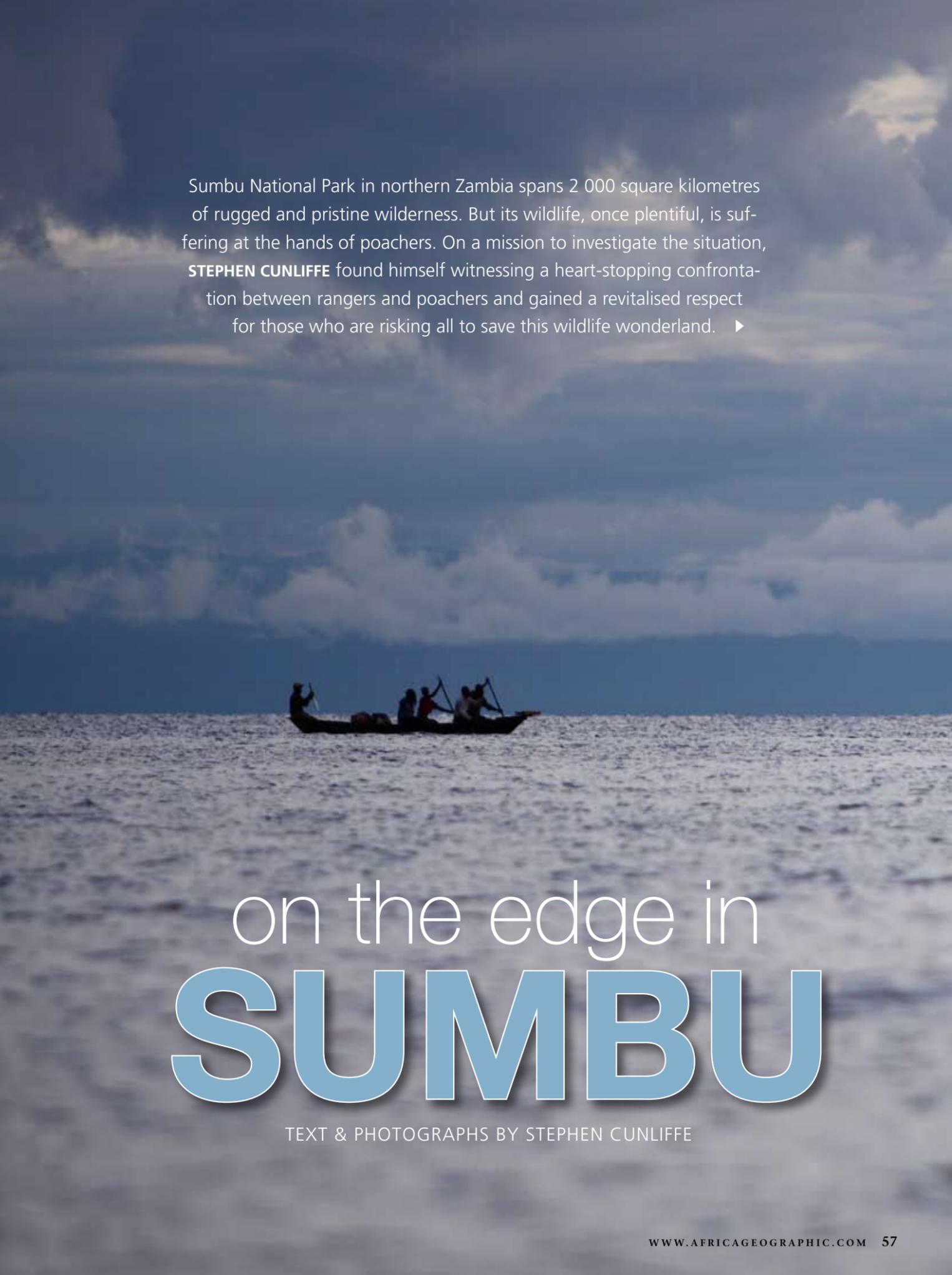


Sumbu National Park in northern Zambia spans 2 000 square kilometres of rugged and pristine wilderness. But its wildlife, once plentiful, is suffering at the hands of poachers. On a mission to investigate the situation, **STEPHEN CUNLIFFE** found himself witnessing a heart-stopping confrontation between rangers and poachers and gained a revitalised respect for those who are risking all to save this wildlife wonderland. ▶



on the edge in  
**SUMBU**

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



ABOVE A ZAWA wildlife officer negotiates a steep ravine to reach a vantage point that overlooks Nkamba Bay and the game-rich Kampasa region in Sumbu National Park.

OPPOSITE Beyond Sumbu's lake frontage, fishing with nets is legal throughout Lake Tanganyika.

PREVIOUS PAGE Fishermen paddle homeward as dawn illuminates a stormy November sky.

'This is serious,' I thought, as I gazed around at the unsmiling faces. In the pale moonlight I could just make out the movements of the wildlife officers as they checked their equipment and readied their AK-47 rifles for the inevitable confrontations that would erupt at sunrise. They sat wordlessly on the deck of the boat, accompanied only by the whine of the outboard as it propelled us towards Nangu Peninsula in Zambia's Sumbu National Park.

The five-man unit, highly motivated under the leadership of Maxwell Silungwe, was responding to reports about illegal fishermen who were plundering the park on a nightly basis. Its brief was to put an end to the nefarious activities and uphold the sanctity of the park.

Dawn was just starting to wash the stars from the night sky when Silungwe insisted that, for safety reasons, the boat should divert and drop me off to watch the action from the shore. My disappointment tempered with more than a little relief, I climbed over the sand dunes at Kasaba Bay and found a prime observation point on the crest of a dune.

As the sky brightened, the scene below me was revealed. I was utterly unprepared for the sheer scale of the operation. Nine boats were pulled up on the shore or moored in the shallow waters. The fishermen had thrown caution to the wind and while some were blatantly dragging gill nets, laden with fish, onto the beach, others used hand lines to haul out their catch. They seemed completely unconcerned about the possibility of being apprehended.

## monitoring and patrolling the park and its surrounding game management areas fall to just 23 wildlife officers

I was wrenched out of my reverie by two shots ringing out in quick succession. The Zambia Wildlife Authority (ZAWA) patrol boat roared onto the scene and, from my lofty perch, I could just make out the looks of surprise and disbelief on the faces of the poachers. Those were soon replaced with expressions of steely determination as they leapt into their boats and began paddling frantically towards the park boundary. A few well-placed warning shots over their bows from the ZAWA craft sapped their fight, allowing the scouts to subdue the smaller boats with ease. I watched as one fisherman tried to wrestle a rifle from an officer: a crack on the head with a heavy wooden paddle discouraged him.

The bigger boats posed more of a challenge. These were the gill-net operators and their large, rowdy crews refused to go quietly. Once they realised that the scouts were not going to shoot them, they fought back. Armed with knives, pangas and oars, they threw petrol on the patrol boat as it came alongside their vessel and threatened to attack any officers who tried to board. The ZAWA unit, completely outnumbered, was forced to withdraw, and had to take comfort in the knowledge that it had



apprehended three boatloads of small-time subsistence poachers. Insults bellowed by the commercial poachers as they headed towards the safety of the Lufubu River drifted across the water long after their boats had disappeared.

In its development programme for the northern region, the Zambian government has stressed the importance of 'effectively controlling, reviving and promoting' the 2 020-square-kilometre Sumbu National Park. However, this commitment has not yet been supported by any visible increase in the manpower or resources allocated to the beleaguered sanctuary, and Sumbu remains the scene of a long-standing conflict for its limited natural resources. Monitoring and patrolling the park and its surrounding game management areas fall to just 23 wildlife officers – the poachers certainly have the upper hand. Despite battling the odds, this band of anti-poaching officials displays a capacity for commitment that is a source of hope and a giant stride towards ensuring the park's resurrection.

It's important to understand the problem. The local Tabwa and Lungu people have lived off the land and the lake since time immemorial and feel that it is their right to continue. 'But commercial fishing catches are down and we're seeing more and more illegal fishing activity here,' said Phil Nielsen, himself a local who now manages Nkamba Bay Lodge, deep inside the national park. 'Unfortunately, declining fish stocks also fuel increased bushmeat poaching. ZAWA has to display a more robust anti-poaching presence, especially along Sumbu's 100 kilometres of frontage on Lake Tanganyika. The park's waters are an essential fish-breeding ground and play a critical role in replenishing fish stocks throughout the greater lake area. This is why we make our boats and fuel



available to the scouts and assist with their patrol logistics,' he added, referring to the fact that lodges in the region often provide vessels for cash-strapped ZAWA's scout patrols.

Staggeringly, outside the national park, there are no fishing regulations or quota restrictions and the concept of fishing seasons does not exist. Gill nets are legal and fish of any size can be harvested freely. In an attempt to crack down on fish poaching within the reserve, especially using illegal netting, ZAWA patrols confiscate and destroy gill nets taken from fishermen inside the boundaries. Sadly, the nets are both cheap to replace and readily ▶



[Sumbu's] wildlife populations are showing signs of recovering from decades of heavy poaching

available in Mpulungu, to the east, where they are often made from mosquito netting that has been donated to the town's residents by well-intentioned nongovernmental organisations. There is little doubt that the struggle to resurrect Sumbu will be a long and hard ordeal.

I joined Nielsen on a legal fishing trip trolling Rapala lures around Nkamba Bay. One of the best-known of the lake's 350 species is the rare goliath tiger, which can weigh up to 35 kilograms and is highly sought after by sports fishermen during the national angling competition held on Lake Tanganyika each year. Our sights were set instead on hooking a lake salmon, a Nile perch or a *nkupi*, the largest of the lake's 200 to 250 cichlid species, for our lunch. As we pattered along gently, I watched basking crocodiles slip silently into the water ahead of us and listened to the haunting cries of African fish-eagles drifting across the ripples. Phil interrupted with some mind-boggling facts about the great lake.

At 677 kilometres, Tanganyika is the world's longest freshwater lake and, at 1 433 metres, the second deepest after Lake Baikal in Russia. When high winds chase squalls of rain across its surface, they often whip up ferocious storms with waves of up to six metres. Despite this upheaval, no mixing with the lake's lower waters occurs and, as a result, all life in this Great Rift Valley body of water is limited to the upper 200 metres: the lower 1 200 metres, known as 'fossil water', is either too high in hydrogen sulphide or too low in oxygen to support life.

Phil's monologue was interrupted by the sudden screech of the drag. As I grabbed the rod, a second reel screamed that it too might have hooked lunch. Soon two decent-sized *nkupi* lay in the boat. Phil

headed for the nearest beach, where we kindled a fire and grilled our fish. As we ate, I reflected that the funds generated from our fishing permits, along with the fees levied on park visitors, are absolutely essential to ensure Sumbu's survival.

After smothering the coals, we hiked a few kilometres inland to locate the myth-shrouded 'balancing boulders'. The Tabwa people believe that the spirit of Nundo, the god of fishing, resides within the precariously poised rock formations and they regularly visit the site to place gifts and offerings inside the caves below the boulders. We too offered a few silent words of thanks for our delicious meal before returning to the boat, passing on the way a herd of skittish puku and a lone bushbuck ram.

**W**hile Sumbu is definitely not teeming with game, its wildlife populations are showing signs of recovering from decades of heavy poaching. The following morning, on an escorted walk around the tiny Kampasa Swamp forest, we came across hundreds of puku gathered on the grassy plains, large warthog families rooting with their snouts in the soil, huge numbers of bushbuck feeding along the lakeshore (23 shared one grassy clearing!), seven sitatunga and a pair of klipspringer, seemingly frozen on the hillside. Not bad for a morning stroll in the park, I thought.

Sumbu is an outstanding playground for adventurous souls who thrive on genuine wilderness experiences. You can enjoy the fight of your life with an energetic tigerfish, take a boat ride and a hike to Africa's second highest uninterrupted waterfall, the Kalambo Falls (South Africa's Tugela Falls are the continent's highest), or simply kick back and savour spectacular beaches and sunsets. You can explore uncharted territory or view the rapidly recovering numbers of game on foot or in a vehicle. Crocs notwithstanding, there's also the opportunity to swim, snorkel or scuba dive with the lake's myriad colourful fish species. ■

**ABOVE** A pair of grey crowned cranes stalk across the swampy Kampasa flood-plain. Some 350 bird species have been recorded at Sumbu.

**OPPOSITE** The *nkupi*, or yellowbelly, is the largest of Lake Tanganyika's 200-plus cichlid species. Cooked over the coals on a deserted beach, it makes a deliciously succulent meal.



## infotravel

### WHEN TO GO

Sumbu National Park is open throughout the year and, while the best time for game viewing is during the dry season (May to early November), keen fishermen and birdwatchers should consider visiting during the rainy season (November to April), when the fish are biting and migrant birds arrive.

### GETTING THERE

At present there are no scheduled flights into Kasaba Bay, although charter flights to its tarred aerodrome can be arranged from any registered airstrip in Zambia. The nearest airport operating scheduled flights is located in distant Kasama. For enquiries about charter flights or to make a booking, go to [www.proflight-zambia.com](http://www.proflight-zambia.com)

Self-drive visitors have various options: the best route for those in two-wheel-drive vehicles is along the Great North Road to Mpulungu and then via a boat transfer to Sumbu. Those with 4x4 vehicles can choose one of three approaches to the park, depending upon their time constraints and thirst for adventure. Travelling from Lusaka, the road through Kasama and Mporokoso to the Sumbu gate is 1 188 kilometres; it's 1 363 kilometres if you follow the road through Mansa, Kawambwa and Mporokoso. Adventurous souls can detour north via Nchelenge and Kaputa on an unforgettable route past some of Zambia's finest waterfalls. Self-drive visitors are urged to contact the lodges before departure for updated information about the condition of the roads.

Fuel can be purchased in Mpulungu or, periodically and at a premium, in Sumbu town. Visitors should stock up with supplies in Lusaka or Kasama, as nothing is available in the reserve.

Tanzania Railways operates a weekly ferry service on the historic 500-berth MV *Liamba* between the major ports on Lake Tanganyika. The lodges also offer their guests scenic boat transfers from the coastal town of Mpulungu to the camps.

### WHERE TO STAY

Well-established Ndole Bay Lodge offers a range of accommodation options, from en-suite rondavels to self-catering camping facilities. Recently refurbished in luxurious style, Nkamba Bay Lodge specialises in fully inclusive fly-in packages geared towards fishermen. Both camps offer boat cruises and fishing excursions, as well as vehicle-based and hiking activities; Ndole Bay also operates overnight dhow trips, fly camping in the park, watersports and Zambia's only recreational scuba diving facility. For more information, go to [www.ndolebaylodge.com](http://www.ndolebaylodge.com) and [www.nkambabaylodge.com](http://www.nkambabaylodge.com)

### FURTHER INFORMATION

The Zambia Tourism website has a wealth of information on both the national park at [www.zambiatourism.com/travel/nationalparks/sumbu.htm](http://www.zambiatourism.com/travel/nationalparks/sumbu.htm) and Lake Tanganyika at [www.zambiatourism.com/travel/places/tanganyi.htm](http://www.zambiatourism.com/travel/places/tanganyi.htm)

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