

Matusadona NP



Matusadona National Park is situated on the shores of Lake Kariba but was proclaimed a non-hunting area on 7 November 1958 before the dam was built.

It became a Game Reserve in 1963, and in 1975, in terms of the Parks & Wildlife Act, it became a National Park. The Park comprises some 1 400 square kilometers of diverse flora and fauna. Before the lake was built, Matusadonha was a vast, rugged wilderness with limited access.

With the lake came ecological changes. One in particular, the lakeshore contributed greatly to the increase of large mammal populations in the area, especially elephant and buffalo. The grass found on the shoreline is *Panicum repens* and is a rejuvenative grass – needing only fluctuating lake levels to replenish its nutrients. With this ready food source, buffalo, waterbuck, zebra, and even impala have thrived and with them the predators. Matusadonha is an Intensive Protection Zone (IPZ) and home to several relocated rhinoceros.

Matusadonha has three distinct ecological areas. First is the lake and shoreline grassland; second, the Zambezi Valley floor, a mass of thick jesse and mopane woodland, and; third, the Escarpment area of Julbernadia and *Brachystegia* woodlands.

The Jesse/ Mopani area is sparsely grassed, but provides habitat for browsers, most notably the black rhino. Elephants range throughout the Park, seeking the shade of the Jesse in the heat of the day.

The Escarpment rises some 700 metres above the Valley floor and is extremely rugged. Over the years, elephant and fire depredations have caused the once substantial woodlands to dwindle, and in parts, grasslands have taken over. It became necessary to take control measures to reduce the elephant population to a manageable size. It also became necessary to carry out early burning programmes in the upper escarpment, to prevent later, hot fires from raging through and causing serious damage to tree growth. The effectiveness of the programmes can now be seen by the tremendous regrowth apparent in the Escarpment area.

Animal species that are found in abundance include elephant and buffalo. Other common species are those of: night ape, honey badger, civet, small spotted genet, slender mongoose, banded mongoose, spotted hyaena, wild cat, lion, leopard, yellow spotted dassie, black rhinoceros, zebra, warthog, common duiker, grysbok, klipspringer, waterbuck, bushbuck, scrub hare, porcupine, vervet monkey, chacma baboon, side-striped jackal, hippopotamus, roan antelope, kudu and bush squirrel. Some of the more elusive species include: clawless otter, white-tailed mongoose, reedbuck, sable antelope, eland, civet, rusty spotted genet, caracal and bush pig. Animals that are present but only sighted on rare occasions include wild dog, cheetah, roan and pangolin.



Lion Research Project

In 2014 the Matusadona Lion Project (MLP) was implemented in Matusadona NP, Zimbabwe, as a lion population ecology study. The park once held Africa's second highest density of lions in the 1990s, c. 100 within the 400km² valley floor area, but studies in 2004 highlighted a dramatic decline to a mere 28 animals.

The area was deemed a 'viable' Lion Conservation Unit by the IUCN; an area of known or possible lion range, and considered an ecological unit of importance to the species. However, there has been a distinct lack of research to ascertain a current conservation status for the population and what precisely is limiting this important population.

Matusadona forms the heart of the larger Sebungwe region – the eastern most part of the Kavango-Zambezi Trans-Frontier Conservation Area. Over the last 2 decades, the Sebungwe has suffered extensive habitat loss and wildlife numbers have dwindled due to human activities. Such losses have left protected areas like Matusadona NP isolated from one another hindering those species dependent on large home ranges and migration, placing them at risk of local extinction.

The Matusadona Lion Project is working in collaboration with ZPWMA to preserve the lion population of Matusadona, and other large carnivores, and to promote its long-term viability within a meta-population scale by improving the connectivity with other wildlife areas of Sebungwe.

The Matusadona Lion Project is led by Principal Researcher Rae Kokeš, supported by assistant researchers PWMA Ecologist, Ashley Mudungwe, and Kristoffer Everatt.

The Matusadona Lion Project has been provided with a based and logistical support at Changa Safari Camp since its onset. Changa are proud to support this conservation initiative and encourage participation with its guests to learn first hand from the Matusadona Lion Project team about conservation in Zimbabwe.

The Matusadona Lion Project is seeking support for equipment and logistical costs. For more information please contact the project on matusadonalions@gmail.com or click the button below to make a donation toward the project