

Zimbabwe's 'Wild West' Mavuradonha: The Demise of Community Development and Conservation in a Failing State

by Brian J. Hesse



<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/zi.html>

The Magical Mavuradonha

‘Take your malaria tablets. And drink nothing but bottled water.’

Individuals in parts of Africa are almost always told these, and a litany of other, warnings. Yet in the unpopulated backcountry of the Mavuradonha Wilderness of north central Zimbabwe, the elevation is too high for malaria. And in the years since 2000, when your author first started going to the Mavuradonha in the company of guests, none have ever fallen ill by drinking directly from the Mavuradonha’s crystalline waters.

Of course most visitors who really experience the Mavuradonha’s backcountry will find themselves thirsty from exertion at one point or another. No roads and no vehicle access equates into hard work. Rugged, mountainous terrain has to be negotiated on foot or horseback. This inevitably involves scaling boulder-strewn, granite ridges and sliding down red, serpentine slopes littered with aardvark holes and warthog burrows. Bamboo shoots, virtually unbreakable with human hands, and *mahobohobo* branches adorned with plate-sized leaves, must be brushed aside. Grass, sometimes as tall as a rider on horseback, must be pushed through. The reward? Under rock overhangs one can find ancient, undocumented clay pottery, or even older paintings. Amongst soaring peaks one might observe elephant, giraffe, buffalo, eland, sable, kudu, zebra, duiker and many other mammal species. In Miombo and Mushanje woodlands – and in one unusual part of the wilderness, under *Raffia* palms – there are countless orchids, aloes, euphorbias and proteas to be catalogued. A bird checklist can run up to 300 species long. And in terms of sounds, there are the ‘shouts’ of baboon in response to leopard, the occasional roar of lion, and the subterranean cacophony of an estimated 20,000+ Egyptian Fruit Bats, thought to be the largest known colony south of the equator.

But for all of the Mavuradonha Wilderness’ unique and diverse ecology, it means little in light of Zimbabwe’s past injustices and present demise of the rule-of-law.

From ‘Fortress Conservation’ to ‘Community-based Conservation’

Several factors have shaped conservation and community development in Zimbabwe, including in the Mavuradonha. During European colonisation and white, minority rule from 1890 to 1980, settlers appropriated nearly three-quarters of the country’s most arable land. Black peasants were forcibly resettled onto marginal ‘Tribal Trust Lands’, more commonly known as ‘communal areas.’ Whereas most of the

white minority were ultimately given private, legal title to land, the vast majority of blacks were given usufruct rights only – meaning the state continued to own the land even as occupants on that land were allowed to use it.

As for wildlife, from British colonial rule through the regime of Ian Smith, all belonged to either one of two parties: on private, freehold land – that is to say, on mostly ‘white’ land -- wildlife belonged to the landowner; on government land – parks, reserves, national forests and communal areas -- it belonged to the state. Consequently, a tiny minority were encouraged to have a stake in managing wildlife. A vast majority were simply alienated from it.

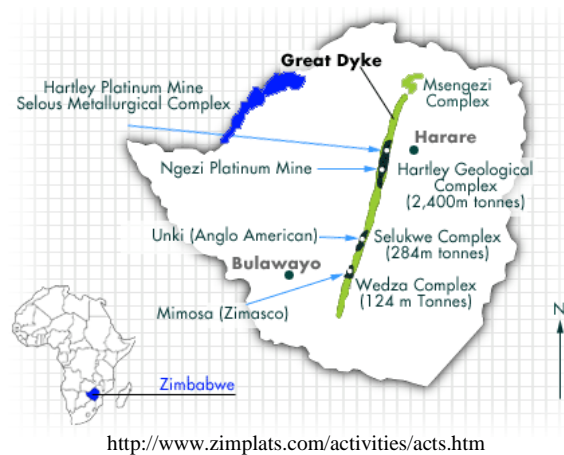
Given these realities, protected areas abutting communal areas became especially prone to conflict. A subsistence farmer might lose an entire year’s crop to a night-time raiding elephant, or livestock to wandering predators. The consensus view at the grassroots level was that governing authorities thought animals more important than humans. Additionally, the view went, people were being asked to bear inordinate risks for the sake of animals, and when humans lost out, little to no compensation could be expected. Accordingly, peasants and communities on communal lands were often inclined to sabotage neighbouring conservation arrangements out of resentment and self-interest.

With independence in 1980 came a move away from ‘fortress conservation’ in many areas. In its place arose ‘community-based conservation’ in the form of Zimbabwe’s Community Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources, or CAMPFIRE. Under a CAMPFIRE arrangement, legal ownership of land and wildlife continues to be vested in the state. However, Rural District Councils are given devolved power to decide how the land and wildlife are to be managed. Revenues from a Council’s decisions are to flow mostly to the Council, and then to be invested in local communities. In theory this is to be to the benefit of people, animals and habitats: people have every incentive to see wildlife areas and associated habitats thrive given the economic benefits resulting from, say, tourism. Indeed, this is what convinced the Muzarabani Rural District Council – 180 kilometres away from the Mavuradonha but under whose devolved jurisdiction the Mavuradonha Wilderness falls -- to develop a long-term contract with a professional safari operator (Carew Safaris) as far back as 1991.

More recently, the Council has negotiated contracts with two professional operators, Mopani Safaris and Varden Safaris. Mopani Safaris conducts limited hunts and works on five-year contracts. Varden Safaris conducts photographic safaris and has a ten-year lease through 2013. Concession fees are to be negotiated annually, based on past and projected revenues generated from paying clients. In 2008, leaders on the Council requested the equivalent of approximately US\$12,000 for a concession. During the best of times this would have been a steep sum. Given the limited quota Mopani Safaris has for hunting (sustainability does not allow many animals to be taken, as per the directive of National Parks authorities), and the five percent ‘occupancy rate’ Varden Safaris is realising for photographic excursions due to Zimbabwe’s current tumult, the amount was especially high. Here the inherent weaknesses of the Zimbabwe’s CAMPFIRE scheme converge with domestic and international factors.

The Geography of Corruption

In her work 'Participation and Devolution in Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE Program', Judith Mashinya notes that many CAMPFIRE projects in Zimbabwe have been especially prone to elite capture. The ruling ZANU-PF party has interfered with and undermined local participation – for example, through gerrymandering of rural district boundaries -- to the point many rural district council members have few checks on their actions. She surmises the national political elite are willing to 'protect incompetence and reward corruption' at the rural district level as long as councillors tow the ruling party line.



Opportunities for ZANU-PF politicians' enrichment in the Mavuradonha Wilderness are great. The Mavuradonha Wilderness sits in the Msengezi Complex of Zimbabwe's Great Dyke, a 550-kilometre-long 'spine' running north-south through the middle of the country. As John Guilbert and Charles Park explain in *The Geology of Ore Deposits*, Zimbabwe's Great Dyke is a 'rare near vertical layered ultramafic intrusion' rich in gold, silver, chromium, nickel, tin and especially platinum. Zimplats, which runs large platinum mining operations in parts

of the Great Dyke south of the Mavuradonha, claims the Great Dyke contains the second-largest known platinum deposits in the world (see map). Because of the the Great Dyke's raised geography and vast horizontal layers of metals and mineral ore deposits, mining is logistically easier, and therefore especially lucrative.

Perhaps unsurprising, two mining interests have accordingly been drawn to, and are active in, the Mavuradonha: one is a shadowy Chinese interest locally registered as Labenmon Investments; the other is a London Stock Exchange-listed company, African Consolidated Resources, with European, Canadian and Australian investors. On the latter company's website (see <http://www.acrplc.com/>), it says:

African Consolidated Resources (ACR) is a mineral exploration company, headquartered in London, with a local head office in Harare, Zimbabwe... ACR was incorporated in 2005 to invest in Zimbabwean mineral assets. The Managing Director and Chairman are Zimbabwean-born, and have the extensive networks required to operate successfully in Africa. The perception that business in Zimbabwe is high risk, has significantly discounted most assets. The Directors believe that mineral resources in particular are a class that has been significantly undervalued. This perception creates an investment opportunity rarely available in world-class mineral belts.

Local police officers, National Parks officials, the Environmental Management Authority, and lawyers have all informed the mining consortia and Muzarabani Rural District Council that known mining-related activities are not in compliance with current environmental laws or with contractual CAMPFIRE obligations. Few miners or ZANU-PF councillors seem worried. In ACR's case, their claim to 'have the extensive networks required to operate successfully in Africa' alludes to governmental collusion at the highest levels. For the Chinese, their 'local partner' is Joice Mujuru, one of President Robert Mugabe's two

vice presidents, a woman whose husband is Solomon Mujuru, the former head of the army and one of Zimbabwe's richest men.

Battling ‘The Law of the Jungle’ in the Wilderness

Given an environment where the politically-connected seemingly act with impunity in the Mavuradonha, what are conservationists and community activists to do?

A necessary starting point is to be honest about the fact that local communities around the Mavuradonha are receiving limited benefits from the current CAMPFIRE arrangement. This is mostly because so few tourists or hunters are coming to the area. Fewer visitors mean fewer locals get employed to guide, cook, clean and provide other goods and services on the visitors’ behalf. And what little revenue does get generated mostly has to flow through the Muzarabani Rural District Council first, over 180 kilometres away. Many locals are quick to point out only a fraction of this tiny amount ever returns. As a result, there is an ambivalence about the Wilderness’ future. Sentiments range from ‘If mining will bring some money to me today, and tourism isn’t, why not let mining take place?’ to ‘Others make money off of the Mavuradonha, but not me. So perhaps I should look for ways to get what is mine.’ In response, James and Janine Varden of Varden Safaris have undertaken a spirited ‘hearts and minds campaign’ locally.

Like many of the most successful development efforts in Africa, the Vardens’ efforts focus on modest, common-sense endeavours and partnerships. To mitigate human-wildlife conflicts when animals roam outside the wilderness, they contacted the Elephant Pepper Development Trust (see www.elephantpepper.org). Red chilli peppers were subsequently planted around farmers’ fields. Capsaicin, the part of a chilli pepper which makes it ‘hot’, repels many mammals, but especially elephants. In addition to forming a natural olfactory barrier, the peppers can be harvested and sold, the ‘red gold’ often generating more revenue than an entire plot of maize.

When rural schools around the Mavuradonha expressed a need for learning resources, the Vardens gathered donations internationally. More impressively, they brought to the schools the most dramatic teaching aid at their disposal: a two-year-old orphaned elephant calf, Kimba Melu, which Varden Safaris has adopted. As students were able to touch and learn about Kimba, a tangible connection was formed with the Wilderness, Kimba’s future home.

When faced with the tragedy that many AIDS orphans were not in school, the Vardens began a rabbit project. Before, some AIDS orphans had to mind free-ranging cattle and goats, which necessarily took them out of the classroom and into surrounding pastures during school hours. Others could not afford school fees, which also kept them out of the classroom. Once these AIDS orphans were given fast-breeding rabbits in simple enclosures, a balance was struck. They could raise their livestock cheaply on the very grounds of the schools they attend. What is more, the rabbits could be eaten for sustenance or sold at a profit, thereby allowing them to afford necessities and school fees.

Of course *kusanganisa* – ‘to connect’ in Shona, referring to a desire for conservationists and community activists to work in tandem for the benefit of local communities – can only be so effective given

the realities of Zimbabwe's current crisis. It will also take action from the broader international community. Granted, 'smart sanctions' have been levied on the 130-odd highest members of Robert Mugabe's government. But as has been witnessed with regard to Labenmon Investments and African Consolidated Resources, many officials are able to partner with such 'legitimate interests' in a way which neutralises any sanctions' bite.

Of greater hope is that an informed international public might agitate for corporate social responsibility in the Mavuradonha Wilderness, much as it did in response to Shell Oil's involvement in Rivers State, Nigeria in the 1990s. African Consolidated Resources might be especially susceptible to such pressure given its listing on the London Stock Exchange and its European, Canadian and Australian investors. Even Labenmon Investments, with its Chinese connections, might not be immune; Chinese officials wish to avoid 'China in Africa' being shown to be about amoral business interests operating with little consideration for the environment or local communities.

The Beginning of the Beginning?

Fighting for the ecology and communities of the Mavuradonha is one thing. Yet failing has implications for other conservation areas and communities in Zimbabwe, too. Consider what has already been seen in Tengenenge village (in Shona, *tengenenge* means 'the beginning of the beginning') and Nyamaneche National Park, both about a 45-minute drive from the eastern edge of the Mavuradonha Wilderness.

Tom Blomefield, a white Zimbabwean, founded Tengenenge as an artists' community for over 100 families in 1966 (see <http://www.tengenenge-toblomefield.com/village/village.html>). Nyamaneche National Park is adjacent to Tengenenge and spreads over some 5,000 hectares. Though the park is home to Zimbabwe National Parks' Wildlife Unit Capture Team, it was better known – *was* being an important word -- for its herd of nine white rhino.

In March 2008, President Mugabe signed an 'indigenisation and economic empowerment act' which entitles governmental ministers to transfer the majority share of any company to 'any person who before 1980 was disadvantaged by unfair discrimination on the grounds of his or her race, and any descendant of such person.' Perhaps in response, Tom Blomefield transferred the title for Tengenenge to Dominique Bhenura, a black Zimbabwean. Around that time, a Labenmon Investments 'base camp' was established at Tengenenge for heavy equipment ranging from earthmovers to bulldozers. Chinese geologists and surveyors have now become a frequent site on the roads between Tengenenge and the boundaries of the Mavuradonha Wilderness. They often pass Nyamaneche National Park, usually in the company of private security details with high-calibre weapons. Perhaps coincidentally, but likely not, for the first time rhino have been poached in Nyamaneche. Four were killed for their horns in March 2008 alone. There are currently two major markets for such rhino products. The first is in Yemen, where carved rhino horns are used as handles for ceremonial daggers. The second market is in Asia, especially in China with its growing

middle- and upper-classes. There rhino horn is sold as a traditional cure for skin diseases, bone disorders and fever.

Recently, your author was given the opportunity to speak to assembled students and community members at two schools on the boundaries of the Mavuradonha Wilderness. ‘You have been given two great gifts’, I said. ‘The first is the neighbouring wilderness. Many visitors would love to come to this area year after year after year to see its animals.’

‘The second gift is this.’ I tapped my temple with a pointing index finger. ‘Who will come to the Mavuradonha if its mountains are hauled away, its animals gone and its streams made dry? How will you eat then?’ After a pause, I concluded with this thought: ‘Your second gift will tell you what to do with the first.’

-- Author’s Biography –

Dr. Brian Hesse is an Associate Professor in International Relations and Political Economy at Northwest Missouri State University. He is from rural Wabaunsee County, near Paxico, Kansas (population 211), and is a first-generation university graduate. He initially earned a dual B.A. degree in Political Science and History from Kansas State University, along with a secondary degree in International Studies. Subsequently, the British government offered Dr. Hesse a Marshall Scholarship, which he used to earn a Ph.D. in International Relations from the London School of Economics. When not in the classroom, Dr. Hesse prefers to be on the African continent where, since 1998, he has been a seasonal Guide and Safari Leader for the U.S.-based company Cowabunga Safaris (<http://www.cowabungasafaris.com/>). His research and work on the African continent has taken him from Egypt to South Africa, and from Senegal to Zanzibar. In addition to articles in the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, *International Journal*, *The Journal of Asia-Pacific Affairs*, *African Studies Review* and other publications, Dr Hesse is the author of the book *The United States, South Africa and Africa: Of grand foreign policy and modest means* (http://www.amazon.com/United-States-South-Africa-Foreign/dp/0754617394/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1305045383&sr=1-1). He serves as an editor for the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* and was a chief editor and contributor to the book *Somalia: State Collapse, Terrorism Piracy* (Routledge, March 2011 -- <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415594639/>).