

EcoTourism in Malawi

*Story by Alison Wiklund
& Kenneth McKaye*

World Wide Fund for Nature -- Finland has been actively promoting eco-tourism as a major source of income for local communities and, in partnership with Olympia Tours of Finland, WWF Finland organized a Finnish tour group to Malawi for ten days last November 2003.

Fifteen in number, the visitors began their tour at Mvuu Camp in Machinga, run by Central African Wilderness Safaris (CAWS). The Camp is situated in Liwonde National Park, famous for its



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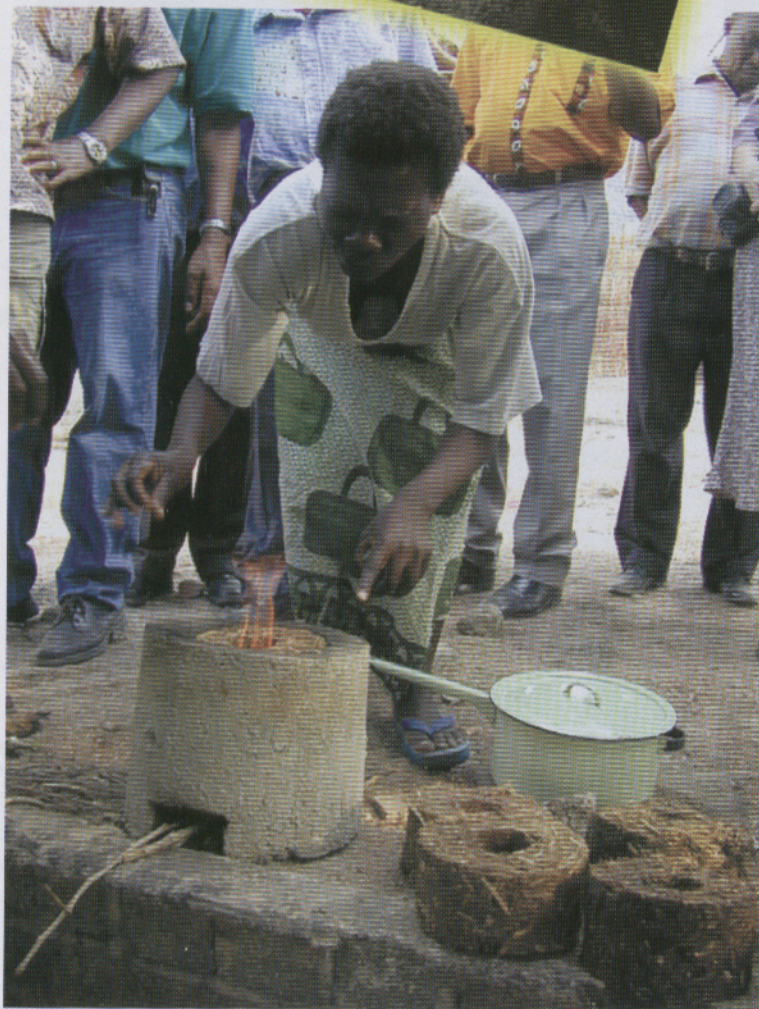
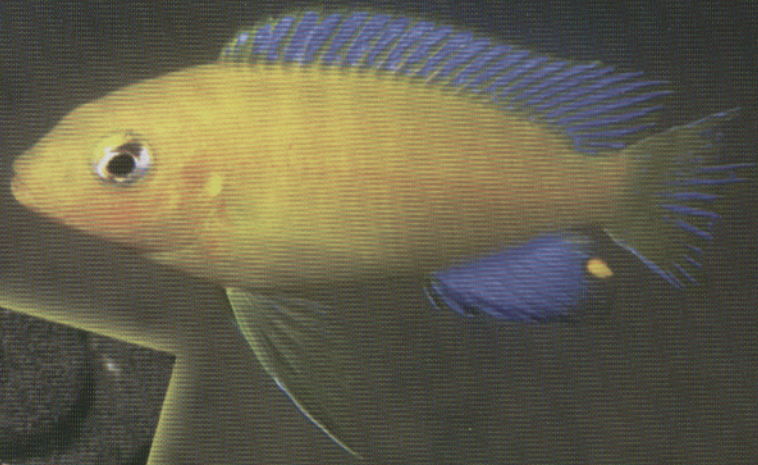


elephants, Black Rhino Sanctuary and most particularly, for its diverse bird populations on the river Shire. It is no wonder that Liwonde is considered one of the most important bird paradises in southern Africa. While in Liwonde, the visitors enjoyed several excursions in the Park in an open Land Rover, by boat, as well as on foot.

The boat safari explored parts of the Shire River and adjoining lagoons – a bird-watchers' paradise with an amazing variety of birds from eagles to kingfishers. The guests saw the famed Black

Rhino Sanctuary, where the endangered black rhino has now been reintroduced and successfully bred - as well as elephant, eagles, kingfishers, Egyptian geese, crocodiles, hippos, kudus, and other antelope species. During a hiking safari, experienced park guides also pointed out groups of shy impala, animal tracks or indigenous flowers, shrubs and magnificent baobab trees. In the late afternoon, they enjoyed refreshments by the river and admired elephants silhouetted against the setting sun. At night, guests were lulled to sleep in their luxury-class tents by the sounds of the grunting hippos and trilling cicadas.





Mumbo and Domwe, a veritable paradise surrounded by crystal-clear waters and colourful species of fish. Run by Kayak Africa, visitors at the camp were also provided with opportunities for snorkeling, kayaking and learned how to play the national board game Bawo. The accommodation and dining facilities were attractively designed in harmony with the landscape and were ecologically friendly. These lush and tranquil green jewels, with sandy beaches and unusual rock formations, were the back-drop for exploring the hundreds of indigenous species of brightly-coloured cichlid fish that are much prized by the world aquarium trade. Here tourists could see fishes living in every possible habitat—weeds, rock, sand mud, open water, and riverine outlets.

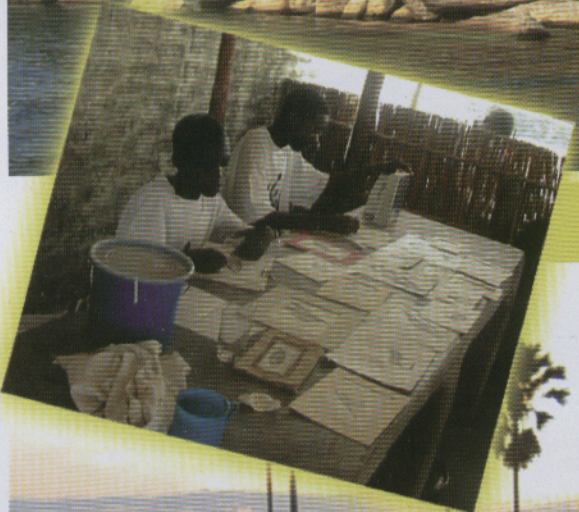
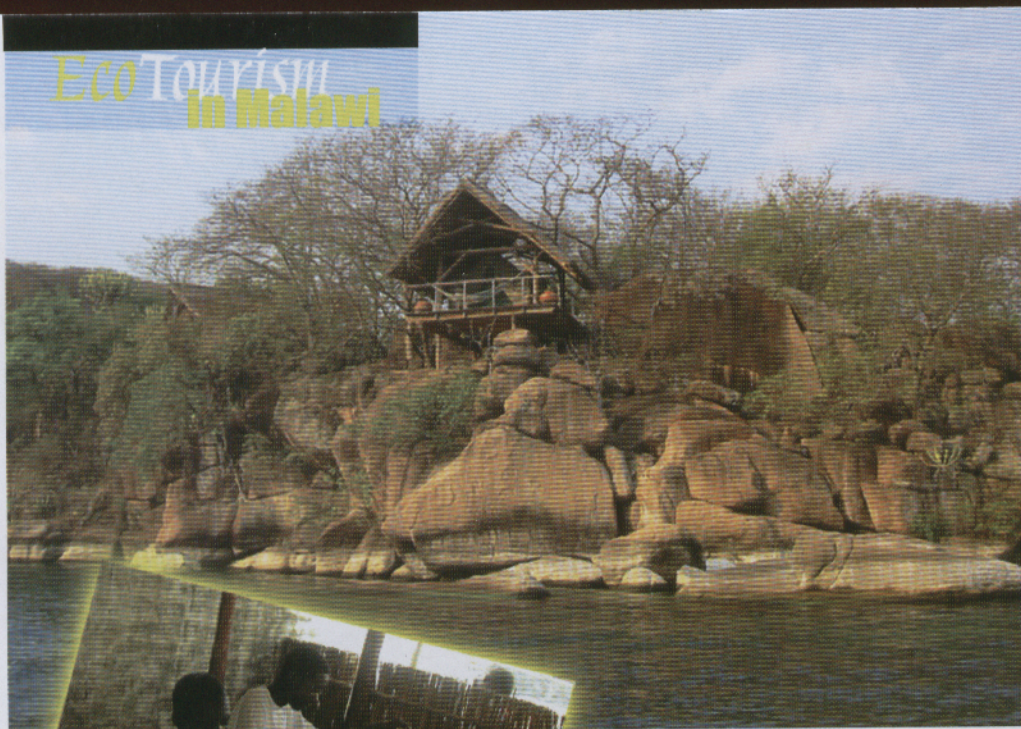
Furthermore, these beautiful fish exploit all available sources of food. Cichlids have adopted almost every imaginable form of behavior except flying -- to capture prey. Watching these fish hunt will fascinate the inquiring tourist every bit as much as tracking Africa's big cats. They are "upside down" predators with reverse coloration—light on top, dark on the bottom—that flip over to surprise their prey. A beak-nosed cichlid with a curved head grabs its prey in a rapid attack around a corner. But probably the most amazing behavioral feeding adaptation is that of the "Play Dead Fish". This species falls dead-like into the sand and remains motionless. Its colour pattern disguises it as a rotting corpse, which attracts scavenging cichlids. Inquisitive unsuspecting visitors become the consumed, instead of being the consumer.

The exact number of species in Lake Malawi is unknown, but estimates suggest that there are more than 1,000 species, over fifty times more species than the Galapagos finch made so famous by Charles Darwin. Furthermore, numerous new species are being continually discovered. This biological wonder of the world was brought first hand to the attention of the Finnish visitors, who were able to observe directly how WWF Finland has been carrying out its conservation projects, whilst promoting community development. WWF Finland tour activities included meeting the women who made fuel briquettes from organic waste, for cooking – in order to save the diminishing forests of Lake Malawi National Park; they watched how children learnt to respect and protect the wildlife of their country by drawing animals and plants from the area on the hand-made paper, also produced from organic waste

The next leg of the Finnish tour took the visitors to another contrasting area of outstanding beauty-- Lake Malawi National Park designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site by United Nations in 1984 in recognition of the high fish species diversity and biological importance of its fauna. Here they were able to experience three nights in luxury tents on the beautiful islands of



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by the women of the village. This has now become a flourishing business called Chembe Paper Shack, with hand-made cards and books being sold both locally and abroad.

In addition, the Finnish tour-group was able to visit two Malawian Primary Schools both affiliated with Finnish schools. Supported by WWF Finland, this connection has generated a lively exchange of correspondence, drawings and photos and a better understanding of the respective cultures. The visitors were able to watch a class in progress and were also treated to a short song recital. Together with partnerships of the Ministry of Tourism, Education, Environment and Natural Resources,

and others, WWF Finland has developed projects in both Liwonde and Lake Malawi National Parks because of their focus on sustainable economic and environmental strategies for the conservation of endangered flora and fauna. However, there is cause for optimism. WWF Finland and the Finnish Foreign Ministry are trying to help the Malawian people to conserve this valuable resource by developing alternative means of sustainable development for the economic and healthy well being of the inhabitants. Such a development and educational programme will reduce the pressure on their unique natural resources, including both the endangered fish and tree species of the region. 

THE WWF PROJECT GOALS ARE TO:

- 1) Create alternative economic opportunities for local villagers in a sustainable fashion through: a) developing a briquette and hand made paper business using waste vegetation; and b) fostering an ecotourism industry focused upon the underwater wildlife that is unique to the region;
- 2) Develop an environmental education programme for the local populace on the need to conserve, identify and understand the biology of their fish: a) initiating a complete faunal survey of the fishes in Lake Malawi National Park (LMNP) and describing all presently scientifically unidentified species; b) producing educational materials for both tourists and locals, including posters and a guide book to the fish of LMNP, and 3) Develop a fish management programme that now includes an aquaculture programme adjacent to LMNP. 4) Develop co-operation between Finnish and Malawi schools (connecting both teachers and students) - to increase understanding of the different cultures and motivate Malawian students to take care of the environment in different ways; 5) Foster HIV/AIDS awareness through the use of wildlife cartoon characters in an educational booklet.

natural surroundings, understand their relationship with their environment and enable them from an early age to take care of a garden in their primary schools. Through this training, children are made aware of the Web of Life, the need for growing healthy food and how we all depend on our precious natural resources. They will also understand why the conservation of Malawi's National Parks are important for their future well-being.

The long-term objective of HEEED Malawi and WWF Finland's programme is to increase the economic well-being of the people adjacent to Malawi's beautiful National Parks, improve the health and environmental conditions within which they live. We believe that by following this programme of helping Malawians to help themselves, they will then be able to appreciate and conserve one of the planet's great natural wonders. Malawi will become one of the major tourist attractions in the world where evolutionary wonders occur greater than those seen in the Galapagos Islands or on the Serengeti Plains. Meanwhile, eco-tourism in Malawi is still in its infancy and those first visitors from Finland last November made a real contribution to the economic well being of local communities close to Liwonde and Lake Malawi National Parks. We hope that this is the beginning of many more such visits to Malawi. For, through these exchanges, Malawian children and adults alike are encouraged to take pride in protecting their natural resources and to participate in this process.

WWF Finland believes that environmental education is critical for ensuring the continuity of Malawi's natural resources and National Parks. Children are the future stewards of both and it is therefore important to train youngsters to observe their

