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## Hunting the Wrong Kind of Animal in Luangwa Valley

By [Glaeser Conradie](#)

There I was, trying to gain practical experience on game management and client relations in the middle of Zambia's Luangwe Valley, asking myself: What am I doing here? This sounds like the opening line of a Mickey Spillane novel, and all that was missing was the dame and the smoke-filled room. However, this is my story and I feel that I should tell it.

It was unusually cold that Thursday night on 9 August 2001. The riverine forest was showing signs of the harsh winter. The cathedral like arches, consisting mainly of mopane, African ebony, tamarind and Natal mahogany, was misty, and the only noise to be heard was the staccato huh-huh sounds of the hippo's as they were leaving the water.

Luambe is situated in the Luangwa Valley, between the South and North Luangwa National Parks. It is a piece of paradise and I was tasked with management of the Luangwa Wilderness Lodge (the only Lodge in the Park). I arrived in April 2001 and my brief was to manage the camp, entertain the guests, conduct the game drives, and undertake anti-poaching exercises. Coming from the heart of the Wineland, Stellenbosch, this was all very new and exciting to me. As I mentioned earlier I was here because I wanted to be here, but every day was proving to be a fast pitch on a quick learning curve. Especially that night . . .

For some unknown reason the twelve staff members, from the local Chewo tribe, and I were sitting in the Lodge's little kitchen in the head nodding hours of the night. The tiny kitchen was made of reeds and wood, like everything else in the camp. One of the conditions of our operating license is that everything must be made from natural material from the region.

The government anti-poaching scout on duty that night, armed with an AK47, had joined us and was eager to sit close to the fire with the rest of us. Maybe he suspected what was about to happen, or it could be that he was just cold, but somehow we all sensed something was about to happen.

And it did when at about 9 o'clock we heard the sound of shots from the direction of the Chipuka Plains. For you who have not been to Zambia I need to explain. People there generally do not own firearms and there is hardly any noise at night, apart from those of Mother Nature. You can imagine the noise a gunshot makes in this quiet natural setting.

An icy silence followed the sound of shots. The scout and I looked at one

another. In an unspoken moment we realized that it was too risky to investigate at night. Poachers sometimes work in groups of twenty or more, coming from the local villages of Lundazi. The poachers know a jail sentence of at least 6 years awaited them if they were caught, and they will not hesitate to resist capture!

Although I am a professional hunter in South Africa, I was not registered in Zambia and thus not allowed to carry a rifle or a side arm. All I had was a "knopkierie," a round-tipped stick one of the Madalas (old man) made for me from Mopane wood. The "kierie" has been handy a few times already when I had to deal with the odd snake in the footpath or the stray poachers. I might have been fooling myself, but I felt safer carrying it.

We knew that the "knopkierie" and one AK47 was not enough firepower, and that we needed back-up from the Anti-Poaching Unit head office at Janjusi, about a 45 minute drive away. I loaded the staff and the guard into the Land Cruiser and we set off for Janjusi at speed.

Upon our arrival the officer on duty informed us that there were no scouts available and, in the typical African concept of time, that we should return the next morning at 5 AM. By then, of course, it would be too late. Frustrated and angry we left. We have a saying in Africa: AWA or Africa Wins Again.

But just before I was willing to admit defeat, AWA thoughts dissipated. My right hand man, Peter Phiri, suggested that we should talk to his uncle, the Honorable Chief Chitingulu. The Chief knew that it was important for him to actively oppose poaching, as poaching activities in any Chief's area reflects badly on him. We decided it was worth a try, and a few minutes later we arrived at his homestead. I am not a song and dance man, but the Chief could see from my gestures and the way I was wringing my "kierie" that I was really frustrated at the thought that the poachers might get away. The Chief was in a humble mood, and we startled rolling once again.

The Chief accompanied us back to Janjusi and ordered the officer on duty to make scouts available. Peter and I waited in silence as the Chief, the officer and the scouts argued. The argument was never really on, I have yet to see any bureaucrat beating a Chief in an argument. All the government officials come from the area that is controlled by the local chiefs. About half an hour later, five scouts appeared from out of the woodwork and we were ready to go. It was after 10 PM already; we drove the chief back to his chieftom and made our way to the camp.

As we came closer to the Chipuka Plains we could clearly see the dancing silhouettes caused by a brushfire against the night sky. The eerie scene resembled a rising moon. The poachers need the fire to dry the meat during the night, before leaving the park at daybreak.

In true Zambian decisiveness the unit leader, Binwell Banda, decided that we should go to bed and confront them at 4 AM. It took me a while to fall asleep, being anxious and excited.

At precisely 3:47 we woke up, got ready, and left for the plains. Four staff members, Peter, Yotam Phiri, Martin Sakala, and (Pastor) Peter Nkata accompanied us. It was still pitch dark. After a 30 minute walk in the direction

where we thought the poacher's camp was, we halted. Peter and Yotam decided to wait at the Land Cruiser and the rest of us proceeded. Although this was serious lion territory, that was the last thing on our minds.

After a further twenty minutes' walk, Binwell stopped. We were approaching a dense Mopane thicket and we realized that it would be safer to wait for more light. Surprising armed poachers in the dark in a thicket can be extremely dangerous. And at times like this the possibility of the odd loose shot adds to the danger; it was a risk I was not willing to take. At this stage I was very tense and there was no way I could sit still; I continuously paced up and down. That twenty minutes felt like an eternity.

Binwell gave the signal and took the lead, walking very slowly and carefully over a bed of dry Mopane leaves. You have a lot of time to think in Zambia, it is that kind of country, and thoughts were racing through my head while I traced Binwell's steps. One of the thoughts was of a scenario that we had stumbled on earlier.

A few weeks previously we found a poached elephant carcass, the meat stripped from the bones. The strange thing was that we also found 34 decapitated White-headed vultures around the carcass. I was told that the poachers poison the carcass to kill the vultures and then use their heads to make muti (medicine) which, they believe, will help warn them when the anti-poaching patrols are in close proximity. That would be the same Anti-Poaching Unit of which I was now a part.

With the help of their muti and the crunching Mopane leaves, I was certain that they must have known about us already. We walked slower and slower. Every now and then Binwell lifted his hand and we fell down and waited. Needless to say, mostly a precaution.

But after about 5 minutes into the walk and stalk he suddenly grabbed me by the shoulder and pulled me down with force. I could see the tension in every line of his body. He pointed to the ground and I could see blood and the faint outline of hippo spoor in the breaking light. We were very close to whatever awaited us. A few more paces and then we saw the hippo's carcass about 50 meters ahead of us. The poachers were drying the meat, but there was no sign of them. They had heard us coming.

I do not know whether it was relief or disappointment, but I suggested that we go to the carcass and look for tracks. Binwell did not agree and indicated that we should proceed to the left in order to try and cut them off from the road to Lundazi.

I was still nervy, and with the rush of adrenaline still kicking in my blood, not sure what to expect. Looking at the faces of the armed scouts behind me didn't help much, either. We were so close, and I was wondering how we'd allowed them to escape our grasp. In Africa there are no rules and procedures, and generally doing things by the book is limited to showing your passport at the border post. In my opinion we were doing quite well on this venture, even if it was my first attempt at confronting poaching.

All of a sudden Binwell started running forward, as fast as if his life depended on

it. I followed as quickly as I could, not knowing whether we were chasing or fleeing. Running full out with a jacket, jeans and heavy boots, my legs and lungs soon started to protest. The dry branches were snapping around us and we could hear the whistling sound of our feet hitting the soft sand in the footpaths.

Then I saw the poachers. They were scattered all over, Binwell already chasing one. Frank, one of the scouts running about 2 meters behind me, started firing warning shots. I wasn't sure in which direction he was firing, but it was unexpected enough to scare the living daylights out of me. I wondered whether my lungs or my ears were hurting the most.

As we ran out of the Mopane thicket onto the misty Chipuka Plains at about 6 AM, shots going off all around me, I knew I did not want to die here in the depths of Africa. And although it is a life-long dream to fight poaching in Africa, I would have given all I had to be back home in my favorite restaurant in Stellenbosch with a cold beer, a pizza, and a nice girl next to me.

In what felt like a few seconds I can recall the first poacher going down and the scouts hitting him. The unit leader stepped in and stopped them. But to a certain extent I could understand the frustration and anger, as I too shared their feeling. In the heat of the chase you are so tense that it is fairly easy to lose perspective.

About 70 meters further on we caught another one. There are two types of poachers, the firearm carrier and the skinner. So far we had only managed to corner the skinners. The so-called "hunter" was still on the loose and was about 80 meters ahead of us. Binwell and I were still chasing him, but I could feel my lungs screaming in protest and knew I wouldn't make it much farther.

Binwell shouted something in Chewo and stopped. He took a rest with his AK47 over a broken Mopane tree and took aim. I stood a meter behind him with my hands over my ears. I wasn't sure what to hope for. I wanted that poacher, because it was probably the same one that had killed the elephant and the vultures a few weeks before. But I also knew that a bullet through the spine is not a pretty site.

It seemed to be an easy shot. The poacher was running in a straight line and with my knowledge of running shots and the training and experience these guys have, I feared a messy result. The shot went off--it was a miss! From the corner of my eye I saw Martin Sakala, the gardener at the camp, about 100 meters to our left pursuing the poacher. I felt like shouting, "Good for you Martin!" A few meters further and he was able to grab the unfortunate poacher. Our mission came to a rather abrupt end.

After everybody re-grouped, I watched a process that I could not always understand. The scouts made the poachers roll over each other in the ashes left from previous veldfires to humiliate them, and heaped verbal abuse on them. It was not my place to question the humiliation or the verbal abuse, and at times I wonder why we react that way. I still felt that we had managed to get a message across. This carried on for a few minutes, and then we headed back to the Land Cruiser where Peter and Yotam were waiting for us.

A few days later the poachers each received a six-year sentence in the regional court at Lundazi. Poaching activities in the park calmed down, albeit for a short

period only. After that initial lull, poaching activities picked up again and we resumed our patrols.

The more I become involved in the fight against poaching, the more I realize the seriousness of the threat. In the 1980's there were more than a hundred thousand elephants in the Luangwa Valley. Commercial poaching brought the numbers down to approximately thirty thousand by 2000. The realities around me made me aware of the desperate and difficult situations in which many other so-called natural game reserves in Africa find themselves, regardless of the conservation efforts and the anti-poaching efforts in these areas.

Going back to Zambia at the beginning of May this year (2002), I don't know what to expect after the rainy season, but I'm sure the poaching will not have stopped and there will be a lot of work waiting for us. I am still trying to make sense of the poachers and why they are willing to take the risks.

I have to be honest and admit that in an ideal world they would have been hunters, hunting from an ample basket of game, but we no longer live in that world. Ivory and the black-market prices have turned these hunters into commodity traders. They no longer have access to the game resources, so they venture into the game parks to poach. The answer might lie in the hands of the Chiefs and their management approach, but that alone would be the basis of a Ph.D. thesis.

If there's anyone interested in more information or want to support us in any way, please feel free to contact me at the following e-mail address:

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