Managing conflict around contested natural resources: a case study of Rusitu Valley area, Chimanimani, Zimbabwe

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SUMMARY

Chidhakwa focuses on three villages adjacent to Haroni and Rusitu forests in Zimbabwe. Conflict started when the government set aside the forests as protected areas in the mid-1970s without taking local forest resource rights into account. The study highlights the use of third parties, participatory rural appraisal, coalition building and economic development projects in facilitating negotiations among different stakeholders. It also explores the problem of unequal power relations in conflict management processes. Although the rural communities living near the forest are key stakeholders, they lack the power and resources of the other parties engaged in negotiations.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

KEY ISSUES
- What is the source of conflict?
- Who are the stakeholders or interested parties?

CONTEXT
- Are local institutions for managing natural resources also used for conflict management?
- How does one distinguish primary and secondary stakeholders?

CONFLICT BACKGROUND OR HISTORY
- How does historical analysis help us to understand and manage contemporary conflicts?
- How does the perception of a conflict influence attitudes regarding its solution?

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION PROCESSES
- How do you generate information for conflict management?
- What tools can be applied in conflict management?
- How can parties to a conflict be brought together?

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION OUTCOMES
- Are all issues in a conflict always resolved completely?
- Do conflict management processes always satisfy all parties?

LESSONS LEARNED
- Why should we talk of conflict management rather than resolution?
- Why are power relations important in conflict management?

KEY ISSUES

The case study presented here summarizes conflict management processes around contested forests in Rusitu Valley in Zimbabwe. It illustrates how governments and outside agencies ignore local management systems and institutions and try to impose new ones with the support of national legislation. External actors, both government and non-governmental, are all agreed on the need to save two unique forest patches from destruction by the local people. There is no agreement, however, on how best to do it. For a long period of time (between 1974 and 1993) there was no effective communication between external agencies and the local community. This resulted in a conflict situation that manifested itself in various ways, including arrests and fines being imposed on local people, and local people in turn causing bush fires and cultivating crops on the fringes of the forests.

The case study presented here helps us understand conflict management processes around protected areas or other contested resources, particularly woodlands. In order to manage such conflict situations, there is need to open up channels of communication between the conflicting parties. In this particular case, participatory methods were adopted in order to initiate dialogue with the local communities and establish the key areas of conflict. This was done mainly through a series of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) sessions facilitated by a non-governmental organization (NGO). These exercises were later complemented by the efforts of a third neutral party, the District Administrator for Chimanimani District, who brought all the parties together for discussions and to plan the way forward.

Conflict in natural resources management is inevitable, granted that there are different uses of resources, different users, interests and value systems. Ashby (1998) identifies a number of causes of conflict which include, *inter alia*: stakeholders with livelihood use for natural resources being excluded from use and/or from decisions about the use of the resources; inequitable access to scarce or degrading resources; unprecedented increase in the rates of extraction; interventions at inappropriate scales; traditional ways of sharing resources being undermined by governments; and lack of clarity about boundaries, access, use rights and responsibilities. In the case of the Rusitu Valley conflict, we can also add differences in values, beliefs and interests among different actors. This list of causes of conflict is not exhaustive and the causes are dynamic.

Conflicts in natural resources management can be categorized in various ways, depending on how they occur and manifest themselves. Warner and Jones (1998) categorize conflicts broadly in terms of whether they occur at the micro-micro or the micro-macro level, i.e. among community groups or between community groups and outsiders. The Rusitu Valley conflict was largely of the latter type and pitted the community against outsiders, but conflict among the outsiders also

took place. There were also various interest groups at the local level. Most people in the area are farmers, producing mainly bananas and other fruits and crops. The conversion of the Rusitu forests to agricultural land made more sense to them, as shown by the gradual reduction in the sizes of the forests. There were also traditional leaders and spirit mediums interested more in the preservation of the core areas of the forests (for ritual purposes) and limiting access and harvest of products. The harvest of various forest products by different local groups also cannot be ignored, for example thatching grass, medicines, indigenous fruits and fuelwood.

Although "conflict" has negative connotations and is usually viewed negatively, it is a potential force for positive social change, as was the case in Rusitu Valley. A compromise was struck between conserving the forests and community benefits through community-based tourism. Conflict management processes might not have satisfied all community interests, granted that there are various interest groups at the community level, but it is apparent that management of the forests might improve through community contribution.

Pendzich (1993) suggests that conflict management should seek to bring all actors together so that they come to an agreement on the contentious issues. This can be done through various conflict management processes, listed in the Box.

BOX	CONFLICT MANAGEMENT PROCESSES

Conciliation: a third neutral party attempts to communicate separately with disputing parties for the purposes of reducing tensions and agreeing on a process for resolving conflict.

Facilitation: a third neutral party assists in running a productive meeting.

Negotiation: involves a voluntary process in which parties to a conflict meet face to face to reach a mutually acceptable resolution, mostly through consensus.

Fact finding: a third neutral party gathers information from all sides and prepares a summary of key issues.

Mediation: involves the assistance of a neutral third party to a negotiation process.

Source: Based on Pendzich, 1993.

We may also add avoidance (keeping conflict from becoming publicly acknowledged), coercion (threatening or actually using force to impose one's will), arbitration (where a conflict is submitted to a mutually agreeable third party) and adjudication (where a judge or administrator is relied upon to make a binding decision).

In the case of Rusitu, it was apparent that power relations were very important in conflict management. Power was not evenly distributed among all the actors and the local people were faced with various constraints, for example access to information and decision-making power. The final agreement on the utilization of the forests was shaped according to the interests of external bodies, mainly NGOs. The local community was also operating from an inferior position, considering that some partner meetings were held outside the community, at the district centre. Only a few representatives could attend.

Conflict management processes are not mutually exclusive and one can lead to another, as occurred in the Rusitu case. The major strategy adopted in Rusitu was to initiate dialogue with the community through participatory approaches. The bringing together of all parties to the conflict followed later. Issues were then discussed openly and some solutions sought for some of the key issues identified.

The case study is relevant to community-based natural resources management because it illustrates that conflict management calls for communication among all parties and facilitation of discussion. However, it is difficult to resolve conflicts in situations of unequal power and different value systems. Demarcating areas for protection is not necessarily the best way to conserve resources since resource management should be done within a certain context – historical, political or otherwise. Indigenous knowledge systems and practices should be accorded equal importance. The management of natural resources should be done in a participatory manner and all stakeholders should understand the objectives.

Conflicts in natural resources management are also dynamic and can be prominent for long periods of time. In Rusitu, the conflict spanned several years and the contemporary situation could not be treated in isolation from the historical processes in the area. For conflict management to be successful there is need to conduct a historical analysis (with the participation of local people) so that the major issues can be identified, analysed and discussed.

CONTEXT

The case study is centred on three villages around forests officially known as the Haroni and Rusitu forests. These are small patches of forest located in Rusitu Valley, in Chimanimani District, on the border with Mozambique (see Map below). They are now part of the 15 botanical reserves in Zimbabwe (see Map on p. 191). The two forests are unique from an ecological point of view and present the only remaining lowland tropical moist forest in Zimbabwe. They contain unique (to Zimbabwe) species of flora and fauna, e.g. birds, amphibians, trees, shrubs and butterflies. The area attracts low volumes of tourists, mainly nature enthusiasts.

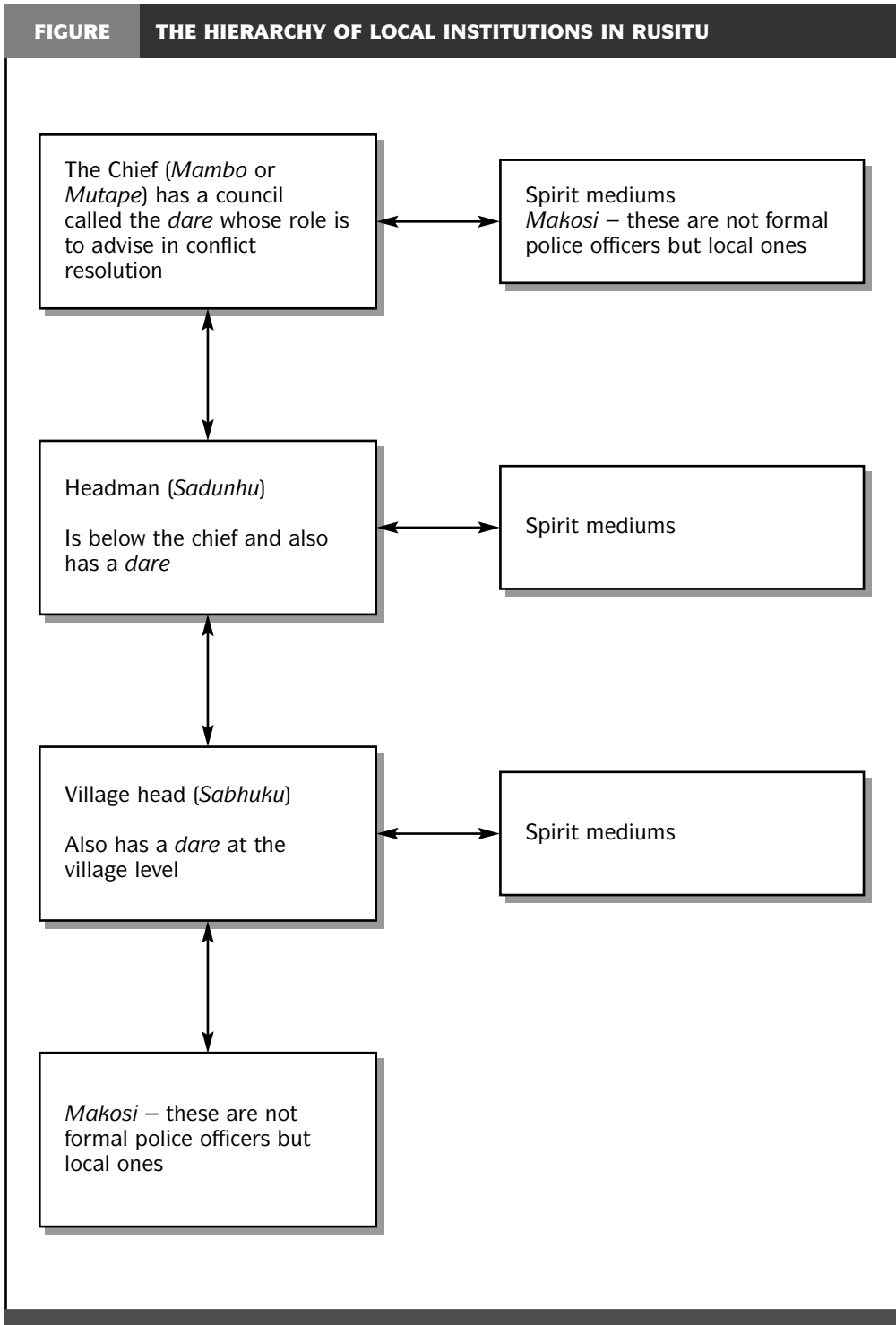| MAP	LOCATION OF RUSITU VALLEY IN ZIMBABWE
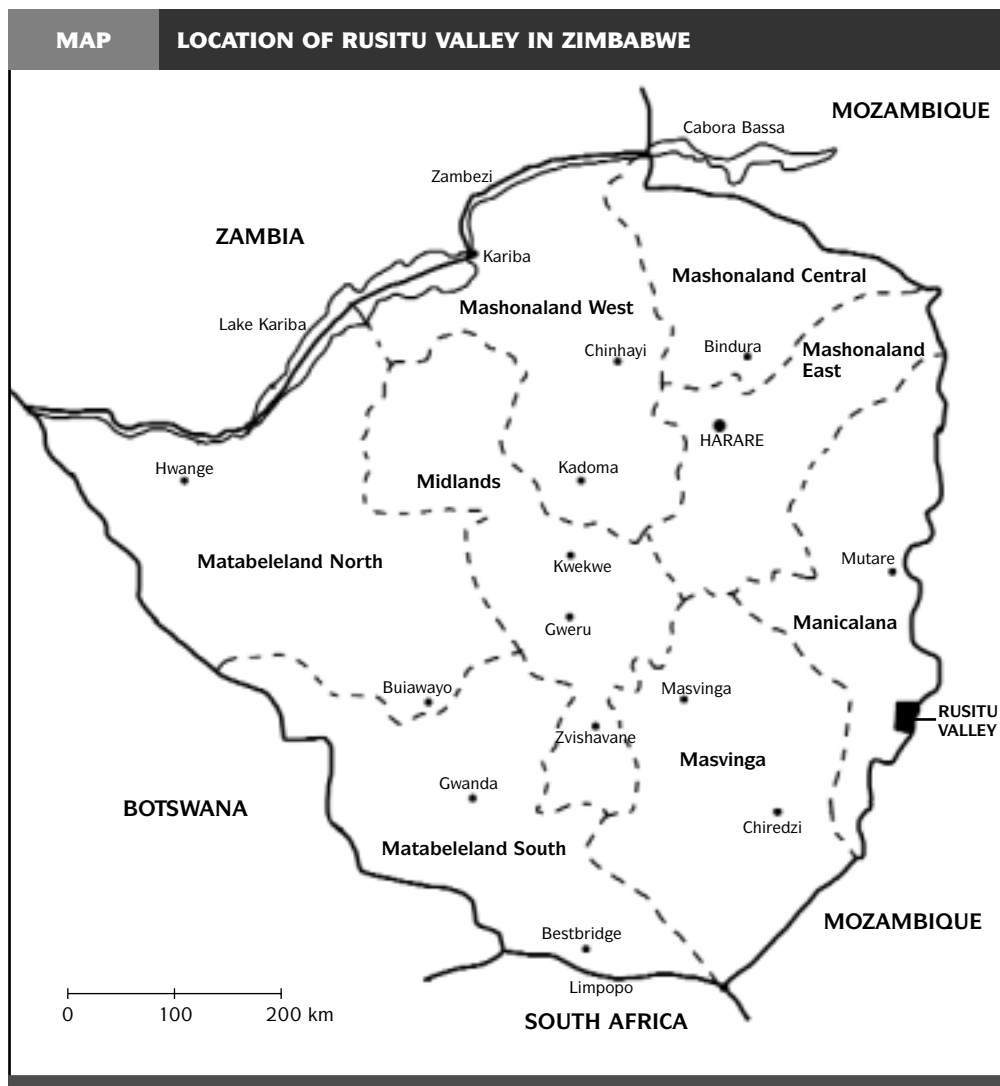
These two patches of forest have been the subject of contested management between the local people, government institutions and outside agencies, especially NGOs. The inhabitants of Rusitu Valley have constantly been forced to migrate to make way for new developments such as plantations and national parks. They settled in the lower Rusitu Valley in the early 1900s and declared the Haroni and Rusitu forests sacred forests managed through local institutions, norms and values.

The forests are managed through (informal) rules and regulations, i.e. instituted and executed by the community with no support or recognition from the government. Local institutions (chiefs and headmen) were not recognized as formal local authorities until about a year ago. There was a deliberate attempt after independence in 1980 to strip them of their powers. New institutions created in their place (Village and Ward Development Committees) did not receive the expected respect and recognition from the local people, and the government has recently resuscitated traditional institutions. Local rules and regulations include a ban on utilizing certain plant and animal species prescribed as sacred, on harvesting any products from the core of the forests deemed as the most sacred, and on cutting indigenous fruit-trees. A local system for punishment and sanctioning is also in place, for example one might be asked to brew local beer for free consumption by all the villagers and/or to slaughter a goat or other livestock. The level of punishment depends on the gravity of the offence.

The Haroni and Rusitu forests have historically been managed by the local people, who view them as sacred forests and as the abode of their ancestral spirits. The forests are managed through a hierarchical system of *de facto* local institutions and spirit mediums as represented in the Figure. The chief is the ultimate local authority with regard to management of resources and conflict resolution. The local village head deals with a dispute first, and if he/she fails to resolve it, he/she refers it to the headman, who may in turn refer it to the chief if there are problems. At all three levels, spirit mediums play an important advisory role in the local institutions. Spirit mediums are taken to be the link between the spiritual, human and natural worlds and their advice is widely respected.

FIGURE	THE HIERARCHY OF LOCAL INSTITUTIONS IN RUSITU

The Chief (*Mambo* or *Mutape*) has a council called the *dare* whose role is to advise in conflict resolution

⟷

Spirit mediums
Makosi – these are not formal police officers but local ones

↕

Headman (*Sadunhu*)

Is below the chief and also has a *dare*

⟷

Spirit mediums

↕

Village head (*Sabhuku*)

Also has a *dare* at the village level

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Spirit mediums

↕

Makosi – these are not formal police officers but local ones

The two forests were declared as botanical reserves and gazetted as such in 1974 by the then colonial Rhodesian Government. Legally speaking (i.e. in terms of the National Parks and Wildlife Act), botanical reserves are intended to preserve and protect rare or endangered plants, or representative plant communities growing naturally in the wild, for the enjoyment, education and benefit of the public. No form of consumptive utilization (e.g. harvesting fruits, bark or fuelwood) is allowed without permission of the director of national parks and wildlife management. Since the declaration of the forests as botanical reserves, local people have defied these regulations and have continued to utilize products and conduct their rituals. The locals do not even recognize the official names of the forests and prefer to use their local names, which are Nyakwaa and Chizire for Rusitu and Haroni forests respectively.

MAP	THE BOTANICAL RESERVE OF ZIMBABWE
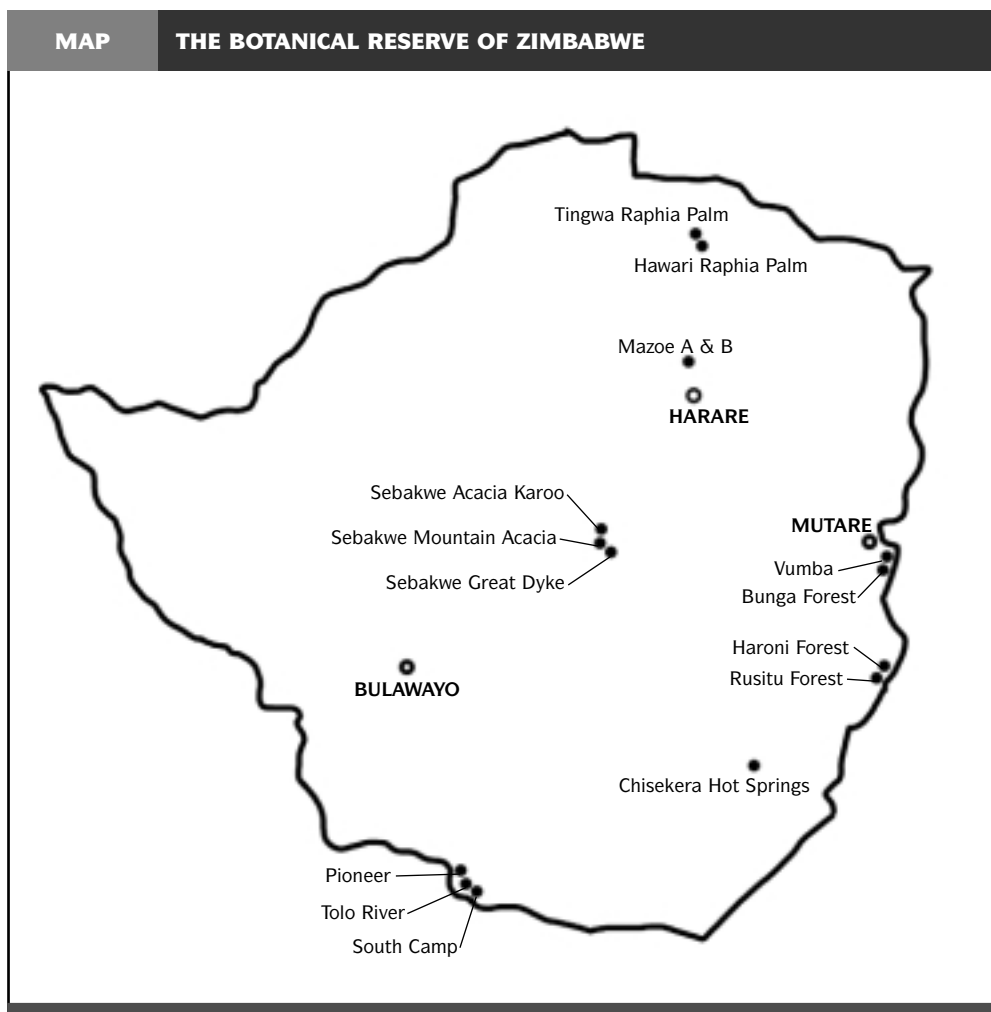
The declaration of the forests as reserves brought with it several major changes with respect to the institutional basis for the management of the forests. Several of the traditional and cultural functions of the forests were ignored and the local decision-making and control processes were abolished.
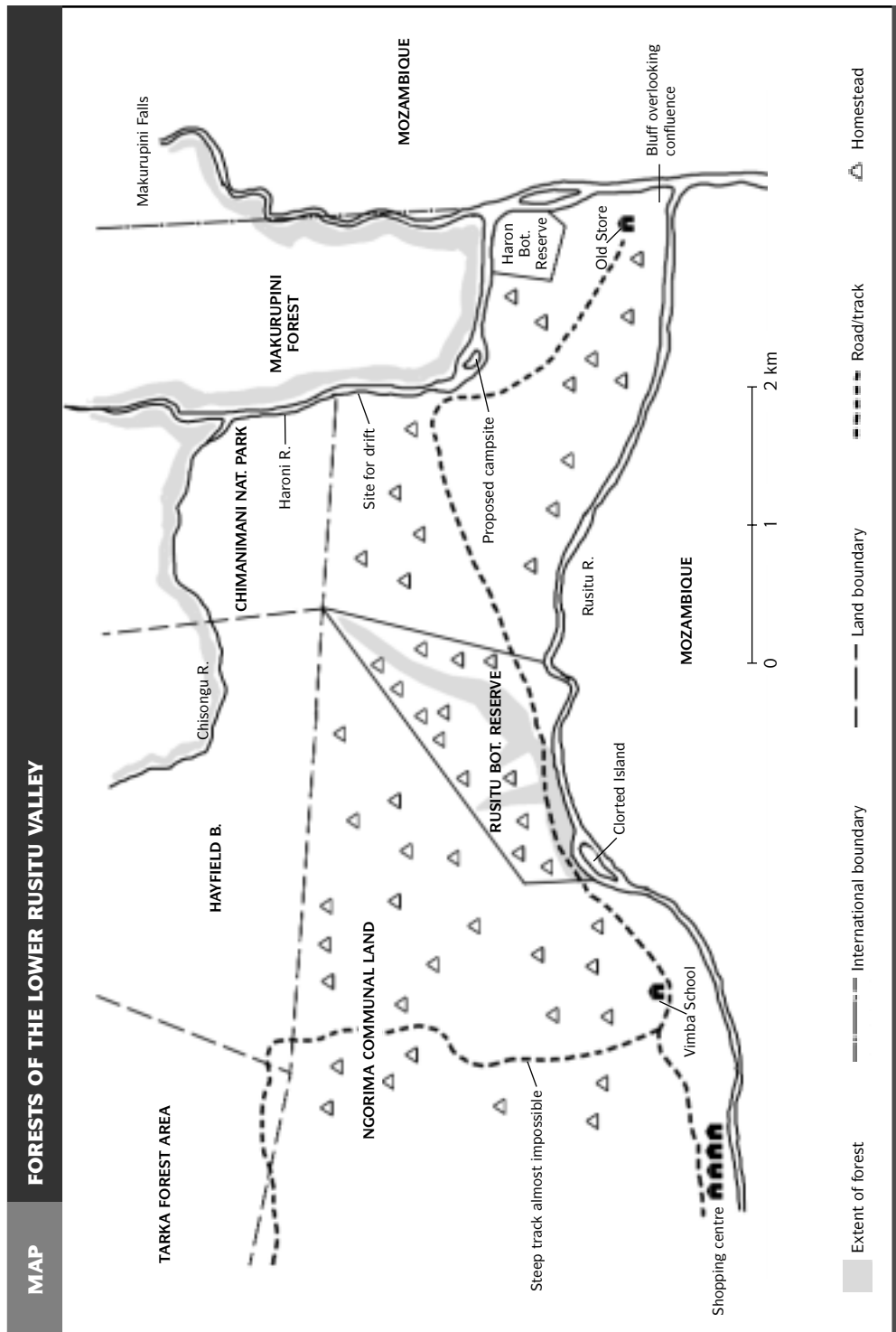
CONFLICT BACKGROUND OR HISTORY

The conflict in Rusitu Valley cannot be understood outside the context of land appropriation and subsequent struggles that have characterized the area. Hughes (1996a) identifies three distinct phases in the struggles for land and natural resources in Chimanimani. The first phase began with the arrival of white colonial settlers from South Africa between 1892 and 1893. This phase saw the seizure of land and eviction of inhabitants from their original places of residence on the Chimanimani Highlands (see Map opposite). By 1895, settlers had claimed most of the eastern (Chimanimani-Chipinge) highlands. Africans were left to occupy areas unsuitable for white settlement and agriculture, including the Haroni-Rusitu river valleys.

The second phase saw the acquisition of land by private companies and the government for plantation forestry. In the 1950s, the Anglo-American Corporation established Border Timbers Pvt. Ltd and acquired Tilbury Estates, the state Forestry Commission established Tarka Forestry Estate and the London Rhodesia Company (Lonrho) established the Rhodesia Wattle Company. Communities were evicted from their land to make way for plantation forestry. Most of the land was cleared and planted with wattle, pines and eucalyptus. People were thus eventually crammed into native reserves that included the Haroni-Rusitu river valleys in Vhimba.

The third phase in the appropriation of land was related to the establishment and expansion of the Chimanimani National Park, in the early 1960s, and encroachment of the park into Rusitu Valley. In the 1950s, government-sponsored aerial photography revealed the existence of small patches of evergreen forest in the Haroni-Rusitu river valleys in Ngorima, including the Haroni and Rusitu forests (Whitlow, 1988). The patchiness of these forests was attributed to slash-and-burn smallholder agriculture and subsequently, in 1973, the forests were declared protected areas (Hughes, 1996b). During this period, the war of liberation in Zimbabwe was escalating in the area and the reserves could neither be demarcated nor surveyed. In addition, the local community was not aware that "its" forests had been designated as protected areas.

MAP **FORESTS OF THE LOWER RUSITU VALLEY**

Makurupini Falls

MOZAMBIQUE

Bluff overlooking confluence

Haron Bot. Reserve

Old Store

MAKURUPINI FOREST

CHIMANIMANI NAT. PARK

Haroni R.

Site for drift

Proposed campsite

Rusitu R.

MOZAMBIQUE

Chisongu R.

RUSITU BOT. RESERVE

Clorted Island

HAYFIELD B.

NGORIMA COMMUNAL LAND

Vimba School

TARKA FOREST AREA

Steep track almost impossible

Shopping centre

2 km

0   1

Extent of forest

International boundary

Land boundary

Road/track

Homestead

After independence in 1980, the new government did not change the status quo. Backed by (and recognizing) colonial legislation and policies, the government revalidated both the national parks' and the botanical reserves' boundaries. The major problem was that the boundaries of the reserves were neither surveyed nor marked. Attempts to exclude local people from the reserves were met with resistance and were largely ignored.

The conflict around the management of the Rusitu forests was characterized by differences in the way different people and organizations perceived the way that the forests could be conserved. Several actors (both internal and external), all claiming to be interested in saving the forests from destruction by the local people, were involved. This claim was being advanced, despite the fact that the forests had survived without interference from external actors for a long time. At play in the Rusitu conflict were differences in values and belief systems. Among the actors, some were conservation- and preservation-oriented (government institutions, mainly the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management – DNPWLM), some were forest-dependent (the local people and private tourism companies), some were development-oriented (the NGOs) and some were profit-oriented (individuals and private business), as shown in the Table.

TABLE	MAIN ACTORS IN THE RUSITU CONFLICT	
Main actor	**Perception of problem**	**Proposed solution**
Local community (including various subgroups)	External agencies claiming their forests and blaming them for forest destruction	Total control by the local people and no external intervention in forest management issues
Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management (DNPWLM)	Forests were facing certain destruction by the local people	Fence off the forests Enforce non-consumptive uses Demarcate boundaries and evict squatters from designated areas
Forestry Commission	Forests were being destroyed by cultivation, deliberate bush fires, cutting of poles and trapping of small game	Surveying and demarcation of reserve boundaries and de-gazetting degraded areas Eviction of squatters

Wildlife Society of Zimbabwe, Chipinge Branch	Destruction of forests caused by lack of knowledge of the local people and intense harvesting for poles and bush fires	Support school to raise indigenous seedlings to sell for reforestation Support law enforcement and provide resources for scouts Erect perimeter fences around the forest areas Market the area as a tourist destination
Rural District Council (RDC)	Forests were being destroyed owing to lack of opportunities and development	Attract more tourists to Rusitu and bring overall development to the area
Southern Alliance for Indigenous Resources (SAFIRE)	Forests would not be completely destroyed but were reduced owing to poverty and lack of options outside agriculture	Integrated development strategy that links forest management to overall development of the area Conduct participatory problem analysis and solution
Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE Association) and the Zimbabwe Trust (ZIMTRUST)	There was no appreciation of the value of the resources and no linkage between conservation of forests and community benefits	Support non-consumptive utilization and community-based ecotourism
Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front) – ZANU (PF), Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) and Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP)	The ruling party and two state security bodies were all interested in security issues on the border with Mozambique and were keenly following all issues regarding development of the community (and maybe later would claim responsibility for positive outcomes)	Any proposed development to take place in a secure environment and all partners to be open to each other
Private business (Mentrick Enterprises, Pamwechete Safaris, Rory Duncan Trading and Chimanimani Tourist Association)	Blamed the local people for causing destruction of the forests through cultivation	Proposed that private developers could be given the opportunity to invest in tourism and, in the process, develop the local area

Among the community, there are also various subgroups, such as traditional medical practitioners, carpenters, crafts makers and cultivators, all paying allegiance to traditional institutions. There were no distinct intracommunity conflicts over the forests and their resources or over the handling of the conflict with external actors. Historically, the community has its own rules and regulations controlling the use and management of the forests. The forest is managed both for traditional cultural reasons and for the harvest of products, both timber and non-timber (see photo). Community interests centre on the preservation of the sacred areas and on conducting its annual traditional rituals.

The conflict in Rusitu manifested itself in various ways, ranging from avoidance initially, to open confrontation later. Since the gazetting of the forests in 1974, they had neither been surveyed nor fenced off. Among the local community, no one knew where the exact boundaries of the proposed reserves were. The liberation war in Zimbabwe between 1975 and 1980 made it impossible for any government personnel (either surveyors or DNPWLM staff) to visit the area. It was only after independence in 1980 that DNPWLM and other players renewed their interest in the conservation of the Rusitu forests.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT
AND RESOLUTION PROCESSES

The most recurrent argument voiced by the various actors in the Rusitu conflict was the blame placed on the local communities for the destruction of the Haroni and Rusitu forests. However, the actors proposed different solutions, all in the name of saving the forests from certain destruction by the local people (see Table). The first phase in the management of the Rusitu conflict involved initiation of dialogue with the local community. This was followed by the efforts of the Chimanimani District Administrator (DA) who, as an adjudicator, facilitated communication among all conflicting parties. The DA's role at the district level is to coordinate all development activities as the representative of government. The DA initially communicated with all parties separately and later brought them together to discuss the major problems and plan for the future. These processes are discussed in the following.

From the early 1980s to the early 1990s there were isolated incidents of harassment of local people by staff from DNPWLM. The major points of contention were the harvest of minor forest products and cultivation on the fringes of the two forests. Local people were arrested by parks staff and their fishing lines, axes and other implements confiscated. Fines were also imposed on them.

Harvest of bark for medicine

In 1992, the government contracted a chartered surveyor to mark the boundaries of the two reserves. The surveyor did so without any consultation with the local community and, after this exercise, about 15 homesteads were incorporated within the boundaries of the reserves. According to DNPWLM, these people had to be evicted from the park estate (Kawadza and Rogers, 1993). In the same year, members of the Chipinge branch of the Wildlife Society of Zimbabwe also resolved to save the Rusitu forests from what they assumed to be total destruction by the local people. With the agreement of the parks warden for Chimanimani, they sponsored (financially) the sending of eight scouts to Rusitu with the mandate to stop the cutting of understorey and poles and generally to "educate the local people to preserve the reserves". There was open confrontation between the local people and the scouts and physical abuse occurred, together with arrests of local people, which served no purpose.

The first serious effort to engage the local community in dialogue began in 1993. The Fuelwood Crisis Consortium (FCC), the Southern Alliance for Indigenous Resources' (SAFIRE's) predecessor organization, commissioned a needs assessment survey of the community adjacent to the reserves. A consultant facilitated the assessment. This survey was also to focus on some participatory problem analysis of issues surrounding the management of the Rusitu and Haroni botanical reserves. This was done in an attempt to identify a potential strategy for the sustainable development of the area, holding the interests of the community as

The completed village boundary map

paramount and, at the same time, attempting to preserve the integrity of the reserves (FCC, 1993). The survey incorporated a socio-economic study, appraised existing development projects within the area, assessed current literature on the area and also involved discussions with various local stakeholders.

The major findings of the FCC (1993) survey were that the reserves had been created without adequate consultation and reference to the needs of the local community, that there was no dialogue between the various players, that the area needed development and that local management practices were in place.

One outcome of the FCC survey and initial consultations was a set of recommendations made by the local community. These recommendations were drawn from discussions with various local people and institutions. It was proposed that surveying and demarcation of the forests be done in conjunction with the local people; local land shortage problems be taken into account in proposed solutions; a local development committee comprising local people and external agencies be established; a detailed PRA exercise be conducted; and channels of communication be opened up.

There were attempts by DNPWLM, the Rural District Council (RDC) and the DA's office in 1994 to organize meetings between the national parks department

A sacred pool along Haroni river (within Haroni forest)

and the local people to resolve their differences. These meetings were largely boycotted by the local people and were not conclusive. The meetings were also not productive because already there was mistrust between the local people, DNPWLM and the Wildlife Society of Zimbabwe, mainly the Chipinge branch.

A series of PRA workshops was conducted by SAFIRE between late 1994 and early 1995. Participatory tools were used to generate discussion. These tools included participatory mapping, transect walks, livelihood analysis, activity calendars and product flow diagrams. The exercises were aimed at identifying community priorities and encouraging discussion of the issues relating to the management of the forests, e.g. the contentious boundary issue and utilization of forest products. SAFIRE eventually stationed a project officer in the area. Gradually the local community became a willing partner in discussions on the management of the Rusitu forests.

After the major issues had been identified through participatory exercises and workshops, the DA for Chimanimani, playing the role of an adjudicator, decided to communicate with all actors separately. This was done to establish their positions. Later, all actors in the conflict were brought together at the district centre in April 1995. The DA is the chief civil servant at the district level and ensures that development efforts are effectively coordinated and conflicts at that level

resolved. The office of the DA was not directly involved in the Rusitu conflict, but whether the parties to the conflict viewed it as neutral is doubtful.

All the actors were asked to present their views and how this affected the conservation of the forests. The local people were not happy that external actors were accorded the same status as them. Many contentious issues were raised, mainly related to the role of the community, the boundaries of the forests and what to do with the so-called squatters. It was wrongly assumed that the local community was homogeneous and could be represented by a few people. There were different interest groups, e.g. cultivators interested in opening up land for agriculture, traditional institutions interested in preserving the core of the forests, local people interested in harvesting various products including fruits, medicines and thatching grass, and some who were interested in new job opportunities that the proposed ecotourism venture would bring.

The first stakeholder meeting marked the birth of what later became known as the Vhimba Consultative Group, a loose coalition of all actors concerned with "saving" the Rusitu/Haroni botanical reserves. This group brought together all actors, including the local community, and they agreed to hold regular meetings and consultations. Represented at the meeting were RDC, the DA's office, the local chief, SAFIRE, the Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE), Chipinge Wildlife Society, DNPWLM, the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO), Chimanimani Tourist Association, the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) and the ZANU (PF) party. The DA facilitated the meeting. Stakeholders were asked to present their views separately and this was followed by a general discussion.

A series of problem solving meetings was held, adopting participatory approaches to conflict management, whereby all parties would present their positions for discussion. An increase in understanding and trust enabled the parties to settle their differences on substantive issues, mainly related to saving the Rusitu forests.

The most positive aspect of these meetings was that all parties to the conflict could sit down together and discuss the issues openly. The only major point of agreement was the issue of community benefits through an ecotourism project. However, this idea originated from external actors. Local people were contesting the gazetting of the forests as botanical reserves and preferred total control through local institutions. Other aspects remained contentious and are yet to be resolved, e.g. the boundary issues and the proposed eviction of the so-called squatters. On the ground, in Rusitu, small measures were being taken to replace mistrust gradually. Small projects were initiated, e.g. a maize-grinding mill was donated to the community in late 1995 by SAFIRE. In addition, DNPWLM scouts were removed from the area. The Box illustrates the major events and processes in the Rusitu conflict.

BOX	HISTORY OF EVENTS IN RUSITU
1974	The Rusitu and Haroni forests are declared botanical reserves
1975–1980	Period of war. The reserves can neither be demarcated nor protected by parks staff
1980	Independence. The government reaffirms the gazetting of the forests as protected areas
1980 to early 1990s	Isolated incidents of harassment of local people who are trying to harvest both timber and non-timber forest products. Local people are arrested, fined or beaten by staff from DNPWLM
1992	A chartered surveyor is contracted to mark the boundaries of the protected areas. Local people complain about lack of consultation. DNPWLM scouts are sent to Rusitu to police the area and arrests and beatings escalate
1993	FCC needs assessment study. Need for further analysis identified
1994	More participatory exercises conducted by SAFIRE. Major issues are identified and the idea of an ecotourism project is discussed. Meetings between DNPWLM and the local people prove futile
1995	The DA brings together all parties to the conflict for a meeting. A series of meetings is held and key issues identified. Agreement is reached on the ecotourism project but not on other issues such as "squatters" and the boundary
1996	Ecotourism project proposals completed
1997 to date	The ecotourism project is being developed. Other issues are still outstanding and conflict is largely latent. DNPWLM clears firebreak following surveyed boundaries and slashes bananas and other fruit-trees. Conflict remains largely unresolved

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION OUTCOMES

The Rusitu Valley conflict has not been completely resolved. Some positive developments can, however, be noted. All actors were in agreement about the central role that the local community should play in the management of the forests. DNPWLM could not sideline the community but had to take its views on forest management into account. The issue of benefits to the local community was also addressed. The idea of encouraging ecotourism was put forward and plans drawn up to start a tourism venture involving the local community and outside investors as partners.

Plans for establishing community-based tourism facilities are already advanced and DNPWLM has agreed to allow communities to benefit from the proceeds, through a long-term lease (granted by DNPWLM through RDC) that allows them to utilize the forests in a non-consumptive way. NGOs such as SAFIRE, the Zimbabwe Trust (ZIMTRUST) and the CAMPFIRE Association are involved in providing services, including the training of local people in enterprise skills, tour operation and guiding of tourists and marketing, for example. The CAMPFIRE Association will offer financial support for the setting up of the tourist facilities.

RDC will also benefit directly from a percentage of the proceeds, up to a maximum of 20 percent of the revenue, for providing administrative support. It is still unclear whether the benefits from this tourism venture will filter through to the communities and whether there will be other conflicts related to the distribution of the benefits and utilization of both timber and non-timber forest products. The success of the tourism venture is directly linked with non-consumptive use of the forest, and the local community is effectively prohibited from harvesting products. However, in practice local people continue to harvest various timber and non-timber forest products.

However some aspects of the Rusitu conflict have not been resolved. Contentious issues concern the extent of the boundaries of the forests, and also ownership and control of the forests. The local people recognize their own boundaries and insist on "social fencing" rather than a physical barrier. They prefer to manage the forests through local rules and institutions, with no perimeter fences. Government institutions, mainly DNPWLM, recognize different boundaries (which are wider) and still want to evict the so-called squatters from within the surveyed areas. Firebreaks have already been cleared around the forests, although they have not been fenced yet. This issue has not been resolved, first because there is no agreement on where the boundary should be and, second, because no one wants to take responsibility for evicting and resettling the affected people.

The other issue is whether communities can be allowed to harvest products from the forests, both timber and non-timber. At the moment, the community is not (officially) allowed to harvest any products from the forest. However, local people continue to harvest both timber and non-timber products. DNPWLM largely turns a blind eye to the harvest of products in the interest of mutual trust. Perhaps one major weakness of the conflict management process in Rusitu is that there is no clearly defined management mechanism. It has not, for instance, been decided whether there will be co-management between DNPWLM and the local people. As things currently stand, the local people will receive benefits through non-consumptive tourism and they are, in turn, expected to police the forest areas and continue limiting harvest of products. The issue of consumptive use of forest resources might create new conflicts in future, if not discussed now.

The initial agreement on the need to involve local people has affected the management of the forests positively. The local community has realized that it can benefit financially and materially by protecting the forests. There is no evidence of clearing of new land for agriculture close to the forests. A local trust has also been elected to oversee the management of the forests and the tourism venture. This local body is legally recognized by RDC and in law. There are also local resource monitors in place. Their role is to monitor harvest of products and help DNPWLM in patrolling the forests. Facilities for the ecotourism project are being put in place. A campsite and some chalets are being built close to the forests to accommodate tourists. The road to Rusitu is currently being upgraded to facilitate the smooth flow of traffic and tourists to the area.

LESSONS LEARNED

The conflict around the forests in Rusitu Valley presents important lessons for conflict management in natural resources conservation. The following issues can be drawn from the Rusitu case.

Power relations play an important part in conflict management. In the Rusitu case, the local community is relegated to the same status as the other players, mainly NGOs. Its primary interest of total control of the forests is disregarded and the views of other players take centre stage. The community was contesting the gazetting of the Rusitu forests as botanical reserves and might not have been interested in just benefiting from non-consumptive uses. A good deal of importance is attached to outsiders' views, mainly that the community can benefit from ecotourism, and this is considered "the" solution to the conflict.

It is difficult, therefore, to resolve conflicts in situations of unequal power. In this case the community is less powerful than the government and non-governmental

institutions. Government institutions (e.g. DNPWLM) were backed by strong national legislation, allowing them to map the course of action. Some meetings to resolve the conflict were also held at the district centre, more than 50 km away. In some cases no members of the community attended and decisions were taken in their absence.

It is difficult to try and completely resolve conflicts around natural resources management. Rather, we should promote conflict management. In the case of Rusitu, there has been agreement on certain aspects of the conflict, for example the central role of the local community. There are still some unresolved issues, such as those regarding the forest boundaries and the eviction of people from within surveyed boundaries.

It was shown that conflict around natural resources involves actors with different values, capacity and resources. Classical conflict resolution processes call for the bringing together of all stakeholders, discussing all the issues at stake and reaching a consensus. Bringing actors together is, however, not an end. In the Rusitu case, it was apparent that the various actors had their own interests, some of which were probably not publicly pronounced. It is difficult to reconcile the views of various actors. Conflicts are not only between outsiders and local people but also between different groups of outsiders. Conflict management processes should seek to identify all stakeholders and provide them with an opportunity to present their views. This should be followed by discussion or sharing of the various positions with the stakeholders.

 The Rusitu case also showed that conflicts should not be addressed outside their broader historical and political context. There is a need to consult widely with the local people in order to understand the history and context of conflicts. In the Rusitu case, the people had been dispossessed of their land before and viewed the Rusitu forests as their sacred groves, to be protected by them at all costs. Participatory exercises help in identifying all these issues and facilitate community involvement in planning.

Conflict management processes call for participation of all stakeholders, including local communities. Experience in participatory methodologies is needed in order to be able to identify the key issues. In Rusitu, participatory methods were applied in order to engage the community in debate and also to build its trust. These exercises provided the community with an opportunity to air its previously ignored views. PRA should, however, not be viewed as an end but as a means to facilitate communication and dialogue.

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