

Botswana, Tourism and Biodiversity: Preliminary Results from Rapid Situation Analysis



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Introduction

The purpose of the rapid situation analysis was to take a snapshot view of how Botswana appeared to be particularly successful in managing human-animal interaction, biodiversity and tourism in relation to wildlife and the natural environment. The success seems to be framed by policy choices and long-term thinking. Fieldwork, including extensive meetings with private and public sector stakeholders was undertaken over a three-week period prior to the May, 2019 lifting of the ban on elephant trophy hunting (which thus does not form part of the commentary for this article). The fieldwork comprised two components: a series of formal meetings in Kasane and Maun with various stakeholders (including tribal leaders, NGO staff, researchers, community leaders, regional and national institutions), and site visits to areas that demonstrated the range of conservation-touristic activities: Chobe game park, Vumbura plain, Mombo, and Sandibe.

The public and private sectors in Botswana have complete clarity of purpose in their thinking about tourism. Conservation and sustainability seem to lie at the heart of their efforts to future proof the industry. Particularly impressive, was the sheer quality of the tour guides, their scientific knowledge and passion for their job, which they see as being far beyond escorting tourists. Notably, they keep up to date through reading wildlife textbooks, communicating with each other, and ensuring self-discipline during safaris so as not to disturb or overcrowd animals in their natural habitat.

Fieldwork included visits to several tourism hotspots where it became apparent that tourism staff, gamekeepers, and government anti-poaching forces communicate well and are all genuinely committed to protecting the wildlife of the country, where hunting has been banned with a shift to lucrative photographic safaris.

The general thrust of Botswana's tourism policy (1992) is to balance sustainability with ensuring significant and positive socio-economic outcomes for the population at large (but with particular thought on employment in rural areas). In this sense,

the policy sees aesthetic and natural resources (perceived scenic beauty, abundant charismatic wildlife/ mega-fauna, and ecological, geological and cultural characteristics as assets with potential to benefit all levels of society.

The Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP) has traditionally played a leading part in both framing and shaping the progress and organisation of tourism since the 1990 Parliamentary Tourism Act.

Botswana has some seventeen percent of the country designated as National Parks and Game Reserves. Moreover, twenty percent is designated Wildlife Management Areas. However, the development and use of tourism has not been uniform in all such areas. For example, the 13,000 km² Okavango Delta (the world's largest inland wetland habitat of this type) is considered the most important attraction in Botswana, second only to the long-established Chobe National Park. Further national parks and game reserves, for example, Central Kalahari Game Reserve and Kgalagadi Trans frontier Park (former Gemsbok National Park) are less well known and thus has fewer tourists.

The specific site visits facilitated highly detailed discussions with key stakeholders and Botswana Tourism Organisation (BTO) officials and their private and third sector partners. All the evidence pointed to well-established, complex, and beneficial relationships between the indigenous populations, government, research community, and private and third (NGO) sectors. These relationships have framed and facilitated positive community engagement in tourism over many years. The relationships seem built on trust and underpinned by world-class, exemplar tourism policies. These policies and their implementation on the ground (including the controversial decision to ban trophy hunting, which was subject to much opposition from lobby groups inside and outside Botswana-although since rescinded) have made a significant contribution to the international political geography of conservation. BTO's approach to policy and strategic planning for sustainable tourism (including dealing with human-wildlife

conflict resolution) is based on partnerships, stakeholder engagement, and includes working with research institutes and national/ international NGOs who, evidence from the interviews indicate, feel empowered to positively influence policy.

The temporal restrictions meant that a substantial part of the fieldwork was focused mainly on BTO's work: its activities in the Chobe, Makgadikgadi, and Okavango Delta Ramsar sites comprise a significant amount of Botswana's tourism geography. The area in which the situation analysis took part is a major constituent of the Kavango Zambezi trans frontier Conservation Area (KAZA-TFCA, which is almost 520,000 km²). KAZA-TFCA was legally established by treaty in 2011 between Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe). Because of the long tradition of stable politics and a high reputation for good governance, in effect, Botswana (followed closely by Namibia) is the lead nation in this major conservation initiative.

A lot of the data gathered during the interviews concerned elephants and their management, in fact, the long-term health of the Okavango Delta in Botswana relies heavily on its northern neighbour, Angola. To this end, BTO is an active stakeholder in OKACOM, the secretariat providing technical and advisory services to the three governments of the Cubango-Okavango river basin. Their main aim is to foster better livelihoods and a healthy environment in the basin. The general feeling in the secretariat is that tourism could act as a high-profile cross-cutting theme that could offer some protection to the rivers feeding the Okavango Delta, but it is seriously underdeveloped in Angola, and needs further development in Namibia. The political complexities were also picked up by another regional organization, Kavango-Zambezi.

Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA), which concentrates on conservation and also tourism. BTO is presently working with KAZA in exploring ways for local communities to have a more dynamic involvement/ participation in wildlife conservation leading to greater socio-economic benefit and reduction in human-wildlife conflict. The Chobe Land Board spoke highly of BTO's role as a key stakeholder in its struggle to resolve the issue of traditional pastoralists in and around Chobe national park and

the need to protect species and fauna for tourist businesses- on the basis that a healthy tourism sector is seen (time and time again) to provide direct socio-benefit to what would otherwise be marginalised peoples.

A most interesting meeting was held with Reggie, a tribal leader with responsibility for five villages who explained the role played by BTO in helping the transition from consumptive wildlife tourism (hunting) to observation and photographic wildlife tourism... not an easy process given the sudden loss of income (trophy payments from hunt organisers to local communities). BTO helped the shift to capitalising on conservation and how BTO stepped up its advisory role in negotiations with tourism companies. Reggie was of the opinion that "without them [BTO] we would be lost". BTO has also been a contributing stakeholder to the policy of Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM). Tourism features in this 2006 policy document, defining what is meant by CBT and providing guidelines for its successful implementation. Regarding community traditions, BTO were major players in negotiating an end to traditional wildlife hunting by indigenous tribesmen, influencing community buy-in to new conservation ideas. This was a very challenging task with multiple layers of political, social and economic complexities.

In general, discussions on the ground revealed an overwhelmingly positive narrative and all of those with whom the researcher spoke were effusive about BTO's commitment to social and environmental sustainability in the region and the sensitive way in which they approach it. BTO has also had a role in empowering and safeguarding local communities by advising on, monitoring, and enforcing legal agreements concerning tourism and private sector land lease contracts. BTO's activities has gone a considerable way in in reducing vulnerability to poor financial deals between communities, their natural assets, and lease rental agreements with the private sector.

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