

BREAKING DOWN THE BARRICADES

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INTRODUCTION

A brave vision or an impossible dream?

In front of me as I write is a map of southern Africa. It is like no map I have seen before of this region. As a result of the colonial scramble for land, the filigree of national boundaries is characterised by straight lines; many were drawn with no regard for natural features, existing tribal territories or long established migratory routes. Overlaid on this backdrop is a breathtakingly bold vision for the future. Great swathes of land are linked to re-establish ancient wildlife ranges. A vast corridor sweeps southwards connecting the Great Lakes from Lake Albert in Zaire via Lake Tanganyika all the way down to Lake Malawi; another runs down the length of the Great Rift Valley. With scarcely a gap, another even larger tract of land brings together the Zambezi Valley with Zambia's Kafue National Park and the Okovango Delta, and extends westwards to Namibia's Skeleton Coast. It is a collage of Africa's current national parks and wildlife reserves with the existing gaps between them filled in to present a series of 'Peace Parks'. A brave vision or an impossible dream?

In April, the Presidents of South Africa and Botswana signed a treaty linking the Gemsbok National Park and the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park to form Africa's first Peace Park, the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. Under this treaty, the two countries retain their sovereign territory but agree to share facilities and cooperate in a joint management plan. Visitors will only have to complete formalities once on entry and can then travel freely within the 37,991 square kilometres of park regardless of which country they happen to be in.

The concept of transfrontier conservation has been enthusiastically promoted by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) for some time. As early as 1932 the USA and Canada established a treaty to form the Waterton-Glacier National Park from existing protected areas. Similar but often less formal arrangements are in force in an estimated 100 regions worldwide ranging from the Manas Parks of India and Bhutan to cooperation between France and Italy to accommodate migrations of ibex, reintroduce the bearded vulture and protect vulnerable species such as lynx and wolves.

In 1990 and 1996 Dr Anton Rupert, President of the Worldwide Fund for Nature South Africa and President Chissano of Mozambique met to discuss ways of creating permanent links between protected areas in Mozambique and their adjacent counterparts in South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. Later, researchers carried out feasibility studies, produced reports for the respective governments and obtained agreements in principle to pursue the matter further. Two years ago the Peace Parks Foundation, a non-profit making company was formed under Rupert's chairmanship to fund and help develop Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs). The organisation aimed to promote regional peace and stability, create new jobs associated with the anticipated growth of tourism in southern Africa and help conserve biological diversity.

The foundation initially identified seven potential TFCAs. Kgalagadi is the classic model and was the simplest to bring to fruition because all the land was already national park territory. Many of the others are highly complex mosaics made up of parcels of land belonging to national parks, private game reserves, agricultural farms, game farms and hunting concessions, large-scale mining enterprises and communal

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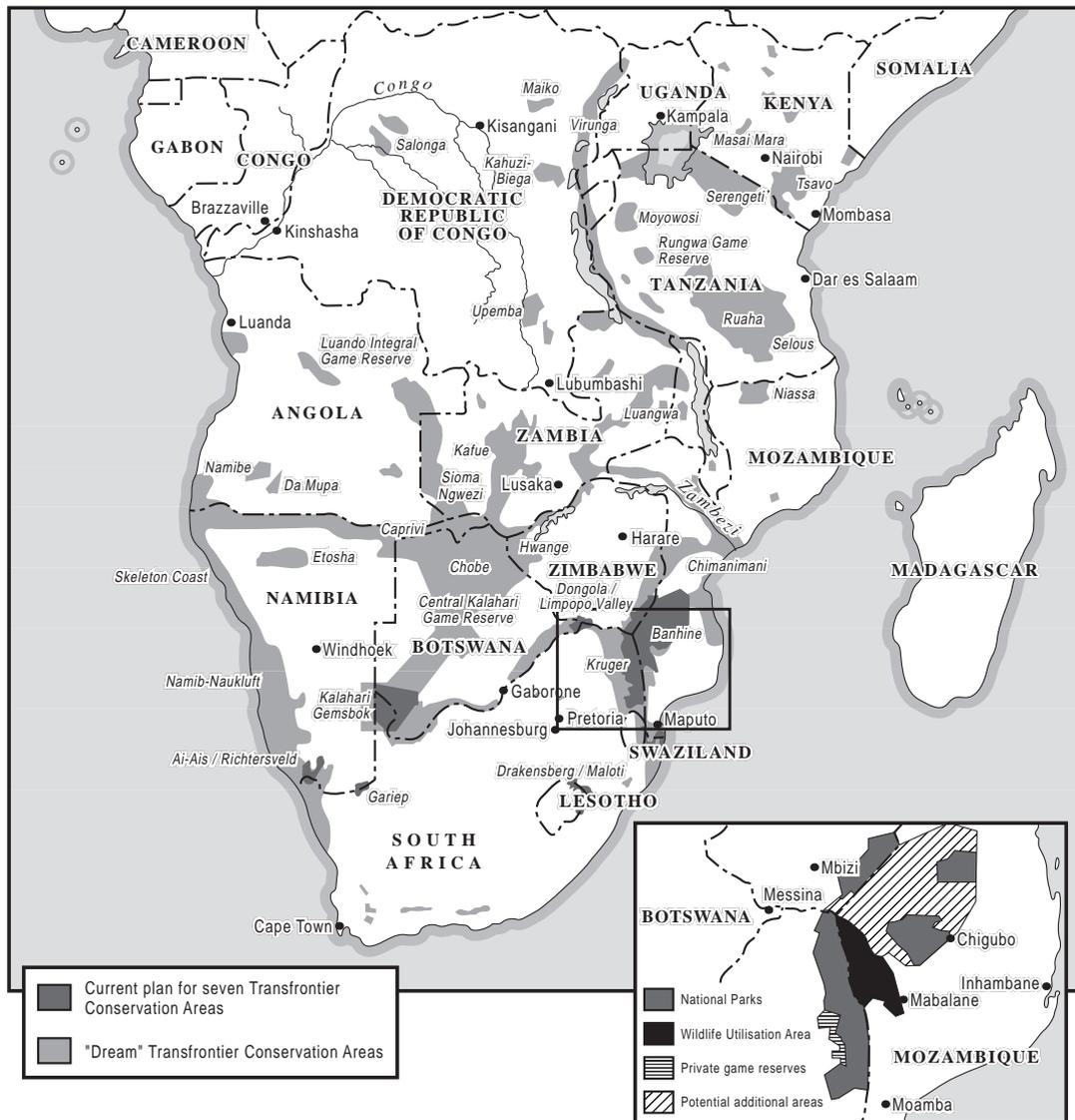
A good example of how complicated the procedure can be is illustrated by the Kruger/Banhine-Zinave/Gonarezhou TFCA. This is the largest of the original seven proposed parks at a staggering 95,712 square kilometres. The South African portion mainly comprises Kruger National Park, one of the best stocked and managed national parks in Africa, together with a number of the highly profitable private game reserves that border it. Kruger receives around 900,000 visitors per year, drawn to one of the major areas of vertebrate diversity in southern Africa. It has 147 species of mammals including 1,500 lions, 2,000 spotted hyena, over 8,000 elephants, 2,200 white rhinos, 250 black rhinos, 32,000 Burchell's zebra, 2,200 hippos, 5,000 giraffe, 1,500 warthog, 16,700 buffalo, 3,500 kudu, 1,500 waterbuck, 14,000 blue wildebeest, 100,000 impala, assorted eland, nyala, bushbuck, roan, tsessebe, sable, steenbok, mountain reedbuck – and so the list goes on. And that is before considering 505 species of birds, 51 species of fish, 35 amphibians and 119 reptiles. In October a new international airport will open at Eastgate, just outside the park entrance. This will take direct flights from Europe. Just one jumbo jet per day will take up all of Kruger's spare tourist capacity.

Meanwhile, across the border in Zimbabwe, Gonarezhou National Park receives just 5,000 visitors each year. It is under-stocked, under-resourced and difficult to reach from Harare. It is therefore ideally placed to soak up some of the overspill from Kruger to the benefit of both parks through a proposed new corridor. But of course life is not that simple. Zimbabwe's cattle farmers are dead against anyone removing fences that would allow the free movement of South African game into Zimbabwe. This is because of the threat posed to Zimbabwe's valuable beef industry from bovine tuberculosis which some of Kruger's 16,000 strong buffalo herd carry. It is a sensitive and contentious issue for which no solution has yet been identified. A strong debate rages about the relative economic values of farming versus tourism, with both sides taking up entrenched positions.

The Mozambique portion of the proposed TFCA, which makes up 72% of the whole is around the size of Wales. It includes the Coutada Wildlife Utilisation Area, a vast hunting concession which has allegedly been implicated in luring lions from Kruger through holes cut in the intervening fence, doping them with drugged meat and then presenting them to hunting clients to be shot as trophies. Beyond Coutada, is an even larger sparsely populated area of communal land surrounding Banhine and Zinave national parks. Seventeen years of civil war have left Mozambique's parks largely bereft of game and resources. Banhine, which is half the size of Kruger, has no infrastructure, no roads, and not a single member of staff working there. The reinvestment required to bring the Mozambican area up to standard is enormous and long-term.

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So why should the South Africans risk all they have established in Kruger by tearing down the fence that demarcates the border with Mozambique – a border that for many years not only prevented animals utilising their traditional migratory routes but also separated two warring countries? The answer is range. Kruger has too many elephants for its size, and since 1976 the park authorities have been in the invidious position of having to cull between 300-600 elephants per year to limit the destruction of vegetation and habitat. Removing the fence and allowing the elephants to spread out into Mozambique will alleviate the overcrowding problem in Kruger and eliminate the highly sensitive and unwelcome need to cull elephants. Similarly, other species such as cheetah and wild dog, one of Africa's most endangered species with only an estimated 3,000 still in existence, need far greater range to move and hunt than is currently available to them.



As if all of the above is not enough, other issues haunt the process. In the past, national parks were established on an exclusive basis. Tribes such as the Makuleke were marched off their land in northern Kruger in 1969. They and many other similarly dispossessed local communities were fenced out and denied the right to farm, subsist, hunt, forage for firewood or draw water from what they regarded as their rightful land. Meanwhile, rich western tourists from whom the tribes derived no financial benefit, drove around photographing or hunting animals and staying in luxury lodges.

A MODEL FUTURE

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The task of satisfying these conflicting interests is a daunting one. The substantial progress that is being made, albeit painstakingly slowly with many years of frustrating diplomacy at all levels, has a number of roots. First is the re-emergence of South Africa from the political wilderness which has enabled its very considerable experiences and resources to be brought to bear. In conjunction with this, many other conflicts within the southern African region have subsided enabling international diplomacy to resume. Second is the three-pronged approach of transfrontier conservation, This combines addressing Africa's key crises of unemployment and poverty with establishing a culture of peace through open borders and cooperation and at the same time furthering the cause of biodiversity conservation. Different elements of this appeal to different levels in the chain but there is no doubt that the potential for increasing unemployment and producing much needed revenue has greatly influenced the high level of political support. The heads of state of Botswana,

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Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe have all promised support by agreeing to be honorary patrons of the Peace Parks Foundation.

Lastly, the success is in large measure due to the broad-minded, inclusive approach that is being taken towards managing the peace parks. The old concept of national parks as centres of pure protectionism for wildlife with all other activities being excluded is seen as being financially, socially and politically unsustainable. The new model for transfrontier conservation is to bring together a mosaic of different land parcels, under different land tenure and wildlife management regimes which will be mutually supporting and contribute both to conservation and rural economies.

The effect of this is that national parks will exist alongside private reserves, farms, hunting concessions, communal land and commercial enterprises managed under an umbrella organisation in which they all have a voice. No longer will national governments dictate all policy. The TFCAs will have self-determination about wildlife policies, investment, and how they manage their natural and financial resources. Their work will begin, in the words of executive director of the Peace Parks foundation, Dr John Hanks "*by righting the wrongs of the past.*" Land claims will be processed and land returned to its rightful owners who will be able to decide how, if at all, they wish to join in with the transfrontier conservation process. The Makuleke have won their claim and 23,000 hectares of northern Kruger have been reinstated to them. They have decided not to re-occupy this land, despite the fact they are traditionally agriculturalists, but to lease it to the TFCA for eco-tourism from which they hope to gain a greater dividend.

Where communities are occupying land within potential TFCA boundaries they will be given the choice of whether to lease the land to the TFCA and seek employment within the resulting tourism job base or to remain in situ and to continue their existence as farmers or pastoralists. If they choose the latter there is no question of them being forced off the land and safeguards will be put in place to protect them from the threats to themselves, their stock and crops posed by wildlife. In some instances this will mean building fences to protect people from wildlife, rather than the old way of building fences to keep indigenous people out of designated wildlife areas.

In Kruger/Banhine-Zinave/Gonarezhou TFCA the priorities are to investigate the issue of disease transmission and to safeguard the future of the Coutada Wildlife Utilisation Area which will shortly go to tender. This will be managed by a private organisation as a mirror image of Kruger, to pave the way for removing the game fence between Kruger and Mozambique. As an interim stage before opening up the Mozambican land, which could take up to 20 years, the Coutada concessionaire will have to agree to fence all the concession area apart from the border with Kruger.

THE ROAD IS LONG

The road ahead is clearly going to be long and hard for the Peace Parks Foundation. The Dongola/Limpopo TFCA is the next most likely to come to fruition, but much still has to be done. Some farms have to be bought from private owners and 4,000 people occupy a key area of communal land in Zimbabwe. If this is to be successfully included, there will need to be some very delicate negotiations. Elsewhere, the Drakensburg/Maloti TFCA is going ahead well, with the keen support of the Lesotho government. There are some signs that, as each TFCA progresses, there is a local domino effect with land owners on the flanks of proposed projects applying to join in.

At government level, the development is even more encouraging. Detailed studies are under way to look at the transfrontier potential of two new huge areas. The first would link Victoria Falls and the Upper Zambezi with Zambia's Kafue National

Park, Zimbabwe's Hwange park, Botswana's Okovango and Chobe park, and Namibia's Caprivi Strip. The second area will need the countries bordering Lake Malawi to join forces and create a TFCA centred around the lake. Encouragingly, the governments of Mozambique and Tanzania have suggested expanding the scope of this to consider including Nyassa National Park in Mozambique and Selous and Ruaha National Parks in Tanzania.

It is tempting to be cynical. How many ill-conceived quick-fix schemes aimed at 'sorting-out Africa's problems' have foundered in the past, lost in a mire of apathy, ineptitude and corruption? How many times before has one heard, 'But this time it is different'? But this time it does seem different. The logic behind transfrontier conservation run on the model described above seems rooted in sound common sense. Creating areas where everyone has a vested interest in the good management of the project and the well-being of natural resources must surely proffer hope. Most compelling is the macroeconomic potential in a region desperate to create both jobs and wealth. In many areas the people are poor and hungry. Throughout Africa, national parks already in crisis from under resourcing are facing the real threat of land-hungry people who see no benefit from the existing regime. Only time will tell whether transfrontier conservation can provide the solution but at the moment the signs look optimistic.

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