Introduction

Victoria Falls National Park is located in the North Western part of the country in Matabeleland North Province and boarders with Livingstone town in Zambia. The Park is one of Zimbabwe’s seven Ramsar sites in the country. The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands provides a framework for wetland conservation and asks that nations promote the sustainable utilization and conservation of wetlands. Zimbabwe became a signatory to the Ramsar Convention in 2011.

The Victoria Falls National Park Ramsar site runs 6km below the Victoria falls to Batoka gorge and 12km above the gorge measuring 6610Ha. It is a world heritage site under the UNESCO World Heritage Convention and is currently protected by the National Parks and Wildlife Authority. The sites catchment area is the Zambezi National Park. This is a transfrontier National Park made up of 3 countries; Botswana, Zambia and Namibia.

Biodiversity

The biodiversity of the Victoria Falls National Park region is rich and varied. The national park contains abundant wildlife including sizable populations of elephant and buffalo, as well as hippo, giraffe, black rhino, zebra, and a variety of antelope, vervet monkeys, baboons, along with warthog, are common. The area supports a wealth of birdlife, with over 500 species, making it a paradise for the birdwatcher. It is also home to many species of reptiles, including crocodiles and 84 different species of fish above the falls.

The Park houses a rainforest which sprays the Victoria falls and has rare plant species such as the mahogany which are not seen anywhere else in the region. The fragile yet resilient rainforest records 70 shrub species and 170 floral species. The unique micro-climate created by the spray from the Falls particularly favours smaller moisture loving plants, especially the herbaceous ground flora which contains some of the rare and unique species to be found in the rain forest. The early rains in November bring the Fireballs, known locally as the ‘red hot pin cushion’, with their large globes of many slender red tubular flowers. The Victoria Falls is one of the most spectacular waterfalls in the world.
The Zambezi river, which is more than two kilometres wide at this point, plunges noisily down a series of basalt gorges raising an iridescent mist that can be seen more than 20 km away.

**Cultural Values and Tourism**

The indigenous Tonga tribal community separated from other ethnic groups developed an independent identity to their craftsmanship skills and styles. These include woodcarving, basket work and pottery marking.

Being a natural wonder of the world the wetland is used for Tourist and Recreational purposes throughout the year. With a number of adrenalin activities taking place at the Victoria falls including white water rafting and bungee jumping. On average over one million people visit per year.

**Threats**

Tourists have the potential to exert a lot of the pressure on this fragile ecosystem resulting in more boats on the Zambezi River and more lodges being built along its banks. On average currently there are twenty helicopter flights through the wetland every day. This threatens the birdlife within the areas as well as increases the noise pollution.

An ‘alien’ (non-natural to the area) species, *Lantana camara*, is a problem in the park and surrounding areas of the Falls. Introduced from South America as an ornamental garden creeper, it is a highly aggressive species which out-competes the local indigenous flora, and without active management is overtaking large areas of the park at the exclusion of the natural species. Another alien invader, the Sword Fern (*Nerphrolepis cordifolia*) which is also a cause for concern.

There is a considerable amount of poaching in the area for animals, fish and trees. This has a huge impact on the environment. The animals are being killed for their meat and skins, the fish are netted out of the Zambezi for food and the trees are cut down for firewood and more dangerously for the huge wood carving industry.

**Conservation measures**

There are three very active non profit making organisations operating in the area and these include Environment Africa, Victoria Falls Anti Poaching Unit and the Wild Horizons Trust. The organisations are dedicated to protecting the area’s unique indigenous fauna and flora, in collaboration with appropriate authorities, local communities and other stakeholders. Projects include but are not limited to, rehabilitation of injured or orphaned wildlife, anti-poaching and wildlife veterinary assistance where required, assisting with community-based projects, and a children’s conservation education program. The Parks and Wildlife Authority is the major government department that oversees environmental management in the area. The Environmental Management Agency is also active in the surrounding areas. The national park is covered by five Acts covering; the National Museums and Monuments Act, Environmental Management Act, Tourism Act, Parks and Wildlife Act and Forest Act.

For more information on Ramsar convention or wetlands contact:

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