Caprivi is a key area for wildlife, which moves freely between Namibia and neighbouring countries. Caprivi has a number of community conservation programmes, in addition to state protected areas. Conservation has a strong commitment towards conservation, which contributes to rural livelihoods through the development of wildlife-based enterprises.

The third aerial wildlife census of the Caprivi and Kavango river systems in Namibia took place in September 2009. These surveys covered the Kavango, Kango, Linyanti and Zambezi rivers and their associated wetlands and floodplains. The area (~18,000 km²) is surrounded by Angola, Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Among the wildlife species that were observed were buffalo and elephant (Loxodonta africana), hippopotamus (Hippopotamus amphibius), crocodile (Crocodylus niloticus), and a variety of birds. Extensive, broad floodplains flood seasonally along these rivers and there are also some smaller, permanent wetlands within the floodplains. Crocodile and hippopotamus as well as floodplain ungulates such as reedbuck, lechwe, waterbuck, puku and sitatunga were counted. Of the woodland species, buffalo occurred in the highest numbers, followed by elephants. Wildlife numbers of all species except crocodile, reedbuck and warthog were recorded. Numbers of cattle and mokoros were recorded in the Linyanti, Zambezi River, while most fishing nets were recorded in the Linyanti stratum, mostly in Lake Liambezi. Two important bird nesting sites were observed.

A total of 19,212 head of wildlife (excluding birds) were observed. The distribution of wildlife was largely confined to the protected areas in the Mamili stratum, the lowest in the Linyanti stratum. The most abundant species, hippo, occurred in the greatest numbers. Of the woodland species, buffalo occurred in the highest numbers, followed by elephants. Wildlife numbers of all species except crocodile, reedbuck and warthog were recorded. Numbers of cattle and mokoros were recorded in the Linyanti, Zambezi River, while most fishing nets were recorded in the Linyanti stratum, mostly in Lake Liambezi. Two important bird nesting sites were observed.

The survey was flown over 16 days. As previously, the survey area was divided into five strata and areas within each stratum were assigned to either protected areas or conservancies. The strata were slightly modified compared to previous surveys to take account of wildlife numbers being lower in the wet season. A 250 m strip width was used for recording wildlife from an altitude of around 90 m. Adjoining transects 800 m apart were used, providing a 100% sampled coverage of the entire area.

Introduction and Methods

Cattle, mokoros (traditional canoes), fishing nets:

These observations provide a measure of human activity and can assist in understanding wildlife distributions.

Conclusions

In 2009, the Zambezi River reached its highest level since 1989, inundating most of the eastern distribution of hippo and resulting in many areas becoming flooded for the first time in several decades. This may have affected wildlife distribution and abundance and may be taken into account when comparing counts between the three surveys. Species such as hippo, for example, were recorded in areas further away from major rivers such as the Kwanza and Linyanti than previously. The majority of Caprivi’s wildlife populations occur along international boundaries and are shared with neighbouring countries; their distribution is variable and transboundary movements in response to environmental fluctuations are common.

This survey recorded 20% more wildlife along the river systems of the Caprivi than in 2007. Wildlife numbers of all species except crocodile, reedbuck and warthog increased. The increase in wildlife both within protected areas and conservancy areas may be attributed both to the movement of wildlife within the Caprivi and movements between Botswana and the Caprivi as well as the efforts of local conservation initiatives such as conservancies which encourage increased wildlife numbers through reduced poaching and game introductions.

Human factors are important: the most important factor limiting hippo numbers in Caprivi is competition with cattle for grazing. Other human influences such as the increasing areas of floodplain habitat being placed under cultivation also have implications for wildlife. Numbers of cattle, mokoros and fishing nets have increased significantly and the environmental impacts of human activities such as fishing and the harvesting of riparian trees for fuel, construction materials and mokoros should be studied to assess whether current levels of utilisation are sustainable.

Results

A total of 19,212 head of wildlife (excluding birds) were observed. The distribution of wildlife was largely confined to the protected areas in the Mamili stratum, the lowest in the Linyanti stratum. The most abundant species, hippo, occurred in the greatest numbers. Of the woodland species, buffalo occurred in the highest numbers, followed by elephants. Wildlife numbers of all species except crocodile, reedbuck and warthog were recorded. Numbers of cattle and mokoros were recorded in the Linyanti, Zambezi River, while most fishing nets were recorded in the Linyanti stratum, mostly in Lake Liambezi. Two important bird nesting sites were observed.

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