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An Assessment of Forest Education Centers as Models for Learning and Teaching in Zambia

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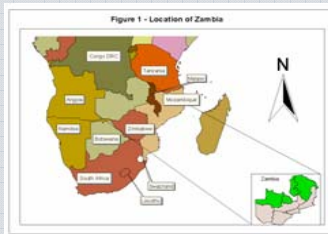
The Importance of Educational Interpretive Centers

Educational interpretive centers provide a practical aspect of conservation and preservation of cultural and natural heritage resources. These centers are an avenue for awareness of essential ecological resources, environmental experiences, community based natural resources management and development targeted at various stakeholders such as school going children, community members, students from institutions of learning, visitors and the general public.

The concept of educational interpretive centers is formally new in Zambia, although it may have existed informally. Most centers have only served to provide guides for national parks, game management areas and lodges. Although useful, this has not inspired advanced heritage interpretation as a profession.

In Zambia, people have 'age-old' tendencies to interact with plants and natural resources in ways that are sustainable. Over time, this has enabled them to discover edible fruits and roots, medicines and remedies, building and construction materials and resources for daily needs such as packaging, utensils and educational aides. The indigenous knowledge accumulated, particularly in health care, nutrition and daily needs, attests to the Zambian people's ingenuity, creativeness, imagination and spirituality. Unfortunately, this knowledge appears to be threatened, and is gradually disappearing. Educational interpretive centers can provide a forum for preserving this history, and can also influence how the community will use, perceive, and relate to natural resources in the future.

Zambia: A Biodiversity Hotspot

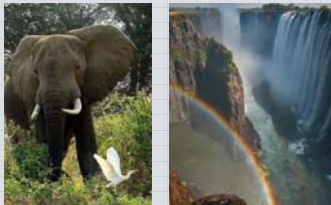


Zambia is a sub-tropical, landlocked country located in southern Africa. Zambia is 752,614 sq km, slightly bigger than Texas. Much of the 12 million population are young: 45% are under the age of 14. With a modest economic growth rate of 5-6% per year, GDP per capita is approximately \$1,400 US per year. Key industries include agriculture and extractive mining (copper, cobalt, and gemstones).

Natural resource managers face issues of poverty, deforestation, and desertification. There exists a great need for education outreach programs, especially with youth, as they are such a large percentage of the population.

Zambia's forest covers 42,452,000 ha. The country is home to an immense amount of biodiversity, including 4,800 plant species, 770 birds, 233 mammals, 143 reptiles, and 57 amphibians.

Even though forests cover 57% of the land, uncontrolled and unsustainable exploitation threatens forests. Lack of strong regulatory instruments and policy measures, coupled with a narrow definition of forest products, has exerted immense and avoidable pressure on natural resources.



Wildlife and waterfalls are all endangered categories of Zambia's natural resource treasures.

Methodology

During a six-month Fellowship, the author explored approaches and techniques used in education and interpretive centers in the US, and how these approaches lead to sustainable interaction with natural resources and benefits for local communities.

Primary Objective: To document how different centers operate for the benefit of local communities.

Information was gathered from practitioners in: government, non-profits, private corporations, and institutions of learning.

Data and information were collected from: participant observations, interviews/narratives, written sources, presentations, conferences, and tours.

Research Questions

- How do local people in the US practically define educational interpretive centers in relation to learning, teaching, age groups, and forest life in association with socio-economic, cultural, and environmental benefits?
- How do different practitioners create a forum for evoking and influencing change dynamics in communicating the value of natural resources to different age groups?
- What age groups frequent education and interpretive centers?

Findings:

Although the purpose of educational interpretive centers is the same in Zambia and the US, the approach and players are different. In the US, interpretive centers are run by both government institutions (e.g. BLM, USFS) and non-governmental organizations, and in some cases the two may even work together. In Zambia, centers are solely run by the non-governmental sector, which presents enormous challenges for the long term sustainability and funding of these educational programs. In Zambia, government efforts in these areas often fail, because they do not create a sense of community ownership for stakeholders.

Interpretive centers in the US are diverse and can involve multiple institutions. Stakeholders and participants come from a broad network, including:

- City planners
- Local government officials
- Forest professionals and plant ecologists
- Academicians/institutions of learning
- Consultants and suppliers
- Museum and heritage professionals
- Traditional land owners and game rangers
- Animal ecologists
- Guides, historians, naturalists, interpreters
- Volunteers

Centers are located in both rural and city areas. For example, some centers have been established in areas that were once not only abandoned after agricultural activities, but also heavily exploited for timber, wood, fuel-wood and animals. Some are in riverine or mountainous areas where museums, zoos, aquaria, botanical gardens, and historical sites have replaced the former habitat. At these interpretive centers, networking, training, and collaboration are encouraged among members and partners in support of the inherent mission.

Key Findings Regarding US Centers

1. **Educational centers in the US require huge sums of investment for them to operate effectively.** US centers often rely on the involvement and participation of wealthy donors in providing financial support towards infrastructure development and operational support.
2. **Centers run by government appear elitist,** as administration members must be highly educated individuals. Centers in the non government sector are more inclusive, where individuals with or without education can participate in the programs.
3. **Activities may be limited to county and or state level** (as opposed to national) due to division into various government jurisdictions.

Unique Features of Zambian Centers

1. **Educational interpretive centers in Zambia emphasize volunteerism and community needs to operate effectively.** Labor is sought from within the community, and members give their time freely.
2. **Centers run by government have policies called "Joint Management Plans" (JMP)** where management is through partnerships such as Community Resource Boards (CRBs) without regard to educational status, but with emphasis on local knowledge systems and practices.
3. **Establishment of centers on customary lands fall under customary laws and jurisdiction of a chief** and may require special consideration.
4. **Investors are not as concerned with long-term support.** There is an emphasis on establishing income generating activities for centers.
5. **Zambian promotional activities are nationwide even when they are being undertaken in a small locality.** One small activity often dove-tails into a bigger picture at the national level.



Left: Community members sort out items handmade from African fan palm for exhibit at an interpretive center supported by the Commonwealth Forestry Association. Right: The Moto Moto Museum is a partner in the interpretation of the heritage value of forests in Zambia.



Zambia Plan of Action

There is a Zambian saying that "Wisdom is like a Baobab tree - no one individual can embrace it." To improve effectiveness and community involvement, museum and educational centers have come together and formed a group to promote interpretation and education using museums, centers, and reserves. This collaborative effort hopes to reach throughout the country and establish activities in each of the 74 districts of Zambia.

The goal is to provide demonstration centers for learning about nature and its constituents. This is in order to spread knowledge systems and practices that make use of resources without harming the chances of future generations to make use of them. One of the basic strategies proposed is an outreach through the eyes of local people, children, youth, women and men who are reservoirs of traditional knowledge systems and practices in areas of conservation, sustainable utilization and preservation.

The themes for the centers are:

- 1: Nature excursions
- 2: Herbarium specimens
- 3: Development of a forest educational pack
- 4: Crafts and shells

In practice, the centers have a mandate to collect, research, document, exhibit and preserve the heritage of the nation for posterity and enjoyment through the approaches mentioned above. Tourism is generally underdeveloped in Zambia and is currently based on wildlife, but little on wilderness and cultural experiences. Therefore promotion of cultural tourism will assist in diversifying the tourism products and involvement of the local people in its development.

Target Groups for participation:

- School and out of school children
- Youth
- Adults (women and men)
- Traditional birth attendants
- Local and international tourists

An important lesson learned from the US experience, will be to impress upon the corporate world to pay attention to the ideals and aspirations of "preserving and conserving" natural ecosystems for social, economic, cultural, environment, religious, spiritual and development survival ends. Without these resources, their existence as a company may be at stake.



Left: Charity Salasini, then a Masters student in Indigenous Knowledge, admires crafts made from forest resources, which will be sold in the craft shop of an interpretive center. Right: If you teach a child today, you will have taught the manager of tomorrow's natural resource.



Left: Outreach to journalists, such as Lwanga Mwilu, help to educate journalists on the importance of investing in natural resources. Right: Partners brainstorm on challenges faced by the natural resources sector. Analysis of field experience is pivotal in designing workable plans.