Local Conservation Groups in Malawi – Partnerships for conservation and development

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About this report

The Important Bird Area (IBA) Programme of BirdLife International aims to identify, monitor and protect a global network of IBAs for the conservation of the world's birds and other biodiversity. IBAs are key sites for conservation – small enough to be conserved in their entirety and often already part of a protected-area network.

Working in partnership with communities and other stakeholders at IBAs towards shared objectives of conservation and sustainable resource management is one of a range of different approaches being adopted by BirdLife Partners to help conserve IBAs. Working with people at IBAs helps to engage a mainly local constituency in IBA conservation. It builds on what are often strong connections – be they economic, cultural, historical – between people and the sites where they live, work and engage in recreation.

The way in which BirdLife Partners work with, coordinate and support individuals and groups involved in the IBA Local Conservation Group (IBA LCG) approach varies across the BirdLife network, reflecting the diverse contexts of the over 100 countries where BirdLife Partners are working. However, shared features include: the attachment to a particular IBA, a commitment to support the IBA’s conservation and sustainable use, a link to the national BirdLife Partner, and being compromised mainly of volunteers. In Europe these local volunteers are known as IBA-Caretakers, in Africa they are known as Site Support Groups, and other terms are used to describe them regionally and nationally within BirdLife.

Several BirdLife Partners are demonstrating success in establishing and coordinating Local Conservation Networks. This report is part of a project which aims to capture, document and disseminate these experiences and the lessons learned from them. The review is part of a project funded by the Aage V. Jensen Foundation.
# Contents

1. Background: Important Bird Areas in Malawi 1

2. The structure of WESM 1

3. Networking and Communications 3

4. Case studies: working with LCGs for conservation and development 4
   - Case Study 1: Lake Chilwa 4
   - Case study 2: Mount Mulange 6
   - Case study 3: Liwonde National Park 9
   - Case study 4: Balaka and watershed management around the Rivirivi River 12
1. Background: Important Bird Areas in Malawi

The Republic of Malawi is a landlocked country at the southern end of the Great Rift Valley and geographically dominated by Africa’s third-largest lake, Lake Malawi. Malawi is one of the world’s least-developed nations with an economy based principally on agriculture. Ninety per cent of its estimated population of 11 million people live in rural areas, and with an annual growth-rate of 2.0 %, it is one of the fastest-growing populations in Africa. National Parks, Wildlife Reserves and Forest Reserves incorporate 21% of Malawi’s land area, one of the highest percentages on the continent. With its varied topography and range of habitats, this relatively small country has a rich avifauna of 648 species; 456 of these are resident and a further 94 are intra-African migrants of regular occurrence. Twenty two Important Bird Areas (IBAs) have been identified in Malawi, covering a total area of about 16,450 km², equivalent to 17% of Malawi’s land area. Twenty of the 22 sites are legally protected: four as National Parks, two as Wildlife Reserves and 14 as Forest Reserves.

2. The structure of WESM

Secretariat

The way in which WESM is organised allows it to engage a wide local-level constituency through a number of structures. At the centre is the WESM Secretariat. Housed in a building in Blantyre, in the South of Malawi, it includes the office of the Executive Director, as well as national programme officers, and the accounts department. It houses an impressive library, a Publishing Unit, and a shop. Nearby land is dedicated to a nursery for the production of indigenous and exotic trees, many of which are sold commercially to raise funds for WESM.

Branches and members

WESM operates through a branch based structure. Nine branches, covering the entire country, are coordinated and supported by a national secretariat located in Blantyre. Each of the branches have a Branch Manager and then are staffed according to the requirements (and available resources) of projects. The branches have responsibility for their own membership and for fundraising (though the Secretariat takes on most of this responsibility), and for recruiting, managing and supporting the Wildlife Clubs within their zone. Most also have projects, often located at IBAs being managed from the branch office – two of the examples recorded in the case studies below are projects at IBAs managed through branches.

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1. Extracts summarised from chapter on Malawi by Françoise Dowsett-Lemaire, Robert J. Dowsett And Michael Dyer, in Important Bird Areas in Africa and associated islands: priority sites for conservation (BirdLife International 2001)
(at Chilwa Lake, managed by Zomba Branch) and at Mount Mulanje, managed by Mulanje Branch and the secretariat.

In 2008 membership across the WESM branches was as shown in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Branch</th>
<th>Individual/Family</th>
<th>Wildlife clubs and CBOs</th>
<th>Corporate/Company*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Balaka</td>
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<td>Blantyre</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mulanje</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/Bay</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zomba</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>439</strong></td>
<td><strong>1049</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* plus 12 Corporate Members recruited by the Secretariat

**Wildlife Clubs**

The Wildlife Clubs form a major part of WESM’s outreach to the local level. Although focused on schools (primary and secondary), and this is the group to which the Wildlife Club publications are targeted, some Wildlife Clubs are also formed by staff of companies and other institutions. In 2008, there were 1049 wildlife clubs (clubs are re-registered at the start of each calendar year). With individual club membership estimated to average 30, the Wildlife Clubs have over 30,000 members, and clearly comprise a major part of WESM’s constituency of supporters – far exceeding the number of individual/family WESM members.

The Wildlife Clubs are managed at Branch level, and branches have an office dedicated to the support of the network, and to organising events, school visits, competitions etc. through which to engage club members. There is also a national Wildlife Clubs magazine, called Natchengwa (meaning Hammerkop) which is produced every three months by the WESM Secretariat.

**Site Support Groups**

In common with other BirdLife Partners in Africa, WESM call their Local Conservation Groups ‘Site Support Groups’ (SSGs). In all the cases visited the formation of the SSG and the relationship between the SSG and WESM is built around a specific project. With a focus on site (IBA) conservation and the sustainable use of natural resources, WESM has supported the formation of village level institutions with the objective of integrating biodiversity conservation with local development and poverty reduction. In a country with high levels of rural poverty, and in situations where people often draw no clear distinction between environmental problems and poverty, addressing these issues together becomes essential.

In total WESM is working with twenty nine SSGs (eight around Mulanje Mountain Forest Reserve, one around Lengwe National Park, twenty around Lake Chilwa). As the examples below demonstrate, some of the community groups and networks that are established extend over large areas, and themselves have multi-layered structures.
Whilst the focus of many of the groups is clearly on income generation and livelihoods, Samuel Kamoto is clear that their members embrace a wider concern for conservation. “Our projects are based on a strong foundation of education and awareness. People recognise that their livelihoods depend on the forests and lakes being in good health in the long-term. At Mulange for example the people who have developed fish ponds and bee-hives recognise that these enterprises depend on the water and forest services provided by Mulanje Forest Reserve. They will report people illegally cutting timber in the forest, and they act as the eyes and ears of WESM. There are many examples of the communities spotting trucks carrying charcoal – they contact us so that we can quickly work with the Forest Department and police to put in place roadblocks and apprehend the offenders”.

The relationships with these SSGs is built around projects, and project funding certainly determines the intensity with which the relationship is maintained. However, WESM have a long-term objective of conserving the sites, and so maintaining and building the relationships with communities is also a long-term activity. Projects follow projects (when fundraising is successful), providing a degree of stability. The branch structure also means that WESM have a presence that is reasonably local to many of the sites (at least more local than having a single office in the capital city) and the attention given to maintaining the national network of Wildlife Clubs also provides continuity of relationship with communities at some sites.

However, what is clear from the case studies that follow, is that the model for LCGs in Malawi is very flexible. The key characteristics are:
- LCGs are community-based
- Most have been established as a result of project initiatives, though the relationship is more long-term than a single project cycle, as one funded initiative follows another
- The LCGs are rooted in the objective of deriving sustainable livelihoods from the sustainable management of natural resources from IBAs (and thereby the conservation of their biodiversity)
- The resource concerned (honey, wild birds), community settlement patterns, and project boundaries are among the factors affecting the make-up of LCGs at a particular IBA, as well as their specific governance arrangements
- Most LCGs are not engaged in systematic monitoring, but most do support site protection and perform a ‘threat warning’ service, alerting WESM and the relevant authorities to any activities which might harm the IBAs biodiversity and ecosystems.

3. Networking and Communications

There is no formal networking of SSGs. However, there have been some successful exchange visits between SSGs, where WESM have facilitated the transfer of experience and technical knowledge between SSGs/communities. More exchanges of this kind are something that communities have requested, and WESM believe it would be useful. However, they are constrained by resources and the lack of a suitable vehicle (e.g. a mini-bus) to organise such exchanges themselves. Similarly there is no newsletter focused on SSGs and their interests, although some of them receive either WESM’s newsletter or that of the Wildlife Clubs.
4. Case studies: working with LCGs for conservation and development

Case Study 1: Lake Chilwa

Lake Chilwa is a shallow lake bordered on all sides by swamps and seasonally flooded grassland. The lake itself is about 700 km² in size, but is liable to dry up in dry years. It is very rich in fish and supports the livelihoods of about 60,000 people. The flood-plain grassland covers an additional 400 km². Lake Chilwa was designated a Ramsar Site in 1997. Snaring and shooting of birds have been practised for a long time, but commercial exploitation of waterfowl started on a large scale in 1996, following the drying up of the lake and collapse of the fishery in 1995. This ability to shift between resources is an important dimension to the resilience of people dependent on natural resources who are living in an uncertain environment, allowing them to survive despite crop failure and a crash in productivity of their usual livelihoods activity – fishing. A survey in 1998/99 estimated that over a million waterfowl were snared or shot following the drying of the lake – the main species taken were Fulvous duck (*Dendrocygna bicolour*), Lesser moorhen (*Gallinula angulata*), Allen’s gallinule (*Porphyrrula alleni*) and Black crake (*Amaurornis flavirostris*). Although the size of Lake Chilwa and the difficulty of carrying out surveys made it difficult to determine bird population sizes, this level of offtake appeared unsustainable.

WESM’s response wasn’t to seek a ban on bird hunting – something that would have been impossible given the size of the Lake – but to give local communities the responsibility for managing their resource sustainably. Although Lake Chilwa is a Ramsar site it doesn’t have any other protected area designation under Malawian law. A revision of the Wildlife Act in 2004 allowed for the establishment of Community Conserved Areas and WESM used this opportunity to empower communities around Lake Chilwa to take care of the lake’s water

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birds. Supported with funding from the Danish Hunters Association, a project is being implemented which is aimed at building capacity of communities to effectively manage hunting in this vast area.

The project is managed out of WESM’s Branch Office in Zomba. We met Gregory Mtemanyama there before driving along the uneven earth road to the lakeside at Kachulu. Along the way Gregory explained the project’s strategy. Twenty hunting clubs have been created all round the lake, and these Clubs have elected representatives to an umbrella body. Working together with local government, WESM, and with technical support, an agreement was reached on appropriate management measures such as a closed season, sanctuaries where hunting is prohibited year round, and the introduction of licensing and bag-limits. These measures have been written into a bye-law, together with the appropriate framework of fines and the measures for dealing with infractions. Importantly the whole process operates at the local level – offenders are dealt with by traditional chiefs, and fines are contributed to community funds that are used for social projects such as repairing boreholes and improvements to school buildings.

So far the system seems to be working well. Whilst there are (and always will be) people who hunt illegally, the regulations seem to be respected. We arrived at the lake side in the late afternoon, as the sun was setting. The fishing season had just re-opened and there was a carnival atmosphere as fishermen landed buckets of tiny ‘matemba’ (Barbus paludinosus) which were then being laid out on long racks to dry in the sun. Great sacks of dried fish were being loaded onto vehicles for transport to market. As we stood watching this scene of industry Emmanuel Njaye came up and briefly greeted us, proudly introducing himself as a ‘monitor’, one of the people responsible for ensuring that the closed seasons and no-hunting zones are respected, before returning to his business of spreading the fish out to dry.

Behind us the reeds had been cleared to create a large pond. A group of White faced whistling duck, Dendrocygna viduata, sat preening themselves on a couple of small islands. Gregory explained that the hunters clubs were now looking at ways of diversifying their livelihoods and earning extra income. The pond had been made on their own volition, in an effort to provide a place where visitors can come and watch the birds more easily. Already they are earning a bit of extra income by guiding tourists, and this is something they would like to enhance. Adding market value to the birds that are trapped is an objective for a (hoped for) next phase of the project. Gregory explained that the birds are smoked and sold, mainly in Zomba – a Spur-winged goose (Plectropterus ganbensis) fetches about 1500 Malawi Kwacha (US$11). But improved smoking has the potential to produce a much improved product with higher market value. Clearly this project still has lots of potential.
Cutting timber for the (illegal) production and trade of charcoal is a major threat to Malawi’s forests, including those of Mount Mulanje.

Case study 2: Mount Mulanje

Mount Mulanje is the highest mountain in Malawi, rising from the plains, at 600-700m, to a high plateau at 1,800-1,900 m, surmounted by bare rock peaks up to 3,002 m. Various forest types cover the mountains slopes, whilst most of the land around the mountain reserve was cleared for tea cultivation at the beginning of the twentieth century. Some 180 species have been recorded. The site used to be and probably is still the stronghold for Thyolo alethe Alethe choloensis. Spotted ground-thrush, Zoothera guttata was discovered in 1983, and the race flavigularis of Apalis thoracica (endemic to this site and the Zomba area) is common at the site. The mountain has been in a Forest Reserve since 1927, and is a UNESCO Man and Biosphere reserve, but the ecosystems of Mulanje are all threatened to varying degrees.

Part of Mount Mulanje’s unique biodiversity is the Cedar, Widdringtonia (Mount Mulanje is an Alliance for Zero Extinction site, and this is one of the trigger species). This component of the forest’s biodiversity is also a highly prized and highly valued resource. Its strong sweetly scented timbers are highly valued by wood carvers and by builders – the wood is resistant to attack by termites. As a result the forests on Mount Mulanje’s steep slopes are threatened by illegal loggers. Clearance of the lower slopes for expanding farmlands is putting further pressure on this unique ecosystem.

However, the forests provide important ecosystem services to neighbouring communities as well as people much further afield. From a distance, as we approached the looming mass of Mount Mulanje, its head buried in cloud, we could see water cascading down the slopes, feeding springs and rivers that provide fresh water to local communities.

Recognising the importance of Mount Mulanje, the Mount Mulanje Conservation Trust (MMCT) was established and endowed in 2002 with the objective to facilitate conservation, research, management and increased understanding of Mulanje mountain and its resources in a transparent, professional, committed and collaborative manner. As part of this wider initiative WESM in collaboration with MMCT and Concern Universal, are implementing a project, funded by the European Union Delegation in Malawi and Irish Aid, based out of the small town Phalombe. The project is aimed at helping people develop alternative livelihoods to those based on illegal and unsustainable extraction of timber from the reserve.

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We met Lusungu Ngulube outside the ‘Cash and Carry’ in Phalombe. Lusungu is manager for education and extension of the Mkhumba Boundary Communities Livelihoods Improvement Project and together we went to see what the project is doing. Our first stop was at the house of Foster Menyani. As we sat in the shade outside his house, Foster explained how, with the support of the project, he had taken up beekeeping. “I used to cut Mulanje cedar from the forest. But it would often get confiscated by forest guards, and I have been to court several times. But now I have 84 bee hives and I can work freely without fear of being arrested”. He went on to explain that he started off with just a couple of hives provided by the project. By re-investing the revenue from his honey sales he has been able to add more and more hives – and he still has ambitions to increase the size of his apiary. He packages the honey in half litre bottles and sells them (about 40-50 per hive) for between 3-400 MKw each (240 MKw = £1).

Lusungu explained that Foster is an example of a wider initiative that is supporting beekeeping around Mount Mulanje. In this one zone (one of two beekeeping zones around Mount Mulanje) there are 198 beekeepers that are organised into a beekeepers federation called Phalombe Beekeepers of which Foster is the chairman. In turn they have been linked to a wider organisation, the Sapitwa Beekeepers Association, to assist with quality control, packaging, and marketing. Whilst most individuals only have 3-4 hives, this still represents an important source of additional income for many households. Foster believes that many bee-keepers would like to increase the number of hives they own, but are constrained by the lack of capital. A bee-hive costs about 1500 MKw to build, yet households have other priorities – food, medicines, clothes, school-fees – putting demands on the earnings from their honey sales.

We moved from the shade of the tree to take a look at some of Foster’s hives. The hives were located in a patch of woodland next to his farm, suspended between two poles and shaded from the glare of the sun. Adjacent farmland is being planted with more trees to allow for his expanding business.

Foster has become an advocate for forest conservation. Not only is he developing his own woodlot where he can keep his hives, and preventing people from cutting the timber on his land, but he is trying to encourage other illegal loggers to switch to beekeeping. He has given hives to 4 of his acquaintances, providing them an opportunity to learn about beekeeping and to make the
switch from cutting timber, and living a life of fear and confrontation.

Our next visit was to Mrs. Mary Magareta. Mr and Mrs Margareta are one of 15 families in the WESM project that have been introduced to fish farming. Descending from her house we came to four ponds arranged in a cascade—a small breeding pond and then three interconnected fish ponds, all fed by a spring of clear, cool water emerging from the hillside. The project provided Mr and Mrs Magareta with 1500 fingerlings of ‘Makumba’ (*Oreochromis shiranus*) and technical advice to allow the start up of this enterprise. The operation is kept as low-tech as possible. Mr and Mrs Margareta dug the ponds themselves, and used recycled materials to connect the ponds—Mrs Magareta showed me how a screw-cap plastic bottle with holes punched in it provides an effective faucet and filter. The fish are fed on maize bran and surplus vegetables that they grow in their own garden.

![Image](image-url)

There is so much demand for the fish that they are sold locally. When a day and time for harvesting is announced people come to the pond to buy the fish—no transport or elaborate marketing is required and the fish are all sold and consumed locally—within the village where the Magaretas live. The last harvest yielded 1400 fish that were sold for 17000 MKw, and the expectation is that the pond can be harvested 2-3 times each year.

Mrs. Magareta is now using her experience—and resources—to support others in the neighbourhood establish ponds of their own, providing them with fingerlings and sharing her knowledge. And recognising the importance of the forests of Mount Mulanje for maintaining the flow of spring water on which her fish ponds depend she has become a strong advocate for forest conservation.

As well as providing alternatives to the illegal use of forest resources, the success of conservation efforts at Mount Mulanje also depend on raising awareness of how the goods and services from the Biosphere Reserve contribute to local livelihoods, and on a strong science base for the management decisions that are made. Tiwonge Mzumara is based at a
centre run by the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian. The centre is housed in a set of colonial buildings on the edge of the reserve, in the very shadow of Mount Mulanje. Tiwonge is an education officer with CCAP, and has responsibility for running the centre’s environmental education programme, which is closely linked to the work of the MMCT. She is also a member of Mulanje Branch of WESM.

However, her real passion is revealed when she starts talking about the ornithological work she is doing. Recently returned from completing a Masters Degree at the Percy Fitzpatrick Institute in Johannesburg, South Africa, Tiwonge’s attention is now focused on the birds of Mount Mulanje. She explains that she has established some permanent transects and monitoring points which are being visited twice yearly. She has completed 3 seasons and is about to start the fourth. Already her work is providing information helpful for informing management of the reserve, revealing the migration patterns and seasonal altitudinal movements of some of the mountain’s unique species.

Tiwonge explains “the Forest managers are keen to clear invasive species from the Mulanje forest reserve, such as species of pines for instance (pinus patula). That’s a good thing but it has to be done at the right time. My research has shown that clearance was causing disturbance and destruction of nests. Also some invasive species are nevertheless providing valuable nesting habitat – for example the Yellow-throated Apalis can be found nesting in invasive Rubus”.

Tiwonge’s work and interest in birds is also inspiring the forest guards with whom she works. By helping her with mist-netting and ringing they have begun to learn to identify birds. Some are now chosen to act as guides when visitors to the reserve want someone who has a special knowledge of the area’s avifauna. However, the lack of binoculars is currently limiting the growth of this emerging interest.

Case study 3: Liwonde National Park

Liwonde National Park was gazetted in 1973 to protect examples of biotic communities and the catchment of the upper Shire River and regionally important game populations, including elephant *Loxodonta africana*, Lichtenstein’s hartebeest *Alcelaphus lichtensteini* and sable antelope *Hippotragus niger*. The Park is primarily a system of Rift Valley flood-plain habitats with associated woodlands on higher ground. It follows the upper Shire river (the western boundary) for 30 km, up to the south-eastern shore of Lake Malombe; a northern section connects it with Mangochi Mountain Forest Reserve. The park has a list of over 380.
species, and it is the only locality in Malawi where Lilian’s Lovebird, *Agapornis lilianae* is recorded and is an important site for species with well over 1,000 individuals occurring\(^4\).

Being a national park, national legislation limits opportunities for local communities to extract resources from within the park boundaries – although the Department of National Parks and Wildlife will allow the occasional collection of fuelwood for use at funerals, little else can be removed.

In the past, with little incentive to support conservation, communities around the park have taken what they can, mostly illegally. Poaching was rife and according to the Park Manager Samuel Nyanyali ‘everyone was a poacher – the only people benefitting from conservation were visiting tourists’.

In 1998, recognising that the system was not working, the Government of Malawi, (Department of National Parks and Wildlife) supported by WESM started a revision of the National Parks policy which was finalised in 2000 and included opportunities for collaborative management and benefit sharing at the country’s national parks. The aim was to reverse the prevailing situation at the time and engage communities around the park as partners in conservation.

At Liwonde, communities were supported to form the Upper Shire Association for the Conservation of Liwonde National Park (USACO), an umbrella body representing 31 villages on the park’s periphery. Villages formed Village Natural Resource Committees which elected representatives to be part of USACO.

Because of the dense settlement around the park it was felt that resource extraction wouldn’t be possible. Instead the approach that has been taken is that of benefit sharing. The park makes its income from the concession fees on two lodges within the park, and also from gate fees. Guidelines for sharing this income with local communities have been drawn up and are awaiting final approval and signature by the Minister. Already, in anticipation of the new arrangements, poaching has declined and villagers are regularly reporting any incidents of poaching that they come across. In return, the National Parks Department have recognised the restraint that communities have shown whilst the legal terms are being negotiated, and, together with WESM (funded through the Chunguni Trust) they are providing financial and technical support to income generating activities such as mushroom

production and rearing of guinea fowl, as well as provision of social services like bore holes to improve village water supply.

However, the new management arrangements will only really be tested once the benefits from the park start to be shared with local communities, and they can make decisions on how resources are used. We visited one such community, at Mulipa with M\^\textcircled{P}hilip Mwidthokona, an officer responsible for Education and Extension. Vested Dosani, the chair of USACO, explained how things have changed. “In the past there was only antagonism between the park officers and the local community. Now there is lots of interaction and dialogue between people at different levels. We speak with the park officers often and openly, without fear. 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 our grandchildren who will suffer if the animals disappear”.

The community are clearly planning on how they will use the revenue they receive. Interestingly they first mentioned investment in activities which will provide more opportunities for earning income. “We would like to develop a cultural village where tourists will come and watch traditional dancing, and learn skills in wood carving and craft production so that we can sell things to the tourists” I was told. “We also want to scale up some of the activities we have been introduced to, like bee-keeping, woodlots and fish-farming”. Then came the provision of community services, like improvements to the school and bore hole.

However the final comments from the community were quite revealing of the gap that had grown between the community and the park on their doorstep. “We also 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. We hear about the tourist lodges, but we have never seen them. For us, going to see the park would be like going to see a park in another country – it is a foreign place to us!” Clearly, now that the communities are to become partners in the conservation of the park’s wild animals it seems entirely appropriate that they should get to see the resource that they are helping to protect.

Assessing and demonstrating benefits to people from the new co-benefit arrangements at the park, and how they relate to the wider economy and natural resource use, should be made easier through an ongoing monitoring programme that WESM is coordinating among all the communities around the Liwonde National Park. WESM is part of the Management Oriented Monitoring Systems Project (MOMS for short), a regional initiative of the Southern African Regional Programme Office of WWF. Through a series of forms or modules addressing 48 different resource use issues, both positive (e.g. farm income, income from non-timber forest products) and negative (e.g. problem animals, illegal tree cutting) monitors in each village are keeping records which are then synthesised to show weekly, monthly and annual patterns. WESM is coordinating the MOMS project at 8 different sites across Malawi (involving 190 monitors), and it is hoped that by demonstrating the value of natural resources the information will provide input into policy decision-making at national level. However, at local level, such as around Liwonde national park, the information is also helping communities to understand their own natural resource use issues better: “we are learning which kinds of animals are giving us most problems and also which areas around the park are experiencing a loss of food production” said one of the women monitors. The information is also helping park staff and WESM to understand better resource use problems around Liwonde, helping them to identify resource use hotspots and the places where it is most important for them to give help.
Case study 4: Balaka and watershed management around the Rivirivi River

Although many of WESM’s activities are focused on priority conservation areas including IBAs, they also engage on environmental issues in the wider landscape. The work being undertaken by the Balaka Branch of WESM provides an excellent example of how WESM are working with communities to address poverty-environment issues at local and ecosystem level.

The Rivirivi River, whose source is the Dzunji Hills, flows to the Shire River passing through mostly dry areas around Ntcheu and Balaka. Although the river was once perennial, it now becomes reduced to a few pools distributed along its course during the dry season. This is affecting local livelihoods, dependent on the river for watering livestock and washing. WESM and communities identified the clearance of forest vegetation from the river banks as a key factor which is affecting the river flow, and so began a project, funded by the Malawi Environmental Endowment Trust (a local endowment set up to assist in responding to various environmental issues in Malawi) to try to reverse the situation.

The project covers about 40 km of river and 25 villages, and is focussed mainly on environmental management – reforestation, agroforestry, rain water-harvesting, and the use of vetiver grass to control erosion. To implement the project WESM works very closely with the government extension services from the departments of agriculture and forestry. Not only does this allow the project to benefit from the capacity of these agents in the area (about 20 extension agents) but it also helps with skills transfer, and ensures some continuity and sustainability beyond the end of project funding.

Together with the WESM Balaka Branch Treasurer, Blacksan Mwale, and Irene Ekonia the Education and Wildlife Clubs Coordinator, we headed off to visit two of the communities –
Chiputula Village and Joshua Village – that were taking part in the project along the Rivirivi River.

If the enthusiasm with which the singing, dancing women met WESM when we arrived in the village is anything to go by, the efforts have been greatly appreciated. The communities were eager to show us the results of their efforts. At Joshua village we scrambled down the river bank and across a muddy tributary and entered the shade of a young forest. Now five years old, and the result of a combination of natural regeneration and enrichment planting, the woodland is now well established, and we sat in the shade to talk about how their new forest would be used. The community explained how they are starting to keep bee hives in the forest, which currently covers 25 ha of land adjacent to the river. They have also planted trees that they use for medicines, and in the longer term they hope to manage the area for fuel wood and maybe charcoal production.

At Chiputula, land adjacent to the reforestation area showed us what can happen when the forest is cleared. A deep erosion gully had formed, a scar across the hillside. Yet the signs are encouraging that this can be reversed. Although the project is only 5 years old, and it would be foolish to attribute changes only to the project, in the last dry season the river continued to flow.