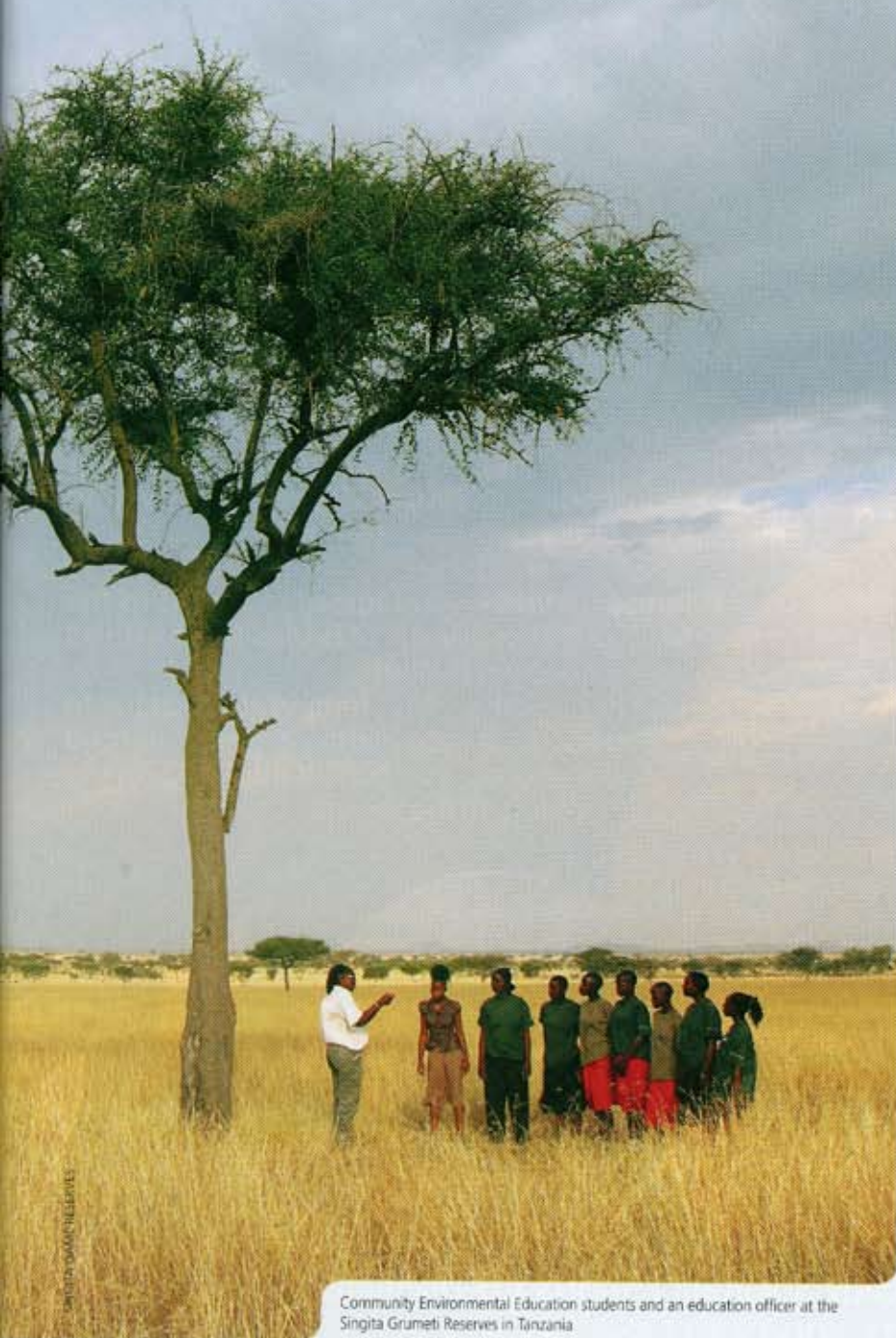


paradise

lost and found

Africa's diverse variety of ecologically sensitive areas is of great appeal to global tourists but is that enough to ensure paradise forever? By KERRY DIMMER





Community Environmental Education students and an education officer at the Singita Grumeti Reserves in Tanzania

Once upon a time in Africa, all living

things were honoured. But when new technology came to the continent, nature became a commodity and was quickly thrown off balance – with terrible consequences.

Now, ironically, it is technology and human will that drives development that may undo some of the damage. One way in which this is being achieved is through tourism, specifically ecotourism.

Africa is considered by many as the birthplace of ecotourism – in its raw form that is. As hunting safaris grew in popularity, and the demand for ivory increased, the declining numbers of species like leopard, lion and elephant made it clear that if these populations weren't protected and poaching eliminated, many more animal varieties would completely disappear.

The pressure that environmentalists and animal activists put on governments in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in East Africa where hunting activities were prolific, resulted in the introduction of legislation aimed at protecting many aspects of the environment. This landmark victory gave these countries a conscience, but the resulting flood of tourists highlighted the unnecessary pressure that their presence was having on not just the ecologically sensitive zones, but also on the cultures of the communities that live in and around these areas.

It was obvious that ecotourism needed to be controlled and guided, particularly in Africa which has some of the world's most diverse and varied species of animals, plants, and biomes. And so it was that ecotourism was defined as 'travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and (usually) small scale'.

According to the UN World Tourism Organisation, ecotourism has escalated to become the fastest growing segment of the travel industry over the past five years, with growth of 30% per annum. It is expected that southern Africa alone could be looking at growth of 300% by 2020. But how good can this be for the ecologically sensitive areas of Africa?

'Well, provided some basic tenets are adhered to, very good indeed,' says Jochen Zeitz. His non-profit organisation, the Zeitz Foundation, follows a strict '4 Cs' policy – conservation, community, culture and commerce.

The Zeitz Foundation's vision is of an eco-sphere that is maintained in the healthiest



Wild gorillas in Uganda

possible state. 'This of course means a commitment from our various stakeholders and communities where we are active, to support the highest standards of sustainability with the lightest tread on the environment.'

One of the foundation's first initiatives is Long Run – nine destinations that have been certified and endorsed by Long Run ambassadors and specialists as 'global ecosphere retreats'. Three of these are in Africa: Chumbe Island Coral Park in Tanzania, Segera in Kenya, and Wolwedans in Namibia.

Apart from the obvious ecological attractions that the three offer, there is another common thread among them: they all conduct some form of green-friendly activity, be it harnessing solar energy, harvesting rainwater or using easily dismantled structures that have no permanent impact on their surroundings.

Being authentically 'eco' is, however, rare and difficult. Many retreats and destinations make such claims based on one eco-friendly act alone. It's called 'greenwashing'. But by adopting accreditation systems, governments and tourism-related businesses will be able to classify the 'eco-worthiness' of a site.

Just getting to an African eco-sensitive destination, whether by plane or road, already leaves a footprint, but as Zeitz says: 'As long as those negative impacts are offset against meaningful efforts to minimise harm and maximise the good, then every small act

begins to heal the whole and produces commercial benefits to the maintenance of those sites.'

Many projects do not have the benefit of external funding and expertise, and are dependent on the extraordinary offerings of the actual site. Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary in Sierra Leone is such a case.

It leans towards satisfying most of the basic rules of ecotourism: to help educate the traveller; provide funds for conservation; directly benefit economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and foster respect for different cultures and human rights.

Tiwai means 'big island', a real misnomer, for despite being Sierra Leone's largest inland island, it is only 12 km². Its drawback is that it is host to one of the most diverse concentrations of primates in the world – some extremely rare and endangered.

Visitors camp in prepared rainforest tents and while it's recognised that it is important to encourage as many visitors and researchers as possible, it's also understood that the hosting capacity must be in relation to the ecological impact of those visitors. Tiwai is a community-driven conservation programme and all funds go back into the project as well as towards helping support other community programmes.

Eco-sensitive zones in Africa are usually in remote areas and not easily accessible, such

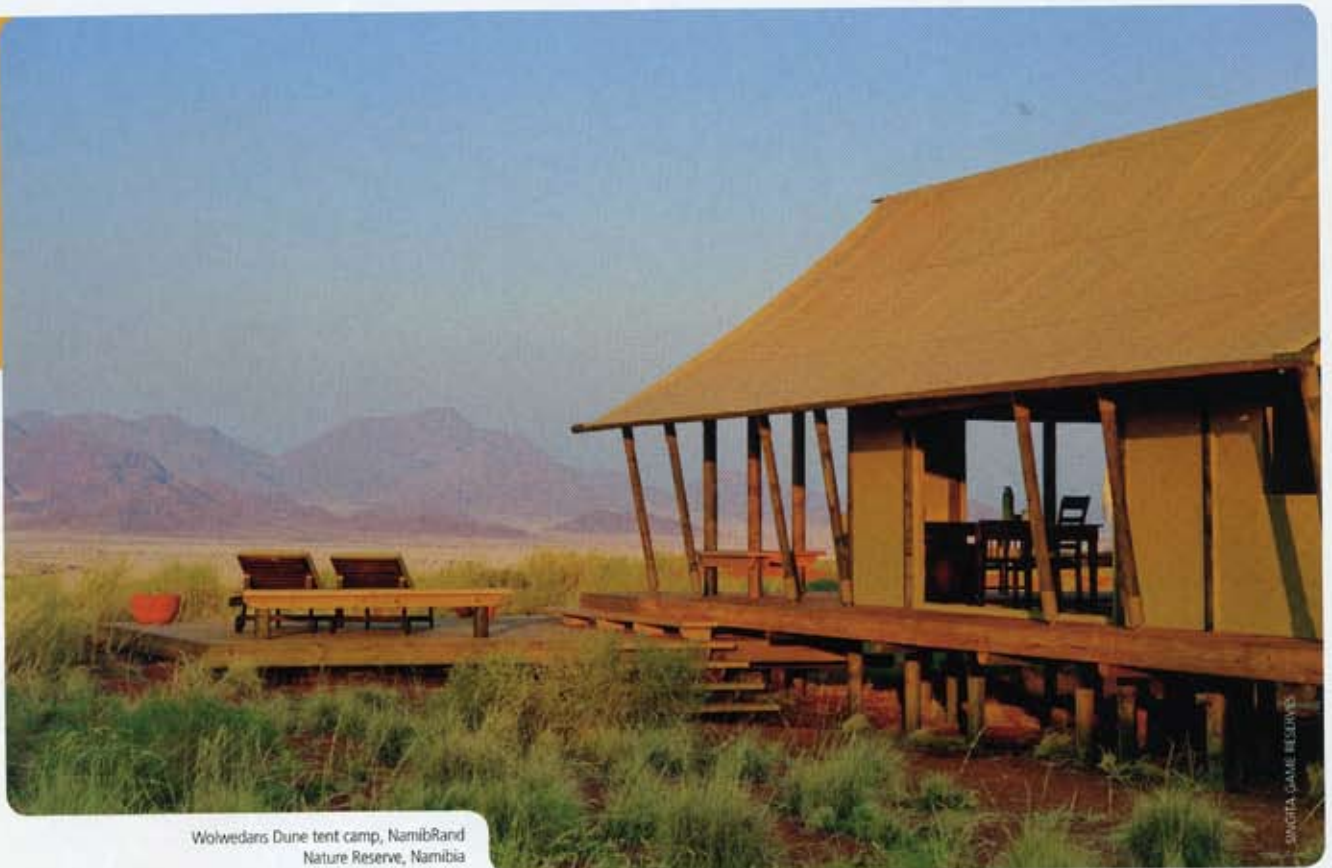
as the Selous Niassa Wildlife Corridor between Mozambique and south Tanzania. Rudolf Hahn managed, from 2005 until recently, the Corridor Project with funding from the UNDP's Global Environment Facility.

'The Selous Niassa Wildlife Corridor can be compared to conservation areas like the Serengeti and the Ngorongoro Crater, but it's a new tourism destination, and is slow in attracting attention from tourists,' says Hahn.

'Currently only low environmental impact hunting has been developed in the northern part of the corridor, but the southern part (which reaches the Ruvuma River interface) has the potential to be developed as a new destination for non-consumptive wildlife-based tourism.'

There are several areas along the corridor that have been designated by communities for eco-friendly tourism, but despite joint ventures within the private sector, approval is still outstanding from the Ministry for Natural Resources and Tourism. All new construction requires an environmental impact assessment to avoid any negative effect on the ecosystem.

'Although tourists are not expected to flood the corridor in the medium term,' says Hahn, 'there are a number of techniques ready to be implemented that serve to prevent deterioration of the natural heritage. These include environmentally friendly construction as well as waste and energy management.'



Wolwedans Dune tent camp, NamibRand Nature Reserve, Namibia

It's one thing to educate a tourist about how to behave in an environmentally sensitive area, and another to ensure these regions are maintained. One way of doing so is through educating local communities.

Singita Grumeti Reserves in the western corridor has heeded the call by the Tanzanian government to address the destruction of biodiversity by educating the locals so that they too can play a role in the preservation of the surrounding ecosystem.

Lindy Rousseau, Singita group sales and marketing manager, says of the Environmental Education Centre it has established: 'Trainees are encouraged and equipped to pursue their livelihoods in a more sustainable fashion and to devise effective solutions to the primary factors that threaten the ecosystem within which they live. We aim to have 350 youths complete the programme each school year.'

The youth is an ideal market to target because they will become the future leaders of commerce, industry and government. Another such educational effort is being

undertaken by Southern Cross Schools in Hoedspruit, South Africa.

The eco-friendly school is situated on a private reserve and scholars are encouraged to join the Biosphere Society that exposes them to all aspects of biomes and wildlife, inclusive of animal autopsies. Many of these children will go on to become eco tour guides, conservationists and environmentalists.

Avako Ezaki, director of communications at the International Ecotourism Society says that Kenya is one of the leading African countries that effectively promotes and supports ecotourism.

'Ecotourism Kenya plays a key role in connecting stakeholders. Likewise, Botswana has successfully developed unique wildlife safari tourism strategies which attract high-end visitors.'

The milieu of eco-sensitive areas in Africa is varied: the rainforest of Ghana; lemurs in Madagascar; game reserves in Kenya and South Africa; birding in Botswana; Simien Mountains in Ethiopia ... the list is endless.

That there are huge economic benefits, both for governments and communities – derived from entry fees, licences and concessions, lodging, transportation, food, guides and souvenirs – is not in doubt.

James Cumming, analyst and environmental economist at OneWorld Sustainable Investments comments that the gorillas in Uganda and Rwanda are a case in point: 'Those animals would be entirely wiped out if it weren't for the US\$400-a-day fees that tourists pay in order to spend 30 minutes with these gracious yet terrifyingly large and confident beasts.

'You must take note that it's often not only tourism that needs to be managed in areas such as these, but the role of needy locals who see the environment as an infinite resource, having a very anthropocentric view of nature, killing or chopping down what they can to put food on the table.'

So, while the focus must be on the impact travellers have on the ecologically sensitive areas of Africa, it must be balanced with a commitment by indigenous people to honour their paradise before it is lost.

Perhaps the signboard at Lake Manyara National Park in Tanzania sums it up: 'Let no one say, and say it to your shame, that all was beauty until you came.' **AD**

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