

Mozambique's Zambezi Delta: Better And Better!

I've often written that, in many ways, African hunting is better now than ever before. It's true that there are more countries now open to hunting than ever before. Thanks to modern travel, Africa is more reachable than ever before, and thanks to the burgeoning game ranching industries in Namibia and South Africa, African hunting is more available and more affordable than ever before. I am sure that both of those two countries hold ten times the wildlife today than when I first visited them more than 30 years ago. It's wonderful to have great examples like them, and I use them often. I have long considered it part of my job to make hunters want to go hunting...so I freely admit that I put the most positive spin on things that I can. It's really a matter of whether your glass is half-empty or half-full. Mine is always at least half full!

On the other hand, it's difficult to find equally good examples in wild Africa. There are still many good areas, but very few that have the concentrations of wildlife that I was fortunate to see in the 1970s and '80s. There are reasons this is so, and excessive sport hunting is almost never among them. Illegal subsistence hunting, commercial poaching, human encroachment and competition with domestic livestock...those are primary issues in Africa's fast-shrinking wild lands. Africa remains incredible, but wild Africa is diminishing.

There are exceptions. One of the areas turning back the clock is coastal Mozambique, the big Coutadas surrounding the Marromeu Reserve just south of Zambezi. I first hunted Mozambique in 1989, just as the long civil war was wind-



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ing down. I found it a wasteland, and I predicted with perfect inaccuracy that recovery was unlikely, if not impossible. Fortunately, I was wrong! As hostilities ended, adventure-some outfitters moved in and started the healing process. It took years, but when I returned to Mozambique in 2006, I was astounded by how good it was. Since 2008, I've returned to the Zambezi Delta every year. There are no species here that I haven't collected and, realistically, few that I'm likely to "improve." Even so, I love this area, and I'm sure I can continue to find excuses for returning. The variety is excellent: Lots of buffalo, sable, waterbuck, hartebeest, eland, reedbuck, warthog, oribi, more. There are specialties: Suni, red duiker, blue duiker, bushpig, Chobe bushbuck, nyala, Selous zebra, and crocodile. Hippo, elephant, and leopard are available on small quotas. The only thing missing is the area has very few lions (which has probably aided recovery!). Things I like about the area: You never know what you might run into on a given day; and the country varies with the game, from floodplains and papyrus swamps to dense miombo forests.

But here's what I like the most: I can honestly say that, year-by-year, I can see the wildlife increasing and growing calmer. I just finished my fourth safari with Mark Haldane's Zambeze Delta Safaris. The changes are gradual, and it depends on one's luck as well as time of year, but I'm certain I saw more sable, more nyala, more eland and more Lichtenstein's hartebeest than in previous years. I'm also certain that the most plentiful (and thus most-hunted) animals,

warthog and reedbuck, were more readily seen and more plentiful than ever before.

What has happened there is truly a miracle of modern wildlife management, so successful that the World Wildlife Fund, at best guardedly neutral toward hunting, has been supportive of sport hunting in the area. In 1973, at the beginning of Mozambique's long civil war, there might have been 40,000 buffalo in and around the Marromeu Reserve. In 1990, as few as 1,000 remained...but today's count approaches 20,000, with beautiful bulls in every herd. Sable have increased from dozens to thousands...the latest count is 2,600 between just Coutadas 11 and 12. The uniquely striped Selous zebra, currently

hunted only there, has increased from 18 to 300. The cover-loving nyala are impossible to count, but sightings have increased from rare to commonplace.

Although I really enjoy the area, it could not support phototourism; overall density and variety are just too low. The Zambezi Delta is a hunting area, and hunting has funded and enabled the wildlife's recovery. Things are not perfect. Locals are constantly poaching, and worse: Bandit outfitters sneak in, and one concessionaire was recently ejected for overshooting his quota. Even so, hunting places value on the wildlife, instilling government interest and funding anti-poaching efforts. Seriously, despite other lip service, the only really effective anti-poaching in the area is done by the outfitters. Rabid anti-hunters would decry this as self-serving...but in less than 20 years, these efforts, funded by outfitters and their hunters, have turned an area that was in serious trouble into what I reckon to be, today, not only one of Africa's best buffalo areas, but also one of the very best general bag areas. The recovery of the Marromeu complex has been a great conservation success story...and a great victory for hunting.

On my most recent hunt in Mark Haldane's Coutada 11, I was part of a group put together by Gordie White and Kelly McMillan. Interestingly, half the group was on their first-ever safari. Coastal Mozambique is not a manicured game ranch...it's hot in October and some animals are difficult. It's an aggressive first safari, so I was interested in their impressions. Good grief, I needn't have worried. Every hunter's wish list was filled before the hunt was half over, with some moving on to additional buffalo, others to crocodile, and a couple of us just kicking back and enjoying being there. Those first few days the skinners were really busy with buffalo, sable, nyala, waterbuck and more flowing into camp. Trophy quality was superb, and although I shot a few nice animals, it really was wonderful just to see it. In the past 30 years, I have seen very few wild areas that are genuinely getting better. The Zambezi Delta is, and it gives me hope.