

# BioSoc: the Biodiversity and Society Bulletin

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## CAN COMMUNITY CONSERVATION SURVIVE POLITICAL INSTABILITY?

It wasn't so long ago that the CAMPFIRE initiative in Zimbabwe has held up as a model for community-based conservation. Certainly it has inspired and informed many community conservation efforts across Southern Africa and, indeed, worldwide. But how has it fared under the political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe? Everisto Mapedza explores the fate of CAMPFIRE and of state-forest co-management in Zimbabwe in an effort to understand the resilience of community-based institutions in the face national instability.

The study finds – not surprisingly – that wildlife populations are declining and habitat is being degraded – both in quality and extent. This is largely due to a breakdown in the policing power of local institutions and in incentive structures for biodiversity conservation. In particular, the study noted a trend towards increased illegal use of wildlife – highlighting that elephant hunting had reverted back to commercial poaching for ivory rather than for meat and that unconfirmed reports noted that this poaching was largely being carried out by the military or those with strong political connections. With rampant inflation, and the withdrawal of donor support, incentives for conservation have also been weakened resulting in increased encroachment on conservation lands by farmers and livestock herders. Where there is still the opportunity for capturing financial benefits – for example from trophy hunters and a few hard-core tourists – resource management institutions have been prone to political influence and the capture of benefits by the politically powerful.

Nevertheless, despite the difficulties, local institutions appear to be surviving and the author sees this as cause for some hope, making recommendations to further strengthen these institutions so that they are better placed to reinvigorate community conservation once some form of democratic governance has returned. These include:

- Increasing the direct flow of benefits to local communities – for example by making a direct link between community institutions and safari operators rather than via the local authority.
- Giving local communities greater powers to deal quickly and effectively with problem animals directly rather than having to deal with the bureaucracies of local governments – which are increasingly faced with transport constraints and unable to respond anyway.
- Re-assessing the balance between wildlife and livestock in order to more realistically address immediate livelihood concerns and develop a more integrated approach to sustainable rural planning.
- Reinstating donor support to local community institutions in order to strengthen the resilience they have demonstrated to date and build their capacity for broader natural resource management.

Conservation can seem irrelevant in crisis situations, but it has to be assumed that stability will eventually return. When it does local level institutions are likely to be the best-placed to pick up the pieces.

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## SOURCE

Mapedza, E (2007). Keeping Campfire Going: Political Uncertainty and Natural Resource Management in Zimbabwe. *Gatekeeper Series No 133*. IIED, London

The report is available to [download from IIED](#)

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