



AFRICAN PARKS EXPANDS

STEPHEN CUNLIFE

African Parks has made a major impact in Zambia through its pioneering management of Liuwa Plain National Park. Now this innovative organisation is poised to expand its park management programme. **Stephen Cunliffe** reports on what this could mean for Zambia's wildlife – and for its visitors.

African Parks was established in 2000 as the first private institution to combine conservation expertise with a commercial approach to park management. The terms of its mandate leaves it directly responsible for its results. Thus it does not simply offer support to state conservation agencies, but gets stuck in with a hands-on approach.

For the last five years Liuwa Plain has been African Park's flagship project in Zambia. Here the organisation has followed its now-standard approach: to rehabilitate a neglected park and, using sound business principles, to manage it as an economic entity. This approach attracts reputable ecotourism operators who bring their skills, capital and marketing clout towards developing a sustainable tourism infrastructure. All revenues, such as entrance and concession fees, are retained at park level to help wean it from donor support and become financially self-sustaining.

Critical to this recipe is the local community. African Parks recognises that people who live around the park must see tangible benefits if they are to

offer it their support. Each project thus has a local capacity-building dimension, providing community conservation, training and education programmes. Parks typically employ 80–250 permanent staff members in management alone, with many more finding temporary work.

Now Zambia looks set to benefit from a redoubling of African Parks' commitment to the country. Discussions are under way with government over three potential new projects: the Bangweulu Wetland Park (consisting of the new Chikuni Partnership Park and the adjacent Bangweulu Game Management Area), the Lower Zambezi National Park and West Lunga National Park.

Further negotiations are still required before formal partnership agreements can be signed. But the Zambian Wildlife Authority (ZAWA) has had five years to assess the Liuwa project, and its invitation to African Parks to expand their Zambia programme suggests that it likes what it has seen.

Peter Fearnhead, CEO of African Parks, believes that four projects of this scale are probably all that the organisation

can handle within a single country at present. African Parks' vision for Zambia is to ensure that these parks are effectively rehabilitated, restocked and managed. This will both shore up their conservation value and will enhance their long-term attractiveness to reputable tourism operators – thereby contributing to the country's broader economy.

Such ambitious plans will require substantial investments of money, time and effort. But if the reputation and track record of African Parks are anything to go by, then you can rest assured that these wonderful parks – such vital components of Zambia's natural heritage – will be in very capable hands.

VISIT LIUWA PLAIN

Robin Pope Safaris is the first major operator to offer safaris into Liuwa Plain since the park's rehabilitation. The safaris, led by Robin Pope himself, include a three-hour boat transfer across the vast Zambezi floodplain. Find out more at www.robinpopesafaris.net