



RAISING SIOMA

Zambia's third-largest national park lies sandwiched between the Zambezi and Kwando rivers as they drain southwards from the Angolan highlands. A tract of completely undeveloped wilderness, Sioma Ngwezi may be almost unheard of, but its inclusion into the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area may well be the catalyst required to trigger its emergence. With generous funding from donors and guidance from the Peace Parks Foundation, newly established concessions and camps are helping the park to shake off its reputation as a poachers' haven and open its doors to adventurous eco-tourists. **Stephen Cunliffe** set out to discover if the area is, finally, destined for a brighter future. ▶

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Air hissed from a hole in the rear left-hand tyre, bringing our vehicle to a juddering halt. It was our third puncture of the morning and the wheel-unfriendly terrain threatened to thwart our progress in Sioma Ngwezi, one of Zambia's least visited national parks. Having already used the last spare tyre, our resourceful guide dashed off into the bush and returned with a large woody thorn that he used to plug the hole. With the hiss silenced, stillness descended as our unlikely crew of adventurers, comprising reformed poachers, enterprising tourism operators, keen naturalists and laid-back Zambian Wildlife Authority (ZAWA) scouts, contemplated what to do next.

Our reformed-poacher-turned-guide Mwape Saingo* had an uncanny knowledge of the park and a rare ability to find routes through even the most impenetrable-looking teak woodlands

and mopane belts. (See 'Confessions of a former poacher' on page 50.) He had located the remnants of ancient roads and managed to keep our 4x4 vehicle heading deeper into this abandoned wilderness. Despite his efforts, however, decades of mismanagement and neglect had rendered the landscape inhospitable, and it had defeated our tyres at an alarming rate.

Our quest was to reach the fabled rebel base of the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO), concealed within Lusaka Forest deep inside the sanctuary. Before even setting foot in Sioma Ngwezi, I had heard the legend of the giant cooking pot that still stands in the old base. The local Lozi people were divided as to its purpose. Some thought that the soldiers had used it to torture and boil their enemies; others believed it was a receptacle for making bombs. Oddly enough, nobody even hinted at the fact that it might simply have been used to feed the SWAPO army that used to reside in the park.

But now, in our unfortunate predicament, would it be sensible to push on deeper into the unknown with no further spare parts? The forest fringe lay tantalisingly close, barely a few kilometres ahead. To press on was tempting but, after a brief discussion, we accepted the only prudent option and retreated to the nearest village to regroup and carry out repairs.

Proclaimed in 1972, 5 276-square-kilometre Sioma Ngwezi is the third-largest national park in Zambia. Combined with the surrounding 35 000-square-kilometre West Zambezi Game Management Area, it forms an enormous conservation area. The park is an integral link in the migratory route of wildlife and once offered refuge to beleaguered elephants fleeing the wars that raged across the border in Angola and in Namibia's Caprivi Strip.

However, its resources and wildlife have for decades been illegally harvested and abused by humans. SWAPO came first, establishing its headquarters within

the park during the Namibian liberation struggle and living off the land. The soldiers were followed by refugees from Angola, who settled along the Kwando River and plundered the park to assuage their hunger. Finally, the local Lozi population turned to it for their livelihoods. The wildlife provided a source of food to people whose crops had failed during times of drought and, for them, the bushmeat, ivory and skins promised an alluring source of income. A torrid era of syndicated commercial poaching followed.

Rampant poaching is just one of the problems that face Sioma Ngwezi. Human settlements and land-use activities have sprung up inside its boundaries. During a recent Peace Parks Foundation-sponsored aerial survey, an astounding 42 villages were counted inside the park, predominantly along the Kwando River, and a further 65 were recorded along its edge. Compounding the challenges were an estimated 237 head of cattle, 129 cultivated fields and three illegal timber-harvesting operations seen within its borders. ▶

ABOVE, LEFT Sioma Ngwezi's birdlife is prolific. Here an African jacana, a common resident in southern Africa's lightly vegetated waterways, crosses the surface in search of food.

ABOVE, RIGHT The horseshoe-shaped Ngonye Falls.

PAGE 47 Deceptively docile. Crocodiles are plentiful in the Zambezi, where they can be safely observed from the deck of a river cruiser basking on the sunny banks.

*The names of the former poachers have been changed to protect their identities.

CONFESSIONS OF A FORMER POACHER

Mwape Saingo*, 46, turned his back on a life of illegal hunting on 4 November 2007 when he accepted a job as a road-builder. Today, this ex-poacher uses his intimate knowledge of the landscape to construct the best game-drive routes in Sioma Ngwezi.

Driven to killing animals by the lack of work in Barotseland, Saingo poached everything from herbivores and elephants to lions and leopards. 'It was so easy to get hold of AK-47s,' he explained. 'Starving Angolans were always fleeing the civil war across the border. They arrived in Zambia desperate for food and would happily sell their weapons for 45 000 kwacha (about US\$9) or even a few buckets of maize. I sold the bushmeat in the local villages and towns, but ivory was taken to Nangweshi where a big tusk would fetch 100 000 kwacha (US\$21). I have personally killed at least 20 elephants. I did not like it but when you have no job, your crops fail and hunger makes you desperate, then ivory fetches lots of money.'

Saingo is adamant that ZAWA cannot solve the poaching epidemic alone. 'The poachers know this park much better than the anti-poaching scouts, who are often involved in the poaching anyway, either directly or by loaning their weapons to local poachers,' he revealed. 'I firmly believe that employment and development are the only solutions.'

Today 36-year-old David Chanda* is a carpenter and construction group leader. A hard-working, intelligent man with an amiable character, Chanda seems to be destined for management. 'I have never had a job before now and I survived on subsistence farming and poaching,' he explained. 'When the grain in our stores ran out, poaching was the only way that I could support my family. I've killed a lot of kudus, some sables and I once wounded a buffalo that almost killed me before it ran away,' he went on.

How do poachers find ammunition? Reluctant to share the secret, Chanda hinted that the easiest way was to buy it on the black market across the Namibian border, sometimes stuffing the shells in hollowed-out loaves of bread. His final comments had an ominous ring: 'I have stopped poaching but others continue. In the past few days I have eaten bushmeat; I've been wondering where it came from.'

Today, the general mood of pessimism about Sioma Ngwezi's future has been replaced by one of optimism. The change was kindled on 7 December 2006, when a memorandum of understanding was signed jointly by Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe to cooperate in the establishment of the largest peace park and the world's biggest conservation area. It was the cornerstone for the Kavango–Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA TFCA), which encompasses the Okavango and Zambezi river basins, where the borders of the five nations meet. It is envisaged that the area will incorporate 36 national parks, game reserves, game management areas and community sanctuaries to produce a continuous sanctuary spanning some 287 132 square kilometres. That's almost the same size as Italy.

Sioma Ngwezi is the last untouched and undeveloped section within the KAZA TFCA and has enormous conservation

and tourism potential. In mid-2008, Zambia's Integrated Development Plan (IDP) was adopted to ensure the equitable and sustainable development and management of that country's component of the TFCA. While acknowledging the park's potential, the IDP emphasised the need for its controlled development to minimise the impact on the environment. Since then six concessions, varying in size between 40 000 and 50 000 hectares each, have been declared and are up for tender. Several new gates, access roads and a network of game-viewing tracks have also been identified for development.

There are plans to expand the management infrastructure and to construct patrol camps to facilitate the monitoring of the park and its newly declared wildlife-recovery zone. A three-way border post, located in the south-west of Sioma Ngwezi, is also envisaged to speed up tourist movements between Namibia, Angola and Zambia.

With repaired tyres and renewed enthusiasm we tried twice more to reach the Lusaka Forest, but the thick mopane belts and the demise of a wheel-bearing forced us to admit defeat. So instead of searching for giant boiling pots, we decided to explore the Njobwe and Katuli pools in the north-west. Bouncing along overgrown game tracks, whipped by the branches that overhung the route, we skirted perennial pools and saw regal kudu bulls and herds of skittish impala, as well as diminutive duikers, steenbok and wart-hogs. After one particularly gruelling day, we were rewarded with a superb sighting of a group of sable antelopes and zebras at a waterhole.

We camped for three nights at the rustic Sioma Bush Camp near Chitobo Pan on the park's boundary, although we could have opted for a temporary tented camp erected in the Katuli Pools area by the owners of Mutemwa, a lodge



on the Zambezi River. Camping at either site is a truly spiritual experience. Despite wildlife numbers being depleted, the variety of surviving species is impressive, with elephants, giraffes, eland, greater kudu, sable and roan antelopes, zebras, lions, spotted hyaenas, African wild dogs and cheetahs all having been recently sighted.

While their presence is evidence of the park's potential to bounce back, it will take some time for Sioma Ngwezi's



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Mist swirls over Sioma Ngwezi as a lone canoeist paddles across the upper Zambezi at sunrise.



TRAVEL NOTES

WHEN TO GO Although it is open throughout the year, the best time to visit Sioma Ngwezi is during the dry season, from May to early November. During the rainy season, from mid-November to April, self-drive visitors should contact the lodges to find out about the condition of the roads and the park's accessibility.

ACCOMMODATION The well-established Mutemwa Lodge and newer Sioma Camp provide a range of accommodation options from luxury en-suite safari tents to self-catering camping facilities (Sioma Camp only). Both destinations offer trips into the national park in private open-top safari vehicles, as well as daily bush walks, tigerfishing and outings to the stunning Ngonye Falls. Go to www.mutemwa.com and www.siomacamp.com for details.

HOW TO GET THERE Sioma Ngwezi's nearest airport is Livingstone International. Transfers can be arranged via the safari lodges that operate on the upper Zambezi River; alternatively, fully equipped 4x4 vehicles can be rented in Livingstone. For those facing time – rather than budgetary – constraints, the airstrip at Mutemwa Lodge caters for private and chartered aircraft. The website www.proflight-zambia.com will advise you about bookings and charter flight options.

Self-drive visitors approach the park via the 90-kilometre, badly rutted dirt road linking Sesheke to Senanga. No fuel or supplies are available in the reserve, and the nearest petrol station is in Sesheke. Stock up on fuel and provisions there or across the Namibian border in Katima Mulilo, which is cheaper and offers more variety.

For further information about Sioma Ngwezi National Park, visit the Zambia Tourism website www.zambiatourism.com/travel/national_parks/sioma.html. To plan your trip to Sioma Ngwezi, which is best combined with a safari to nearby Kafue National Park, contact Africa Geographic Travel on tel. +27 (0)21 762 2180, e-mail info@africageographic.com or go to www.africageographictravel.com

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wildlife numbers to recover significantly. But that's no reason to delay your visit to Barotse and the upper Zambezi. Ngonye Falls, the river's second-largest cascade; world-class tigerfishing (I landed a 16-pounder – that's 7.2 kilograms – on my first morning); scenic cruises past basking crocodiles and lazy hippos; and guided walking safaris are just a few of the reasons to visit the region before it becomes 'discovered'. During the hot summer months you can take a dip in a picturesque natural pool located between two sets of rocky rapids on the crocodile-free Lumbe River.

Prolific birdlife is another major attraction. On a single afternoon walk near Mutemwa Lodge with nature enthusiast and ex-Springbok rugby player, Gavin Johnson, we ticked off good sightings of Allen's gallinule, African finfoot, half-collared kingfisher, lesser jacana, Schalow's turaco, and what may be Zambia's first recorded and photographed sighting of a bare-cheeked trogon.

Although undeniably a key component of the KAZA TFCA, Sioma Ngwezi National Park remains a remote region caught in a conundrum: it's barely on the map but is on the verge of development. Provided that all the parties involved deliver on their promises under the auspices of the IDP, the region seems destined to embark on a long and prosperous era for both its wildlife and people. Rumours abound that the famous black-maned Barotse lions have once again returned to this forgotten corner of Zambia. Their arrival would seem a fitting way to herald the long overdue dawn of a brighter future for Sioma Ngwezi.

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