

## The Impact of Chobe National Park on Rural Livelihoods and Conservation Behaviors – Chobe District, Botswana

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Contemporary natural resource management is marked by discourses that attempt to build positive relationships and synergies between conservation and development with such concepts as co-management and stakeholder participation, particularly the involvement of local people in resource governance and benefit sharing attracting significant attention. The present study is trying to unravel the extent to which these goals are realized by focusing on the influence of Chobe National Park on people's livelihoods and the effect this has on their conservation practices. My interest in the study area and population has been spurred by my familiarity with Chobe District as a biodiversity endowed area yet one where poverty and dependency are still the order of the day. The area teems with diverse natural habitats and wildlife

species, among them the Chobe River System which feeds in to Victoria Falls and mega-fauna mammalian species including elephant, hippo, buffalo, lion, leopard and several ungulate species. A remarkable feature is the park's elephant population which constitutes the largest and least molested herd in the world, and which has grown from about 45,500 in the 1980s to 151,000 at present. Altogether these resources designate the Chobe region the second most important wildlife and tourism area in Botswana after the Okavango Delta. Given the position of the tourism industry in Botswana as the second engine of economic growth after diamonds, it follows therefore to ask: Do the highly acclaimed tourism-related benefits of the protected resources trickle down to the household level?

It became apparent from the exploratory research I carried out in summer 2008 that there is significant growth in tourism based economies and employment related benefits in Chobe while on the other hand there numerous adverse effects: mainly elephant property damages, predation, human life endangerment and the overshadowing of conservation on the agricultural potential and non-tourism land-based economies of the area. These insights helped to shape my on-going PhD research work which is grounded on the theories of empowerment and social exchange and set out to determine: 1) if the park is resulting in positive and significant livelihood effects, 2) if there is an equitable distribution of the livelihood effects of the park amongst people – or if there is a

dichotomy of “winners and losers,” 3) factors underlying the nature and distribution of the livelihood effects of the park, and 4) if there is correlation between livelihood effects of the park and conservation behaviors.

Detailed collection of data to answer these questions was completed in July 2010. Within the hinterland of Chobe National Park, three settlements (Kasane, Kachikau and Parakarungu) were sampled with household surveys and key informant interviews conducted. The sampling of the settlements was based on differences in level of economic development or urbanity, proximity to the park, and length of community conservation programs/projects. Most of the settlements in the study area have a rural setting except for the emerging urban area of Kasane and Kasungula which is the tourism hub of the district.

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