Living with wildlife -

the story of Impalila Conservancy

Impalila – after Impalila Island, ‘the far-away place’
A LITTLE HISTORY
Prior to Namibia’s independence in 1990, communal area residents had few rights to use wildlife. Wild animals were often seen as little more than a threat to crops, livestock and infrastructure, as well as community safety. Ground-breaking legislation passed in the mid-nineties laid the foundation for a new approach to the sustainable use of natural resources. By forming a conservancy, people in communal areas can now actively manage—and generate benefits from—wildlife and other resources in their area, encouraging wildlife recoveries and environmental restoration.

While a conservancy is a natural resource management structure, it is defined by social ties. Conservancies unite groups of people with the common goal of managing their resources. Today, over 60 communal conservancies embrace one in four rural Namibians, underlining a national commitment to both rural development and conservation.

IMPALILA offers an enchanting mix of... Living with wildlife – the story of IMPALILA CONSERVANCY

Conservancies enable development and conservation over large areas... Quick Facts

Region: Caprivi
Size: 73 square kilometres
Approximate population: 2,000
Main languages: Subiya and Lozi
Date of registration: December 2005

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MILESTONES AND SUCCESSES
1996 – policy changes allow communal area residents to benefit from wildlife and tourism by forming conservancies
2001 – implementation of the Event Book monitoring system in Impalila Conservancy
2005 – Impalila Conservancy is registered in December
2006 – the Human Animal Conflict Conservancy Self-Insurance Scheme (HACCSSIS) is introduced in Impalila Conservancy
2006 – conservancy members receive training in predator management and chill production used to deter elephants
2007 – Impalila becomes part of the annual Caprivi Game Count

A CONSERVANCY IS...
• a legally registered area with clearly defined borders and a constituted management body run by the community for the development of residents and the sustainable use of wildlife and tourism
• managed by a group elected to serve the interests of all its members
• a place where residents can add income from wildlife and tourism to traditional farming activities
• a place where wildlife populations increase as they are managed for productive gain
• a place where the value of the natural resources increases, enhancing the value of the land
• a forum through which services and developments can be channelled and integrated
• zoned for multiple uses to minimise conflict and maximise the interests of all stakeholders

QUICK FACTS

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IMPALILA is the ‘far away place’, a small island nestled in the furthest corner of the Caprivi in north-eastern Namibia. It is a very small conservancy, covering less than a hundred square kilometres, and embraces around 2,000 residents, most of whom speak Subiya, as well as the area’s lingua franca, Lozi. The original inclusion of the finger-like Caprivi strip into Namibia was agreed in the late 19th century by European colonial powers at the ‘Berlin Conference’ to allow the German colony access to the Zambezi River. The narrow strip is surrounded by Angola and Zambia to the North, Zimbabwe to east and Botswana to the South. The borders were drawn without following any cultural divisions and separated people with a common heritage into different nations. During the South African administration of Namibia, people were moved off Impalila Island to create a reserve, but a few families returned during the floods of the late 1950s and remained. The Impalila community began the process to register as a conservancy together with the neighbouring Kasika community, originally intending to register as one conservancy. After a lengthy process, it was decided to form two conservancies, which were registered in December 2005.
Conservancies are living landscapes...

With its cultural and environmental diversity, the Caprivi has always occupied a unique place in Namibia. The culture of people in the area was heavily influenced by the Lozi and Kololo kingdoms that dominated the region in successions of power from the 1600s to the late 1800s. At its height, the Lozi empire, based in what is today Zambia, brought people of around 30 different ethnic affiliations, including the Subiya, under one overarching Lozi influence. The Subiya have been the main group occupying the area between the Chobe and Zambezi Rivers for the last few hundred years and have always retained some degree of cultural autonomy. Much of Impalila Island’s small population is still made up of four extended Subiya family groups, who resettled on the island during a period of flooding in the late 1950s. The families moved from nearby Kasika, which is susceptible to flooding, to Impalila via Botswana in order to utilise the higher ground of the island.

The Caprivi Region is generally very flat, falling within the Kalahari Basin, the largest accumulation of sand in the world. The environment of Impalila is relatively unique in the area. The small wedge of higher, rocky ground deflected the course of the Zambezi River and was thus surrounded by a maze of meandering channels, backwaters and floodplains. The Chobe River is in fact a backwater of the Zambezi, diverting some of its floodwaters to the west. Impalila Island lies around 950 metres above sea level and is one of few places in this part of the Caprivi that is not affected by regular flooding, increasing its value as an area for permanent settlement.

Average annual rainfall in the area is amongst the highest in all of Namibia at between 650 and 700 millimetres. Nonetheless, rainfall is highly variable from year to year, while the changing water levels of the rivers influence the accessibility to land in lower-lying areas.

Fish are an important resource for the island, both as a direct food source and as a source of income through sale and recreational angling. Over 80 species of fish have been recorded in the Zambezi. Since the establishment of conservancies, wildlife numbers in communal areas have rebounded from historic lows prior to independence. Eastern Caprivi supports a large wildlife diversity, which is under pressure from people, as settlement and subsistence agriculture have reduced wildlife habitat. The conservancy is still home to a variety of large mammals, including elephant, buffalo, lechwe, sitatunga and waterbuck, all of which occur mostly on the floodplains in the west of the conservancy. Crocodile and hippo are common in the rivers, while the island’s woodland is home to small populations of bushbuck, warthog and common impala. The diversity of woodland, riverine and floodplain habitats supports over 450 bird species, including rare birds such as Pel’s fishing owl, crested guinea fowl, rosy-throated longdaw, rock pratincole, African skimmer, pygmy goose, black coucal, olive woodpecker, Schalow’s turaco, emerald cuckoo, river warbler and half-collared kingfisher.

The fertile soil of the island has produced a unique woodland, referred to as Impalila woodland. Many plants found here occur nowhere else in Namibia. The island is fringed by lush riverine vegetation, while the dry woodland of the interior is dominated by mopane and silver cluster-leaf, and dotted by stately baobabs. Other important trees include sycamore fig, leadwood, manila, jackal berry and bird plum. The Zambezi floodplains in the west consists of vast grasslands, while the margins of waterways support lush growth, including phragmites reeds and papyrus. Many plants have important traditional uses as a source of food, medicine or building material.

A maze of meandering waterways surrounding a magical island in the mighty Zambezi, countless birds and impressive wildlife, golden sunsets and friendly people...

the far-away place’ is the place to be CASTING A LINE FOR THE PRIZED TIGER FISH WHILE ELephANTS LOOK ON FROM THE RIVER BANK, ENJOYING WONDERFUL BIRDING ALONG QUIET BACKWATERS, OR WALKING THROUGH ENCHANTED WOODLAND ALONG PATHS THAT LEAD TO BEAUTIFUL VILLAGES BENEATH HUGE BAOBABS... “THE FARM AT Impalila is one of the points of convergence where four countries meet - Zambia to the north, Botswana to the south and Zimbabwe to the east. Attractions like the world-famous Victoria Falls and Chobe National Park are within easy reach. Impalila also lies at the heart of KAZA - the Kavango Zambezi Trans-frontier Conservation Area, an initiative that links five countries and is one of the largest contiguous conservation areas in the world.
many of tar road from the Ngoma border post to the town. This means that
endless maze of four-wheel drive tracks across the floodplains of
and a few small shops provide a relatively basic selection of goods.
limited network of dirt roads. An airstrip allows access for charter planes
small plane. There are very few vehicles on the island, which has only a
in this remote corner has been limited. Impalila Island is
devoted to the conservancy and its members come from a variety of sources. Sources and amounts vary from year to year,
MANAGING NATURAL RESOURCES

Conservancies facilitate sustainability...

The management structure of Impalila Conservancy consists of a nine member management committee and an executive committee made up of the chairman, vice-chairman, secretary, treasurer and traditional authority representatives. Conservancy employees include the conservancy manager, treasurer and secretary, four community rangers, three tour guides, two resource monitors and a watchman. Two fisheries monitors are employed by the Ministry of Fisheries & Marine Resources and work closely with the conservancy, using the conservancy office and other facilities. The conservancy operates from a floating office moored on the bank of the Chobe River. The conservancy owns only one boat, which is used for monitoring as well as tourism activities, limiting responsiveness to issues. The conservancy actively monitors a variety of natural resources and their use. Resource monitors support craft development, create awareness of tree damage, and monitor the use of plants such as reeds and thatching grass, mopane and palm tree. The conservancy issues recreational fishing licences, while the Ministry of Fisheries issues commercial licences. Fisheries monitors create awareness on the management of fish resources and regularly weigh and measure catches. They record fishing methods and create awareness of the importance of net mesh sizes and the type, number and lengths of nets used. There is a closed season for fishing throughout the month of December. To further protect fish stocks, a fish reserve in the Kasai Channel seeks to limit fishing in this area to catch and release sport angling.

Impalila is part of the annual Caprivi Game Count carried out by the Ministry of Environment & Tourism (MET) with support from NGOs. The count is done on foot along fixed routes, recording both wildlife tracks and sightings. Community rangers also carry out active natural resource monitoring through the Event Book monitoring system, recording game sightings, human wildlife conflict, poaching incidents, game utilisation and any other data deemed important by the conservancy. Data is aggregated into monthly and annual reporting charts that facilitate adaptive management. In addition to the boat patrols and monthly fixed foot patrols that record Event Book data, the conservancy also carries out some joint patrols with the police and follows up on poaching incidents. The conservancy is active in mitigating human wildlife conflict. Incidents include regular crop damage as well as attacks on people and livestock. Crocodile attacks are a big issue, which has been reduced through crocodile fencing at strategic points. The remote location of the conservancy hampers rapid response to incidents by MET officials, putting pressure on conservancy staff to deal with the Impalila Conservancy provides vital structures for managing the communal natural resources of the area in a way that enhances development and ensures sustainability through the National Policy on Human Wildlife Conflict Management. The conservancy uses a mix of modern technologies and traditional knowledge and skills to enable healthy wildlife populations, a productive environment, and the effective management of natural resources.
Conservancies are full of opportunities...

The great diversity of environmental assets, combined with a wealth of cultural resources, creates untapped potential in Impalila Conservancy.

Challenges...

The young conservancy is still exploring ways to maximise benefits for residents and has been faced with some community frustration over a lack of tangible rewards from the conservancy formation. Limited engagement from the tourism industry and especially from mobile houseboat operators has been a source of disappointment. Land distribution on the island is a challenge, and the conservancy has not been able to secure land for an office, or for community tourism developments.

Poaching of wildlife and fish stocks is an ongoing challenge and the conservancy faces poaching incursions from neighbouring countries. Limited funds have restricted conservancy effectiveness, especially regarding monitoring and anti-poaching activities, and have inhibited investment in community development projects.

The rich resources of the conservancy provide a variety of opportunities, especially within tourism. Structured agreements with all tourism operators utilising Impalila will increase conservancy income as well as community benefits, while also being of great advantage to the operators through improved community relations and a much better company image. Developments that formalise the conservancy's own tourism activities provide opportunities to increase direct income and employment. The potential of cultural tourism, while already being utilised, could be further enhanced. The annual Masubiya Cultural Festival provides the opportunity to create a seasonal highlight that can attract additional visitors. Craft sales are an important source of income and targeted support can optimise this sector.

The conservancy has a variety of plans to enhance tourism in the area. Impalila is working together with neighbouring conservancies to initiate the formation of a management complex that encompasses adjacent conservancies and facilitates joint management at a larger landscape level. This has advantages for both natural resource management and tourism development.

While the relative inaccessibility of Impalila makes it difficult to incorporate the island into regular tourism routes, the remoteness is part of its charm and great potential exists for more exclusive travel. Impalila has a variety of opportunities to benefit from regional tourism, and especially from the proximity of high tourism traffic in Botswana. Access from Kasane in Botswana is relatively easy and Impalila offers a unique island retreat that can complement wildlife safaris in both Botswana and Namibia. The luxury of fly-in travel can make Impalila a wonderful stop-over on any Namibian fly-in safari.

Human wildlife conflicts are monitored using the Event Book and clearly indicate the main conflict species.

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