



TRAVELLERS FRIEND » A definitive guide for destinations along the Zambezi River

Chobe is Botswana's wildlife stronghold

Aerial survey provides good and bad news



Giraffe and kudu

PHOTO: KELLY LANDEN

By Kelly Landen

Elephants Without Borders (EWB), with the support of Botswana's Department of Wildlife and National Parks, recently completed flying a major aerial survey counting wildlife species throughout northern Botswana.

The project was led by EWB's founder, and San Diego Zoo scientist Dr. Mike Chase, coordinated by EWB's program manager, Kelly Landen and piloted by Mike Holding from Afriscreen Films. The survey took nearly 250 hours of flying time, a

flight line total of 25,598 km, covering a total of 73,478 km², which included the National Parks of Chobe, Makgadikgadi, Nxai Pan, Moremi Game Reserve, the Okavango Delta and the surrounding Wildlife Management Areas in the Ngamiland, Chobe and Central districts.

The survey's sampling intensity averaged 20% in comparison to 5% during previous surveys and is the first independent fixed-wing aerial survey to provide concession level estimates for wildlife populations in Botswana.

Astonishingly, numbers of animals in northern Botswana have fallen substantially within the last 15 years.

Wildlife species counted included: elephant, roan, sable, zebra, giraffe, gemsbok, eland, kudu, impala, lechwe, springbok, buffalo, tsessebe, hartebeest, warthog, wilde-

beest and hippo. The team also recorded observations of selected large birds: wattled crane, ground hornbill, saddle-bill stork, fish eagle, lappet-faced vulture and bateleur.

Baobab trees were assessed with note taken of size and possible damage. Elephant carcasses and bones were recorded, as well as additional notes on environmental conditions such as bush fires and the structural integrity of fence lines. In the tribal grazing areas, cattle were also counted.

Botswana conducted its first systematic aerial survey in 1993 followed by seven subsequent surveys, lastly in 2004. The new data allows for a comparative analysis of wildlife distribution, abundance and trends over time.

Some of the results were unexpected. Astonishingly, numbers of animals in northern Botswana have fallen substantially within the last 15 years. The exception is elephant numbers which in northern Botswana have remained at a constant 130,000 since 2003. Wildebeest declined by a staggering 90%, and remain at a small fraction of their past numbers.



Buffalo and Zebra

PHOTO: KELLY LANDEN



Aerial shot of a herd of elephant

PHOTO: KELLY LANDEN



A herd of Sable and their young

PHOTO: KELLY LANDEN

In Ngamiland there has evidently been a district wide halving in the abundance of giraffe, kudu, lechwe, ostrich, roan, tsessebe, and warthog.

However, in the Chobe district, there has been a very different trend. The wildlife populations within Chobe have remained fairly stable. In 1996, elephants doubled their Chobe population to 60,000, likely due to movement from neighboring concessions allowing hunting the previous year.

Since then, elephant numbers have remained similar in Chobe, as well as buffalo, giraffe, kudu and zebra. There has been a slight decrease in roan and ostrich estimates. However, sable and lechwe numbers have doubled; eland and tsessebe have tripled; impala and warthog are now ten-fold; and hippo number in the hundreds.

It was noted that woodland species (sable, kudu, eland) have shifted from Chobe National Park into the Chobe Forest Reserves, likely due to the habitat change along the riverfront.

Throughout Africa, land use, habitat fragmentation, vegetation changes, drought effects, veterinary fences, fires and poaching have been cited as contributing factors to the decline of wildlife. However, as this study shows, conservation management requires a good understanding of wildlife population dynamics and reliable estimates of population densities. It is places such as Chobe that people visit to experience Africa's beautiful scenery and plentiful wildlife, to be treasured and protected for future generations.

A big five safari destination!

Kasane – Chobe – Botswana

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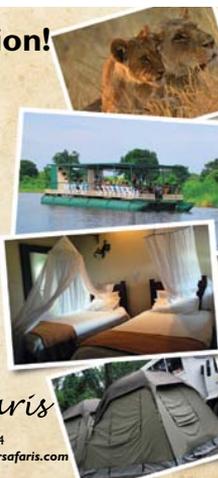
Activities: Chobe National Park game drives and boat cruises are available daily. Chobe Day trips from Victoria Falls or Livingstone include breakfast and a lunch cruise – an all day activity.

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