

Saving Malawi IBAs

Title **To view the original PDF of this World Birdwatch article**, [click here](#). In Malawi, the Wildlife and Environmental Society of Malawi (WESM, BirdLife Affiliate) operates through nine branches covering the entire country, supported by a national secretariat in Blantyre. The branches have responsibility for their own membership, some fundraising, and recruiting, managing and supporting Wildlife Clubs within their zone. These Wildlife Clubs, mostly in schools but including some companies and institutions, are a major part of WESM's local outreach. In 2008, there were 1,049 Wildlife Clubs, with over 30,000 members, far exceeding the number of individual/family WESM members. Most branches manage their own projects, often located at Important Bird Areas (IBAs). The Local Conservation Groups (LCGs) have been formed as part of these projects. In Africa, where the LCG approach was pioneered, they are known as Site Support Groups (SSGs). In total WESM is working with 29 SSGs (eight around Mulanje Mountain Forest Reserve IBA, one at Lengwe National Park IBA, and 20 around Lake Chilwa IBA). Thanks to its varied topography and habitats, this relatively small country has a rich avifauna of 648 species. Twenty two IBAs have been identified, covering 16,450 km², 17% of Malawi's land area, 20 are legally protected. The SSGs are village-level institutions integrating conservation with development and poverty reduction. 'Our projects are based on a strong foundation of education and awareness', explains WESM's Samuel Kamoto. 'People recognise that their livelihoods depend on the forests and lakes being in good health in the long term.' There is no formal SSG network. However, there have been successful visits between SSGs to exchange experience and technical knowledge. Communities have requested more such exchanges, but are constrained by lack of resources and a suitable vehicle. Most SSGs are not engaged in systematic monitoring, but help protect their sites. 'At Mulanje, they act as the eyes and ears of WESM', says Samuel Kamoto. 'They report people illegally cutting timber in the forest, and there are many examples of communities spotting trucks carrying charcoal and contacting us so we can alert the Forest Department and police to put roadblocks in place.' Mount Mulanje is the highest mountain in Malawi. Various forest types cover the slopes, although most land around the reserve has been cleared for tea cultivation. Some 180 bird species have been recorded. The site was (and probably is still) the stronghold for Endangered Thyolo Alethe *Alethe choloensis*, and in 1983 Endangered Spotted Ground-thrush *Zoothera guttata* was found there. Part of Mulanje's unique biodiversity is the cedar *Widdringtonia*, whose strong, sweetly-scented, termite-resistant timber, highly valued by woodcarvers and builders, is targeted for illegal logging. Clearance of the lower slopes for farmland is adding to the pressures. In collaboration with the Mount Mulanje Conservation Trust (MMCT) and Concern Universal, and with funding from the European Union and Irish Aid, WESM is implementing a project to help people develop alternative livelihoods. With the project's support, Foster Menyani, who formerly made a precarious living cutting Mulanje cedar, has taken up beekeeping. Beginning with a couple of hives provided by the project, he has re-invested the revenue from his honey sales. 'Now I have 84 hives, and I can work freely without fear of being arrested.' Foster has become an advocate for forest conservation. He is developing his own woodlot to keep his

hives, and prevents people cutting timber on his land. He has given hives to four other cedar poachers, offering them the chance to change from a life of fear and confrontation. In this zone, one of two around Mount Mulanje, there are 198 beekeepers, organised into a federation called Phalombe Beekeepers of which Foster is chairman. While most have only a few hives, this still represents important additional income for many households. WESM's Mulanje project has also introduced people to fish farming. The Margareta family, one of 15 in the project, have four fishponds arranged in a cascade, all fed by a spring of clear, cool water from the hillside. The operation is kept as low-tech as possible. Mr and Mrs Margareta dug the ponds themselves, using recycled materials to connect them. The project provided 1,500 fingerlings of Makumba *Oreochromis shiranus*, and technical advice. The fish are fed maize, bran and surplus vegetables from their garden. No transport or elaborate marketing is required, and the fish are all sold and consumed within the village. Mrs Magareta is now helping her neighbours establish ponds of their own, providing them with fingerlings and sharing her knowledge. She has become a strong advocate for conserving the forests which maintain the flow of water to her ponds. Lake Chilwa, a shallow lake of about 700 km² bordered by swamps and seasonally flooded grassland, is very rich in fish, and supports the livelihoods of about 60,000 people. It meets IBA criteria mainly because of its large congregations of waterfowl. Hunting these birds has long been part of local livelihoods, but large-scale commercial exploitation started in 1996, when the lake dried up and the fishery collapsed. This ability to shift between resources is an important dimension of the resilience of people dependent on natural resources and living in an uncertain environment. But a survey in 1998/99 estimated that over a million waterfowl had been taken following the drying of the lake, a level that appears unsustainable. WESM's response wasn't to seek a ban on bird hunting, but to give communities the responsibility and capacity to manage their resource sustainably. A revision of Malawi's Wildlife Act allows Community Conserved Areas to be established. Under the management of WESM's Zomba branch, 20 hunting clubs have been created around the lake, with representatives elected to an umbrella body. WESM worked with the clubs and local government to reach an agreement on measures such as a closed season, no-hunting zones, and licensing and bag-limits. These have been written into a byelaw, with a framework of fines and measures for dealing with infractions. Importantly, the whole process operates at the local level?offenders are dealt with by traditional chiefs, and fines contribute to community projects like repairing bore holes and improving school buildings. So far the system is working well, and the regulations seem to be respected. The hunters' clubs are now looking at ways of diversifying their livelihoods. They are earning extra income by guiding tourists, and would like to develop this. Liwonde National Park, a system of Rift Valley flood-plain habitats with associated woodlands on higher ground, has over 380 bird species, and is an important site for Near Threatened Lilian's Lovebird *Agapornis lilliana*. National legislation limits opportunities for surrounding communities to extract resources from the park. With little incentive to support conservation, people took what they could. According to Park Manager Samuel Nyanyali, "everyone was a poacher"the only people benefitting from conservation were tourists?. Recognising that the system was not working, Malawi's Department of National Parks and Wildlife, supported by WESM, revised national park law to authorise collaborative management and benefit sharing. WESM supported the formation of the Upper Shire Association for the Conservation of Liwonde National Park (USACO), representing 31 villages. The villages formed Natural Resource Committees, which elected representatives to USACO. Because of the dense settlement around the park, resource extraction wasn't viable. Instead, guidelines have been drawn up for sharing the income from gate fees and the park's two lodges with the community. Together with WESM, the Parks Department is providing financial and technical support for income generating activities such as mushroom and guinea fowl farming, as well as services like bore holes to improve water supply. Vested Dosani, chair of USACO, explained how

things have changed. With the new benefit sharing arrangements the animals are now our own, and if we find poachers we will tell the park staff?it is us, our children and grandchildren who will suffer if the animals disappear.? Comments from the community reveal the gap that had grown between themselves and the park on their doorstep. We want to see the animals in the park from time to time! At the moment we only ever see the occasional elephant when it strays out of the park and destroys our crops. The park is a foreign place to us.? Now that the communities are to become partners in the conservation of the park?s wild animals, it seems entirely appropriate that they should be able enjoy them.