

Kasanka National Park: Protecting threatened evergreen forests and their unique wildlife in central Zambia

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Kasanka National Park in central Zambia is a relatively small but extremely diverse landscape in the southern headwaters of the Congo River basin. The park and surrounding landscape have been managed by the Kasanka Trust Limited (KTL), a Zambian non-profit company, through a public-private partnership with the Zambian Department of National Parks and Wildlife since 1986.

Kasanka is best known for its bat migration – from October to December every year about 10 million Straw-coloured Fruit Bats (*Eidolon helvum*) migrate from across central Africa to Kasanka, and roost in a 25-hectare patch of evergreen forest in the centre of the park – a truly phenomenal wildlife spectacle that draws visitors from around the world. The park is also endowed with a wide variety of habitats and diverse fauna that includes 479 species of birds.

Among the most important and threatened habitats in Kasanka are wet and dry evergreen forests, known locally as *mushitu* and *mateshe*, respectively. Both occur patchily in Kasanka but are disproportionately important due to the unique plant species they are made up of and the wildlife they support. The seasonal bat colony, for example, is totally reliant upon the *mushitu* forest for their roosting area, while the largest intact *mateshe* forest at Bufumu is home to Böhm's Bee-eater, Purple-throated Cuckooshrike, Narina Trogon, African Broadbill, and breeding African Pitta. Also in the Bufumu forest is Kasanka's Big Tree, an enormous wooden banana (*Entandrophragma delevoiyi*) standing 65 metres tall. The Big Tree is thought to be the tallest known tree in Zambia.

The main threat facing these habitats is fire. Almost all fires in and around the park are set by local community members or poachers, for whom burning is traditionally practised in the driest months between August and October. To safeguard the remaining fragments of *mushitu* and *mateshe*, and to mitigate the impact of widespread burning in the dominant miombo woodlands, KTL implements a fire management plan that includes a number of fire exclusion zones and mosaic early burning.

KTL has been very fortunate to receive a grant of £7,500 from the African Bird Club in 2019 that has contributed towards the protection and mapping of the threatened *mushitu* and *mateshe* evergreen forests in and around Kasanka. The grant has been used to maintain a network of some 35 km of firebreaks around the bat forest and around Bufumu forest. The firebreaks are cut by a team of local contractors over a period of 4 months from May to August. During the same period another team is employed to conduct early burning elsewhere in the park. Early burning is started in June, before the miombo woodlands have completely dried, leaving a mosaic of burned and unburned habitat that limits the spread of more damaging fires later in the dry season.

With the financial support of the World Land Trust, KTL is establishing three Community Forest Management Areas (CFMAs) in the park's periphery that will cover some 21,000 hectares. The primary reason for this is to protect Kasanka from encroachment by commercial farmers and cattle ranchers that are threatening the ecological integrity of the park. Little is known about remaining

patches of *mateshe* forest in these areas. Using satellite imagery, KTL has attempted to identify areas of *mateshe* in the new CFMAs. Possible *mateshe* forests will be confirmed by ground observations and protection strategies will be developed in partnership with local communities in 2020. These may include firebreaks in conjunction with beekeeping, to diversify community livelihoods and promote better environmental stewardship by discouraging burning and deforestation. It is hoped that over time, sensitive evergreen habitats will be allowed to recover from years of burning and that wildlife can recolonise areas around Kasanka, providing additional benefits to local communities.