



Clockwise from flag: Mozambique's Kalashnikov-rifle flag flutters over a village school - a reminder of conflict from the past

Uchesse's chief unloads cement bound for the local school

Sunset over explorer David Livingstone's 'Lake of Stars'

Schoolboys framed by Uchesse school's cracked, bare walls

A dugout canoe - the only means of transport and source of fishing income for many lakeside people

The Manda Wilderness coastline with its fine white beaches, crystal-clear freshwater and so-far untouched hinterland

Facing page: The next generation, raring to go

BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE BLUE LAKE

After decades of neglect and isolation, the Mozambique shores of Lake Niassa are emerging as fertile ground for both development and conservation, with local Chinyanja people somewhat torn between the two as major and minor players get involved.

Those players include the WWF, intent on protecting one of Africa's biggest freshwater lakes; the Mozambique government, keen to tap the region's tourism potential; commercial interests eyeing large tracts of under-utilised land; an eco-tourism project determined to protect both the land and the people who live there; and, at the core of it all, a young communities association feeling its power for the first time.

And in the meantime, wildlife which abandoned this northeastern corner of Mozambique when it was gripped by a long civil war is steadily finding its way back, delighting conservationists and occasionally alarming those who share its natural habitat.

Jeremy Toye sets out on a venerable lake steamer to explore one of East Africa's least-exploited regions.

As the Ilala steamer nears the remote Mozambique town of Cobue, she meets the only other vessels on Lake Niassa - the dugout canoes

of the fishermen and an occasional dhow with tattered sails stitched together from rags and mosquito nets. The fishermen are farther out in the lake than they used to be, because, they say, the number of catfish and tasty 'chambo' (*Oreochromis squamipinnis*) have declined over the years. Some of their fishing tackle looks alarmingly familiar - fine-meshed mosquito nets that scoop out even the smallest fry and leave none to breed.

Some of those fishermen are not from Mozambique at all - they come south from Tanzania or from across the western side of the lake in Malawi. As part of its conservation schemes, Malawi imposes a seasonal ban on fishing on its side for part of the year, so the fishermen head for Mozambique - and many of those I saw on the sandy beaches had the same fine-meshed nets.

The WWF (www.worldwildlife.org), backed by the Mozambique government in distant Maputo and the regional centre of Linchinga, began promoting a Niassa aquatic reserve for the lake during 2006, following earlier findings that local fishermen recognised the need for action as their catches dwindled.

But when the WWF people arrived on the scene, they met with a force more powerful than a handful



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of fishermen. This was UMOJI, a community-led organisation linking the 15 villages in a lakeshore area covering over 120,000 Km - the size of Greater London.

UMOJI, the local chinyanja word meaning "As One", had its origins on land, not on the lake. UMOJI was the local villagers' enthusiastic and positive response to a combined conservation and tourism project started in 2000 by a small group of friends led by Patrick Simkin.

'Mr Patrick', a 37-year-old Englishman who runs the luxury Nkwichi Lodge he built among the hidden coves to the south of Mala village, recalls that he and his colleagues wanted to work with the communities as well as government officials. The result was the Manda Wilderness Community Trust (www.mandawilderness.org), a UK-registered charity that works alongside local villagers to offer improvements to lives where vital services such as health facilities have been in very short supply.

As an example, Simkin cites the construction of a new maternity unit in Cobue. Seven communities each committed to make up to 1,800 bricks for the project - a major undertaking in an area where everything is done by hand. The Manda Trust and others provided imported material such as cement and nails, and the villagers supplied the labour.

Education was the other top priority. The Manda Trust and lo-





cal villagers have built or renovated six schools so far and hundreds of schoolchildren now see the benefits of primary education for the first time.

UMOJI also managed another major achievement in a country where socialist principles still mean all land belongs to the state: they won the right to the titles of the land they live on and farm.

The UMOJI representatives gathered on Cobue's main beach one summer's morning were clearly proud of what they had achieved and relish their reputation as hard bargainers. That new-found feeling of empowerment came to the fore when the WWF plans for an aquatic reserve began to take shape.

The WWF declared that in order to protect the lake, a buffer zone along the lakeshore should be created in which human activities such as farming and settlement would have to be controlled. And since WWF was working with government officials, it was suggested that the state should have that control. UMOJI resisted, especially when it was suggested that the government should take back their hard-won land-titles.

"We were tough on them," remembers Charles Chitedzi, one of the local chiefs serving on UMOJI alongside democratically-elected representatives. He says it with a broad grin, and most of the negotiation was serious and cordial.

But tension rose when rumours spread that the WWF plan would ban fishing altogether along a whole swath of the shoreline. And when a WWF team visited one village to explain their real plans, it was peppered with sticks and stones.

Eventually, a deal was thrashed out that UMOJI says will protect breeding areas along the shore such as the mouths of rivers, and limit the use of fine-mesh nets to areas more than two Km offshore - and then only for the local equivalent of sardines. And UMOJI believes it will be responsible for controlling the lakeshore buffer zone.

At that point, the focus of attention shifted back to the landward side. The Manda Wilderness Trust had won a grant from the Ford Foundation to commission a conservation management plan for the 120,000 Km² concession inland from the coastal strip.

A team from Mozambique's

University of Beira's CEDECA consultancy won the bid. According to a final draft of the report, it proposes a wide range of activities aimed at balancing commercial exploitation with active conservation. How those developments will be funded and managed remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, commercial activity is increasing, at widely-varying levels. At the most basic, the arrival of solar panels and mobile phones has brought electric power and electronic communication to the area for the first time. Aptly-named 'solar pensions' can mean an old lady with a solar panel can earn two dollars a day from charging phones and car batteries - and that in a land where a dollar a day is considered a generous living wage.

Nwichi Lodge, the largest employer in the district with some 100 people involved in some way, has been joined by smaller, locally-run backpacker ventures. And to the east, a group of international big-game hunters run the Chipanji Chetu game park which is starting to produce revenue for both them and the local people - and of course creating controversy over the ethics

of hunting with guns. A helicopter crew has been surveying the area for mineral deposits.

Meanwhile, the number of sightings of wildlife is said to be growing, although no formal survey has yet been done. Packs of rare wild dogs have been seen regularly, and CEDECA's report lists species of animal ranging from elephant to sable to banded mongoose. A fine leopard was recently spotted - in the main room of a half-constructed house close to Nkwichi Lodge: it was eating an equally fine duiker. Visitors are warned about the occasional crocodile, and the monkeys are a delight to visitors and a pest for residents in equal measure.

The trick will be how to balance the undoubted attractions of the lake with its millions of brightly-coloured cichlid fish providing a joy for snorkellers, and its hinterland of unspoilt natural wilderness, with the needs of the local people who until now have lived a marginal life based on low-scale fishing and subsistence agriculture. It may be up to UMOJI to keep that balance in check. ●

— Jeremy Toyo

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Cobue and the Manda Wilderness are truly remote, but getting there is part of the adventure.

From Malawi

By Charter Plane:

Lilongwe to Likoma Island (60 minute flight). Transfer by boat to Cobue and Nkwichi Lodge (speed boat - 40 minutes / dhow - 90 minutes) not including time for immigration formalities.

Plane transfer - aprox US \$300 per person each way: cheaper standby fares sometimes available. Boat transfer - US \$60 per person each way.

Nyassa Air Taxis: sales@nyassa.mw
Executive Air Charters: franco@malawi.net

By the Ilala Ferry on Lake Niassa:

This historic ferry leaves from Chipoka (60 minutes drive from Lilongwe) in the south on Friday evenings reaching Cobue on Saturday morning. The ferry

leaves from Nkhata Bay in the north on Monday evening reaching Cobue on Tuesday morning.

Ferry prices from:
Chipoka to Cobue = US \$100 per person each way
Nkhata Bay to Cobue = US \$40 per person each way
Contact: iales@nyassa.mt

Note: the Ilala's stop in Cobue was suspended in recent weeks, and is due to resume in late May. Disembarking in Likoma is an option, with boat transfers from there as above.

By Yacht on Lake Niassa:

Danforth Yachting run charter trips on Lake Niassa. Board the catamaran Mufasa at Monkey Bay on the southern shores of Lake Niassa and sail for 3 days up the east coast.
Contact: info@danforthyachting.com

By Road:

Via Mangochi (the scenic route) or via Liwonde (the quick route) to Namwera/Mandimba border post. From the border

post it is 170Km taking approx 3 hours (depending on road conditions) to Lichinga. For rest of route see driving from Mozambique.

From Mozambique

By Plane:

There are regular schedule flights from Maputo, Beira and Nampula to Lichinga. From Lichinga, access is by road (see below) www.lam.co.mz

By Road - Drive from Lichinga to Cobue:

A beautiful journey, down the rift valley escarpment, through Yao and Nyanja traditional lands. Initially the route is across the Lichinga plateau, before dropping down the escarpment to Lake Niassa. The journey takes around 4.5 hours.

Transfers can be arranged via Nkwichi at US \$350 per vehicle with driver each way. Or contact Lourio Empreendimentos in Lichinga.

Contact: lempreendimentos@teledata.mz