



WILL WHITFORD



**Safe space.** A real-time alert triggered by collared lions gives farmers time to kraal their cattle in a specially built predator-proof boma



WILL WHITFORD (2)



JAMES GIFFORD

From top: **Community work.** The 'Life with Elephants' drama performance; the 'Elephant Express' transports children safely to the village school; Ecoexist supports farmers by buying surplus millet for use by Okavango Craft Brewery

## WILD LIVES

Elephants and lions are dream sightings for wildlife lovers, yet they can be the stuff of nightmares for the people that share their land. **Sue Watt** joins a tour designed to benefit both the communities and conservation of the Okavango Panhandle and enriches your safari experience.

From the air, I can see the village of Eretsha sprawling out to acacia woodlands, lush marshes and herds of elephants meandering along their ancient pathways.

With help from local NGOs Ecoexist Trust and CLAWS Conservancy, the 700 people who live here are learning to cope with crop-raiding elephants and lions hungry for livestock. Both organisations work with the five villages of the Okavango Community Trust, Eretsha included, that collectively own the Vumbura concession (NG22) and for which the conservation tourism operator Wilderness pays annual lease fees.

Leaving from the beautiful Vumbura Plains camp, the first stop on my tour with Helicopter Horizons is to a predator-proof boma with some 200 cattle, braying in the dust, cowbells chiming, and guarded by five herders.

A strange sighting on safari maybe, but it's relevant in an area where predation by lions brings revenge killings. In 2013, CLAWS (Communities Living Among Wildlife Sustainably) estimated that half the lions here had been poisoned.

### TURNING THE TIDE

"Our mission is to save both cattle and lions, so we herd strategically, staying

with the cattle day and night," Kutlwano Tsheko, CLAWS' boma coordinator, explains. "We do everything for the farmer. We pay for vets and medicine, for the herders, their food, everything. If we reduce conflict, we'll have more lions, and more visitors will come. If we kill lions, we kill our economy."

CLAWS uses a real-time alert system triggered by 14 collared predators that sends messages to farmers warning of their presence nearby. Over 60,000 alerts have been sent to date and 107 farmers have signed up to the security of the bomas, in exchange making a pledge not to kill the big cats. Reaping the rewards, CLAWS has seen a 50 per cent increase in local lion numbers and in three years no cattle have been preyed upon.

Wilderness support CLAWS with funding and logistics, and now they are completing the circle by buying the farmers' new Certified Wildlife Friendly™ beef for Vumbura Plains and Little Vumbura camps, paying a premium for the communities' collaboration in lion conservation.

### ELEPHANT AWARE ECONOMY

An elephant emerges from woods near the village, shaking its head and trumpeting noisily. A frail old man falls to the ground, fainting through fear, and the bull rushes towards him, ears pinned back, screeching and kicking up dust. It stops, sniffs the limp body with its trunk then runs away, leaving the victim for dead.

This isn't a serious charge, nor even a mock one: it's a drama created by local people running the innovative Life with Elephants Tour. Daniel, an 80-something village elder, is reenacting a real-life encounter from his past, with another actor demonstrating elephant behaviour, crawling around in a grey costume complete with big ears and floppy trunk.

"It's part of our Elephant Aware Economy," Graham McCulloch, Ecoexist's co-founder explains. "We held a competition for traditional arts and storytelling to identify potential business opportunities and were blown away by the talent. Now we have 10 enterprises

bringing in tourism revenue direct to households, all from living with elephants."

Women from the Hambukushu tribe then dance to a joyous harvest song, ululating passionately as they wrap me in a skirt of sorghum stalks like hollow corks that rattle as I try – badly – to gyrate my hips. I'm better at shopping, so I check out their beautiful traditional basketware displayed nearby, choosing one that symbolises the ever-present waterlily of the Delta.

Next, we visit the primary school, in an old rondavel with a crumbling thatched roof. Many pupils now travel by Ecoexist's 'Elephant Express' school bus, avoiding perilous encounters with pachyderms. Around 100 noisy children greet us. "They're excited because they don't often see white people," teacher Tabella explains.

### CHILLIES AND CHEERS

Ecoexist has helped facilitate communal plot clusters with electric fencing for 180 farmers well away from known elephant corridors. Purchasing surplus millet at a premium, they turn it into refreshing Okavango Craft Beer, available in local lodges. For smaller-scale farmers, the NGO teaches other mitigation techniques and Selelo demonstrates these with her friends in the village.

The women plant millet seeds, then smoulder chillies in elephant dung to deter pesky crop-raiders. They bang loudly on tins, scaring the award-worthy 'elephant' actor away, and shine with pride in their storytelling as we join in their laughter. "We aim to teach people how to live with elephants," Selelo says, "and to pass this on to new generations."

Flying back to Vumbura Plains, we see more elephants wandering along their ancient routes, leaving the farmers' clusters undisturbed. "It's a birds-eye view over the landscape of coexistence," Graham says.

That evening, we raise our glasses of cold Okavango beer to the warm, resilient people of the Panhandle, grateful for all those committed to ensuring people and wildlife can share this landscape harmoniously. 

*Sue Watt visited Wilderness Vumbura Plains with Yellow Zebra Safaris. The Conservation & Co-existence Cultural Experience was booked through Helicopter Horizons.*