

Dimbangombe: Success in Africa.

Story and photos by Allan Savory.

The Dimbangombe Ranch in Zimbabwe is the oldest, most advanced holistic management learning/demonstration ranch in the world. This is where the Africa Centre for Holistic Management runs its College of Agriculture, Wildlife and Conservation Management, training and assisting thousands of impoverished people alongside large populations of Africa's wildlife.

Recently, after hearing about Dimbangombe at a major Water Summit conference, Zimbabwe's new minister of Water Development, Sam Nkomo, came to see it for himself. At the summit, he witnessed scientists and politicians, united as never before, agreeing that water is the lifeblood of the nation, that wells are going dry, that dams are filling with silt, and that no local or foreign experts know what to do. Sam now sat in the African bush with me, drinking tea on the edge of a clear pool covered with flowering water lilies. In the distance, a herd of elephant, having slaked their thirst and coated their hides with fresh mud to ward off insects, wandered away across the grassland toward the forest.

Sharing a dented tin mug and joining us for tea were two Ndebele cattlemen invited to sit with the minister. They work on the ranch and are in charge of the cattle herd that is the single most-important tool used to manage the wildlife habitat and health of the river and underground water supplies. From his fellow tribesmen, Sam heard that this pool was new, having only appeared in the upper river catchment in the last two years. They told him water had come and stayed through the dry season higher up in the river system than it had ever been known before.

"What witchcraft is this?" asked the minister. "You must have had a lot more rain because how else can water appear where it has not existed in a hundred years?"

There had been no more rain. Rather than give a long scientific explanation, I enjoyed my tea, while two barely literate old herders talked to the minister and his permanent secretary in their own language. They explained how we had increased the cattle and goat numbers 400 percent, and how they ran them in one herd, constantly moving to a

plan to fit the wildlife needs, grass needs and more. They told him they did this so the hooves, dung and urine would cause more plants to grow, covering more soil; how more water now soaked into and stayed in the soil; how the boreholes were now more reliable; and the river is now flowing longer in the year and water is arising higher than they have known up the river drainage, where we were sitting.

As a result of that simple demonstration of what is possible using common sense and good science, the minister, who had to get on to meet the president of Zambia, left his permanent secretary behind to start planning a partnership between the Africa Centre and government to restore all rivers in the nation so that cities, industry and agriculture can look to a brighter future. We are now drafting a concept paper to jointly present to American, or other government development agencies, to begin training people in government agencies and eight universities and colleges. The goal is exciting—to stop biodiversity loss and land degradation so that the nation can begin restoring the health of all its rivers running through forest reserves, communal pastoral lands, ranches, national parks and farms because the watersheds of the rivers involve all land uses.

I have always been passionate about Africa's wildlife and people. Our cattle/goat herd is run without fencing that is so damaging to wildlife, which needs to move freely. The livestock are herded daily to a carefully managed grazing plan that integrates their moves with the sable antelope, buffalo, elephant, waterbuck, kudu, bushbuck and zebra. And because we protect and need the predators—lions, cheetahs, leopards, wild dogs and hyenas—the management herd sleeps securely at night in portable lion-proof corrals sur-



The Dimbangombe River has been restored by livestock on holistic planned grazing over its watershed and along its banks. Elephants now drink in new pools a mile above their traditional water hole, due to a healthier river system.

rounded by the herders with their cooking fires.

Even though the portable lion-proof corrals were developed for protection, we found by accident that we had developed a powerful soil-restoration and crop-production tool. Where the corrals are placed for about five nights on the worst of gullies—bare-capped eroding soil or other problem areas—and the animals trample the ground to death and cover it with dung and urine, the recovery is amazing. And where we have trained local starving people to place the overnight corrals on their crop fields, they have achieved levels

of corn production on average threefold, some fivefold, higher than control fields using traditional practices.

Suddenly our learning/demonstration site is taking on greater significance than we anticipated. Because of this, we hope we can serve many nations. ■

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Bare, hard eroding ground for 30 years, over a foot of soil loss at base of trees. This land was subjected to extremely high impact from cattle spending the night on it in 2007. Subsequently, it has been only subjected to holistic planned grazing and wildlife use and no range management, reseeding or any other practice.



Same land in 2009 (note bent-over lower branch of tree on the left). Erosion has stopped. Vastly more feed and cover for wildlife has grown and more water and carbon are being absorbed into healthy soil. Using holistic management, amazing recovery takes place.