The Ruaha National Park,
Tanzania

BY SUE STOLBERGER

Editors Note: This is the second of two articles concerning the Ruaha National Park (RNP), located in south-central Tanzania, and describes how a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) can work with the local parks authority toward achieving common goals in a challenging environment, using wilderness as a common denominator. The first article, written by Mr. MGG Mtahiko, chief warden of the park, appeared in the December 2004 issue of IJW. RNP is still an exceptionally wild, undisturbed area. The Wilderness Zone in Ruaha National Park comprises 6,022 square kilometers (2,325 sq. mi.). Within this area lies a seldom-visited and remote wilderness core known as the Isunkaviula Plateau. The WILD Foundation and the Sierra Club have supported the preparation of a wilderness management plan for the Isunkaviula area. The Friends of Ruaha Society (FORS), a local NGO, works closely with Tanzania National Parks (TANAPA) inside RNP to facilitate its wilderness agenda. Outside RNP, FORS works with local communities to develop environmental education programs at 10 local schools and to assist in local community wildlife management programs operating in surrounding buffer zones. FORS also has consistently sounded alarm bells concerning the drying up of the Great Ruaha River that runs through the park, caused by upstream irrigation projects.

The Friends of the Ruaha Society

The first written record of the Ruaha area was in 1877, when it was noted by early explorers as a wildlife haven. In 1912 the Germans established it as a game reserve. Later, it was enlarged by the British, and finally, in 1964, the Tanzanian government declared the area to be a national park encompassing more than 10,200 square kilometers (3,938 sq. mi.). Subsequently, several game reserves were added to the north, east, and west so that today, the whole ecosystem is more than 45,000 square kilometers (17,375 sq. mi.).

In the early years, the park was underfunded and underresourced, tourists were extremely few, and the park struggled. In 1984 the Fox family, who had recently built a lodge in Ruaha National Park (RNP), gathered together a group of interested people in Tanzania and formed the Friends of Ruaha Society (FORS) to support those responsible for protecting Ruaha’s wildlife. Funds were raised locally to buy boots and water bottles for patrols and diesel fuel and spare parts for vehicles and machinery. The group helped with antipoaching patrols through use of the FORS plane, a Cessna 182 (largely funded by the Tusk Trust in the UK), and implemented myriad other ideas to help create incentives for the park’s game rangers.

Artist Sue Stolberger shares a digital image with the park botanist, Gladys Ng’umbi. Photo by Michael Sweatman.
By the early 1990s, due to the considerable increase in tourist revenue, Tanzania National Parks (TANAPA) became better able to support its many parks and staff. The role of FORS began to alter. In 1994, instead of buying the nuts and bolts needed for the park, the society shifted its focus to ways to promote the park and to tackle environmental issues. Initially they produced a color leaflet on RNP that TANAPA still uses for publicity purposes. FORS also highlighted the ecological disaster that occurred when the Great Ruaha River dried up in 1993, due to excessive agricultural use of water upstream.

Meanwhile, FORS continued to fly the antipoaching patrols over the vast protected area. In addition, FORS put considerable effort into protecting the southern buffer zone of the park by employing and equipping village rangers, working closely with the new Wildlife Management Areas (WMA) established by a project funded by the British government to reallocate hunting revenues back to the communities living in the WMA. FORS continued to assist the park in any way it could, such as by installing VHF radios in all the ranger posts and vehicles, donating the HF radio link e-mail system for park headquarters, upgrading the clinic, and equipping the ranger posts with rechargeable flashlights.

In 1999 FORS was approached by Dr. Dulle, a Tanzanian veterinarian working for the government. Interested in the need to protect wilderness areas, he realized the urgency in educating his fellow Tanzanians on the importance of looking after its rich natural heritage. Within a short space of time FORS and Dr. Dulle devised an environmental education project that served the primary schools in the areas surrounding the Ruaha National Park.

As a result, FORS established environmental education programs in 10 schools. At first, FORS used educational extension officers to introduce the program into the schools. Now, two full-time education program officers, Anna Marie Malaya from Tanzania and Sarah Vatland from the United States, have been employed. When new topics are introduced into each program, each school undertakes training. After four to six weeks, follow-up visits by FORS staff address problems and obtain feedback. Initial results are very encouraging, and FORS is considering preparing a comprehensive guide that will be easily replicable at schools throughout Tanzania.

Other small income-generating projects have also been started in the villages, such as growing vegetables suitable for use by the camps and a lodge situated in the RNP. The production of honey and other food items for use by the camps and lodges are other
examples of small industries emerging due to FORS's efforts.

FORS continues to assist the park in many ways. As funds become available, the Idodi Secondary School will receive the environmental education program. FORS also hopes to soon stimulate interest in nature guiding courses and other tourist-related matters, incorporating local knowledge and traditions into the program as much as possible.

Ruaha Wilderness Zone
Ruaha is an exceptional area, situated in the convergence zone of northern and southern species and habitats (in the eastern African context). The park is composed of an area of Rift Valley floor, where the Great Ruaha River meanders for 150 kilometers (93 m.), with mainly mixed acacia/combretum/baobab woodlands and open areas. This vast area is mainly brachystegia woodland (commonly known as miombo). The river valley area rises to form the escarpment edge of the Rift.

In the remote western corner of the park, the Isunkaviula Plateau rises to more than 1,800 meters (5,900 ft.) and is regarded as the core wilderness zone. Due to difficult access, this ecologically important area has not been studied in detail and forms an extremely valuable part of the Ruaha Park resource. Initial research indicates that high altitude and isolation over a very long period have formed an extremely important niche of biodiversity. Furthermore, the species in the Isunkaviula Plateau appear to be affiliated with western species rather than with those in Africa’s Eastern Arc. Therefore, RNP may well be the convergence zone of both northern and southern species, plus the eastern and western species (in the African context).

Wilderness Management Issues
Unfortunately, the plateau area is used by poachers as an access route to other areas of the park. Well-used bicycle trails are encountered. On inspection of these tracks, there are obvious signs that the bicycles are heavily laden on the return trip, probably with dried meat from poaching camps located in other remote, inaccessible areas of RNP. In order for these poachers to make easier access routes for themselves, they light many fires that continue to destroy the remaining forests, with much damage evident. This is a critical issue as the remaining stands of this ancient forest area are very small. This area is in urgent need of protection. However, with the RNP already struggling to keep up the required standards needed in the areas used by tourists, areas such as Isunkaviula are very
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vulnerable as funds and resources are limited.

Looking after wilderness areas is a delicate balancing act. It requires extremely careful handling with low impact development, such as walking trails and remote camping areas accessible only by foot. Although the Isunkaviula Plateau would be a magnificent addition to Ruaha’s already stunning array of wildland experiences, it will require funding. FORS has been collaborating with the chief park warden, Mr. MGG Mtahiko, to see how they could assist with protecting this very special and unique area from destruction. A start has been made with the WILD Foundation and Sierra Club supporting the creation of an easier, peripheral access route for the antipoaching patrols along the western boundary. Soon a temporary ranger post will be established that will enable the rangers to be based closer to this unique area.

The people who live around the peripheral areas of the park are hunter-gatherers by tradition, with intimate local knowledge of nature handed down from generation to generation. FORS is anxious to keep these very valuable skills alive. The group aims to start by establishing a program, using the Idodi Secondary School as a base for the training of guides, using as much local “bush craft” as possible.

When walking one day with one of our village scouts, we stopped to listen to a red chested cuckoo that was calling for the first time. When the bird was finished, the scout turned to me and said, “When that bird starts to call, the village people know that the rain will come very soon, and that it is now time to plant their crops.” I asked him: “How can you be so sure that the birds are right?” The reply came swiftly, without hesitation. “They know: these birds talk to the rain.”

FORS’s challenge is to honor and help maintain these natural and human-made systems in an effort to keep the balance of Ruaha as it has always been—using local knowledge, folklore, and tradition to form an integral part of the Ruaha experience. IJW

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upon the manager’s ability to educate the public on how to responsibly enjoy wilderness while understanding the many benefits this unique resource provides to all people. IJW

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