



WHERE WATER SHAPES THE WILD

Kavango-Zambezi's range is centred on the network of rivers that sustain life in the region. The role of water in these ecosystems is particularly evident in the vast Kafue National Park, says Dianne Tipping-Woods

Floating in the bubbling waters of a hot spring near Mafikides' Camp, near where the Kafue River meets the Muchingapi River in northeastern Kafue National Park, my thoughts drift to the hidden forces beneath me. Tectonic activity deep within the earth was heating the water that rose to the surface. I revelled in the warm bubbles rising against my skin and warmed the surroundings for elephants. Grassy evidence of their presence floated among the water lilies.

"Elephants do use the springs," explained guide Catherine Hise. "But the water is too warm and sulphuric for hippos and crocodiles." For humans, the sulphur concentration is relatively low, sparing us the acid smell of rotten eggs often associated with geothermal springs. It was pleasant to linger and reflect on the morning's sightings: Rohan's hoveaters, neckback and a herd of majestic sable.

These hot springs are part of a natural geothermal system fuelled by tectonic activity from the East African Rift Valley.

Where the Kafue River enters

Zambia's largest national park, the Lebanga Hot Springs (the park's hottest hot), while cooler

springs seep into smaller waterholes and streams throughout the park. The interplay of geology and water creates a dry season refuge, providing minerals and salts.

More broadly, water – vast rivers and sprawling wetlands fed by dramatic rainfall – shapes life in this vast, wild park, from the teeming swamps of the Basungu Plains in the far north to Lake Itezhi Tezhi in the south.

The Kafue River drains a 155,000sq km basin and discharges 10 cubic kilometres of water annually into the Zambezi. "It plays a disproportionate role in the hydrology of the entire system," said Bruce Elendit, Kafue Conservation Director for The Nature Conservancy.

The Kafue forms the park's eastern boundary between Hook Bridge – a visitor access point – and Itezhi Tezhi. Flying into Changa Ashipa at the start of my safari, I glimpsed rapids, islands and hippos. Storm clouds signalled the arrival of summer rains.

"Kafue National Park is not just shaped by its seasons, it thrives because of them," said African Parks' Craig Reid, who manages the park for the large conservation non-profit. Seasonal flooding sustains the park's diversity, including herds of elephants, thriving predators, abundant fish... and 50

per cent of Zambia's human population, who rely on this hard working river.

"The Kafue anchors both Kavango-Zambezi's and Zambia's future," said Reid. "Beyond wildlife and tourism, it sustains livelihoods through fishing, agriculture and hydropower."

The annual rains, which range from 600mm in the south to 1200 mm in the north, transform the park into an inaccessible waterscape for months each year. They also make it one of the best wildlife destinations in the world, especially in areas like Basungu and Nam'ula Plains, but also in less well-known regions.

"I don't give my guests breakfast until we've seen lions," joked guide Chris Ndlovu of Modiri Bath Camp as he drove us into Basungu Plains. We saw three lions before then.

These seasonal wetlands (and the Kafue Plains and Lukanga Swamps) become critical fish nurseries and breeding grounds for arthropods and thousands of birds like slaty egrets and Cinnamon plovers. They trap sediments, absorb nutrients, regulate river flows and sustain ecosystems downstream.

But at the tail end of the dry season, they become golden plains and every palm

grove, papaya seed bed and lagoon teems with life. The drying landscape supports vast herds of red kudu, puku, buffalo, wildebeest, Litzmann's hartebeest, Delmas waterbuck, and sable and rean antelope. Wildlife is equally abundant there are warbled ones, grey-crowned cranes, rose-throated longbills, openbill storks, fish eagles...

Elsewhere, water percolates into *am-bas* (seasonally waterlogged depressions) and filters into rivers and wetlands. "Because of their deep soils, dambos are never completely dry," explained James Makanga of Classic Zambia's Muchenje Camp. From this unfenced Eden, I watched Meyer's parrots and Malimbok monkeys chatter in mangrove trees while lions stalked puku.

And it's not just lions. Inexpensive sightings are frequent too. On a late afternoon boat cruise on the Langa River, our guide, Everisto Kamukhe from Northern Kafue Safaris, pointed out Schube's moose and a pygmy hogbeast from then. "Inexpensive!" A dappled beauty appeared, and we followed her in the boat for kilometres as she wound along the bank, pausing to drink before vanishing into the thicket of reed systems ➔

KAFUE IN NUMBERS:

Zambia's largest park, spanning **22,460sq km**

With Game Management Areas, the Greater Kafue landscape covers **68,000sq km**

Contains over **2000km of roads**

42 elephants collared

30-40 black rhino to be translocated from LUWA Plain NP in 2026

1600 wildebeest and **300 zebra** to be translocated from LUWA Plain NP in 2025

In 2023, **113 poachers** and **188 illegal fishermen** arrested

In 2023, **295 snares**, **46 firearms** and **76 bicycles** confiscated

500,000 people living in Game Management Areas beside the NP

One 6-star lodge (Anantara) to open in 2026

Tourism revenue of **US\$1.8 million** projected for 2024

Tourism projected to increase by **100 per cent** within 5 years

