



Okavango fishermen use dugout canoes on still water. Their activities are disturbed by tourist motorboats, which cause waves on the river. Photo: Greenwich photography / flickr

Delta fish dispute

Tourism in the Okavango has been great for the economy – but not for local fishermen who make their living on the river. **Mandy Rossouw** reports

Increased tourism may help Botswana weather the storm brought on by the global financial crisis, but plans to increase the number of tourists going to the Okavango Delta will be met with fierce resistance from local people who live and work along the river's banks.

In Samochima, a village close to the northeastern border of Botswana, fishermen say the burgeoning tourism industry – which brings many visitors straight to the Okavango – needs far better regulation.

"There should not be people coming here as if the floodgates are open; they must regulate who comes here and how they behave while they are here," Soasiko Njwaki, the chairperson of the local fishermen's association, said recently at a public meeting attended by chiefs in the area. The association has a membership of 400 fishermen and was founded last year when increased tourism began to have a negative effect on the people's livelihoods.

Njwaki said that tourists who went to the area paid "a lot of money" to tour operators and therefore felt that they "can do what they want".

"We, as people living here, are conscious of the ecology and environment, but the tourists come here with boats and mess with our environment," he said.

The motorboats used by the industry disturb the fishing communities on the river.

"We are here with our dugout boats [canoes made from the trunk of a tree] and they come with motorboats, which cause waves in the river."

There are also concerns that tourists who use houseboats do not have proper waste disposal and therefore deposit human waste into the river, polluting the water downstream.

According to Njwaki, discussions with the department of water affairs have come to naught. He said initiatives by government to encourage more visitors to the area – such as popular fishing competitions – ruin

the pickings for local fishermen.

"They throw back the small fish that they catch during the competition and then when we catch them, they still have hooks in them, which are poisonous because they were in the fish's flesh for so long."

The fishermen's association has had some small victories, such as outlawing the use of mosquito nets to catch small fish. Some women use locally produced baskets that enable them to catch small fish, but these are allowed because they use the fish only to feed their families.

Local fishermen earn on average 1750 pula (about R2000) a month from their activities and, with funding from the United Nations Development Programme, they have acquired refrigerators to keep the fish fresh until weekly market days, when people from the area and from Namibia go to buy fish, such as bream.

About 18% of households consume half of the fish they get from the river; the rest is sold at the market.

How does SA's neighbour fare?

Q&A with Mpho Dibeela, editor of Botswana Guardian, on the country's stance on key issues



Mpho Dibeela

What, in your view, are the biggest obstacles that Botswana faces today?

Failure to diversify the economy away from an over-reliance on diamond revenue and the mineral sector has remained a serious problem. An example is the recent economic meltdown where government revenue was severely hit because of the low demand for diamonds, the result being that Botswana had to borrow from the African Development Bank to fund part of its budget. Just this week the government signed another loan agreement of \$186-million with the World Bank to fund its integrated transport project. The other challenges are in the areas of fighting and containing the HIV/Aids scourge, improving delivery among public sector employees and fighting the rising scourge of crime and road carnage.

Has the government done well in entrenching democracy?

There has been stagnation in this area with new democratic countries like South Africa that seem to be doing better than Botswana. For example, the provision for direct election of the state president is something the ruling party is yet to embrace. The state continues to have specially elected MPs who are nominated by the ruling party and endorsed by it – with no member to date (43 years into democracy) having come from the opposition parties. The democratic process of electing leaders is compromised in this aspect. The government is unyielding in exploring the value of funding political parties. This means that only those with resources are bound to do well. And the incumbent government always has an edge over others because the president and his vice-president use state transport to reach every corner of the country to campaign for the elections.

What is the situation today regarding press freedom in the country?

This is stifled particularly with the recent promulgation of the Media Practitioners Act, which gives the minister full political control of the

press in that she has the power to appoint and dissolve some of the committees. This also comes at the time when the Press Council of Botswana has been, to a great extent, effective in handling queries from the public about the media. What the press agitated for was a statutory recognition of the Press Council, not the creation of a new monster meant to control. However, publishers of private newspapers and owners of private radio stations are challenging the Act in court for, among other reasons, going against the letter and spirit of the Constitution that protects the freedom of expression.

How do you view the recent extrajudicial killings, where several people were murdered under mysterious circumstances? Does it spell danger for the future?

This new phenomenon is very worrying. The laws of the country are clear – that one is innocent until proved guilty. This, therefore, means that suspects are not given that benefit. It is unfortunate that no arrests and prosecution of those behind these extrajudicial killings have been made. Government has not come out strongly to condemn this – provoking the anger of the Law Society of Botswana, which has since petitioned the state president, calling for action.

Botswana's reputation for good governance is so entrenched that a recent African Union observer team declared this year's elections as free and fair even before the elections took place. What do you make of that?

That was an unnecessary over-excitement because there is no way such a pronouncement can be made before the full process is completed. To a great extent, however, the elections were free and fair, just as all those before them.

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