

Community Conservation Adjacent to Ruaha National Park, Tanzania

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Abstract—In the areas adjacent to Ruaha National Park where rural communities exist, much more work and education is required to enable them to benefit directly and indirectly from tourism and managing their own natural resources.

Ruaha National Park History

The first written record of the Ruaha area was 1877. It was noted then that it was a “wildlife haven” a “Garden of Eden.” In 1912, it was established as a game reserve, later it was enlarged by the British, and finally in 1964, the Tanzanian Government declared the area to be a National Park encompassing over 10,200 km² (3,938 miles²). Subsequently, several game reserves were added to the north, east and west, so that today the whole wilderness ecosystem is over 45,000 km² (17,375 miles²).

The park is situated in southern Tanzania, an area that has, until very recently, been off the beaten track. Because of this, it has, so far, escaped from mass tourism and other modern developments. As a result, it is still exceptionally wild and undisturbed. It is without doubt a beautiful haven, a pristine wilderness teeming with game, wonderful vistas, and masses of birds.

Unlike many African parks, Ruaha does not have a problem with human encroachment. There is only one area that is populated along the southern boundary, and it has been designated a Wildlife Management Area (WMA). The other park boundaries join onto more wilderness in the form of vast game reserves and game controlled areas.

No hunter/gathering is allowed in the Ruaha National Park, itself; however, it is allowed in the WMA and in the surrounding game reserves. Hence, Ruaha Park forms a nucleus—a core preservation zone—of flora and fauna for the surrounding reserves. The people in the existing villages are largely living on a subsistence level; maize, rice, and beans are the main crops; honey and bee keeping and hunter/gathering also form part of their livelihood. There are some livestock keepers in the area as well.

The Friends of Ruaha Society, (FORS) a local NGO, was originally set up in 1987 to help fund the day-to-day running of the park. In those days, visitors to Ruaha were few and the park was hopelessly under funded. Now however, the

situation is quite different, and FORS has shifted its goal to work outside the park with the local communities.

Here their growing focus has been to develop an environmental education program with nine primary schools situated outside the park. Until earlier this year, I was an integral part of the FORS team. However, after almost ten years of extremely active participation, I decided to step down from the committee. I am, however, continuing with conservation efforts together with my long-time Tanzanian FORS partner, Dr. Dulle, who is a government vet.

I am by profession an artist, and for the past 23 years have lived and painted in many, if not most of the beautiful, remote areas in Eastern Africa. My passion for painting goes hand in hand with my passion for the natural world and for the indigenous people who, up until recently, have been the successful stewards of Africa's wild lands.

As a child I would visit Ruaha with my parents, and it was without doubt, as a result of these childhood trips, I decided to make a life for myself in the African wilderness. So it is for me a great privilege that I have returned to this beautiful haven. For the past 11 years, my partner, sculptor Robert Glen, and I have been extremely honored to be allowed to actually live in the Ruaha Park itself.

Although I hope to bring the wonders of Ruaha to people through my art, I also feel that it is extremely important for me to do whatever I can to ensure that the Ruaha Park and its people, are eased into the 21st century with as few scars as possible.

Before I returned to Ruaha in 1994, my art took me on a wonderfully nomadic life. It was (and still is) filled with adventures, living and experiencing the most inspiring wild lands and people imaginable. But I became like a hare running in front of a jackal. Everywhere I went, I was forced to move on, to find new pastures, the ever hungry, ever growing destruction that uncontrolled mass tourism had on once beautiful places and rural communities was snapping at my heels.

The speed at which people and wild lands are abruptly transformed from a well structured rural co-existence into the harsh reality of the Western cash economy is very much a double-edged sword, that to me still has many more questions to it than answers.

Ruaha however, is an exceptional area, situated on the convergence zone of northern and southern species. It boasts not only both Greater and Lesser Kudu, but is also the southernmost range for the Grants Gazelle. It has a very healthy population of wild dogs, elephants, leopards, and cheetah. Quite apart from the large mammals that people flock to Africa to see, Ruaha also has, due to its geographical location, a very diverse bird population, with the current number of species recorded at 530. If this is not already enough to warrant Ruaha as a very special location, it also enjoys a very interesting and large variety of flora, with

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over 1,650 species of plants recorded. In comparison, the NE Serengeti has approximately 410 species recorded and the Selous Game Reserve has 830.

Interestingly, due to my eye for color and detail, plus the hours I spend sketching birds and animals, I have uncovered two new species of birds within the park itself. One is a variation of the Red billed Hornbill now called *Tockus ruahae*, and the other is a new variation of Arnots Chat, which has still to be named.

As in most parks in Tanzania, Ruaha has a large section of it set aside as a wilderness zone, which by law permits only limited activity. In the remote western corner of this wilderness zone is a very interesting plateau area rising to over 1,800 m (5,906 ft). Called the Isunkaviola Plateau, this important area, due to difficulties of access, has remained until now without detailed study.

The Chief Park Warden, Mr. Mtahiko, and my partner Robert Glen (who is also a well known ornithologist) planned together the first proper expedition to this exciting area. I, along with Park Ecologist, Gladys N'gumbi, accompanied them on these exciting trips.

It would appear from an initial study that altitude and isolation over a very long period have formed an extremely important niche of diversity. It has been suggested by the recent observations, that this remote plateau area has more affiliations to Western bird species, rather than to the Eastern Arc species. It could be that not only does the park represent the convergence zone of northern and southern species but it could also perhaps represent the convergence zone of eastern and western species.

This highland oasis of riverine forest is cool, green and lush with ferns and orchids adorning the damp thickets. Enormous *Newtonia Bucannanii* trees some 42 m (138 ft) high emerge from a canopy in which forest birds, such as the great Crowned Eagle, find nesting places. It is quite different from the hot, dry Ruaha valley floor below.

Unfortunately, however, the area is also well used by poachers, not as a base to hunt from, but as an access route to other remote areas of the park. Well-used bicycle trails are encountered. In order for these poachers to make easier access routes for themselves they light many fires which continue to be very destructive to the remaining forest sectors and much damage is evident. The situation is critical, as the remaining stands of this ancient forest are very small.

This area is in urgent need of protection, however with the park already struggling to keep up the required standards needed in the zones used by tourists, areas like Isunkaviola are very vulnerable as funds and resources are limited. So the Ruaha Park is developing a small conservation program for this unique plateau.

The Great Ruaha River

In addition to this, for many years I have been sounding the alarm bells highlighting the ecological disaster of the annual drying up of the Great Ruaha River which happened for the first time in 1993. In the early 1970s the only access into the park was via the ferry, across the Great Ruaha. The river was perennial, flowing ferociously fast and strong for most of the year.

The Ruaha River runs along the entire length of its southern boundary and is the lifeline for the park during the dry season. The main reason for the drying up of the river is from the mismanagement and overuse of water in the catchment area, mainly by extensive rice farms upstream from Ruaha Park. This area is in itself a beautiful wetland area that is in danger of being irrevocably damaged. Unfortunately, with the annual drying of the river for increasingly longer periods, lasting up to three months at a time, irrevocable damage has already been done to the ecology of the river and to the Ruaha ecosystem as a whole. Two examples of this are the loss of fresh oyster beds and the reduced breeding success of the White crowned Plover, whose only known breeding ground in Tanzania is the Great Ruaha. Additionally, the movements of the larger, more popular mammals, such as elephants and wild dogs, are beginning to alter during the dry season.

Thanks to all the hard work done by the dedicated staff in Ruaha Park, and under the excellent guidance of Chief Park Warden Mr. Mtahiko, the park is literally teeming with game, a haven of peace for all who are lucky enough to visit. But now, looking ahead, it is difficult to believe that the Great Ruaha River will be there to sustain it in times of need. It is really tragic that the very reason for the game being here in the first place, the perennial Great Ruaha River, is no longer the life force that kept the system going throughout the dry months.

We hope that the government will continue to do its utmost to reverse this sad state of affairs. I will continue to highlight this issue and do what I can to ensure the future of Ruaha's abundant and beautiful wildlife heritage.

The Future

After my brief summary, I am sure you can all see that Ruaha Park is endowed with an array of stunning wilderness experiences: the diverse flora and fauna along the Great Ruaha River, which follows an ancient finger of the Great Rift Valley system, the extensive areas of Miombo woodland with its specialized avifauna, plus the magnificent and unique Isunkaviola Plateau. Many days could be spent in Ruaha enjoying completely diverse habitats and activities.

However, as yet, the only area of Ruaha that is extensively accessed by tourists is the very small portion that runs along the Rift Valley floor, the rest of the park lies untouched as a huge wilderness zone. As we all know, looking after wilderness is a delicate balancing act that requires substantial funding and management. In an effort to address this situation, Ruaha Park is looking into diversifying activities and introducing limited use zones in the wilderness areas where trails for walking and fly camping may be introduced. However, these ideas are all very much still in the planning stage.

Despite these new developments, the fact remains that the vast wilderness areas are in need of immediate protection, more protection than the park can afford to give. Therefore, I have been collaborating with Chief Park Warden Mr. Mtahiko, to see how we could assist. A start has been made with the WILD Foundation coming to the rescue with \$10,000 to help protect the Isunkaviola Plateau. This generous donation was used in creating a route for the anti-poaching patrols to

access the remote area. The new track was carefully designed to use the existing cut-line along the western boundary. A temporary ranger post has also been established, which enables the rangers to be based closer to this unique area.

The immediate problems facing Ruaha are not how to rehabilitate, or how to stop encroaching villages, but how to introduce to the people here the concept of tourism. Until about two years ago, Ruaha was little known to the tourist industry, and the villagers themselves equally ignorant to the benefits that tourism can bring. However, once tourism hits a place it changes very fast and not necessarily to the benefit of those that live there, so we need to act quickly.

Ruaha Park has its own Community Conservation Department and has started programs with the villagers to address many of the pressing issues. They have assessed and identified, through some great teamwork, the specific issues or problems that are particular to each village. For example, some of the villages are a hot bed for poachers, some have a rampant charcoal trade resulting in deforestation, and some are harvesting timber illegally.

However, it is not all doom and gloom, as on the other hand there are villages who, from their own initiative, are starting re-forestation programs, another that has a successful bee keeping association, and yet another with a cultural program.

The Park Community Officers are now looking at ways to try to bring these people and issues together, to encourage them to initiate environmental programs that are income generating, and to try to discourage or find alternatives for the illegal practices that go on. It is important that these people benefit from the park and in so doing the park will benefit from them. I work closely with the Park Community Warden, as though they have identified the programs that should be addressed, funding and implementing them is always a problem. I have a list of programs that we would like to implement, and promoting local eco-tourism is high on the list.

However, as I said before, tourism and what it can mean is a totally new concept for most of the people around Ruaha. Without a vision, it is impossible to inspire people to implement new ideas. So one of the first programs that we need to address as soon as possible, is to take a group of villagers on a trip to northern Tanzania where there are successful eco-tourism activities going on. In so doing it will hopefully inspire and enlighten them to begin their own business in Ruaha and in the surrounding Washing Addition. There is a Village Association called MBOMIPA, which was set up

by DFID for dealing with village programs. This association currently includes the 19 villages that are closest to the park. This year, the association, through the sale of their hunting quota, made 36 million shillings, which is approximately \$36,000. From this sum, each of the 19 villages received \$1,000. The remaining \$17,000 was put back into the MBOMIPA coffers to go towards the yearly running costs. The Ruaha Park works very closely with this association, and tries to involve them in as many areas as possible. The Chief Park Warden, Mr. Mtahiko, is chairman of the Board of Trustees and I am also a member of the Board.

Additionally, in an effort to do something ourselves, my partner and I are building an environmental centre at the Idodi Secondary School. This school is the only secondary school in the vicinity of the park, and was largely built by funds donated from Ruaha Park. We hope this centre will become a nucleus for environmental incentives. It will be a place where meetings can take place involving all sections of the community, and will be the only facility in the area with audio-visual equipment. This equipment will be solar powered and will enhance lectures from teachers and invited speakers.

Dr. Dulle and I have also started a program called EMI (Elimu Mazingira Idodi), the Environmental Teachers of Idodi, which is the collaboration of primary and secondary school teachers together with village leaders. This committee is there to advise and coordinate environmental programs in the area, such as combating the growing charcoal trade, taking children and villagers on trips to the park, and other environmental issues. All these are co-coordinated with the Ruaha Park initiatives.

The people who live around the peripheral areas of the park are hunter/gatherers by tradition, their local knowledge of nature is intimate, handed down from generation to generation. The challenge is to learn how to honor these natural and man made systems and allow them to continue. We must keep the harmonious beauty of Ruaha alive, using local knowledge, folklore, and tradition to form an integral part of the Ruaha experience.

I will end with a quote from a speech by Valii Moosa, the previous environmental minister of South Africa, now head of the World Conservation Union (IUCN).

There is a common misconception that to invest in conservation is somehow contrary to investing in peoples' livelihoods. However, the idea that you need to get rich first and then worry about your environment is not only untrue, it is dangerous. It makes sense therefore that investing in better management of ecosystems will help reduce poverty.