

# Travel

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE AND SFCHRONICLE.COM | Sunday, December 6, 2015 | Section P



**Rick Steves' Europe:** Food tours serve up a true taste of a country **P2**



Photos by Mark Sissons / Special to The Chronicle

Elephants gather at life-giving seasonal waterholes supplied with pumped borehole water in Hwange National Park during the dry season.

## ZIMBABWE

# HWANGE'S FRAGILE ELEPHANTS



Guests at Jozibanini Camp ride mountain bikes to a remote part of Hwange National Park, where tourists' presence helps guard against poachers.

A journey to a park with herds so big nature needs help sustaining them

By Mark Sissons

Dozens of elephants gather at the waterhole beneath a sprawling leadwood tree. Jostling for space to drink, testosterone-driven young males swing their tusks at mothers and calves. Matriarchs trumpet their arrival. A Dumbo-eared youngster curls his tiny trunk around his mother's spongy feet.

Many more elephants are on the way.

Before a dentist named Palmer killed a lion named Cecil, Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park was most famous for its enormous herds of elephants — approaching 50,000 at last count. Along with a supporting cast of

fellow Big 5 members — cheetahs, rare African painted wild dogs and more than 400 species of birds — they inhabit Africa's roth-largest park, an exceptionally diverse landscape of teak and miombo forests, false mopane woodlands and vast grassy savannas.

For "tusker" lovers, this enormous wildlife sanctuary half the size of Belgium is the place to be during the May-to-November dry season, when tens of thousands of elephants congregate around its waterholes. On a continent where many pachyderm populations are being decimated to feed Asia's lust for ivory, such a huge concentration of elephants

*Elephants continues on P4*



## FROM THE COVER



Mark Sissoms / Special to The Chronicle

Hwange's elephant herds have grown too large, and now nearly 50,000 elephants depend on water pumped by diesel engines during the parched dry season.

## SUSTAINING THE HWANGE ELEPHANTS

Elephants from page P1

in a single park appears initially encouraging.

But look closely at Hwange's waterholes and you'll see emaciated elephants with withered skin hanging off alarmingly thin torsos, their skulls sunken and shoulder blades protruding. A healthy elephant spends around 16 hours a day eating up to 600 pounds of leaves, grass and shrubs. Overgrazing has dangerously diminished that food supply here.

During the dry season, they also need to consume up to 50 gallons of water a day to remain hydrated. Hwange's elephants depend on water pumped by diesel engines managed 24 hours a day.

### Elephant man

Probably nobody knows Hwange and its elephants better than

Mark Butcher, a native "Zimbo" who worked with Zimbabwe's Forest Commission in the early '60s and spent decades as a game warden here before opening his own safari company, Imvelo Safari Lodges.

In his khaki shorts and broad-brimmed safari hat, Winchester Magnum .456 rifle slung over one shoulder, this weathered and wiry man reminds me of one of Hemingway's "Snows of Kilimanjaro" characters. Except for his funky footwear — a pair of dusty old Converse sneakers.

Hwange is a ticking ecological time bomb, Butcher explains, with far more elephants than its natural carrying capacity can sustain. Containing no major rivers or lakes and precious little natural ground water, especially during its harsh dry season, the proposed zone along



Imvelo Safari Lodges

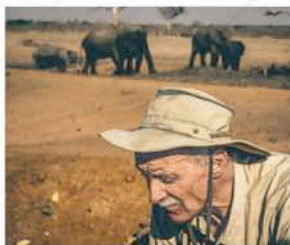
Nehimba Lodge lies inside an 8,000-acre private concession rich with wildlife in the northern part of Hwange National Park.

Zimbabwe's western frontier with Botswana was a poor choice for a national park.

But Ted Davidson, appointed Hwange's first warden in the 1920s, had an idea: Why not drill boreholes and pump water for its waterholes during the dry season? The elephants and other wildlife would no longer need to migrate, and the park would thrive year-round.

Davidson's solution temporarily solved Hwange's water problems, and wildlife — especially elephants — flourished.

But his best intentions eventually went awry, and the park's elephant population soared, doubling in under a decade.



Mark Sissoms / Special to The Chronicle

Former Hwange wildlife officer Mark Butcher, who now runs Imvelo Safari Lodges, keeps several pumps running during the dry season.

Mass contraception was tried but failed. Translocation was ruled out because of the massive

logistics and expenditures required. Once considered a viable option, culling is no longer socially acceptable. And letting nature take its course by simply shutting off the water supply, as some experts have recommended, would lead to mass death.

"We created this water problem with the best of intentions, and we've

appointed ourselves to be the caretakers of these animals," says Butcher. "Now we are morally obliged to sort it out. We can't just turn off the taps and walk away from it."

### Hwange's heartbeat

On a scorching September morning, I join Butcher on a Land Cruiser journey through Hwange's rugged wilderness of Kalahari sandveld, mopane woodlands and acacia scrub. Our mission, which Butcher calls "the pump run," is to deliver diesel for the engines, oils and filters, plus payment of wages and rations for the pump attendants who staff the network of waterholes.

Imvelo maintains throughout the park. The practical side of this "safari" offers insight into Hwange's water supply situation and hands-on experience helping conserve and protect the elephants.

As we arrive at one waterhole, its diesel-powered "heartbeat" chugging away in the distance, Butcher points to the herd drinking and splashing in the cool, clean borehole water.

"I've seen people watch all of these elephants standing around drinking and think it's wonderful," he says. "What they don't understand is that these animals are at the absolute end of their tethers."

As a young pump attendant in a tattered Zimbabwe national football team jersey named Oscar emerges from his tin shack to greet him, Butcher smiles.

"These guys from the local villages, they're Hwange's true unsung heroes," he says, ex-

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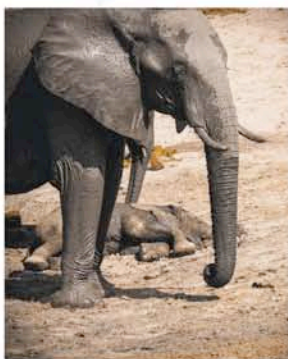
*San Francisco Chronicle* **SF GALE**





Thirsty elephants drink from the swimming pool at Nehimba Lodge in the northern part of Hwange National Park.

Imvelo Safari Lodges



Mark Sissons / Special to The Chronicle

Many of Hwange's nearly 50,000 elephants succumb to hunger and thirst during the dry season.

plaining that they volunteer to live alone, far from their homes for months on end, maintaining the pumps, always on the lookout for poachers.

And sometimes having to fend off hungry lions at night.

At the next waterhole, we spot a long line of elephants slowly marching toward us across the savanna. But this pump is broken, and no water will flow until it can be fixed in a day or two.

When the elephants arrive to find the waterhole bone-dry, they fuss and trumpet. Then, with ears flapping angrily, some look straight at us, as if to say, "Hey, where the hell is the water today?"

Soon they give up in frustration, and the whole parched procession starts out for the next waterhole several miles distant, undernourished calves struggling to keep up.

#### Reclamation project

There are still remote parts of Hwange that hark back to an earlier, more rugged era of safaris before rose-petal baths, complicated dietary restrictions and in-room Wi-Fi. Situated in one of the park's most southern and untouched areas, Jozibani Camp is one of them.

Named for a nearby ranger station abandoned for decades, this small cluster of spacious canvas tents on elevated teak platforms overlooks a seasonal waterhole. Surrounded by wind-blown fossil sand dunes and Zambezi teak forests, where ancient elephant migration paths serve as roads and animals are still unaccustomed to seeing humans, Jozibani is still untamed and until recently, unprotected.



Mark Sissons / Special to The Chronicle

Remote Jozibani Camp lies in the seldom-visited, remote southwestern part of Hwange National Park, which was unprotected until recently.

is flowing again, thanks to a recently installed pump, and the animals are starting to return, led by skittish herds of elephants that still prefer to drink by night, out of sight of these funny-smelling, two-legged newcomers.

On a two-hour "tour de bush" mountain-bike ride along miles of elephant paths with Butcher the next morning, I spot fresh lion, hyena and wild dog tracks — an encouraging sign in this freshly reclaimed part of Hwange.

#### Pachyderm pool party

In the end, it isn't all about me going to the elephants. Sometimes they come to me. I spent the last night in Hwange at Nehimba Lodge, nestled in an 8,000-acre, game-rich private concession in the northern part of the park. The lodge's seven "thatched chalets" overlook a popular waterhole and swimming pool frequented by large numbers of elephants and other game.

While dining on Nehimba's deck, Butcher talks about Hwange's prospects.

"If we could find a few million dollars, we could probably bring enough scientific minds together to come up with a solution to this problem," he says.

Whatever it is, we agree that it can't simply involve pumping more water for more elephants. But until then, the flow must go on.

Behind us, a dozen

elephants silently congregate by the pool. Scores more of these ghostly giants will come to drink and bathe throughout the night — characters in a surreal

#### If you go

##### GETTING THERE

**South African Airways** and **British Airways** fly from Johannesburg to both Victoria Falls (Zimbabwe) and Livingstone (Zambia), while regional carrier **Airtlink** flies direct to Livingstone and Bulawayo. Transfers to lodges can be arranged. Wildlife viewing is best between May and November, when Hwange's animals congregate around the park's many waterholes.

##### IMVELO SAFARI LODGES

**Imvelo Safari Lodges** ([www.imvelosafarilodges.com](http://www.imvelosafarilodges.com)) has three lodges and an adventure camp in Hwange, along with two lodges close to nearby Victoria Falls. The company offers visits to local schools and villages, as well as tours on the Elephant Express, a 24-seat bus that makes scenic trips from a hub near Hwange's Main Camp to Imvelo lodges in the southeast corner of the park.

##### OUTFITTERS

**Berkeley's Wilderness Travel** ([www.wildernesstravel.com](http://www.wildernesstravel.com)) and Seattle-based **African Safari Company** ([www.africansafarico.com](http://www.africansafarico.com)) both specialize in tours to the region.

##### MORE INFORMATION

Learn more about conservation efforts and the plight of Hwange's elephants at the **Imvelo Elephant Trust** ([www.imveloelephanttrust.com](http://www.imveloelephanttrust.com)).

wide-screen movie about their own fate, playing in the pale moonlight.

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