



## LAND CASE STUDY

# Okavango Delta : recognizing cultural heritage in a natural site

## Summary

The Okavango Delta, in northwest Botswana, is one of the very few major interior delta systems that do not flow into a sea or ocean, with a wetland system that is almost intact. Land rights issues came out strongly during the inscription process of the Okavango Delta as World Heritage Site. With an influx of tourism operators in the delta, indigenous peoples and local communities were pushed out of their traditional territories to make way for wildlife management areas or concessions. Together with indigenous peoples' organizations, the Indigenous Peoples of Africa Co-ordinating Committee (IPACC) led successfully a consultation and mobilization process for the San to be recognized as the indigenous peoples of the Okavango Delta during its inscription of the delta as a Natural World Heritage Site.



*Okavango delta, River, Animals or People*

## Context

The Okavango Delta covers an area of 1.2 million hectares of seasonally flooded grassland and 600,000 hectares of permanent swamps. Two Indigenous peoples' communities live here - //Anikhwe and Bugakhwe, found in about fifteen of their traditional settlements and dispersed in other settlements. One of the unique characteristics of the site is that the annual flooding from the river Okavango occurs during the dry season, with the result that the native plants and animals have synchronised their biological cycles with these seasonal rains and floods. It is an exceptional example of the interaction between climatic, hydrological and biological processes. The Okavango delta is home to some of the world's most endangered species of large mammal, such as the cheetah, white rhinoceros, black rhinoceros, African wild dog and lion.

Government introduced the Community Based Natural Resources Management programme in 1989, recognizing the importance of adopting a bottom-up approach in conservation, where communities are allocated wildlife management areas to implement income-generating projects that are tourism-related.

Land rights issues came out strongly during the inscription process of the Okavango Delta as World Heritage Site in 2014. With an influx of tourism operators in the delta over the past years, indigenous peoples and local communities were pushed out of their traditional territories to make way for wildlife management areas or concessions.



Mbiroba, one of the settlements falling in the World Heritage site



Communities in activity

The problem got more complicated with government's recent introduction of land reforms that were meant to improve land use in the delta and increase returns. 'Unoccupied', 'unused', and 'underutilized' land was identified and put on the land bank initiative by the Botswana Tourism Organization, to be allocated to investors interested in the tourism industry. Some of these lands were traditional territories and cultural landscapes of the communities.

Indigenous peoples living in the Okavango Delta were worried that the World Heritage status of the delta may negatively impact on their way of life, and most importantly, their access to traditional territories and cultural landscapes.

## Response

Three World Heritage workshops were organized by IPACC in 2013, 2014 and 2015 with Indigenous peoples from different villages around the Okavango to discuss the upcoming inscription of the delta as a World Heritage site, and how this will impact on their lives and livelihoods. Four indigenous youth from Okavango were identified to lead the process.

During the first advocacy workshop in August 2013 in Shakawe<sup>1</sup> the main objective of the workshop was for Indigenous peoples to discuss what the proposed inscription would mean for indigenous peoples' access to their traditional territories and cultural landscapes, livelihoods, and cultural heritage. The workshop participants endorsed the nomination but on condition that some of their requests were met:

- The San to be recognized as indigenous to the delta;

<sup>1</sup>Shakawe is a village located in the northwest corner of Botswana at the beginning of the Okavango Delta, close to Namibia and Angola

- Indigenous peoples' ancient cultural landscapes should be acknowledged in the dossier and post inscription;
- Indigenous peoples will not be subjected to forced, coerced or arbitrary removals as a result of the World Heritage status of the delta

A ten-member committee was formed to deliver this message to the IUCN evaluation team that was to visit Botswana in October 2013.

Two more workshops were organized in Maun<sup>2</sup> (2014) and Khwai<sup>3</sup> (2015) with an objective to not only improve Indigenous peoples understanding of the World Heritage process, but government officials involved in the process as well, such as Department of National Museum and Monuments, Department of Environmental Affairs, and Department of Tourism.



In June 2016, further work was carried out that included engaging the different ministries in Gaborone to explain the position on indigenous peoples regarding their cultural heritage in the delta. Several recommendations were made and followed up. To date the Department of National Museum and Monuments informs that government is in the process of identifying a consultant to carry out the pending research on the cultural heritage of the communities living in the Okavango. The research results will be taken into consideration when drafting a new management plan for the delta.

<sup>2</sup> Maun is the fifth largest town and is the "tourism capital" in Botswana  
<sup>3</sup>Khwai is a village on the north bank of the Khwai River, in the North-West District of Botswana. It's just outside the north gate of the Moremi Game Reserve, which is on the eastern side of the Okavango Delta

## Results

The IUCN Evaluation Team that visited Botswana in October 2013 made recommendations based on their findings, which were included in the final report. One of the most significant findings was that governance within the site is extremely complex, involving multiple stakeholders and no single authority. Indigenous peoples thus made a recommendation on this, that the government of Botswana should consider seeking funding to implement the Community Management of Protected Areas for Conservation (COMPACT) model, as a pilot initially. World Heritage sites where the COMPACT model was implemented have reported significant improvements in conservation outcomes.

One other change worth noting is the relationship between the State and Indigenous peoples. While in the past, prior to inscription of the delta as a World Heritage Site, indigenous peoples were not involved in the decision-making process regarding land and resource-use in the delta, the World Heritage Committee made a recommendation on this, "Efforts should center on ensuring that indigenous peoples living in the property are included in all communication about the World Heritage status of the property and its implications, that their views are respected and integrated into management planning and implementation".

Because of these recommendations, government invited indigenous representatives to the first workshop that deliberated on what had been done and what still needed to be done, and this information was used in the preparation of the first State of Conservation report submitted to the World Heritage Centre in November 2015. In this report, government made a commitment to conduct a research on the cultural heritage of the communities living within the site, and this was scheduled to be carried out in 2016 and 2017. The government of Botswana secured funding for this project from the UNESCO International Assistance in 2017, there is little progress on the ground to date.

At a recent meeting with the Department of National Museum and Monuments, the director indicated that government was considering one of the recommendations made by Indigenous peoples, that they should be included in official delegations attending regional and international meetings.

In March 2018, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) announced funding for the COMPACT model to be implemented in the Okavango Delta.



*"I have heard that government is going to give us back our lands. I still don't believe it, until I see proof, until I see a certificate that says this land belongs to the //Anikhwe."*

**Xaniku Xai, from Ngarange village**

## Lessons learnt

Bridging nature and culture is imperative. Management concepts that use a site-based approach, where nature and culture are seen as existing independently, should be revisited as most of the conflicts between communities and the State are a result of this. Bringing nature and culture together has proved to be highly beneficial in World Heritage sites where co-management with communities was practiced. This would also call for shared governance to improve land use practices, and this can only be possible if the free, prior, and informed consent of the communities is sought in the decision-making process.

The following recommendations emerged from consultations with communities, conservationists, traditional leaders, government and civil society in Botswana (from the paper 'World Heritage and Indigenous peoples in Botswana', Andrias, L.M, et al) :



*Kgosi Tawana Moremi, Paramount Chief, during a world Heritage workshop*

1. Okavango Delta needs a single governance mechanism that meaningfully brings together all major stakeholders;
2. Government and NGOs should promote awareness amongst Okavango Delta residents to help them understand and engage with the management aims, the economic development plans, and the different responsibilities of agencies responsible for the site;
3. The situation of women and girls in the World Heritage site needs review and dialogue. Goals and monitoring of the impact on women of the delta should be part of the management and governance plan;
4. Botswana should develop a framework for the development, maintenance and integration of traditional knowledge into the site management of the Okavango Delta;
5. Botswana should create an inter-governmental working group on natural and cultural heritage conservation, creating a bridge between the Department of National Museum and Monuments, Department of Environmental Affairs, Department of Wildlife and National Parks, and Department of Tourism.

## Conclusion

Even though the government of Botswana recognized the San as being indigenous to the Okavango Delta, and recognized the communities' cultural heritage as an integral component in the management of the site, there has been little progress to engage communities on these issues, raising a question of commitment on the government's side.

Advocacy work by Indigenous peoples started prior to the inscription process in 2014 and has carried on to date. Post inscription in 2014, IPACC continued to work with four indigenous youth from Botswana to expose them to proceedings of the World Heritage Committee by funding them to attend the meetings.

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### Who is AFSA?

The Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa is a broad alliance of civil society actors who are part of the struggle for food sovereignty and agroecology in Africa. It is a network of networks, currently with 34 members active in 50 countries. Its members represent smallholder farmers, pastoralists, fisher folk, indigenous peoples, faith-based institutions, women's and youth groups and environmentalists from across Africa. The core purpose of AFSA is to influence policies and promote African solutions for food sovereignty.

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