

Kaza: Is the largest wildlife park in the world a conservation challenge too far?

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Dr Charles Palmer belongs to LSE's Department of Geography and Environment. Dr Palmer outlines the challenges ahead for the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area in Southern Africa.

After 10 years of discussions, the legal status of the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area, or Kaza, was finally established in August 2011. Spread out over five countries, Angola, Namibia, Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe, and taking in an astonishing 36 national parks, Kaza is easily the largest wildlife park in the world.



While not the largest national park globally,^[1] it contains the second largest amount of the earth's surface area after the Northeast Greenland National Park but with arguably more important biodiversity and other environmental benefits.

Indeed, as reported by the Independent newspaper in the UK,^[2] conservationists and scientists praise the founding of a protected area that could enable large and globally-important ecosystems to function more effectively, including the ability of large mammals to range widely, and over national borders without hindrance.

But while the governments involved deserve acclaim for coming to a political agreement, there are concerns about the economic feasibility of Kaza. Understandably, there are hopes that conservation will provide a much-needed engine of socio-economic development in the region.

The hundreds of thousands of square kilometres of Kaza not only includes a big chunk of Africa's important flora and fauna but is also home to poor and in places, long-suffering populations.

Angola has also only recently emerged from civil war and periodic unrest continues in Zimbabwe. Considerable investment, for example, in infrastructure and management capacity, will be needed in order to realise longer-term benefits.

Although southern African countries have a good record of innovation in conservation, ^[3] expanding the area under effective protection on such a scale faces a number of possibly insurmountable challenges.

First, the issue of funding, which the Independent reports may be required on the scale of hundreds of millions of

pounds. Small-scale investment has already been made by the governments of Germany and the Netherlands.

Yet, given the continuing financial crisis in Europe and elsewhere, further funding from donor countries is likely to be subject not only to competition with other development priorities but also increasingly severe budget constraints. However, even relatively small transfers of public funds could, in principle, provide the basis for encouraging some private sector investment.

Second, in order to encourage a level of private sector investment that is required on the scale of Kaza, the conditions for good governance need to be in place.

In other words, government institutions need to be reasonably well-functioning with clearly-defined and enforced property rights and respect for the rule of law.

The record in southern Africa is mixed at best, and there is a risk that investments might only be made in parts of Kaza where there is relatively little economic and/or political uncertainty, and where there is a smaller risk of investments being stolen or expropriated.

There are, of course, other factors driving the level and eventual destination of investment such as the relative attractiveness of different parts of Kaza to tourists. Yet, these less-attractive areas may still be critical for ecosystem functioning and hence, could be the places specifically prioritised and targeted for government or donor support.

But also note that investment need not be made in expanding infrastructure for tourism alone, although it is expected to become a mainstay of Kaza's future revenue streams.

Third, even where investment is forthcoming, the construction of infrastructure such as roads and hotels in areas relatively untouched by development might lead to environmental costs, for example, increased pollution and the depletion of scarce water resources.

With the aid of environmental impact assessments, management plans would need to ensure that such costs are minimised wherever possible. Furthermore, these costs tend to be disproportionately borne by local people who depend the most on natural resources such as land and water for their livelihoods.

Steps should be taken to ensure that local people not only avoid bearing unwanted costs from development plans but are also provided with opportunities to benefit from the expansion of not only tourism but conservation in general.



Memorandum of Understanding signed by the five countries in Dec 2006; courtesy of Peace Parks Foundation

Fourth, management plans for Kaza have to incorporate the preferences of the poor in order to avoid potential

conflict between the needs of conservation and the needs of development.

Southern Africa's record in innovative conservation policy, for example, in establishing alternative, community-based livelihood strategies such as CAMPFIRE in Zimbabwe,^[4] could be applied on a wider scale in Kaza. Yet, setting up such strategies can be difficult, costly and time-consuming, which may act as a disincentive for further adoption and scaling up.

If the private sector is unwilling or unable to support these kinds of strategies, then limited public sector budgets may have to trade-off greater support to pro-poor participation against support that could be strictly used for wildlife protection.

Such trade-offs are not inevitable but are also not uncommon given evidence for the inability of integrated conservation and development projects to deliver on both environment and development policy goals across the developing world.^[5]

Fifth, new developments in areas of high conservation or environmental value, may also make it easier for people to enter and degrade these ecosystems. For example, new infrastructure such as roads brings people into previously remote and inaccessible areas, which may reduce the private costs of land conversion, wildlife poaching and encroachment.

It is inevitable that development will end the 'passive protection' of African wildlands, a term used by Thomas Rudel to describe the status of the Amazon prior to the onset of large-scale development, in the 1960s.^[6]

In particular, large numbers of landmines in parts of Angola may ironically serve to keep people away from wildlife and environmentally-sensitive land. While the removal of landmines in Angola is understandably a priority for the development of Kaza, both for wildlife and people, it is possible that one might come at the cost of the other.



Agreement by the five countries involved in institutionalising Kaza provides a platform for co-ordination across governments. But this is only a first step.

Effective conservation is costly, and it is not at all obvious that the necessary levels of funding from either the public or private sectors will be forthcoming any time soon. It is therefore important not to raise expectations, particularly in the short-term when Kaza may simply exist as a 'paper park'.

Given projected population growth for the region, plans for sustainable, long-run socio-economic development are also crucial, and should not be based on expanding tourism revenues alone. South Africa, which is not involved in Kaza, already has a well-established and lucrative tourist industry.

A country like Angola, on the other hand, stands to gain a lot from developing its tourism industry. But it will need both time and money to develop the necessary infrastructure before it can be confident in attracting the kinds of tourists who would otherwise visit the established and ever-popular wildlife parks of South Africa.

For Kaza as a whole to be sustainable, it should not simply become a gigantic park, with animals on one side of the fence and people on the other. Instead, it should utilise the full range of experiences of conservation-based strategies already being practiced across southern Africa, many of which attempt to provide new income opportunities for the poor.

Of course, the old 'fences-and-fines' national park model will continue to have an important role within the bounds of Kaza. Yet, this will need to be balanced with the needs of rapidly-expanding populations not all of whom will be predisposed towards the conservation of Africa's flora and fauna, with or without the use of incentives to persuade them otherwise.

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_largest_protected_areas_in_the_world

[2] <http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature/into-africa-with-the-reserve-that-knows-no-frontiers-2358190.html>

[3] See: Suich, H., B. Child, and A. Spenceley (2009) *Evolution and Innovation in Wildlife Conservation: Parks and Game Ranches to Transfrontier Conservation Areas*, Earthscan, London.

[4] CAMPFIRE stands for Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources. See: Frost, P. G. H., and I. Bond (2008) 'The CAMPFIRE programme in Zimbabwe: Payments for wildlife services', *Ecological Economics* 65(4): 776-787.

[5] For example, see Tallis, H., P. Kareiva, M. Marvier, and A. Chang (2008) 'An ecosystem services framework to support both practical conservation and economic development', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 105(28): 9457-9464.

[6] Rudel, T.K. (2005) *Tropical Forests: Regional Paths of Destruction and Regeneration in the Late Twentieth Century*, Columbia University Press, New York.