



PEACE PARKS FOUNDATION

# man with a vision

Senior Chief Inyambo Yeta is a man on a mission. Head of the Mwandu office of the Barotse Royal Establishment and responsible for the Lozi people who live in the Sisheke district of south-west Zambia, he has a dream to protect and sustainably develop – for the benefit of his people – the natural heritage of the lands in his care. With the assistance of the Peace Parks Foundation, he is making swift progress. **Stephen Cunliffe** met Inyambo Yeta recently and came away as one of the senior chief's biggest fans.

**O**n 18 August 2011, at a summit of the Southern African Development Community in Luanda, Angola, the presidents of Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe signed a treaty that formally established the 444 000-square-kilometre Kavango–Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA TFCA). Covering an area 15 times larger than Tanzania's Serengeti ecosystem and similar in size to Sweden, this cross-border sanctuary is as magnificent as it is ambitious.

It spans five countries and amalgamates 36 previously separated national parks, game reserves, forest reserves, community conservancies and game-management areas into a single ecological unit. Its primary aims? To restore ancient migration patterns in the world's largest conservation area, the home of an estimated quarter of a million elephants, and to sustainably manage the ecosystem for the socio-economic wellbeing of the local people.

While the KAZA TFCA incorporates some of Africa's most iconic parks, such as Chobe in Botswana, Hwange in Zimbabwe and Zambia's Kafue, there are parts of the new conservation complex that lack formal protection. Here, wildlife is thin on the ground, and it's especially noticeable in the central northern sector, which was once a vital link in the old migration routes between Chobe and Kafue. The Sisheke district is located

slap bang in the middle of this region. So it is a stroke of good fortune that this crucially important area happens to fall under the control of an enlightened leader looking for ways to empower his people.

'When I was young,' Senior Chief Inyambo Yeta said, 'my grandfather used to talk to me about the old Barotseland: a land flowing with milk and honey, where wildlife was plentiful and the forests were thick. Hunger was never ►

'Ecological linkages will be secured between Kafue and Sioma Ngwezi national parks, as well as between Kafue and the various conservation initiatives in Namibia and Botswana. This is what makes the efforts by Senior Chief Inyambo Yeta so significant.'

*Paul Bewsher, Director of Programmes, PPF*

**ABOVE** Senior Chief Inyambo Yeta, head of the Mwandu office of the Barotse Royal Establishment in Zambia.

**RIGHT** At least 85 kilometres of pristine Zambezi River and surrounding floodplains will receive formal protection within the conservancies of the envisaged Sisheke Community Conservation Trust.



a factor in the lives of the people who lived there. Today there is a complete disconnect between the people and their natural resources. There is no wildlife, and they are surviving simply on a hand-to-mouth basis.'

Yeta is adamant that the situation can be reversed. He reasons that his people have to strike a balance between what they take out of the environment and what they put back into it. Then, he said, 'I have a dream that we can fight poverty and we can defeat it. We have to get the local community involved in the conservation of all resources. My idea is to bring back the animals that were once here, but this time we are going to look after them better than we did before.'

**T**he senior chief recently played an integral role in establishing one of Zambia's first conservancies: the Simalaha Community Conservancy.

Spanning the Sisheke and Sekute chiefdoms, Simalaha's formation is the first step in a plan to reopen the ancient migration corridor between Chobe and Kafue. Yeta's passion for this project bubbles over. 'We can use conservation and the proper management of our resources to bring back [the animals] and use them as a tool to fight poverty and create prosperity for our people, who ultimately are the custodians of these assets,' he enthuses. 'Create a favourable environment and the wildlife will return.'

BELOW Sable antelope. Senior Chief Yeta is determined to restore wildlife numbers within his chiefdom.

#### PROPOSED SISHEKE COMMUNITY CONSERVATION COMPLEX



Yeta's plans reach even further. He aims to place the entire Sisheke district within his chiefdom – including an 85-kilometre stretch of the Zambezi River – into the soon-to-be-formed Sisheke Community Conservation Trust, thereby creating a formally protected estate that covers an impressive 1.5 million hectares. A development plan facilitated by the Peace Parks Foundation (PPF) will guide the decision-making process in the establishment of meaningful conservation and other projects within the new protected area.

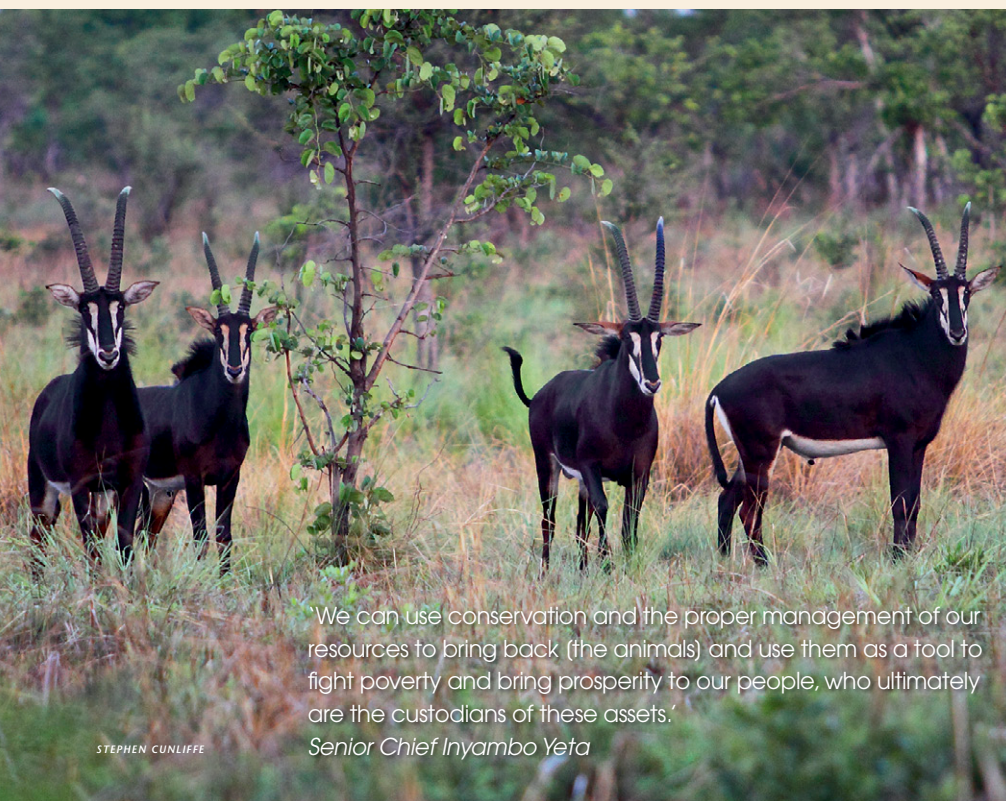
Securing commitments from private-sector partners will help to unlock the economic promise of this wilderness, and Yeta has invited investors to assist local communities to develop the proposed protected areas.

'We believe that a collaborative approach will contribute significantly towards realising our vision,' said the chief. 'It is my belief that the core conservation areas within the Sisheke district can become important developmental tools and will provide tangible benefits to the local communities. My ambition for my people is that they become empowered, and empowered economically, so that they can be proud of themselves.'

The Sisheke district's fortuitous location gives it an immense, untapped tourism potential. PPF has worked with Yeta to establish an integrated development plan for the Zambia component of the KAZA TFCA as well as to institute a climate change project with a view to improving forest and fire management. Enhancing the livelihoods of the primary beneficiaries of the Sisheke community conservancies, who bear the opportunity costs for biodiversity conservation, will give them a real reason to conserve and manage the natural assets for the benefit of present and future generations.

'My desire is to see our children and grandchildren reconnect with nature,' the senior chief said. 'We want to see our lands teem with wildlife again; we want our forests to be what they used to be ... that is our goal; that is our mission; that is our desire.'

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Senior Chief Inyambo Yeta