



How do you increase tourism revenues without impacting the environment and keeping it affordable to all? It's the challenge being tackled in Gonarezhou, where every effort is made to keep the National Park and its facilities as natural as possible. The result is an authentic, absorbing safari experience in a vast wilderness. Will this prove a sustainable, transformative approach? Time will tell, but we have to hope so.

BY SUE WATT

LIGHTNESS OF TOUCH

SHAUN MCMINN

Beauty smiles brightly, beaming with pride as she shows me around my room. This is no ordinary room — it's one she's hand-built with fellow camp assistants Eunice and Margaret, beautifully decorated and made of mud-brick walls, reed and thatch. But more than that, it represents the future in a new connection between communities, conservation and tourism deep in the bush of Gonarezhou.

This remote national park in south-eastern Zimbabwe is one of Africa's last great wildernesses, with rivers sweeping through gorges and floodplains, forests of

giant baobabs, lily-strewn pans — and the dramatic Chilojo Cliffs.

It's been through tough times, embroiled in the civil wars of both Zimbabwe and neighbouring Mozambique during the 1970s and '80s. Wildlife numbers plummeted, and it has since struggled under a dearth of resources.

In 2007 Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority invited Frankfurt Zoological Society to help restore Gonarezhou through anti-poaching patrols, wildlife monitoring and improved infrastructure. A decade later, heralding an exciting new chapter, the two organisations formed the

Gonarezhou Conservation Trust (GCT) to manage the park for 20 years.

Gonarezhou, spanning 5,035sq km, means 'place of elephants' and it's now home to around 11,000 pachyderms. Plans are afoot to reintroduce rhinos once the extensive preparatory work and research have been concluded.

Some 8,000 visitors — mostly self-drivers and safari connoisseurs — came here in 2019, up 29 per cent on 2018. But GCT has a delicate balance to strike. How do they develop tourism without destroying the very reason people come here — to experience the wild, untrammelled

bush — yet still bring in the money to protect wildlife, maintain infrastructure and benefit local people?

"We're aiming to make tourism work for conservation, rather than the other way round," Simon Capon, GCT's Business Development Manager, explains. "Our partnerships with communities, with tourism and with ZimParks are vital to the park's success."

There are no lodges within the National Park and its campsites range from simple wild camping near Chilojo Cliffs to ensuite tents at Chipinda Pools. But three unique *manangas*, meaning a 'place in the bush' in the Shangaan

language, are adding a new dimension.

My bedroom, built by Beauty in Masasani Mananga, replicates the village homes that traditionally are made by women. Overlooking a dam, I am visited by eight elephants splashing away and an egret riding on a submerged hippo, gliding like an avian periscope through the water.

Each mananga has four comfy rooms, a well-equipped kitchen and a *boma*, run by all-female teams who will rebuild them every year. They've been trained at GCT's new Makonde Training School within the park. Helping people to benefit directly from wildlife,

the school is training chefs, guides and camp assistants from nearby communities who'll play a central role in supporting future tourism.

Next day, we drive to Chilojo Cliffs, a seven-hour return journey. We see plenty of wildlife, particularly elephants. Two bulls are playfighting, locking tusks and swinging heads, and several cow herds mooch past, some with tiny babies. But we see just one other vehicle.

"That's Gonarezhou's USP," Simon says. "What you're really paying for isn't your room, but rather the privilege of waking up in this wilderness, sitting on top of Chilojo Cliffs and feeling like you're the only person on Earth." →

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WILL WHITFORD (2)



ANT KASCHULA / PRIVATE GUIDED SAFARIS



MANA MEADOWS / GONAREZHOU CONSERVATION TRUST

Top right: There are estimated to be between 10-11,000 elephants in Gonarezhou

Above: 89 mammal species (including giraffe and eland) and 400 bird species have been recorded in the park

Left: A contemplative evening under the stars in the boma

We have lunch at Gonrezhou Bushcamp, previously run by top private guide Ant Kaschula. GCT has now taken on the camp management, with more revenue going directly to the park for conservation. Working alongside renowned private guides including Ant, GCT provides the camp, vehicles and staff, with the guides able to tailor the safari to their clients' needs. It's a beautiful place near the Runde River; simple but stylish with five ensuite tents and spectacular views over to Chilojo Cliffs.

Almost 200m high and 16km long, in tiers of terracotta, cream and pink, the Chilojo Cliffs tower above the valley floor like a fortress in a fairytale. From the top, we see elephants looking like tiny toys near the snaking river and black eagles nesting in the cliffs below. There's not another soul around, just nature doing its thing in one of Africa's most beautiful settings.

Next morning, Gonarezhou's Community Liaison Officer Elias Libombo tells me about GCT's new partnerships with its neighbours. "Previously, the park and people were like enemies, only coming together if someone committed an offence. Things have greatly improved since we started our *Mpfhuka* meetings. *Mpfhuka* means journey. We don't have all the answers, but we say 'let's take this journey together.'"

The meetings occur in the 12 wards surrounding Gonarezhou, discussing issues concerning the park. GCT now employs community extension workers to monitor and mitigate incidents of human-wildlife conflict – including crop-raiding and killing of livestock – and to provide workshops on conservation and protecting crops and animals. Day trips into

the park for community members and school children are also arranged. For many, this would be the first time that they see the wildlife, especially in a non-conflict context.

But the biggest benefit for communities is employment, and some 77 per cent of the park's 279 permanent staff are local, originating from within 15km of the park's boundary. As tourism develops, employment opportunities will only increase.

The nearest lodge to Gonarezhou is the luxury Chilo Gorge, owned by renowned conservationist Clive Stockil. On the park's northern border, the ten-roomed lodge stands high above the spectacular gorge of the Save River. Most of its staff are from nearby Mahenye, where Clive grew up, and the community receives lease fees and a percentage of its income.

On game drives, we explore the lily-strewn hippo habitats of Tembwehata Pan and nearby Machaniwa Pan, both Important Birding Areas. We see plenty more elephants, herds of eland and, weirdly, a hermaphrodite nyala with the female's reddish colouring but the body and horns of a male. On Runde River's floodplains near Chilo's lovely Mahove Tented Camp, we see zebra, kudu and impala and the pin-sharp paw prints of a lion.

We drive around Mahenye, home to 6000 people whose abodes are mud and thatch, with cattle *kraals* and grain stores. Clive started community-based conservation here 40 years ago with the CAMPFIRE initiative (Communal Area Management Programme for Indigenous Resources) that later became replicated across Africa.

Excluded from their former homelands →



MANA MEADOWS / GONAREZHOU CONSERVATION TRUST (2)

that became the national park, people resorted to poaching and violent battles with rangers ensued. Clive believed that if communities benefitted from wildlife, they'd protect it. After difficult negotiations, hunting safaris were allowed on communal lands with a quota of two elephants annually: the communities received the meat and money, and poaching dropped dramatically. "This community became a good neighbour because they saw real benefits from wildlife: we built the school, the clinic, the boreholes. Their change in attitude over the past 40 years has been phenomenal."

Working with Chilo and GCT, Mahenye recently gave 18,000 acres of land bordering the park to form Jamanda Community Conservancy for wildlife conservation and photographic tourism. Although it is early days, plans include possible wildlife translocations later this year and a five-room camp near the Save River.

"It'll be low impact and low cost. The community aren't looking for millions, they're looking for a little benefit. Even that makes a huge difference to their livelihoods," Clive tells me.



Above and top: Mathuli mananga; an artisan using traditional methods to decorate Masasani mananga

"I'm very appreciative of GCT," he continues. "I've lived here all my life and never has there been a time of such positive engagement with the community as there is right now."

We're sipping G&Ts on the sandy shores of the Save, which looks like a river of gold as the sun sets. On the opposite bank is Gonarezhou, on this side Jamanda. It truly is a special place, and it's clearly in good hands. 🐾

Right: Chilo Gorge, the only tourist lodge servicing Gonarezhou



CHILO GORGE

SAFARI PLANNER

GETTING THERE:

Gonarezhou is a popular self-drive destination, accessible through South Africa or from within Zimbabwe. A 4WD is essential on most roads. Road transfers are available in Zimbabwe from operators like Nyati Travel, and many visitors arrive by light aircraft from Johannesburg, Kruger or Harare.

WHERE TO STAY:

For self-drivers there are several remote campsites with no facilities, chalets and three developed campsites. Check before travelling what is provided and what you need to bring. The new manangas offer tourist quality accommodation modelled on traditional-style housing. Private guided safaris use mobile tented camps, including Chilo's Mahove Camp and Ivy Trail. Lodge accommodation is offered by Chilo Gorge on the northern boundary.

WHEN TO TRAVEL:

Gonarezhou experiences a hot dry climate through the year, with temperatures above 40°C at the height of the summer (from November to April), dropping below

SUE WATT travelled with Gonarezhou Conservation Trust (gonarezhou.org), Chilo Gorge Lodge (chilogorge.com) and Africa Conservation Travel (africaconservationtravel.com).



30°C in the short dry winter in June and July. Average rainfall is about 466mm but is variable, and rains fall mainly in the summer (December-March).

RESEARCH:

Several long-running research programmes operate in Gonarezhou, including studies focused on predators and pangolins.

THE WIDER REGION:

Gonarezhou is part of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park, which links with Kruger National Park in South Africa and Limpopo, Zinave and Banhine national parks in Mozambique. To the north, the Save Valley Conservancy and the Malilangwe Trust are private wildlife conservancies which also have a strong community conservation ethos.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

www.gonarezhou.org



ALAN SPARROW

hosi ya misinya nimani? angava mani? ioke anagahiyena mhuru

"Who is the king of the forest? Who else but the baobab" (SHANGAAN SAYING)

SEARCHING FOR BVEKENYA'S BAOBAB

BY ALAN SPARROW

After a night's camping at Chipinda Pools, Clive Stockil and I drove across the new low-level bridge over the Runde River into the southern section of Gonarezhou National Park. We were on a mission to find the biggest baobab within the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park, which traverses Zimbabwe, South Africa and Mozambique.

We collected Solomon Bvekenya on the western boundary, kindly lent to us by the Frankfurt Zoological Society. Solomon is a local Shangaan and the grandson of the renowned elephant hunter Cecil Barnard, who hunted the area known as Crooks Corner, where the three countries meet, over one hundred years ago. Barnard was nick-named Bvekenya ("He who swaggers as he walks") by the Shangaans. Having grown up here, Solomon Bvekenya knows Gonarezhou well.

Some years before, Clive and I had measured the biggest known baobab in the Save Valley Conservancy, adjacent to the National Park, at 28.9 metres circumference at chest height. Solomon claimed he knew a bigger one, a tree his grandfather had used as a campsite.

We camped rough for the next two nights, spending happy evenings around the campfire, reminiscing on our childhoods growing up in the area. Legend has it that for many centuries

Indian traders had used the Save River to bring goods from Sofala on the Mozambique coast to trade with the then rulers of Great Zimbabwe, including cinnamon, beads, pepper, oils, cowrie shells, silks and salampore cloth, which they exchanged for ivory, tortoise shell, precious stones and gold.

We didn't have to walk far to find Bvekenya's baobab. My first thought was "ahh... two stems". This meant that it could not compete with the other big baobabs, but it was thrilling nonetheless to see the tree we had heard so much about. Its links to the history of Gonarezhou were reason enough for this adventure.

We returned Solomon to his place of work and drove east, emerging upstream of the famous Chilojo Cliffs on the Runde River. Crossing the Runde always feels like turning the clock back 100 years.

Clive showed me the hollow baobab near the Tembwehata Pan, above the junction of the Save and Runde rivers. This tree is said to have been a hideout for poachers. Now it is protected by heavy-duty mesh wire, part of a programme by the Frankfurt Zoological Society, Gonarezhou Conservation Trust and Chilo Lodge to prevent the trees from being damaged by the park's strong elephant population.

Baobabs and elephants: two of many good reasons to visit this wonderful park.