

The Okavango Delta and Tourism

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(In presenting his paper, Mr Johnson asked us to add anything that we felt might enhance his paper from a local point of view. Thus, this note should be read in conjunction with his paper.)

Tourism in Botswana is based upon wildlife in its natural habitat, and while there are many good wildlife areas in the country, there is no doubt that the Okavango Delta is the focus for a great diversity of species. It is here that semi-arid and wet lands interdigitate and the Moremi Wildlife Reserve is the dry-season visiting place for many species which spend the wet season in the drier areas surrounding the eastern Delta. The Kwando, the Chobe River Front, Nxai Pan and the Makgadikgadi also support large populations, which tend to concentrate during the dry season, and the Kalahari supports large herds of individual species, usually widely spaced; but similar and more scenic areas exist elsewhere in Southern Africa. Because of its wide spectrum of species, 36 mammals of Serval-size and over, and more than 200 species of birds and its variety of habitats ranging from swamp and palm-islands through floodplain and riparian strip to mopane and terminalia woodland, the Okavango is unique. Without the Moremi Wildlife Reserve, tourism as an industry in Botswana has little future.

Apart from the Tsodilo Hills, there are no mountains, no massive lakes and no seashores, all of which are major attractions supplementing wildlife in other African countries. For this reason, the viewing of wildlife in Botswana must be enhanced above that of other countries if tourists are to be attracted. This is possible, as wildlife areas are undeveloped, as is not the case in most other countries, and the visitor may enjoy a real wilderness experience. But tourists like to be on the move and enjoy a variety of experiences; thus, these must be provided within and around the Delta. This is becoming more and more urgent with the tourist situation deteriorating as neighbouring countries sink deeper into political uncertainty. Another major problem is the length of the tourist season, May to October, which is too short for investors to consider sinking much capital expenditure. Transport costs are prohibitive: the airfare from Johannesburg to Maun return is P200 and once in Maun, the cost of running a vehicle is staggering; as much as P1 per kilometre in certain areas. Finally, there is an uneven distribution of the attractions which tend to concentrate the tourists in small areas: the Khwai River and Savuti Marsh. At first glance, the cost of an infrastructure which would overcome many of these disadvantages would appear enormous, and in its return to Government, the provider, unwarranted. But this is not necessarily the case.

First, the advantages should be examined. There is no doubt that during the last 15 years tourism in other African countries has been a major foreign exchange earner. With the introduction of our own currency, this has become, almost overnight, of major importance. The Okavango is fairly remote and its inhabitants seeking work are presently forced to leave the area, and often even the country. Tourism is one of the few industries that can be taken to the people. In addition, with the present season, it fits beautifully into the agricultural season, releasing its employees at the exact time that they wish to plough, and re-engaging them as the harvest is gathered. Tourism for most of its employees does not require high academic qualifications, nor long training; an ideal situation for Ngamiland with its low literacy rate. The traditional handicrafts industry has resurged with about 30 000 baskets made by

women exported annually and the number increasing. Tourism not only encourages the industry, but helps to raise production costs, as these are not left to dealers when part of the product is sold direct to the public. For some families handicrafts already form the major part of their income. Tourism will also provide a market for locally-produced chickens, eggs, fruit, vegetables, etc, presently all imported by air at considerable cost. A wide range of other services, all offering employment, such as garages, stores, recreation facilities, etc, will follow.

Provided that tourism is carefully controlled, it has little effect on the land, and is certainly a very valid use of areas, such as the northern Okavango, which is generally considered of marginal value for agriculture of the type presently practised. Besides tourism can make a variety of uses of the resources. Apart from wildlife viewing in parks and reserves, the latter act as reservoirs for some first-class tourist hunting in surrounding areas, and also as a supply for local hunting in the same areas. The return from tourist hunting is enormous, each lion actually killed probably being worth more than P1 000 in revenue alone to Government. The permanent water areas offer some excellent fishing, particularly in the later part of the season as the flood recedes.

From this it may be seen that Government should not look on tourism as a revenue-earner which will show a cash profit on investment; rather, it should see it as an industry providing employment in remote areas and generating other industries there. This now brings us to the development of the industry and the part that should be played by Government and by private enterprise.

Government must be responsible for the development of parks and reserves and for communications. The great attraction is the wilderness atmosphere that prevails, and it is upon this that tourism may stand or fall in Botswana. Thus, it becomes apparent that, with the exception of certain linking roads, too much road system, which would allow a steady flow of traffic, like that in the Yellowstone, would probably destroy the area. Probably the roads actually in the wildlife areas should be improved only to the extent that they guide vehicles through areas of interest; the fact that saloon cars cannot use them should not be a consideration. A minimum of accommodation development should be put into these areas and preferably, it should be kept to the periphery, otherwise they should be left as nature designed them. The cost of airfares will decrease a little once there is a greater traffic of tourists who do not use their own transport and once the season has been extended.

It has become apparent that there are only two major facilities that tourists require: ice and adequate toilet arrangements. Provided these are available, the bare minimum of other facilities will suffice. The costs of permanent lodges are not warranted, nor are they desirable, as they tend to grow and to concentrate the tourists. In any event, the very unevenness of the attraction militates against such lodges. After six years, the Khwai River Lodge still runs at only 30% occupancy during the season and costs P4 000 a month, excluding food, liquor, etc. The cost of fuel alone for lighting and vehicles exceeds P1 000 a month, hence the very heavy charges they are forced to make. Without its subsidiary tented camps at Qugana and Savuti, it would be uneconomic. It is suggested that a good tented camp taking a maximum of 20 persons would be far more effective and would conserve the wilderness atmosphere. Possibly the Government should provide the sites for these in the form of cement slabs, water with tanks and good toilet facilities. These could be rented to private operators on a tender basis for a number of years. By siting these at new areas, such as Nxai Pan, Makgadikgadi, Tsodilo and the limestone caverns at Cwihaba, the season could be extended to cover 9 instead of 6 months. By not improving the roads, tourists would be not just encouraged, but forced to use local operators' facilities. By including geological and historical features, such as Cwihaba,

Makgadikgadi and Tsodilo, the scope of the attractions would be widened, making up for the lack of a sea coast, etc.

The very document from this Symposium will be of the utmost value to tourist operators, since it will tell them a great deal of what they need to know when they explain the attractions to visitors. Proper interpretation is of major importance and sometimes makes apparently less-interesting features live. All tourist guides should be made to have a thorough appreciation of the attractions they are showing, since their audience is becoming more sophisticated.

By adopting the above suggestions, we feel that most of the disadvantages of tourism are dispelled, particularly the need for heavy investment by private enterprise in remote and costly areas, the need for Government to invest heavily in roads, which may in themselves destroy the environment, and the problem of limiting tourists.

We feel that the type of tourist who comes to Botswana should be the person who wishes to experience all that we have to display, and not the person who comes to witness a spectacle. Such a system will almost certainly ensure this. But in addition, we feel that local tourism is of the very greatest importance, since we must value the heritage of nature which we possess. For this reason, a major programme should be mounted to encourage local tourism by providing educational tours for schools and cheaper facilities for other residents.

The Okavango Delta is Botswana's major tourist attraction and a unique feature in its own right. Every country has its attractions, which should, so far as possible, be preserved for eternity. It was pointed out at the Stockholm Conference on the Environment that this is "One Earth." What we have in each country we hold in trust for future generations; it is ours to use, but not to destroy.