



DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP AWARD WINNER 2010

The Okavango Delta in Botswana is a remote 55,374 square kilometre wetland consisting of palm-covered islands, open grasslands, baobab trees, vast swamps and *mopani* woodlands.

CASE STUDY

It is fed by distant rains that fall more than a thousand miles away in the Angolan highlands and slowly swell rivers and streams that eventually spill into the Central Kalahari Desert of Botswana in a huge annual flood that supports all life in the Okavango - a giant desert oasis unlike anything else in the world. At nearly four times the size of Serengeti National Park in East Africa, the Okavango is also one of the largest protected areas on the African continent and among the most important wildlife habitats on the planet, home to large herds of elephants, antelopes, zebras, buffalo and a host of rare and endangered predators, including lions, leopards and wild dogs, among hundreds of other flora and fauna species.

In the 1970s, Botswana was a poor and sparsely populated country. Tourism to the Okavango at that time was almost nonexistent, save for a handful of rustic camps used mostly by trophy-hunting companies. Today, Botswana is still a sparsely populated country, but it is now one of the most developed African countries.



Tourism is now its second largest source of revenue, with the Okavango as the premier attraction. The challenges of water scarcity in a desert country like Botswana, coupled with a population facing poverty soon after independence in 1966, would put pressure on any potential tourism region to develop as much as possible, in as short a time as possible, and bring in as many tourists as possible. But the Government of Botswana, under the guidance of the Botswana Tourism Board, recognised that an innovative approach to a 'low-volume/high-yield' model for tourism could generate a larger economic return with minimal negative impact on the natural environment, thus ensuring that the Delta would be safeguarded for future generations by avoiding the pitfalls of poorly planned and managed tourism development.

In less than 30 years, the Okavango has become a global model for successful conservation and tourism, demonstrating that the protection of wilderness and economic growth from tourism can go hand in hand, to the benefit of multiple stakeholders. This is best illustrated in the Okavango Delta Development Plan, spearheaded by the Botswana Tourism Board and guided by the goals of the Bi-Okavango Commission - a transfrontier co-operation agreement among neighbouring countries, also consisting of national and local governments, community groups, private sector companies and non-governmental organisations.

In adopting the plan, the Botswana Government set out limits of acceptable change, and required tourism camps and lodges to operate according to strict environmental guidelines, including sustainable tourism principles and practices. This led to the creation of a national ecotourism strategy in 2002 and publication of an Ecotourism Best Practices Manual in 2008, based on the conservation through tourism economic model for the Okavango.

CASE STUDY



Through this innovative 'low-volume/high-yield' tourism strategy, the foreign exchange generated helped to transform the country, making Botswana today one of Africa's most prosperous economies and most educated populations, with a GDP per capita above US\$10,500 and with a literacy rate of nearly 80%.



Furthermore, wildlife and tourism in the Okavango Delta now employ 34% of adults from local communities in and around the delta, leading to strong local support for conservation efforts. The private sector, working closely with the Botswana Tourism Board, has been pivotal in this effort, by developing world-class facilities and effectively marketing the Okavango to international visitors.

Today it is one of Africa's top tourism destinations, and one of its most successful conservation programmes. Key destination stewardship efforts by the Government of Botswana include granting tourism concession licenses to those tour companies, lodges and camps that adhere to sustainable tourism principles and practices, including:

- Employing, training and capacity building of local community members to benefit directly from tourism;
- Support for the protection of natural and cultural heritage in Botswana;
- Monitoring environmental impacts through tourism operations based on limits of acceptable change criteria, to avoid damaging the fragile ecology of the Okavango.

The Okavango Development Management Plan expresses this clearly through its vision and goals as: "A carefully managed, well-functioning ecosystem that equitably and sustainably provides benefits for local, national and international stakeholders...to integrate resource management for the Okavango Delta that will ensure its long term conservation and that will provide benefits for the present and future well-being of the local people through sustainable use of its resources."

Today, the Okavango, both a World Heritage Site and a Ramsar Site, is recognised as one of the most important natural wetlands in the world, and it has become a tourism and conservation best-practice success that is studied by other countries hoping to duplicate Botswana's model. In the words of the Botswana Tourism Board, "We now believe that our unique tourism development model can provide a blueprint for the sustainable protection of other unique wilderness areas in the world."

