can relate to, telling stories which incorporate local nature, wildlife, sites of interest, folklore and tales, making the conservation themes and positive messaging relatable and accessible.



Once the narration is complete, we will take this video and the VR goggles back to Gache Gache and test it on the classes that haven't used the goggles before, as well as our key target group (Grades 6, 7 and 8).

The process of testing footage and revising the experience is guiding our wider rollout plan for the project. New video offerings with positive wildlife messaging will be coupled with creative after-school workshops which will include poetry, song, dance and creative writing, as part of our Human-Wildlife Coexistence project.

If successful, the plan is to roll this VR programme out to other communities living close to the Zambezi Valley's wildlife areas.

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