

"Ruaha+10"
"1993 – 2003"- Ten years of the Drying of the Great Ruaha River

**A two-day seminar (11-12 Dec), ICE, Sokoine University of
Agriculture
Morogoro, Tanzania**

**Observations on the drying of up of the Ruaha through the Ruaha
National Park**

Sue Stolberger (suestol@bushlink.co.tz)

Why are we sitting here in this comfortable university, talking about the plight of the great Ruaha river? Surely we should be sitting in the parched river bed in Ruaha park, surrounded by the heat and the desperate situation as it is today. Only then will the seriousness of this problem really hit home.

I have come here today ostensibly on behalf of FORS, however, having lived on the banks of the so called Gt. Ruaha river for almost 10 years and having taken detailed records of its flow since 1994, I feel somewhat compelled to speak, all that I say here is from my own first hand observations.

I am assuming that everyone here is aware of the fact, that prior to 1993 there are NO RECORDS to suggest that the Great Ruaha River EVER dried up. Also, that the Usangu Basin is the 'SOURCE' of the great Ruaha river, which traditionally would FEED it during the dry season, keeping up a sustained flow.

As, as a child, in the early 1970's I made annual visits to Ruaha Park during the August holidays with my parents. In those days, the only access into the park was via the ferry, across the Great Ruaha. The river was undoubtedly full and deep, flowing ferociously fast and strong. This crossing was always a memorable and exciting part of the

Last year the river dried up on the 2nd of November and began flowing again on the 24th December... It is rather mis-leading to say "FLOWING" for what I really mean is that on the 24th a small trickle of water... only a few centimetres wide found its way along the bed of the Ruaha. This trickle does not suddenly turn into a wall of water so that within moments a fine river emerges... ..no... ..what really happens is that little by little this water accumulates, until finally, perhaps some 6 weeks, later depending on the rains,.. .we have what could be termed a SHALLOW STREAM.

This year, during the peak of the rains, the Ruaha river received ONLY 3 WEEKS of water from its source, the Usangu catchment area. As a result of this the river only rose to a 1/4 of its capacity, it fluctuated daily as a seasonal sand river does during the rains, it never once continued at a constant flow.

What I am saying is that this year and last year, the Ruaha river received its water from local run off only, NOT from its so called source the Usangu basin. Therefore the Ruaha river is a seasonal river. NOT it MAY become or it MIGHT BE IF we are not CAREFUL the truth is... THE GREAT RUAHA IS TODAY, A SEASONAL, SAND RIVER

So what? Does it really MATTER if the Great Ruaha River is now reduced to a seasonal sand river? Does it matter that irrevocable damage has been done to the ecology of the river and to the WHOLE ecosystem?

Does it matter that the fresh oyster beds are now no more? Or that the endemic fish have disappeared. Perhaps the uncommon. White crowned Plover... who's only known breeding ground in Tanzania, is the Gt. Ruaha,.... may be smart enough to make alternative plans... as they have not been successful in raising any offspring for the past 3 years. All of this and much, much more does it matter? Who really cares?

Perhaps ... what may be more relevant, to this meeting is,... that as of this year,... the effects of the dry river are finally kicking in,..... the movements of the larger, more popular mammals have altered.

Volumes of tourists come to Ruaha Park to see its wonderful wildlife and enjoy its expansive unspoilt beauty. Or so they think,. Elephants and Wild Dogs usually top the list of the tourists 'wish lists', and up till recently Ruaha has had a reputation of having good numbers of both. However, it was noted this year that both Dogs and Elephants have not been sighted as frequently as usual.

On investigation, ironically what appears to have happened, is that in their search for good water supplies, some of the elephants have moved into, or near the villages for water, and the Dogs, due to fierce competition from the Lions that have taken up residence at the water holes that still exist in the Park have been displaced, and are now also frequenting water sources near the villages.

This understandably is not what the villagers want, the elephants cause havoc in their shambas and the Dogs with their livestock... so here again we have yet another people related problem due to the dry river.

On the one hand the Dogs, an endangered species now face possible threat from disease from domestic dogs and poisoning from unhappy livestock owners. The Elephants will undoubtedly also be in trouble from the irate villagers. On the other hand the word will soon go around the tourist industry that Ruaha has little to offer, with only a rock bed of a river and a handful of animals.

Incidentally,... do you all know that as Ruaha lies on the boundary of northern and southern species of both mammals and plants, Ruaha boasts over 1,600 species of plants as opposed to the mere 410 plant species recorded in the NE Serengeti, or the 800 or so in Selous. Ecologically there is no doubt that Ruaha is a unique and extremely special area.

So as you can see we are not just talking about the DISRUPTION of a RIVER SYSTEM, we are talking about the DESTRUCTION OF A WHOLE ECOSYSTEM.

The fact is, that water abstraction up stream from the Ruaha Park has not only become greater in volume but also more efficient. What is ironic is, that historical records suggest that the Usangu/Ruaha area during the late 1880's, was regarded as a "Garden of Eden, teeming with wildlife. However, fairly rapidly into the 1900's it becomes obvious that the area was heavily hunted and the volume of game was drastically reduced, so much so, that reports suggest that one struggled to see even an Impala.

However, since Ruaha was gazetted as a National Park in 1964, all the money, time and effort spent by TANAPA has really paid off, the Ruaha ecosystem is once again a Garden of Eden.

Isn't it TRAGIC, the very reason for the game being here in the first place, the Great Ruaha River, is now no longer there, ... it is no longer the life force that kept the system going. what will happen now? What is the future? Will the game survive?

We now have the game but we don't have the water to sustain it. Does this mean that all the time and money spent by TANAPA has been in vain?

Indeed the fate of the Ruaha Park looks bleak, as does the fate of the people who live around the park, not to mention those living down stream, the fishing industry in Mtera Dam will and has been severely threatened, the hydro electricity that supplies much of Tanzania faces serious challenges, people from all walks of life are being affected by the drying of the Ruaha river.

The Usangu water catchment area has been put under tremendous pressure from over use by rice farming. In the height of the dry season,

when the water is at its lowest, the rice schemes flood their paddies. One of the worst aspects of this is that, although vast areas are submerged in water, not all paddies are utilised, and it often lies wasted and merely evaporates unused. Recently, the time for flooding has been brought forward, that is, earlier in the dry season, this enables the stakeholders to obtain higher prices for their rice, though actual annual yield, remains constant. This earlier season depletes the water reserves sooner, therefore, downstream, in the Ruaha Park, the river dries up earlier, leaving increasingly longer periods of drought.

Secondly, to compound the issue, there are thousands of cattle utilising the swamp area, which is a serious threat on the swamp itself. The massive herds that spend the dry season here do tremendous damage. Their hooves trample down the soft spongy surface, thus reducing the surface area of the swamp drastically each year, not to mention the vast amount of water that the animals consume daily.

It is important that all stakeholders are made to face up to the seriousness of the situation and take the initiative to make the necessary compromises on the short term financial gain. Regulations must be implemented to ensure that there is some flow re-instated into the Ruaha River during the dry season. I have noted through my 10 years of constant observation that a flow of approximately 70cm wide, by 10 centimetres deep, was enough to keep the existing pools in the Park, with enough fresh water to keep the fish alive, and keep it sufficiently palatable for the animals to drink. SURELY one can BEG for such a minute amount of water to continue through the channels!

Unless the situation of the Usangu Catchment area is taken under control, it is possible that the rest of Tanzania's valuable water reserves may follow a similar fate.

One only has to look at Ethiopia and Kenya to see how devastating mismanagement of water resources is to National development. We are all

aware of the massive mistakes that have taken place globally, we know the pitfalls, and Usangu is a classic example.

If Tanzania is to continue to develop for a better future, the ONE resource that lies at the heart of all life is WATER. So, instead of seeking more, and more water, by different and more desperate means, efforts should be made to control our demand, and cut down on the rampant waste that we see every where.

It is imperative, for the survival of the Nation that we learn to manage water as a crucial ingredient to our survival. The Usangu Catchment Project should be used as a role model leading the way for the rest of Tanzania.

WE NEED ACTION NO MORE TALKING

IT IS TIME FOR ACTION