

Where the elephants walk

Wildlife-rich Zambia is tackling poaching with steady success

SUE WATT

THROUGH thorny scrub, we trek for an hour with four armed rangers to reach the elephant carcass. Tinged orange from the soil, its bones lie scattered, dispersed by scavengers. The skull is heavy and huge, the size of a beach ball, but as if made of lead. Then begins a detailed forensic analysis worthy of any crime scene. The shape of the skull proves the skeleton is female; her teeth indicate she was 27 years old; her decomposition suggests she died three years ago. But the clue to her death lies in her tusks. She had none.

Had poachers killed her, the tusks would have been brutally hacked off leaving gaping holes, but this elephant's tusks are naturally absent, as occurs sometimes in females. To be certain, a ranger sweeps the skeleton with a metal detector looking for bullets. Its silence confirms she died of natural causes.

"In 2013, we had only five elephants poached in the park, the lowest in our 20-year history," says Ian Stevenson, chief executive of Conservation Lower Zambezi. "Unfortunately last year was a tough one, with 15 elephants poached in the park, all since July. It's still lower than pre-2012 levels but an indicator of the pressure on the whole country's elephant populations."

On October 24 last year, Zambia celebrated its 50th anniversary of independence; the former protectorate of Northern Rhodesia became an independent republic within the Commonwealth. It has endured some economic and political turmoil across the half-century, and like other parts of sub-Saharan Africa has a tragically high rate of HIV and AIDS. But compared with neighbouring Zimbabwe it is peaceful and politically stable. Almost one-third of the country is protected by National Parks and Game Management Areas. But conservation comes at a cost. Desperately underfunded, the Zambian Wildlife Authority (ZAWA) needs private donors and organisations such as CLZ for support; CLZ is based near the western edge of the Lower Zambezi National Park.

It assists ZAWA with logistics and in equipping, training and deploying its rangers. Data capture is critical to informing the frequent anti-poaching patrols that sweep the park and its buffer zone. Stevenson demonstrates a Google Earth map showing each of the rangers' routes; neon lines played across the screen like an elaborate Spirograph.

"We have an excellent relationship with ZAWA and the chief warden here, Solomon Chidunuka," Stevenson continues. "That's crucial to our success." Also crucial are

the 12 lodges within the park, which between them donate a quarter of the organisation's funding. It's a symbiotic relationship: without the wildlife, there would be no tourism, and vice versa. Both need each other. But CLZ also needs local people on side or conservation will fail. With about 3000 residents in the seven villages under the organisation's care and about 2200 elephants vying for the same space, their coexistence creates perpetual problems.

The crux of CLZ's community work is the Environmental Education Centre, where murals about conservation adorn the dorms and classrooms. "Getting the message across to the younger generation is vital," explains Besa Kaoma, the organisation's environmental educator. "They influence their parents, their own age group and their future children too." Pupils from 50 local schools come here for three-day courses on their natural heritage, visiting the park and the wildlife they've previously only ever feared or fed on.

Many of CLZ's new village scouts first came here as schoolchildren. Last year, the organisation employed 20 scouts to work alongside ZAWA's rangers. From November to April, they act as a rapid response unit to deter marauding elephants from raiding crops in the fields and villages. Robert Phiri, a proud young scout dressed in camouflage, tells me how he coped with the dangers involved. "When elephants charge, you must have courage." He emphasises the word with a beaming smile. "You can't show you're afraid."

The education program includes training teachers and scouts in conservation, assisting in guiding qualifications, helping women make handicrafts to generate income and developing a cultural centre for visitors. Perhaps the most important lesson, however, is teaching locals how to live with elephants rather than fight against them. We drive to the riverside where women in colourful wraparound skirts tend maize and sweet potatoes in the fields: a typical African scene, except for fences made of rags drenched in chilli-infused oil. Seemingly, elephants can't stand the piquant aroma of chillies, and CLZ has been spreading the word. "I saw elephants come to-



'When elephants charge, you must have courage. You can't show you're afraid'

ROBERT PHIRI
SCOUT

wards my crops," one delighted farmer tells me. "Then they smelled the chillies and just turned away."

In villages, alongside traditional mud-and-thatch houses, we see grain stores, called felumbus, resembling giant old-fashioned beehives smothered with cement. Each holds a tonne of corn. "Elephants can't smell the grain through the cement, so they walk straight past looking for food," explains Stephen Kalio, the organisation's human wildlife conflict co-ordinator. "Villagers make the bricks for the felumbus and CLZ provides the cement and expertise in building them." Lodges get involved too, providing used oil for chilli fences and facilitating guest donations for felumbus. It's a simple yet effective way of tourism that gives something tangible to local communities living alongside wildlife.

Lower Zambezi's wildlife is thriving: the elephant population is stabilising; last year, for the first time, 20 sabres were seen on the valley floor; elands and, potentially, rhinos are to be reintroduced. CLZ plans another operations base at the park's eastern end, built by Anabezi Lodge, which opened in April last year. On a patrol flight to Anabezi in CLZ's tiny Cessna, we see no poachers. The beauty of the park unfurls beneath us as the Zambezi cuts a swathe across the floodplains in a two-tone landscape of blue and green. Hippos look like bloated pebbles in the river; rutting impalas resemble prancing ants; elephants' tusks glisten like sabres in the sun.

With 11 huge suites overlooking the Zambezi and Mushika floodplains, Anabezi is the park's most remote lodge, and one of its most stylish. Our "tent" comes complete with teak furniture, indoor and outdoor bathrooms, a relaxing lounge and a vast wooden deck with plunge pool and lounges on which to relax and watch the never-ending stream of impalas, warthogs, elephants and baboons on the plain below. I take a morning walk with an armed ranger and Anabezi's manager-guide Matt Porter. We discover leopard prints alongside the bloodied remains of an impala and watch six bull elephants, just 100m ahead, mooching silently to the river. On game



Travels of my aunt and her brushes with fame

THE
INCIDENTAL
TOURIST

ANN RENNIE

WE had always known about the picture because she had told us about it often enough; but as is the way with family stories, it was stored in the memory, to be retrieved for later reference or in retirement travel.

So on my way to Paris I thought I'd break my journey to spend one night in Bangkok and see for myself my aunt's painting; it's the artwork that has adorned all the stationery and correspondence of the Oriental Hotel (now the Mandarin Oriental) since she painted the picture of its 100 years of genteel and gracious hospitality almost 40 years ago. On the hotel's centenary in 1976 she had been commissioned to paint a celebratory tribute from an old postcard.

A bonus was that I'd get to mooch around the hotel's famous Authors' Lounge and secretly wish that some of that literary alchemy would rub off on me.

I could enjoy afternoon tea in an atrium bedecked with bamboo palms, white wicker chairs and starched linen table cloths, and see myself chatting urbanely to

Somerset Maugham about the moon and sixpence and the travails of colonial life. The gentle aroma of lemon-grass would infuse the atmosphere and I'd swoon briefly over an expat life long gone.

My room had a great view over the Chao Phraya River as I watched long barges sail slowly and small junks skip along the water, depositing and picking up tourists from the hotels lining the river. In my brown silk robe I gazed into the high-rise distance of this busy metropolis and thought myself every bit a Thai princess.

In previous editions of *The Famous Hotels of the World* book, this special painting had been attributed simply to a contemporary artist. Now, we had managed to give my talented relative a bit more of a bio and credit where it was due. This was the woman whose life was lived out on the broad canvas of art and adventure. She had been evacuated from Cairo during the Suez crisis and had been in Indo-China during that colonial war, when she met Graham Greene, she a secretary who painted and he a

foreign correspondent who would later turn this turbulent time into *The Quiet American*.

She painted members of the Thai royal family, Harold Holt, soldiers, ambassadors and most of my family. She spoke excellent French and between painting portraits in Asia and Australia she used the portability of her excellent secretarial skills to find work in foreign affairs.

As I wandered through the exhibition of the hotel's history, and burst into tears when I saw that she had been given her due, it was fascinating to see who had sojourned here. It was a list of movers and shakers; the rich, famous and powerful, the people who make history. And it got me thinking about all those who weren't on the list — the behind-the-scenes fixers who make small things happen so that big things grab the headlines.

As I admired her painting, with its impressionistic figures in long white dresses and with open parasols, I thought about her brush with so much life; the travels of my aunt, Valerie O'Neill, and her story waiting to be told.



GETTY IMAGES

The five big parks: where the wild things are



Checklist

Australian-based operators offering safaris in Zambia include Classic Safari Company and Abercrombie & Kent.

- classicsafaricompany.com.au
- abercrombiekent.com.au
- conservationlowerzambia.org
- zambiatourism.com
- anabezi.com

Kasanka: This was Zambia's first park to be privately managed when, in 1990, a British expatriate and a local farmer offered to rehabilitate it through the Kasanka Trust. Big game is rare (elephants number about 40) but small animals and birds flourish. There's an incredible spectacle in November and December when millions of fruit bats swarm for food at sunset. The trust works with local communities and is funded mostly by tourism. More: kasanka.com.

Liuwa Plain: In the Lozi kingdom of Barotseland, Zambia's most remote and possibly most fascinating park was highlighted in a National Geographic film about its solitary lioness, Liuwa. Non-profit organisation African Parks assumed management in 2003 with ZAWA and the Barotse Royal Establishment, and wildlife now thrives: lions have been reintroduced and Africa's second largest wildebeest migration is here. There are no lodges, just a couple of campsites reached by mini-expeditions. More: african-parks.org.

Kafue: The country's largest wilderness, its diverse habitats host 158 mammal species and more than 500 species of bird, yet it sees relatively few visitors. Historically, the region suffered heavily from poaching

but wildlife is vastly improving. In 2008, Game Rangers International was established to work with local communities; today its remit has expanded to elephant research, rescue and rehabilitation, and supporting ZAWA's rangers in conservation and anti-poaching activities. More: gamerangersinternational.org.

South Luangwa: Zambia's flagship park, where conservationist Norman Carr first developed walking safaris 60 years ago, is still leading the field today with exceptionally knowledgeable guides, diverse wildlife and beautiful lodges. Created in 2003, South Luangwa Conservation Society supports ZAWA in law enforcement, rescue and rehabilitation of snared animals, and working with communities on alleviating human wildlife conflict. More: slcszambia.org.

North Luangwa: Neglected for years, it offers just three walking camps and very little infrastructure. Access is more restricted, evoking a true spirit of wilderness. For almost 30 years, the Frankfurt Zoological Society has supported park management through the North Luangwa Conservation Project and between 2003 and 2010 successfully reintroduced black rhinos, previously extinct in Zambia. More: zgf.de.

Elephants gather at the Luangwa River, left; tent deck at Anabezi Camp, below left; poolside dining at Anabezi, right



THE INDEPENDENT

drives, we see kudu, fluffy waterbuck, mongoose, more elephants and hundreds of buffalo, while golden orioles, lilac-breasted rollers and parrot-like Lilian's lovebirds provide dramatic flashes of colour.

During our sunset cruise on the Zambezi, Porter gives a running commentary. A goliath heron about to fly is described as "all cinnamon and silver, taking off like a small Cessna". Nearby, a giant croc on a submerged sandbank looks "like he is walking on water" and elephants "trans-

form into ballerinas" as they wade into the river. On our last night, I wake to the sound of breaking branches outside our suite and can just make out the bulk of a bull elephant feasting on trees, leaving a trail of destruction. I watch in awe at his power and beauty, then think of the scouts, and of the farmers with chilli fences and felumbus. Living with elephants isn't easy, but living without them would be tragic.

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