**Imagine Thirty 17 to 19-Year-Old Youths** in a large school bus arriving at the top of the Zambezi Valley escarpment. Spread before them is a wide rather flat valley filled with trees, including large baobab trees towering above the thick bush. If the valley isn’t covered in haze they can see the mountains of the escarpment on the other side in Zambia. The Zambezi River is not visible at this point but the excitement grows as the youth peer into the wilderness. Most of them have never seen the river or any area that is relatively untouched by humans. Welcome to Rifa Camp.

Over 1200 students per year from disadvantaged schools use the camp (named for the Rifa River here) as their primary field experience. They come mainly from the northern and central part of the country, are often from backgrounds that have become distanced or alienated from indigenous knowledge of natural resources and usually come from schools where there is little if any practical field study.

The base funding for Rifa is provided by the Zimbabwe Hunting Association (ZHA). There are no fees, all resource persons being volunteers, including members ZHA. But Rifa now finds itself in the situation where operating costs are exceeding levels of support from the ZHA due to a decrease in income from citizen hunting. Contributions therefore are needed from private industry to continue running Rifa.

“Once again we thank you and your SCI Houston Chapter for your generous donations …” – P. E. Evans, Secretary, Zimbabwe Hunters Association

By supporting Rifa **HGC-SCI First for Hunters** joins other SCI Chapters as well as companies and organizations like Nissan, the Australian Direst Aid Program, Australian Volunteers International and The Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives Program enabling young Zimbabweans to continue to enjoy and benefit from the programs offered at Rifa. At Rifa much of the learning is done co-operatively in real life situations. Issues like poaching, land and water use...
become interactive processes of learning and planning together at times followed by action taking to bring about change. The teacher/resource person is an active mediator of knowledge and values with students. The hunter plays the same role often coupled with a charismatic personality that helps win groups of learners over to appreciate the wilderness. The scout provides links to indigenous culture and language, which many school children readily identify with.

But one of the most important pieces of the puzzle lies in providing good education in managing the environment (including sustainable development). This is the magnetism provided by Rifa. Located about 4 km upstream of the bridge between Zambia and Zimbabwe at Chirundu; adjacent to the Hurungwe Safari Area of Zimbabwe National Parks, Rifa is situated on the Zambezi flood plain offering students a unique environment that ranges from wetland to riverine to mopane woodland, inspiring with its landscapes and magnificent wildlife and habitats. The diversity of these is amazing and within walking distance of camp. Students meander dry riverbeds, hoping to meet buffalo, while shaded by the riverine trees full of the 100 or so species of birds. These mopane woodlands, baobab and paper bark add to the spectacle and show amazing survival tactics with their stark appearance in winter and green Eden look in the rainy season. Evidence of rifting is seen in the Zambezi basin with its faults, rocks, hot springs and horsts as well as river processes such as cliff erosion and channels and sandbars. Pans arising from dry depressions hold rain, creating pools for migratory birds, crocodiles and even hippo. Wildlife included the Big Five until poaching eliminated the black rhino, but impala and waterbuck still browse beside elephant while painted hunting dogs and lion stalk their prey. And all the while the ever-busy termites breathe life into the bush.

All this and stunning sunsets over the river and an outstanding wilderness make the place one of power, reconnecting children with the real world. Rifa as a venue shapes people's appreciation of wild places, and without the help of HGC-SCI First for Hunters and other organizations it wouldn’t happen.

**HISTORY**

Rifa was set up as a tented conservation camp in 1982, at which time ZHA in agreement with National Parks and Wildlife Management (NPWM) determined to use profits from the administration of citizen hunting in Zimbabwe Safari Areas for the conservation education of youth. It was decided by all involved that senior youth and educators would be the target group, especially those from rural and/or disadvantaged schools. The program would provide field studies and enrichment for the British Advanced Level Biology and Geography, which is still used in Zimbabwe.
NPWM was quite happy to establish this environmental/conservation education camp and make use of its non-hunting buffer zone on the Zambezi. NPW does not involve itself directly with environmental education, but since Independence in 1980 there has been a good relationship between NPW and several Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) to use the facilities of the protected areas for education activities that fulfill common aims of NPW and the NGOs.

**IMPORTANCE OF RIFA EDUCATION TO THE FUTURE OF THE ZAMBEZI RIVER SYSTEM**

The camp itself is on the edge of large tracts of land that have been set aside by the government as wilderness/protected areas along the Zambezi. This is quite different from the agricultural lands one sees across the river in Zambia. In addition to its biodiversity the area is geographically interesting. The valley at this point has both large alluvial deposits as well as outcroppings of other sedimentary rock. Fossil ferns may be found nearby, as well as archeological remains of villages that go back hundreds of years. There is a series of hot springs next to the camp, which is studied as one of the wetland areas along with an oxbow formed after the building of Kariba dam, several pans or vernal pools, dry tributaries and the Zambezi itself. These water bodies around Rifa provide the diverse study that Rifa has offered over the years. Vegetation varies from colonizers on the new sandbank deposits to mopane woodland to riparian.

There are eleven shared watercourse systems in the southern African region. The Zambezi River system is the largest with eight riparian states having legitimate claims on its water resources. The Zambezi Action Plan (ZACPLAN) is one result of an acknowledgement of the need for successful cooperation of the riparian states in maintaining environmentally sustainable and equitable utilization of the river’s resources. This SADC region action plan has acknowledged the importance of education and awareness building for the sustainable development and management of the Zambezi Basin. It is based on an acknowledgement that the level of understanding of ecological issues (especially ecological effects of development in the Basin) is generally weak throughout the Basin, including the population as a whole, politicians, decision-makers/planners, developers and special interest groups.

**THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE**

Before Rifa there was very little in the way of wetland or biodiversity education in Zimbabwe, especially using local examples. Today biodiversity education has become a focal point of the Rifa “A” level program, especially for students of biology. The sustainable futures of diverse ecosystems, and to some extent species, are issues for which the program administration has spent much time developing resources, and begun an outreach effort. Rifa has provided the only education program in Zimbabwe for the A level student that involves the Zambezi Valley wetlands, impacts on wetlands, biodiversity and related issues.

Rifa is built with basic camping facilities, including dormitories for 30 students plus staff to a maximum of 45. Located on the edge of the old river terrace, the camp has views over what once
was a channel and island of the Zambezi. Living accommodation is very basic but does include some amenities like flush toilets and electricity.

Students are expected to do their own cooking and cleaning up. There are three classrooms that house a library, laboratory and museum. These facilities give students an extensive range of resources. It is very tempting to students from disadvantaged schools to spend long evenings in the library as well as taking advantage of looking through microscopes at life from pans or impala stomach contents. All this indoor work is of course fitted into the quiet hours of mid-day when the heat and intense sun send students and staff under the trees.

Teacher education, always a part of the objectives of the program, is accomplished by involving classroom teachers in teacher/lecturer weekend camps. Proactive outreach in 1996 brought the first group of students from a teacher-training college, during their term time and as a part of their course. Continued outreach with the college and its staff continues to bring a group of student teachers back to Rifa yearly.

“At RIFA camp I enjoyed seeing the Zambezi River for the first time in my life. I also saw Zambians in canoes in the great river. Thank you for sponsoring us.” – Linda Crava, Grade 5, Karl Pisce Primary School

The background of student teachers is similar to the less advantaged students. The student teachers from the middle level training college are predominately basic level graduates who will teach only up to basic level rather than advanced level biology. Many have studied general science in rural schools with minimal experiential or hands-on learning. As with many other students attending Rifa, the student teachers have little or no experience with learning activities that go beyond “chalk and talk” or “cook-book” experiments.

The conservation ethic of the volunteers was, like others globally, quite protectionist until the early 1990's with the advent of the CAMPFIRE program. Involvement of some ZHA members in the CAMPFIRE program, combined with increased involvement by educators, brought the issues of community management and sustainable use into the program.

Rifa Conservation Camp is a twenty-seven year old case study of teaching for biodiversity and Zambezi River Valley conservation, providing extra-curricular activities directly related to the objectives of some formal education courses, especially Advanced Level Biology and Geography, and teacher college syllabi. These objectives are coupled with the broader environmental education aims of the ZHA.

When the camp was set up the Education Program of ZHA had two goals. One was to help educate Zimbabwe youth to become citizens who could manage natural resources and facilitate sustainability of the Zambezi Basin Ecosystems, especially wetland varieties. This is in accord with the National Biodiversity Strategies being developed in Zambezi-bordering countries, all of who have signed the Convention on Biological Diversity.
The second was to build awareness and love of the natural environment, especially the Zambezi Valley, thus sustaining its ecosystems by providing an educational experience of diverse nature, in the field, to advanced level students, teachers and student teachers.

**THE FUTURE OF RIFA**

With the increased commercialization of National Parks in Zimbabwe, the future of NGO backed education within or adjacent to state lands is precarious. Free access to National Protected areas, use of personnel as guides, and siting of camps within NPW lands is under threat of being changed to a user pay system from a free access system. Though NPW have verbally agreed to allow student groups to walk through and use the non-hunting buffer areas for field study there is potential for conflicting interests with commercial use by NPW of the same areas for foreign clients.

Finances to run the program and maintain infrastructure of the Environmental Education (EE) centers and camps that came indirectly from Parks via ZHA profits from the administration of citizen hunting in NPW lands is disappearing, and NPW has no plan ensuring financial funds or other support to education programs such as Rifa.

Whereas until now the organization did not need to look for outside donors, they will now enter the competition for funds or have to become more user funded. Preliminary study by ZHA shows no prospect of becoming financially self-sufficient from school fees alone.

“I enjoyed the walks and I enjoyed seeing one of the biggest baobab trees. I also enjoyed the night sounds.” – Natasha Kafinya, Grade 5, Karl Pisc Primary School

That’s the bad news. The good news is that loose arrangements between NPW and organizations in charge of EE programs, such as ZHA, will be formalized.

Another hope for the future lies in the forth-coming national biodiversity strategy. The education program has come to the attention of the consultants facilitating the national strategy workshops ensuring the inclusion of the Rifa education program at the workshop. The national strategy team has been very impressed with the education for biodiversity that has been developing at Rifa and the outreach to the Ministry of Education as well as involvement with international conventions. If Rifa can be directly included as a center for biodiversity education, especially as a field center for student research and learning, the process of finding financial support may be easier as it will have the backing of two ministries - Environment and Tourism, and Education.

**CONCLUSION**

The education program at Rifa is a flexible, ever-changing response to the needs of both students attending the camp, and national or global trends in environmental education. The focus is on biodiversity sustainable use, Zambezi wetland and freshwater ecosystems, and the impact of humans on the past, present and future of the Zambezi River Valley.

Teaching methods that give opportunity for participants to develop skills and strategies for dealing with controversial issues are gradually being introduced.

The hope for the future of the Zambezi Valley lies with the youth who sit with Rifa volunteers on the shores of the river. With cooperation of the government, user groups and support groups
Rifa will continue to provide its unique education for the future of the Zambezi ecosystems and sustainable national natural resources.

**Editor’s Note:** The preceding column with made possible with data and information collected from www.cse2000.org, first-hand reports from SCI volunteers instrumental in delivering the donated funds as well as Rifa students and teachers themselves. Following is the latest report from Rifa, just received as this edition of Lions’ Pride was being completed.

From: zha@mweb.co.zw  
To: gvkwtx@aol.com  
CC: rdeitz@gvtechsolutions.com  
Sent: 12/2/2009 8:00:27 A.M. Central Standard Time  
Subj: Rifa Conservation Education Camp

Dear Mr. Waldron,

I hope you are keeping well.  
This is just to let you know the Houston Chapter camp at Rifa went off very well. Mr. Winhall, our new Camp Manager, was in charge of this camp and walked the children into camp with the help of our National Parks Scout and our Education Officer.  
As I mentioned above, we have employed a new Camp Manager who is a qualified Professional Hunter and Guide. He is very good with the youngsters as is his wife who is also very experienced in the bush.  
At this stage I have made arrangements for Mr. Ant Williams to hand carry the envelopes to Mr. Deitz at the SCI Convention. I will email you as soon as the plans all fall firmly into place and I know the letters are definitely on their way to you.  
I will be contacting you again shortly.

Kind regards  
Trish  
for Zimbabwe Hunters Association  
P. O Box HG 548 Highlands Harare.  
16 Walter Hill Avenue Eastlea Harare

Phone 04 704977/8 or 707306  
Cell: 0912 329434  
Trish Evans  
for Zimbabwe Hunters Association  
P. O Box HG 548 Highlands Harare.  
16 Walter Hill Avenue Eastlea Harare

Phone 04 704977/8  
Cell: 0912 329434

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