

# FOREWORD

It was in 1972 when I was part of a team from Wye College who explored the northern hills of the Nyika National Park. Major Ian Gordon, then Park Manager gave valuable support and a substantial report was produced. It was largely consequential to this expedition that the first Biosearch team formed an excellent professional expedition in March 1997. Subsequently Biosearch has brought further teams of undergraduates and professionals to investigate the



**Figure 1** Chipome Valley 1972

more remote parts of the park. This is the ninth Biosearch expedition. We have reported on poaching and large mammal activity and progressively produced data on other animal and plant species, building up an important inventory of species, illustrating the unique nature of the Park and the value of its protection. It is interesting to reflect on what has changed in the Park over the past thirty years. The old village sites remain clearly identifiable, though the homes with their beautiful artwork have gone. The small

village communities who hunted the game left around 1978 but their impact has been more than replaced by illegal poaching. The populations of large mammal species have suffered. Hartebeest, Cheetah and Hunting dogs all appear to have vanished since the studies by Professor Lemon in 1964. However the topography and location of this extensive 3,142 square kilometres of rugged park continue to provide some barrier to over-exploitation.

To most casual observers the park appears and remains intact and as attractive as ever. There is strong political support for its protection but a lack of resources. Above all, there are keen and committed people on the ground to support Nyika in many different ways; from providing tourist facilities on the plateau to active protection by the forestry workers and the scouts in the bush. Biosearch has provided fit and focused people to investigate some of the more remote parts of the park, which remain substantially devoid of visitors from year to year. It is generally held that an increase in visitor activity is a deterrent for illegal intrusion, yet talk of heavy poaching is bound to be a deterrent to visitors. There is a well-established network of tracks on the central plateau but it is important to emphasise that vehicle intrusion off this system will provide effectively permanent damage to the vegetation. To enjoy the best of Nyika (landscape, birds and flowers) walking is recommended. This will have the added benefit of employment for parks staff and indirectly patrolling of the territory.

One big change over the years – and this directly impacts on the taking of teams into the wilderness areas – is the increased focus on safety. Those who know the area well will concur with the fact that getting lost and possible consequent dehydration (particularly in the far north) is a major issue. The need to have highly qualified leadership, supported by the excellent scouts, has been a



**Figure 2** On the plateau 1972

development that did not concern us in 1972, when we wandered freely in the northern hills, taking advice from villagers from time to time. The use of a local guide has been an essential part of expeditioning for generations but now people need qualifications issued in London to work in the African bush! Ease of exit in the event of an emergency was part of the thinking when choosing a base camp in 2005; north of Lake Kaulime and towards the western escarpment. The steep, dirt road that was built in 1972 during the Wye College Expedition period enables easier access of some areas. That still left us to tackle the steep escarpment, where several random squares were surveyed by the team.



**Figure 3** Elephants in 2005

Our expedition area was relatively well endowed with game. This year we had our first direct encounters with two small herds of elephants:

*"On foot in remote African bush, we happened upon the small herd, sleepy in the early morning sunlight, at first unaware of our excited but silent presence. We watched the slow dawning of unusual smells on the still air, then the careful and steady progression to the refuge of the forest patch into which they melted and were gone."*

Our expedition base camp was sheltered in a valley at the edge of the western escarpment. The very steep escarpments, both to the north, where we have habitually operated, and to the west, have very difficult terrain and unfortunately we did suffer two sprain injuries this year. The poachers clearly encamp on the flatter areas on the rivers and these areas are also easier for our teams. However, to access the plateau ridge between Mpanda and Kawozya and the main central plateau, the escarpment must be climbed by the best routes, along which signs of poaching have been readily identified.

The focus of patrolling on the central plateau, whilst very understandable with the limited resources available, is planned to be a forerunner for more comprehensive coverage in the more difficult areas beyond. With the unhappy social consequences of the extension of the park in 1976, it seems only right that these areas become fully protected as soon as possible. The Nyika National Park should be a large and effective conservation area for the benefit of all - and not least those who were asked to move to achieve this objective. The current Law enforcement action plan (2005) is very welcome and we look forward to seeing it succeed. Protection of the more ambitious plan to set up a Trans-Frontier Conservation Area in association with Zambia will need huge manpower resources and financial support far beyond anything that has been forthcoming to date. Success and momentum with conserving the flora and fauna of the Nyika National Park might well create the confidence to take this ambitious plan a little further.

The 2005 team is very grateful for the support given to them by Leonard Sefu, Director of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife and in particular the provision by Chiza Manda of excellent staff to make the project possible. We have listed in this report, for the record, those who have helped with our expeditions since our reconnaissance in 1996. They have all made a great contribution and we have appreciated the opportunity to learn from them and involve them in the scientific studies, which I believe they have found very valuable.

*Peter Overton*