



# MISSION: SAVING THE OKAVANGO DELTA

TEXT | VICTORIA ENGSTRAND-NEACSU PHOTO | ISTOCK & VICTORIA ENGSTRAND-NEACSU

**ONE OF THE WORLD'S FEW INLAND DELTAS, THE OKAVANGO, IS FACING PRESSURE ON SEVERAL FRONTS. THREE STATES WITH DIFFERING NEEDS MUST COOPERATE TO SAVE IT FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.**

Botswana has in recent decades often been spoken of as an African success story. Stable, reliable and wealthy. Soon after independence in 1966, diamonds were discovered under its desert sands, and consecutive governments have used the revenues to build today's Botswana, where most development indicators point upwards.

The reserves of the precious stones are dwindling, however, and few ex-

pect it to last more than another 20 years. Something must take the diamonds' place to ensure Botswana's continued

prosperity. The most obvious contender, and the apparent choice of the government, is tourism.

Botswana boasts an abundance of wildlife, the dramatic Kalahari Desert, and the Okavango Delta, one of the most delicate aquatic ecosystems in the world. The delta is a favoured destination of well-off safari tourists seeking remoteness and unique experiences. Catering to the top-end

tourist bracket is a conscious choice of the government who fears that mass tourism would hurt the delta's intricate ecosystem.

Maintaining and developing luxury eco-tourism in the delta is dependent on that it stays what it is, relatively intact. However, that in turn depends on the water steadily flowing in every year. The Okavango Delta is end station for the Okavango (called the Cubango in Angola, Kavango in Namibia) that originates in the central Angolan highlands. The water travels through the three countries before it spreads through the ●●●

## COVER STORY



What makes the Okavango Delta so alluring to tourists, its remoteness, is also what affects the local population adversely: the socio-economic conditions in the region, including parts of Botswana, Namibia and Angola, are dire, with widespread poverty, malnutrition and poor infrastructure. "In Angola, the area used to be called 'the land at the end of the world'," says Dr. Ebenizário Chonguica of OKACOM.

The fear in Botswana is that extensive hydropower development upstream will lead to diminishing flows into the



Delta. "A high development scenario would kill the delta," comments Dr. Ebenizário Chonguica,

Executive Secretary of the Permanent Okavango River Basin Water Commission (OKACOM) that groups Angola, Botswana and Namibia.

Following a Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis (TDA) completed in 2011, OKACOM has worked on a Strategic Action Programme for the Cubango-Okavango River basin. In this process, a variety of low- and high-development scenarios were set up to try and predict how the Delta would react.

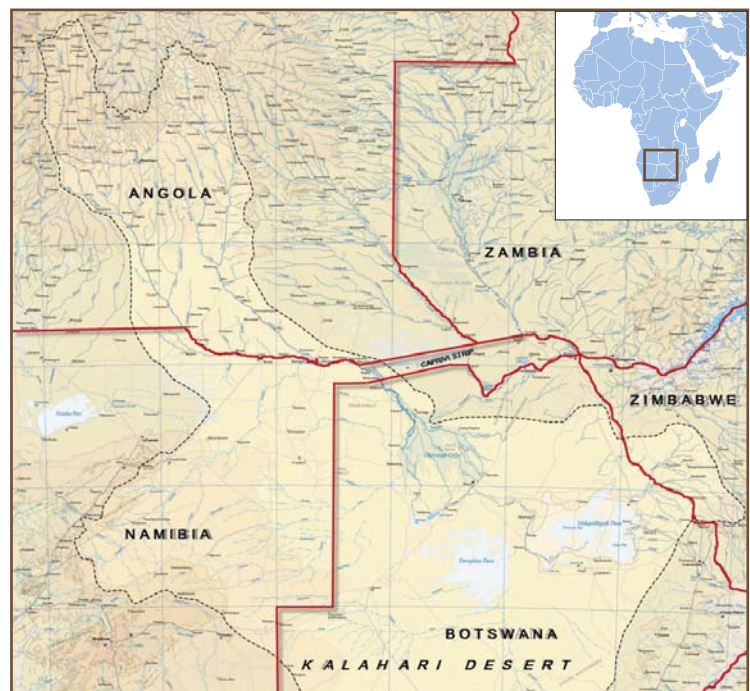
●●● fan-shaped delta. Botswana is the beneficiary of enormous masses of water, as much as 95 per cent of the delta's water comes from Angola.



"Within our boundaries, what water we can call ours is very little. So what we have is shared," says Tracy S. Molemi, Deputy Director of International Waters at Botswana's Department of Water Affairs.

While Angola is by far the biggest contributor to the Okavango, it is also the smallest user of its water. Its neighbours recognise that rebuilding the country after the long civil war that ended in 2002 brings with it a need for energy development, in Angola's case hydropower. Namibia has also said it wants to tap more of the Kavango's water for its own national needs.

**Angola, Botswana and Namibia work together in OKACOM, the Permanent Okavango River Basin Water Commission.**



Map illustration: Elin Ingblom, SIWI  
Okavanga Delta map: [www.coeearth.org](http://www.coeearth.org)

The high development scenario included considerable population growth, increased water demand, irrigation schemes and hydropower development in the next 10-15 years.

“It would completely change the flow of water and sediments, and the level of water stress would be very high,” says Dr. Chonguica. “Habitats would diminish, fisheries and pastures would decline, the food chain would collapse, and the opportunity for tourism attraction would be lost”.

His concerns are echoed by Ketlhatlogile Mosepele, Acting Deputy Director of Research Services and Training at the Okavango Research Institute (ORI), located in Maun at the southern stretches of the Delta. He says that less water coming into the Delta would affect the whole ecological chain – wildlife living in semi-aquatic areas would diminish and tourism would be at risk.

“I am not using too big words if I say that it is about Botswana’s future,” says Dr. Chonguica.

The Strategic Action Programme, which stresses cooperation and joint decisions in matters that affect the Delta, was endorsed by Namibia’s and Botswana’s governments in 2013. Dr. Chonguica is hopeful that Angola, too, will endorse it before the end of 2014.

According to Dr. Chonguica the key is to come up with a solution that alleviates poverty in all three countries, without it affecting the

## THE DELTA IN NUMBERS

- **The Okavango Delta**, in northern Botswana, spreads out like a hand inside the Kalahari Desert.
- It is fed mainly by the river **Cubango** (known as **Kavango** in Namibia and **Okavango** in Botswana) and its main tributary Cuito, both originating in the highland plateau of Angola, and passing through Namibia, on its way into the delta.
- The length of the Okavango River from its source in the Angola highlands to the mouth at the outer margin of the Delta in Botswana is **1,100 kilometres**.
- The Delta has more than **150,000 islands**.
- **The inundated area** of the Okavango Delta fluctuates between 6,000 to 8,000 km<sup>2</sup> during the dry season, swelling to up to 15,850 km<sup>2</sup> during the flood.
- To read the Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis of the Cubango-Okavango River Basin, go to [www.okacom.org/site-documents/tda-final-reports/feffcubango-okavango-river-basin-transboundary-diagnostic-analysis/view](http://www.okacom.org/site-documents/tda-final-reports/feffcubango-okavango-river-basin-transboundary-diagnostic-analysis/view)

Delta. “There is a risk that politicians will be selfish. You don’t win elections outside your constituencies. But we need them to convince their voters that cooperating with neighbours is the

better deal. It is an exercise of thinking before doing”.

Tracy S. Molefi at Botswana’s Department of Water Affairs has thought long and hard about this. “In shared waters, it is very important for people who represent countries to be able to place themselves above national interest. It is not that they should ignore their countries’ interest, but they should see a basin as a whole. The minute you think ‘What do I get?’, you’re stuck.”

She believes that it is a give and take. “In order to safeguard tourism as a top earner far into the future, we need to sacrifice a little bit of tourism today.”

She wants Angola to be invited to invest in the Delta. “Let them (Angolans) get priority, make tourism income from the Delta. We need to compensate upstream so that they don’t block downstream”.

“Selfishness must be avoided”, says Dr. Chonguica. In addition to inviting Angolan investment in the Delta, he says there is a need for joint investments in potential tourism development inside Angola. “We would need a joint effort in clearing land mines and building basic structures, such as airstrips”.

And the time to act is now, says Ms. Molefi. “The technocrats know about the importance of a holistic view. We don’t need to do any more studies. We need to catch the attention of the decision-makers!” ●

## SIWI IN BOTSWANA

- Botswana initiated a **reform of its water sector** in 2008.
- As part of the reform, **SIWI supported the capacity building of staff** from Botswana’s Department of Water Affairs (DWA), Water Utilities Corporation (WUC) and other water stakeholders.
- The capacity-building programme included eight courses on various topics closely linked to the reform process. One covered the area of **Transboundary Water Management**,

a central issue when it comes to managing and safeguarding the Okavango Delta for future generations, in close cooperation with other states.

- To read more about SIWI’s capacity building work, go to [www.siwi.org/knowledge-services/capacity-building](http://www.siwi.org/knowledge-services/capacity-building)
- To read more about SIWI’s work in transboundary waters, go to [www.siwi.org/knowledge-services/transboundary-water-management](http://www.siwi.org/knowledge-services/transboundary-water-management)

