

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

The flow of a lifeline



A channel snakes its way across the Okavango Delta's permanent swamps.

## OKAVANGO RIVER

THROUGHOUT THE WORLD rivers flow down to the ocean where their fresh waters mix with salty seawater. This is all due to gravity and the shape of the continents. Imagine, however, a large river that has its fresh waters finally mingle not with salt, but with dry sand in the centre of a flat surface extending about 2,000 kilometres north to south and approximately 1,000 kilometres east to west. This is the Okavango – one of Africa's great rivers. And the sandy landscape is the Kalahari – one of the largest expanses of sand in the world.

But there is much more to the Okavango than a mix of sand and water. This is a river system that collects all its water over a catchment of about 112,000 square kilometres, flows for hundreds of kilometres down a narrow waterway and then finally disperses across a delta covering up to 12,000 square kilometres. Remarkably, the whole catchment is within one country (Angola), the narrow waterway runs through a second (Namibia) and the Okavango Delta lies in a third country (Botswana). The Delta is really a gigantic sink into which the river pours about 9.4 cubic kilometres of water each year. Sediments and nutrients are also carried down from the catchment and they too come to rest in the Delta. The climate is dry around much of the southern half of the river where evaporation rates are six times greater than annual rainfall. But water in the Delta remains sweet, unlike the saline waters prevalent in this arid part of the Kalahari. Compared to most other rivers, the Okavango's water is exceptionally clear of mud and contains few dissolved chemicals or solutes.

Environmental conditions along many of the waterways are pristine: natural plant life remains intact in most places, dams or channels do not change the flow of water, and pollutants are scarce. Its size and setting in the semi-arid Kalahari make the Delta perhaps the largest oasis in the world. Along much of their length the rivers of the Okavango system are also linear oases, providing water and food to people, livestock, fish, birds, plants and countless other beneficiaries of this lifeline.

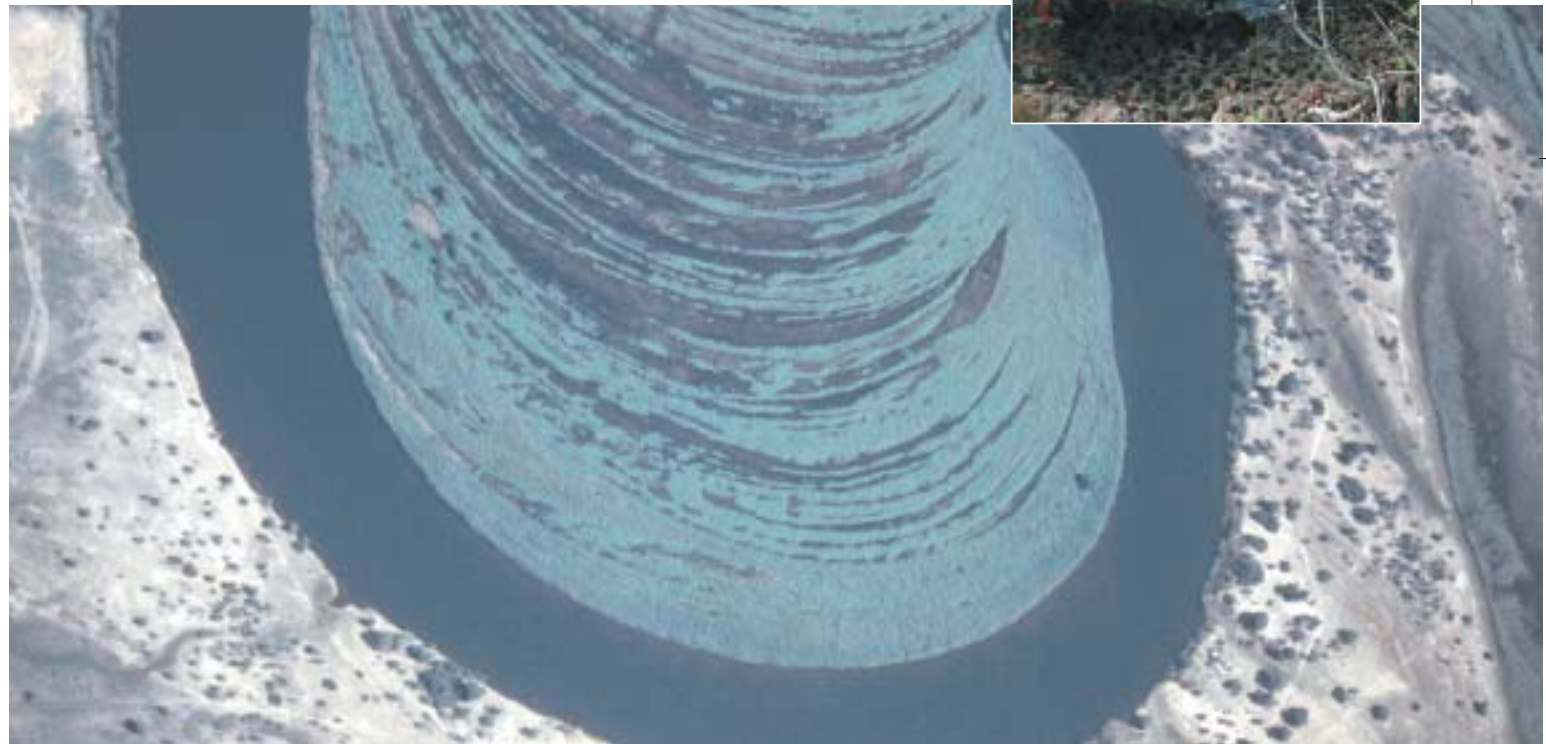
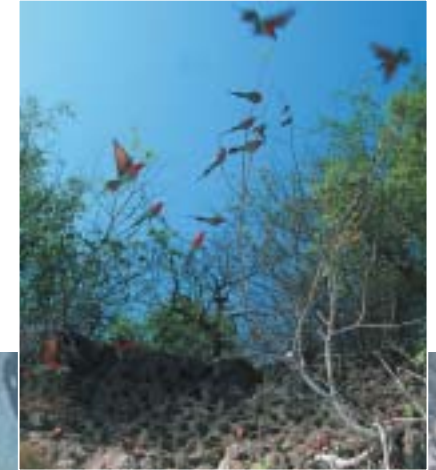
These are some of the key elements of the Okavango. The river system also has high value, especially for two quite different groups of people. The first consists of international tourists and other people who treasure wild places, beautiful scenery and healthy environments. The massive concentrations of wildlife in and around the Delta have made it a highly

attractive destination for wealthy visitors. The second group is comprised of people who live close to the river system from which they obtain such resources as water, fish, building materials and jobs in the tourism industry. The substantial importance of these resources

*Scrolled patterns mark the remains of sand banks progressively deposited along the meandering Cubango/Okavango on the border between Angola and Namibia (below). Cuttings in sand banks such as these provide nesting places for carmine bee-eaters. The colourful birds lay their eggs in rounded chambers at the ends of the burrows (right). A gourd is a useful container for this boy to carry water home from the Cuebe River in Angola (below left).*

is best appreciated by considering the exorbitant cost of replacing them from alternative sources.

People who benefit most from the Okavango are thus mainly local inhabitants and wealthy people who live elsewhere in the world. The river means little to the majority of people living in Angola, Namibia and Botswana. Most citizens live far from the river, and the Okavango is geographically remote from centres of government and decision-making in all three countries. The development of people close to the river has therefore been ignored for much of the time. Most economic activity and development has taken place away from the river. Resources found in the Okavango's rivers do not compare to wealth to be had from diamonds in north-eastern Angola, in southern Botswana and Namibia, from oil along the Angolan coast, or from fish resources on the Namibian coast.



## OKAVANGO RIVER



The Okavango provides many resources: nutrients for dense stands of papyrus (above), fish for white pelicans and other birds (right), and water for livestock and people living nearby (below).



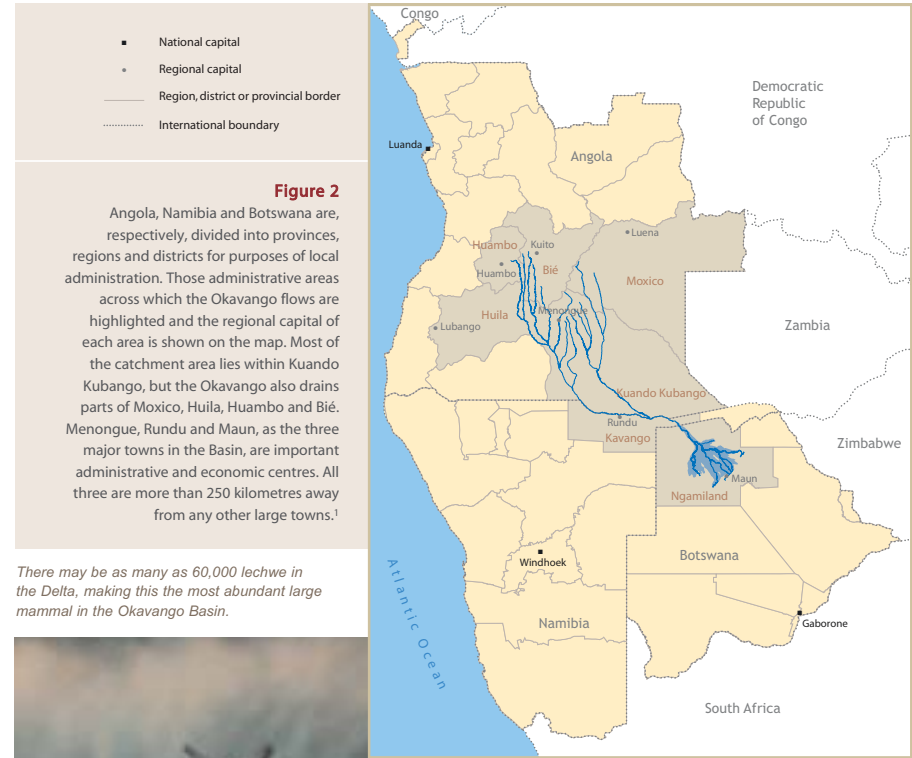
These hard facts are neatly put in a nutshell by the Portuguese description for south-eastern Angola – *as terras do fim do Mundo* – the place at the end of the earth. It is from this remote, wild place that all Okavango water springs. It is an area that has suffered the ravages of war and corruption. It is also the part of the Okavango where rainfall and, therefore, water is plentiful. Rainfall declines and water gains in value to the south. No other open water is available near the river in Namibia or Delta in Botswana, and the Okavango's waters are therefore much more important to these two countries than to Angola. In essence, the Okavango means quite different things to different people and holds different values for these three nations. Material in the pages ahead should shed more light on the workings and many meanings of the Okavango.

### Administrative aspects

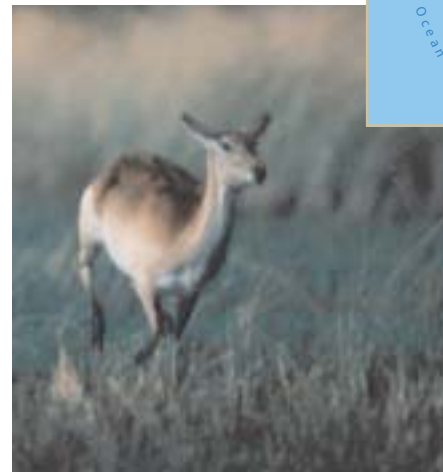
Angola is divided into 18 provinces (Figure 2). A Provincial Governor administers each province and has considerable authority over all local affairs, including the allocation of funds for the development and maintenance of services. Each province is further



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There may be as many as 60,000 lechwe in the Delta, making this the most abundant large mammal in the Okavango Basin.



divided into zones called municipalities. Namibia has introduced a new system of decentralized government which divides the country into 13 regions. Kavango is one such region and people there are represented by regional councillors, one for each of nine constituencies. One of the councillors is appointed as the Regional Governor. The authority of regional governments is rather limited, although they will be expected to take more responsibility for regional affairs in the future. There are eight districts in Botswana, each headed by a District Commissioner as the representative of the central government. The Commissioner is in charge of the district administration, which is responsible for the provision of primary schooling, primary health care, community development and the maintenance of minor roads.

