

BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE

Curious how tourism benefits local communities? **Sue Watt** visits a new photographic enterprise in Botswana to learn more about the model

The African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child” sprang to mind during my recent stay in Botswana. Unusually, it was triggered by a new camp rather than a young child — a testament to the inseparable connection between the recently opened Wilderness Mokete and the nearby village of Mababe.

With its understated style, neutral tones and light footprint, Mokete melds in beautifully with the natural surroundings of the community-owned Mababe concession, a new tourism area lying between the Okavango Delta and Chobe National Park. That community has been core to the camp’s fruition, from conceiving the dream of a high-end safari destination through to its completion as a beautiful camp.

“The local people decided they wanted to change this concession from a hunting area to photographic tourism. We can’t take any glory for that,” Cobus Calitz told me over a delicious bush lunch. Cobus is the leaseholder of the concession, with the community benefitting through lease fees and employment. In partnership with Wilderness, the well-known tourism and conservation operator that developed and manages Mokete, the camp

opened in July 2024.

“Mababe is part of a government programme called Community-Based Natural Resource Management — CBNRM — where people who live in rural areas get to benefit from their

Proud.
Camp manager
Beauty Lesoletsile

natural resources,” Cobus explained.

Established in the mid-1980s, the CBNRM policy empowers communities to choose how they gain income from the wildlife they live alongside, giving it a value and encouraging conservation where human-wildlife conflict can be rife.

“We chose photographic tourism for its conservation, but also to create more jobs for the community,” Vasco Tebalo confirmed. He’s Mokete’s head guide, born and bred in Mababe, and knows every inch of this landscape. Long before it opened, he was planning new roads for game drives and getting to understand the local wildlife dynamics.

Nature makes changes here too. The movement of tectonic plates and earthquakes — the most recent in April 2017 — have altered the Mababe River’s flow and the swell of the Okavango floods. Water now drains into the Mababe Depression wetlands in an area previously parched in the dry season, effectively establishing a whole new ecosystem.

This has led to intense wildlife interactions during July to November, as Africa’s largest herd of buffalo — numbering 6000-8000 — is lured by the only nutrient-rich grasses and water for miles around. They’re followed by formidable lion prides, some 45-strong: the ensuing carnage isn’t for the fainthearted. “I’ve seen one pride kill 11 buffalo in a single hunt,” Vasco said.



Above and left: Visitors. Wilderness Mokete has nine tents, with cantilevered canvas roofs that slide away to open up to the sky

Below: Concessionaire. Cobus Calitz leases the concession from the community, contracting Wilderness to run the tourism operation

Below right: Community. In Mababe village, tourism is helping Idea and others to sustain their Khoisan culture



WILDERNESS (5)

When we visited in April, after exceptionally heavy rains, an abundance of water tempted the buffalo to disperse far and wide. Still, we saw predators aplenty, including the indomitable lioness Motlhokomedi, who raised six cubs alone after her two sisters disappeared, and a pack of seven wild dog lying in a mass of black, brown and gold-patterned coats.

Red lechwe splashed across the river at dusk, running away from lions. And warthog, waterbuck, impala and wildebeest all happily grazed on fresh pastures while elephant and giraffe meandered the plains.

When wildlife wanders into villages, however, its impact can be significant. As we drove through Mababe, we saw the red-brick primary school and health clinic among single-storey brick homes, some encircled within family compounds. But there was no livestock, nor any vegetable shambas.

“Lions kill our animals. And nobody grows vegetables, because of the elephants,” Vasco explained. We passed buffalo dung on the road. “Imagine you’re walking at night, and buffalos are here. You might walk straight into them in the dark.”

We’d come to meet Idea, a sprightly man who, with his family, is keeping the village’s Khoisan culture alive. His thatch house is “the only traditional one in the village,” Vasco said. “His culture is disappearing, but the more international guests come and buy his crafts, the more other locals are getting interested in their culture and want to join him.”

Wearing a traditional headdress and goat-hide over his clothes, Idea discussed the importance of plants to Khoisan people, demonstrated how they hunted with bow and arrow, made fire using bellows, and replicated different wildlife tracks in the sand. “These animals used to be a source of food, but now people know they need to conserve them because of tourism,” Vasco translated.

Plans to create a cultural Khoisan village to benefit

more locals are under consideration, as are initiatives for an airstrip and small guesthouses. “We’re not here to dictate anything,” Cobus said. “We’re here to do responsible tourism and

support the community sustainably. But they choose their projects, for their benefit.”

Some 300 people live in Mababe, including 45 of the camp’s 49 staff. Cobus explained how the entire village is indirectly involved in the CBNRM recruitment process: “Everyone elects a board of trustees to represent them for a three-year term. We tell the board what staff we need and they put forward suitable people. If nobody has the relevant qualifications, then we look outside.”

Among the local staff are managers Dineo Bakgadi and Beauty Lesoletsile, both mothers to young children concerned about their fading culture. They chatted easily about their lives after our visit to Idea. “He has a good vibe — he’s helping to fill the gap in our culture,” Dineo said. “I’m proud of him,” Beauty added. “And I’m proud to be a Khoisan, and to be here at Mokete.”

Most staff here have never worked in tourism, but they know each other well and effortlessly extend their warmth and friendliness to guests. Their shared story gives the camp that all-important community connection and it feels very much a collective venture: the people of Mababe village are integral to Mokete’s future success.

Sue Watt travelled to Botswana with Yellow Zebra Safaris and Wilderness.



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