

Stephen Cunliffe is a wildlife and adventure travel photojournalist with a passion for Africa. Having lived in South Africa and Uganda, he now bases himself in Zambia to explore and publicise the continent's many off-the-beaten-track wilderness areas.

MARK JONES

Back from the brink

Stephen Cunliffe goes on safari in Malawi's Majete Wildlife Reserve and finds more than he was expecting. Not only has the reserve overcome its troubled past, but it is charting an exciting path into the future.

Crouching silently behind a bush, I hear the crack as the nearby tree snaps and crashes to the ground. Looking up, I can see Kamuzu is now engaged in a more gentle procedure; he is plucking branches off the recently deposited tree and nimbly popping them into his waiting mouth.

There is just something to be said for the purity of the wildlife experience when being on level terms with nature's creatures, whether they are big or small. My earlier elephant encounters at Majete Wildlife Reserve were incredibly rewarding, but not nearly as exciting or terrifying as my time huddled 20m away from Kamuzu.

From a lofty seat in the back of an open-topped Land Cruiser, the preceding wildlife drives just lacked the same emotional connection with nature that this walking experience is generating. It was on one of those initial wildlife drives in an open-topped Land Cruiser that my guide actually suggested the possibility of tracking elephants on foot. He'd said that as 15 of Majete's elephants carry radio collars, wildlife scouts would be able to use a transceiver to pinpoint the direction of any desired animal. In my case, the chosen elephant was to be a big bull known affectionately as Kamuzu.

From the start we followed our guides and scouts as quietly as possible and attempted to emulate their actions as they moved effortlessly through the bush. While the radio collar gave the scouts Kamuzu's general location, it was the sudden and unexpected snap of a twig that finally revealed the old bull's exact whereabouts – he was just up ahead. We sneaked slowly forward and took our current position behind this fateful bush.

Now, over my excited, near-deafening heartbeat, I can hear his molars as they crush the branches and strip off the nutritious bark. Incredible.

Kamuzu's appetite keeps him on the move, so we creep from tree to tree as we shadow him. After thirty minutes or so, we eventually withdraw downwind and leave him feeding contentedly. Amazingly, due entirely to the skill, professionalism and confidence of our guides and scouts, Kamuzu was still oblivious to our party's silent intrusion.

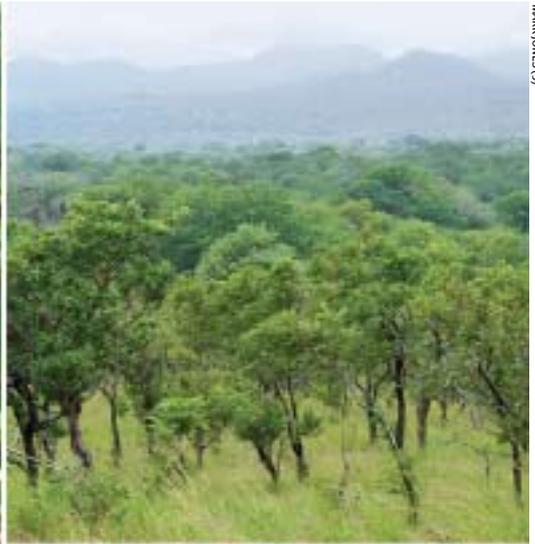
Once at a safe distance, I strike up a conversation with one of the armed scouts. In the hope of learning more about his background and his involvement with Majete, I ask him about his past experiences here.

"On Saturday the 25th of October 1995, I was on patrol with two other officers when we came across a large contingent of poachers," begins Tizola Moyo. "Between the three of us we had two .303 rifles and ten rounds of ammunition. There were at least ten poachers and they were armed with AK47s. Still, we decided to engage them. In the heavy cross-firing that ensued my good friend, Lennox Mabocas, was shot and killed. I cried that day."

During the early 1990s poaching was rampant throughout Malawi's national parks. Demoralised scouts were ill-equipped to tackle the epidemic. After Kasungu and Nyika national parks also lost anti-poaching scouts during the particularly bloody year of 1995, the American government stepped in and provided M16 automatic rifles and training to the beleaguered law enforcement officers within Malawi's designated wildlife areas.

Moyo continues: "These weapons were good for morale and officers were once again motivated to go on patrols. Unfortunately most of the animals were already gone by then. And lack of money remained a huge problem. The government failed to provide resources for us and we did not have the equipment necessary to carry out effective anti-poaching operations. When African Parks took over this all changed."

Proclaimed back in 1955, Majete was, for all intents and purposes, a 'paper park' before the arrival of African Parks Network (APN), a not-for-profit conservation company based in Johannesburg. Patricio Ndadzela, project coordinator for Majete, explained this to me earlier in my trip: "Paper parks are just green smudges on maps, with nothing actually left on the ground. A lack of government funding and the low profile of conservation in Malawi allowed the devastation of this reserve by poachers." To hammer home his point about the scale of the poaching pandemic, Patricio declared: "In the late 1980s Majete harboured a population of around 300 elephants, but less ▷



▷ than five years later they had all been wiped out.”

After signing a 25-year reserve-management lease with the Malawian government in 2003, APN took over the running of the reserve and immediately introduced its business approach of self-sustaining conservation. They began to pump money and expertise into the 691-square-kilometre reserve, providing the necessary catalyst for its resurrection. An ambitious restocking project ensued, with the reintroduction of more than 3000 herbivores, including Lichenstein’s hartebeest, sable antelope, eland, buffalo, black rhino and elephant. In the space of a few short years, Majete was transformed from a previously denuded wilderness area into one of Malawi’s premier wildlife-viewing destinations.

During my time in Majete I’ve learned that this rehabilitation project has not been without its trials and tribulations. Foremost amongst these has been the monumental challenge of winning support from the many villages along the park boundary. When I spoke to Stella Mzumara, APN’s community development coordinator, she elaborated on the magnitude of what they are up against.

“Over 130,000 people live in 146 villages surrounding the reserve, and they are hungry for its resources. We allow regulated access for resource utilisation and also promote sensitisation and awareness campaigns to educate the villagers on what APN is trying to accomplish here. We work in conjunction with these communities to improve infrastructure in their villages, provide training and business ideas to improve livelihoods, and target households with tangible benefits. Conservation will only succeed in the longterm if local people buy into it. It’s a real challenge because of the numbers of people involved, but we are making headway and having success.”

Another challenging time for APN occurred last year when they found themselves embroiled in a highly controversial relocation of Phirilongwe elephants. After an increasing number of serious human-elephant conflicts

in and around the Phirilongwe forest, the decision was taken by Malawi’s Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) to remove elephants for the safety of both the local people and the animals. While this move was vehemently backed by many people, including the International Fund for Animal Welfare, there were many who argued equally hard against it. However, it was not until June that APN agreed that the Phirilongwe elephants could be moved into Majete.

Peter Fearnhead, CEO of African Parks, shared his thoughts on the complexity of the problem. “We were not eager to receive the elephants simply because of numbers of elephants that we already had. Majete is a small reserve with closed boundaries and the additional elephants just accelerate the point in time when there will be too many, necessitating management intervention. However, we fully supported the reasoning behind the Department of National Parks and Wildlife’s decision. The fenced Majete Wildlife Reserve was the only real option available to the government. And as the government is our official partner, we agreed to take them.”

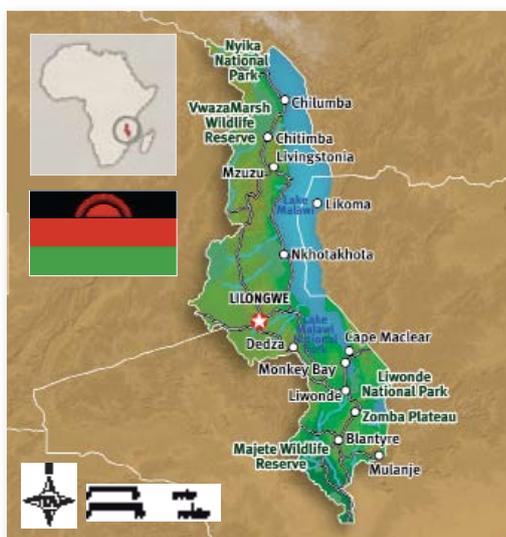
Today, aside from its healthy elephant population, Majete is also home to an enviable array of mammal and bird species. A final phase of reintroductions this year will see the black rhino population grow to 30 animals, as well as the arrival of cheetah and leopard. The addition of the latter two species will dramatically increase predator diversity in a reserve where spotted hyaena and crocodile are currently the only resident large predators. The reserve’s comeback will culminate in the return of ‘the king of the beasts’ during 2011.

Patricio eloquently summed up the situation: “Conservation without money is merely conversation. People sit around and talk about the problems but lack the resources to do anything about it. APN brought money and expertise when they arrived, and in just five years they have transformed Majete from a ‘paper park’ into Malawi’s greatest conservation success story.”



STEPHEN CUNLIFE

Smiles and wildlife (opposite) are in much greater abundance within Majete Wildlife Reserve since African Parks (above) took over in 2003



Plan your trip

Getting there

Majete Wildlife Reserve lies off the main M1 road, 70km from Blantyre in southwestern Malawi. Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com) and KLM (www.klm.com) both fly to Blantyre from London, via Nairobi and Amsterdam respectively.

When to visit

Majete Wildlife Reserve is accessible throughout the year. However, wildlife viewing is at its best during the dry season (June to November).

Visas

Most visitors from the EU, and those from Canada, USA and Australia do not need visas.

Where to stay

Thawale Camp, located in the midst of the Majete Wildlife Reserve (administered by APN), is the premier accommodation on offer. The comfortable tented camp offers six permanent en suite safari tents. Alternatively, those on a tight budget might opt for the well-maintained Majete Community Campsite near the park entrance. Robin Pope Safaris (www.robinpopesafaris.net) have

acquired a concession within Majete and will be building a luxury lodge overlooking the Shire River later in 2010.

Books

Brad’s *Malawi* (5th edition, 2010) by Philip Briggs is the most accurate and up-to-date guidebook available for Malawi.

Find out more

African Parks Network (www.african-parks.org)
Malawi Tourism (www.malawitourism.com)
Robin Pope Safaris (www.robinpopesafaris.net)