



STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



# Wild West back in business

Sioma Ngwezi has long been a 'sleeping' national park. Decades of unrest and neglect have taken their toll on the wildlife, and today this wild western corner of Zambia seldom features on any tourist itinerary. But all that may be about to change, reports **Stephen Cunliffe**.

Recent history has not been kind to Sioma Ngwezi. First came SWAPO from Namibia, setting up their headquarters in the heart of the national park and living off the land. Next came the UNITA rebels from Angola who, desperate for food and ivory to fund their civil war, plundered its resources. Finally, when drought struck the region, the local Lozi people also turned to this beleaguered sanctuary to sustain themselves, and a thriving bush meat trade developed.

While wildlife populations may have plummeted, the habitat remains healthy and the park's potential is vast. Sioma Ngwezi is Zambia's third largest national park, measuring some 5000km<sup>2</sup>. Together with the surrounding 35,000km<sup>2</sup> West Zambezi Game Management Area, it forms one continuous conservation area that stretches as far north as Liuwa Plain. Moreover the region remains a crucial corridor in the migratory route of elephants from nearby Botswana, Namibia and Angola.

This massive migrant elephant population has attracted the interest of the Peace Parks Foundation (PPF), which promotes cross-border initiatives that restore large contiguous habitats. One of its planned 'mega parks' is the enormous 280,000km<sup>2</sup> Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA TFCA). This will span five countries when completed, including southwestern Zambia, making

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African finfoot

it the largest single conservation area on earth. Over US\$100 million has already been allocated to this ambitious scheme.

Meanwhile, two passionate individuals are dedicated to bringing back the tourists to Sioma Ngwezi. Gavin Johnson, an ex-Springbok fullback, has lived in the area for 14 years. Now fluent in the local Lozi language, he is an avid birder who waxes lyrical about the beauty of this wilderness. Gavin currently owns two camps on the upper Zambezi, but plans to acquire three more inside the national park as soon as the Peace Parks' plans take off. By sponsoring a neighbouring school and clinic, he is already contributing to the area's development.

Hans Aaskov has recently joined Gavin. After retiring from the Danish embassy, Hans sold his house and poured everything he had into his lifelong dream of building Sioma Camp. He has already demonstrated some novel ways of fostering a local conservation ethic, including offering cash rewards to locals for wildlife sightings, which helps to cultivate a perception of wildlife as more valuable alive than dead. Hans believes local people must be offered a realistic alternative to poaching and willingly employs reformed poachers.

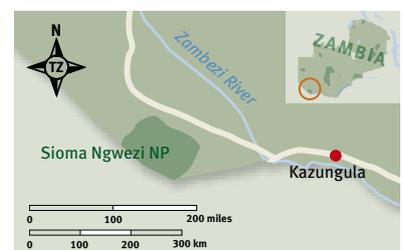
Both these far-sighted individuals are acutely aware of the area's potential and foresee a great future for Sioma Ngwezi. With the park's imminent inclusion in the KAZA TFCA, it seems their dreams may soon become reality.

*A range of accommodation is available at Mutemwa Lodge ([www.mutemwa.com](http://www.mutemwa.com)) and Sioma Camp ([www.siomacamp.com](http://www.siomacamp.com)). Both camps offer drives into the national park, plus bush walks, tiger fishing and outings to Ngonye Falls.*

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Pied kingfisher





# SAFARI CLEAN-UP



On 1 January 2009 South Luangwa Conservation Society launched an Eco Awards scheme for tour operators in the South Luangwa area. **Anna Tolan**, coordinator of the scheme, reports on this innovative development for Zambia's tourist industry.



Unguarded rubbish dumps can be hazardous for animals, such as these baboons.

ensure that standards are maintained at the highest possible level. The focus of the scheme is on operators committed to embracing 'best practice'. This embraces the following measures:

- protecting, conserving and investing in the environment
- minimising and reducing waste
- preventing pollution
- encouraging involvement with and support for local communities
- responsible use of natural resources, such as land, water, energy and timber
- providing direct financial benefits for conservation projects
- educating tourists, staff and the local community.

Today's tourists are increasingly concerned about the welfare of the environment and local communities. The Eco Awards scheme encourages lodges and camps to operate in a more environmentally sustainable and socially responsible way. In doing so, they aim to raise the standard of conservation in the region, and also encourage the local community to become more involved.

The way it works is simple. Tour operators are invited to complete a comprehensive questionnaire on lodges and camps they have used. This is marked by an evaluation team.

An inspection team then makes a site inspection to verify what has been written. The lodges that meet the required standards will receive a bronze, silver or gold certificate, which they are then entitled to use as a marketing tool. An international advisory board has been set up to help with any difficult issues that may arise.

The Awards are non-profit making (although an application fee of \$100 is charged to cover basic expenses) and are specifically tailored to the unique conditions of the area. Stringent evaluation and inspection procedures

This is good news for the environment, the community and the concerned tourist. By choosing to stay at an establishment accredited with a South Luangwa Eco Award, visitors can rest assured that their safari is both environmentally responsible and beneficial to the local community.

For further information please contact Anna Tolan at [anna@chipembele.org](mailto:anna@chipembele.org) or visit [www.slcs-zambia.org](http://www.slcs-zambia.org)



CHIPEMBELE



SLCS

## Hot shots

Watch out jumbos! The South Luangwa Conservation Society has teamed up with the Zambian Wildlife authority to support a new means of scaring away crop-raiding elephants. Poachers and local farmers have long been using homemade muzzle-loading guns. However, one far-sighted farmer recently came up with the novel idea of using these weapons to fire chilli 'bullets' at the offending elephants. Old shotgun shells are packed with a pungent concoction of crushed dried chilli and salt or sand. The gun is then loaded with gunpowder and the shells are fired towards the elephants. The puzzled pachyderms, which have extremely sensitive nasal passages, beat a hasty retreat. So far the scheme is working well, and all monitoring scouts have been equipped with muzzle-loading guns and a good stock of chilli. This new scheme provides important backup to the ongoing chilli-fence project, which also keeps hungry elephants out of farmer's fields, and thus plays a vital role in reducing human-animal conflict around South Luangwa.



# TALES FROM THE BUSH

## CROC SURPRISE



AVIWE UNWIN

In March 2001, safari guide **John Coppinger** led five fellow paddlers on a canoe trip down a remote stretch of the Luangwa River. They started near the source and ended at Tafika Camp, John's base in South Luangwa National Park. John knew, from years of experience, that crocodiles seldom bother canoes. Yet this stretch of river had a bad reputation. John's journal tells the story.

We put in our canoes about 45 kilometres from the source. This was done with some trepidation. Not even the nearby villagers could enlighten us as to the nature of the river downstream. Would there be rapids not negotiable in our Canadian canoes? What about crocodiles?

We were aware of a few sobering facts. A Frenchman named Maurice Patry had attempted a section of the river in 1952 but had aborted near the Lufila confluence, in North Luangwa National Park, after a crocodile attack on his canvas canoe. In May/June 1999 a team of Germans had launched a homemade raft at Mpande (100km from the source), but their raft had been irreparably damaged by a crocodile attack at Chief Tembwe, 100km downstream. And in 1994 we ourselves had been attacked by a croc while canoeing from Marula Puku, also in North Luangwa National Park, to the Luangwa/Zambezi confluence.

The first five or six days were idyllic. The area was sparsely populated, the weather perfect and the river very beautiful, with dense reed beds and a stunning backdrop of the Makutu

mountains to the east and the Mafinga mountains to the west. The few hippos that we encountered were very well behaved, and we treated one another with mutual respect. Crocodiles remained out of sight.



REMOTE AFRICA SAFARIS

On day seven, however, we reached North Luangwa National Park, where the crocodile numbers increased dramatically. And soon we were violently roused from our complacency.

I was in the lead canoe with Isaac Banda when a large croc rushed us from the side. I shouted at him to shoot, but the croc submerged before he could raise his rifle. Minutes later a huge croc (I assume the same beast) grabbed hold of the stern of the last canoe inches from

my brother Mike's backside. It then released its grip and raised its gaping jaws, seemingly poised to attack. Mike leaped forward and flattened himself across the kit that was tied in the middle of the canoe. Fortunately, the croc submerged and did not appear again.

This episode changed our outlook dramatically, and the remaining 200km became a far more daunting prospect. Sure enough, we had a further six crocodile incidents over the next few days, although each time we kept the marauding reptile at bay with warning shots and by banging on the canoes.

All these incidents took place in the vicinity of North Luangwa National Park and involved enormous male crocs. I have since mused that their aggression, given the time of year, may well have been down to territorial behaviour.

We reached Tafika after ten days of paddling, having covered 500km of river. This meant that, after our 1994 expedition, we became the first people to have canoed the entire length of the Luangwa. Good luck to the next fools; we won't be joining them!



# Chongwe Christmas pangolin



BRENDAN REISBECK

**Brendan Reisbeck**, manager of Chongwe River House ([www.chongwe.com](http://www.chongwe.com)), must have been a good boy last year: Santa brought him the top prize on many a safari wish list – a real, live pangolin. This bizarre nocturnal animal is so elusive that many old bush-hands go a lifetime without ever seeing one. Imagine Brendan’s surprise, therefore, when one of his staff knocked on his office door on Christmas morning to report having found one in camp. “The next thing we knew,” he recalls, “this huge pangolin was ambling around the office and testing out the diamond mesh like a climbing frame.” Brendan couldn’t quite believe what he was seeing. “We stood there in amazement,” he continues. “Eight years of working in the bush and this was my first ever sighting. We truly were very lucky.” Reisbeck released the pangolin outside, where he watched and photographed it for a while before it headed home. Better make sure he writes your Christmas list next year.

## WILDLIFE FOCUS: PANGOLIN

The common pangolin (*Manis temminckii*) rests in a burrow by day and ventures out at night to feed on ants and termites. It uses a strong sense of smell to locate anthills, powerful front claws to break in, and a long, sticky tongue to lap up its insect prey. Its pine cone-like scales are made of a keratinous material, like fingernails.

When threatened it will roll into a protective ball, and can work these scales with a vicious cutting action to deter any predator that comes too close. This species is the most widespread of three found in tropical Africa, with another five occurring in Asia. Despite their similar appearance and diet, pangolins (order Pholidota) are completely unrelated to the armadillos (order Cingulata) of South and Central America.

PANGOLIN CUT OUT TO COME

GETTY IMAGES



CHIMFUNSHI

## CHIMFUNSHI LATEST

Exciting news for Chimfunshi Wildlife Sanctuary and Chimpanzee Orphanage, reports **Lesley Thomson**. Thanks to the generosity of donors the centre now has a new office, complete with satellite dish and solar panels. A new access road to the large chimpanzee enclosures is also being constructed for visitors, while African Impact has provided assistance with new accommodation for volunteers.

Meanwhile Sandy, one of the orphans, moved to his new home in February. This chimp was nursed back to health after a serious crocodile attack but, severely traumatised, has since found it hard to share living quarters with the others. Now enough funds have been raised to complete the building of his new home. Four other chimps, whom he has befriended in the last year, will be joining him. Chimfunshi would like to thank all donors, including those who responded to the appeal in the last edition of *Travel Zambia*. Please keep it coming!

Visitors are welcome at Chimfunshi. Entrance is ZK50,000 per adult, ZK25,000 per child and ZK10,000 per person for school groups. A visit includes a talk, a trip around the education centre and time with the chimpanzees. For further information contact Tony Raunch at Chimfunshi Wildlife Orphanage Trust, PO Box 11190, Chingola, Zambia, or email [chimfunshiwildlife@iwayafrica.com](mailto:chimfunshiwildlife@iwayafrica.com)