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TRAVEL LEISURE

ZAMBIA, ZIMBABWE & BOTSWANA



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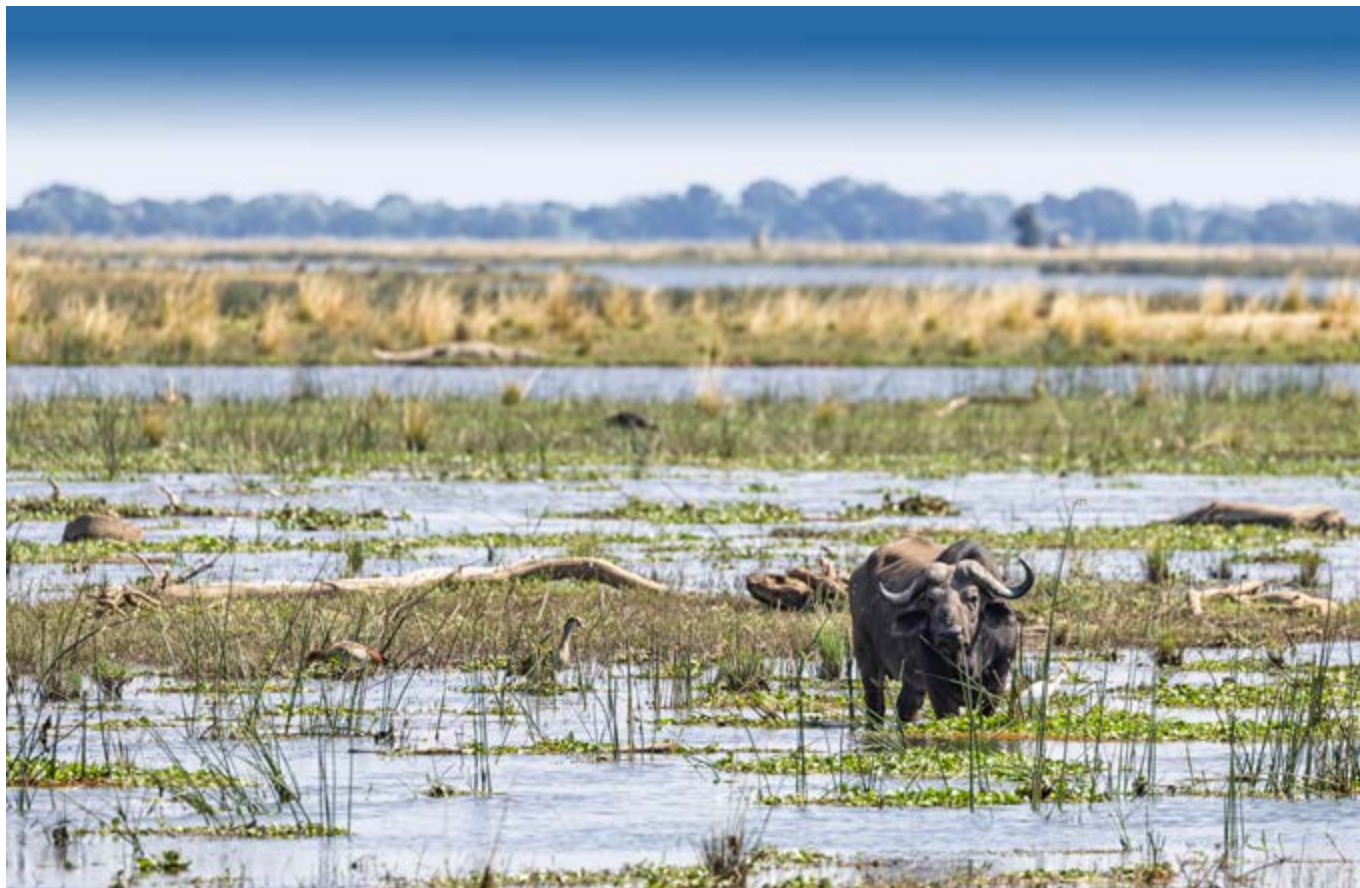
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Following the Herd

WORDS LORRAINE KEARNEY

PICS NICHOLAS TUCKER

Huge swathes of southern Africa are being opened up to form wildlife corridors. Animals are more able to tread the ancient paths, following the seasons. Lorraine Kearney visited Lower Zambezi, one half of the new LOZMAP Transfrontier Conservation Area.

Lower Zambezi National Park marked the end of an epic trip through the huge reserves that make up Zambia's wildlands. The very name sings with magic: it tells a tale of sweltering afternoons and deafening cicadas, blue-purple skies heavy with the promise of rains still to come, the red soil and the green winterthorn trees with their odd reverse phenology.

On the first day, staying at Lolebezi, with the river lapping against the boats that ferry guests up and down to the airstrip at Royal Zambezi Lodge, or take you out for fishing or bird watching, I was mesmerised by a pack of playful wild dogs. We sat for what seemed like hours, watching them gambol and frolic.

There were leopards, of course, camouflaged in their trees. And

baboons, huge herds of buffalo and elephants, but you'd expect that. Just across the river, I watched them go about their elephant business in another country entirely – Mana Pools National Park, in Zimbabwe – and wade across to the islands when something particularly tasty caught their fancy.

On the Kafue River, at Gwabi River Lodge on the edge of Chiawa Game Management Area, a local farmer came to have a beer and lament the loss of his mango crop – an entire harvest gone. Elephants happy, farmer dejected.

A Grand Idea

There are mornings in southern Africa when the map feels like an absurdity. A line has been drawn across a river, or through a forest, or over a plain of gold grass; yet

the elephants still come down to drink, the buffalo shoulder into the floodplain, and across it all, wild dogs trot forward without consulting a border post.

Until recently, conservation in Africa was built around islands: parks ringed by fences and armed authority, set apart from the people living around them. But a new idea has been taking shape across southern Africa – what would happen if protected areas were treated not as isolated fortresses but as parts of larger living systems? Under the Southern African Development Community's model, a network of Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs) now stretches across the sub-continent, linking deserts, savannas, wetlands, mountains and coast through a patchwork of national parks, communal

lands, private reserves and wildlife corridors.

It is a grand idea. From the Atlantic edge of Namibia and Angola to the Indian Ocean systems of Mozambique and Tanzania, these transboundary landscapes are meant to give wildlife room to move again: to follow fresh grazing, to track water, to disperse in drought years, and to repopulate areas that had fallen fallow.

The logic is simple enough: movement eases pressure on any one ecosystem, spreads risk, and keeps populations connected. The modern human reality is harder. When animals regain their routes, sure they still pass through postcard wilderness, but they also move through village edges, crop fields, fishing camps and cattle country.

That tension is vivid in the Lower Zambezi–Mana Pools (LOZMAP) TFCa, the new two-country conservation landscape shared

by Zambia and Zimbabwe. Formalised by a Memorandum of Understanding signed in May 2023, it binds Zambia's Lower Zambezi and Zimbabwe's Mana Pools, together with the surrounding game management areas, safari areas, communal lands and conservancies that make the wider valley function as a single ecological unit.

A new idea for us, maybe, but the animals have been crossing this valley for longer than any state has existed on either bank. The agreement is, in one sense, simply an attempt by governments and conservationists to catch up with what the river already knows.

The River that Ignores the Map

LOZMAP lies below Lake Kariba, where the river relaxes into a broad safari valley. Lower Zambezi is an expanse of river frontage, escarpment and woodland. Across the water Mana Pools is a World Heritage Site. Depending on which management boundary is being

used, the TFCA spans roughly 17,745km² to 18,515km², but its ecological reach extends into a transboundary landscape of about 40,000km².

The Zambezi is both barrier and bridge. It divides two nations, but it also draws animals in from both of them. Elephants feed on the winterthorn forests and wade to the islands. Buffalo fan out across the floodplain in the rains, then bunch into tight concentrations as water contracts. Lions use the same river margins and spring-fed pockets to hunt. Wild dogs work the edges between woodland and open ground, using the breadth of the landscape rather than any single protected block.

Elephants sometimes cross the Zambezi, lions as well; birds, hippos and crocodiles, too. They go where the grass is still green, where the floodplain holds, where there is water.

This mobility is about survival. In years of scarcity, the ability to range can widely determine



whether a population holds on or collapses. It's one reason behind conservationists' talk about connectivity, land bridges and dispersal areas rather than isolated pockets of protection.

Where the Elephants Go

Elephants are the engineers of the valley. They transform woodland structure, open routes, and redistribute seeds.

But it's not all sunshine and baobabs. In Chiawa, next to Lower Zambezi, conservation groups describe severe human-

elephant conflict – like our dejected farmer at Gwabi – with elephants and sometimes hippos raiding crop fields, even consuming a household's entire annual harvest.

Around Mana Pools, conservation reporting by the African Wildlife Foundation points to encroachment into former community conservancy land, displacing wildlife and increasing conflict.

In the middle Zambezi, the future of elephant movement depends



not only on anti-poaching patrols and bilateral agreements but on whether living beside elephants is tolerable for the people whose fields lie on the edge of their routes.

A Sub-Continent Stitched Together

LOZMAP is one stop in a larger southern African experiment. Across the Southern African Development Community (SADC), TFCAs in various stages of development now connect or attempt to connect an extraordinary sweep of habitats: /Ai-/Ais–Richtersveld on the Orange River, Iona–Skeleton Coast on the Atlantic desert edge, Kgalagadi in the Kalahari, KAZA across the inland savannas and wetlands, Great Limpopo in the south-eastern lowveld, Lubombo along the Indian Ocean-facing escarpment, and Niassa–Selous in the miombo wildernesses of Mozambique and Tanzania.



Together, they create a continental narrative, a conservation belt that runs from the Atlantic towards the Indian Ocean across 12 countries and beyond.

Southern Africa's TFCAs are imperfect, contested and still evolving. But in places like Lower Zambezi and Mana Pools, they

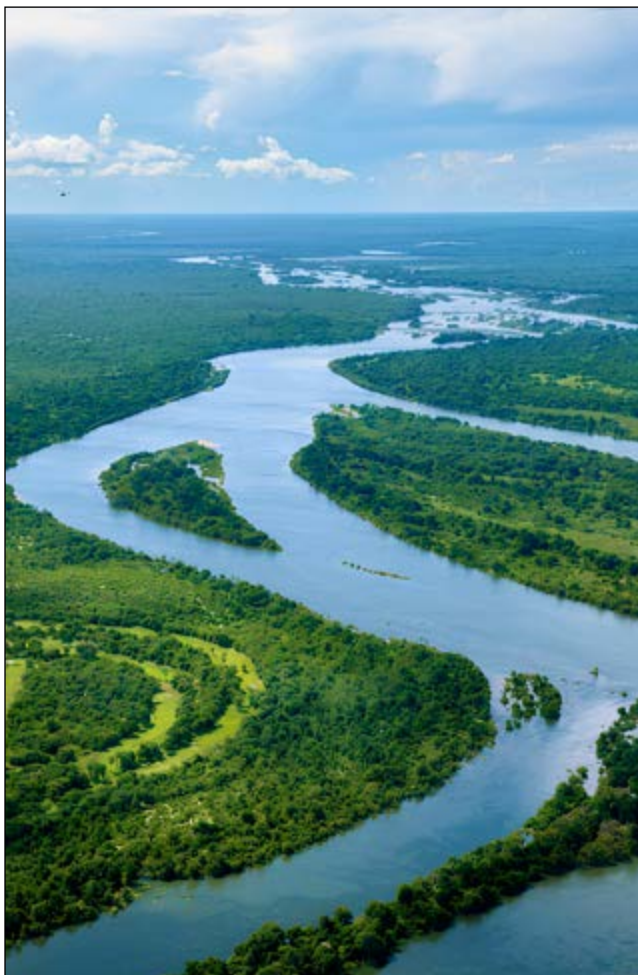
offer a glimpse of a conservation future: one in which the wild survives because it is allowed to keep moving.

Southern Africa's TFCAs

There are 10 established and eight emerging TFCAs across SADC and some of its neighbours, spanning more

than 1 million km², making it one of the largest coordinated conservation initiatives on Earth.

They don't create a single continuous, fence free corridor; instead, they form a network of large, semi-connected conservation blocks.



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