

Waters of Life: Stories from Elephant Marsh

A photo essay by Davies Ezra Chogawana

The Elephant Marsh is a large floodplain wetland located in the districts of Chikwawa and Nsanje in southern Malawi, South Eastern part of Africa. Covering an average area of approximately 60,000 ha, the marsh varies considerably in extent due to seasonal fluctuations in rainfall and river discharge. It forms part of the Lower Shire River floodplain ecosystem and is characterized predominantly by rooted swamp vegetation interspersed with grassy margins. The wetland comprises two main zones: the northern section, which consists largely of semi-permanent marshland, and the southern section, which contains numerous islands and areas of floating vegetation.

The marsh supports rich biodiversity, productive fisheries, agricultural activities, and a range of cultural and livelihood values for surrounding communities. In August 2024, during a field mission examining opportunities for Malawi's blue economy, I visited the southern section of the Elephant Marsh to assess its ecological and socioeconomic significance. A boat journey through the marsh's waterways provided an opportunity to observe the dynamic interactions between local communities, economic activities, and the wetland ecosystem

This series of photos illustrates the marsh's beauty and ecological value, from bird life to canoe-based transportation and rice farming. Yet, it also confronts pressing threats: unsustainable fishing, encroaching agriculture, brick burning, and human-wildlife conflict. Together, the images and narrative reflect the complex interplay of society, ecology, and economy. Even though there is ongoing environmental degradation, the Marsh is still a sanctuary and a source of livelihoods.



*Elephant Marsh is one of the few wetlands that have a thriving population of Hippos (*Hippopotamus amphibius*), a potential source of tourism income for the Marsh.*



Bird populations are thriving at Elephant Marsh. The availability of grasses and water provide a quality habitat to over 110 bird species. Ploceus xanthops (African Golden Weaver) bird nest's, such as those pictured, are a common sight, reflecting the marsh's importance as a breeding ground for avian populations.



Rice cultivation at Elephant Marsh is not only for food security but also for income.



The hydrological regime of the wetlands is determined by the Shire River which runs across it. Canoes are the most common mode of transport in the wetlands.



Unsustainable fishing practices, such as this weir fish trap, are a threat to wetland fisheries in Elephant Marsh. A barrier of plastics and reeds prevent fish from passing through to the other side. This creates an enclosure with an unfavourable, warmer micro-environment, prompting fish to move away from the barrier. In attempting to escape, most of the fish (including juveniles) and other aquatic species moving through the waterway are intercepted and funnelled into a trap strategically positioned along the enclosure. This non-selective fishing method captures a large proportion of the fish population and can lead to depletion of fish stocks, and the unintended capture of non-target aquatic species, thereby threatening the ecological sustainability of the wetland ecosystem.



Population growth and increasing demand for farmland are pushing cultivation closer to riverbanks. The picture shows maize farmers cultivating on edges of river bank. This encroachment accelerates soil erosion and sedimentation, degrades fish breeding habitats, and can introduce agrochemicals into waterways, increasing the risk of eutrophication. It also weakens riverbanks, making them more prone to collapse which alters natural water flows.



Unsustainable land uses have emerged, driven by poverty. Here, open redbrick burning has degraded the buffer zone of the marsh. Poverty-driven land use pressures have led to widespread brick making in the marsh's buffer zone. Soil is excavated from wetland areas to mould bricks for building houses, leaving pits that disrupt natural hydrology, while trees are felled for fuelwood to fire the bricks. These practices degrade wetland soils, vegetation, and ecosystem functions.



*The ever-increasing land pressure has forced farmers to rice farmers to cultivate closer to the river banks, in areas which are habitats for the Nile crocodile (*Crocodylus niloticus*), resulting in human wildlife conflict.*



Livestock grazing in Elephant Marsh. Elephant Marsh provides vital grazing land for livestock, supporting one of the main livelihood activities in surrounding communities. With high livestock populations in nearby districts, the marsh serves as an important source of pasture, underpinning local food security and household incomes.



Elephant Marsh provides grass that supports local livelihoods through thatching, broom making, and income generation. Many nearby households rely on marsh grass for roofing their houses, while others harvest and sell it as a source of cash income. When managed sustainably, grass harvesting is a renewable wetland enterprise that supports communities while maintaining the marsh's ecological integrity.



Cruising through Elephant Marsh is both thrilling and therapeutic. A boat journey along the Shire River can take visitors from Elephant Marsh to Ndinde Marsh and onward to Malawi's border with Mozambique. Surrounded by rich biodiversity and cooled by the river breeze, the experience offers a unique and relaxing way to appreciate the beauty of this remarkable wetland landscape.
