



# A PASSION FOR WATER

E4K founder John Lucas travels to water-rich Zambia to highlight the importance of Africa's water resources, but he gets more than he bargained for, including an up-and-down relationship with a little Series II.

JOHN LUCAS



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Series II rattled along the night road, passed by trucks with no lights and dodging tree branches in the way.

### **The breakdown ...**

We both looked distraught at the Series II with its bonnet open and steam wallowing out. A local shop owner provided some sanctuary as the Land Rover cooled down. Our clutch had broken, and now we were looking for Paul in Serenje, Zambia. Apparently, he was the man with a plan.

We eventually find him through a hole in a wall, which opens into a field of vehicle scraps. For 100 kwacha, he got us on the road again. We drove north to Lake Bangweulu, Zambia. But as the deep valleys and forests gave way to cultivated lands, the Series II acted up again.

The village elders sat on their stumps, probably thinking 'stupid *mzungus* for driving a Series II through East Africa'. Drop by drop, we added water to our vehicle's radiator and she sprung back to life. I couldn't help but notice that water is the building block to all forms of life and yet we love to waste it.

The Series II was struggling to reach 40km/h and we felt the clutch cable giving way. Near Sundus restaurant, the Series II stopped ▶

**M**y long-time friend, fellow Zambian conservationist and expedition partner Lloyd had sent me a reminder of a promise made. The email invited me to spend a month in Zambia, following the waterways of Africa on a conservation research mission. I responded with a resounding 'Yes' and before I knew it, I was on a plane to Zambia.

In 2011, Lloyd and I completed our B-Tech degree in conservation management at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). We not only shared a passion for Africa, but for her waterways as well. Lloyd

returned to Zambia in 2012 to work for African Parks.

From the airport, we made our way through the outskirts of Lusaka, down to Chirundu and to the Gwabi River Lodge, owned and managed by Lloyd's family. Lloyd's dad, Tony, humorously watched two conservationists attempting to rebuild the old blue Land Rover Series II at his workshop.

Emptying out the content of this iconic vehicle filled a few boxes and trays on the workroom floor. Day and night, we tinkered and turned, engine in, engine out, forgetting

this, dropping that. The seats went missing and then the doors disappeared too.

We needed to clear our heads. We launched the boats on the mighty Zambezi River, spotting hippos and crocodiles along the way. I sat in awe of the volume of water before me. As a water conservationist in arid South Africa, I work in areas with limited water supply. Here, the river flows wild and free.

My thoughts were interrupted by a local on a *mokoro* (wooden canoe) speeding past us with only a tensioned fishing line in his hand and a big smile. I immediately knew:

tigerfish. We put the boat adrift and cast our lines in search of it.

Tigerfish are highly adapted predators with large teeth. Records document these fish catching birds in flight and attacking humans bathing in the river. The most famous of the tigerfish species is most definitely the goliath tigerfish (*Hydrocynus goliath*) – the largest on record reaching 70kg in weight.

### **The great northern road**

Back at the workshop, we resumed our work on the Landy. The final touches were added,

including an original Land Rover logo, and off we went. The road took us back through Chirundu and on towards Lusaka.

The little Series II fell into the madness of Lusaka, dwarfed by trucks and lost in a sea of pedestrians pushing anything and everything on homemade wheelbarrows. On one street corner, a man tried to sell us a pre-engraved gravestone at a 'special price'.

The day turned to night and night to morning. Our Garmin GPS no longer showed our estimated time of arrival in hours or minutes, but rather in days and weeks. The



## ABOUT JOHN LUCAS

John Lucas, an award-winning scientist and conservationist, is the founder of Explore4Knowledge (E4K) – an organisation that promotes education through adventure. Through scientific research projects and community-based educational workshops, ecoman John and his team of volunteers work on various projects promoting conservation on a grass roots level and supporting other NGOs and NPOs with resources where possible. Visit [www.explore4knowledge.com](http://www.explore4knowledge.com) for more information.

and went no further. We managed to make contact with the African Parks management.

As the Bangweulu Wetlands Land Cruiser pulled in, big raindrops started to fall and the heavens opened up. We loaded the Land Cruiser with all our expedition gear and, with bruised egos, we drove off towards the miombo woodlands with our beloved Series II vanishing in the rear-view mirror.

### Where water meets sky

We made our way across the forest and into the Bangweulu Wetlands. As we approached the wetlands, the forest abruptly stopped and all we could see was a vast isotropic expanse of green.

The single track took us deep into the wetlands to a point of no return. We parked

at the end of the road and walked the rest of the way to fetch a *mokoro* to transport our equipment to the research outpost.

Sitting on the roof, I tried to think of a way to capture this moment, yet all I could manage was to put down my camera and watch a black lechwe (*Kobus leche*) grazing. Bangweulu is truly like it's called, "where the water meets the sky".

The boats arrived, and we made our way across to Charl, who was busy counting confiscated fishing equipment. The country has implemented a three-month fishing ban and was two days away from reopening the wetlands.

This was done to determine population sizes and calculate yield within this abundant system. We walked out over the marsh

to observe a recently relocated shoebill (*Balaeniceps rex*), endemic to these wetlands.

This 15 000km<sup>2</sup> wetland system hosts over 400 species of bird and an estimated 75 000 black lechwe. However, despite being a 'Garden of Eden', about 57 000 metric tonnes of fish are caught annually by locals, resulting in a decline in the fishing stock.

### Tangible Tanganyika

We were told that the road to Sumbu Bay in Lake Tanganyika takes roughly 10-11 hours. We travelled north, crossing tributaries of the mighty Congo River, known as the river that swallows all other rivers.

Lake Tanganyika, an ocean in the heart of Africa, came into view. Fishermen caught the

warm afternoon breeze home on their dhow. But not all of them had the luxury of sails as they paddled across the fresh water ocean with their daily catch.

We hugged the shoreline of the Nsumbu National Park, passing crocodiles along the way including the local aquaculture industry where people are producing indigenous fish for local and export markets. Soon, we reached Inangu Peninsula where we cast anchor for the day.

The thunderstorm caught up with us, as bolts of lightning danced across the night sky and a curtain of water surrounded the thatch-roof boma. Fireside chats lean towards conservation issues in the area. Studies indicate that fishing vessels on the lake have increased from 50 000 to 100 000 within 15 years. Other lakes, like Lake Kariba,

lose up to two tonnes of tigerfish per year due to international fishing competitions.

### The road back home

From Lumangwe Falls, the roads were rough and the vehicle slipped along the muddy river once called a road. The Kalungwishi River bridge provided us with a moment to breathe and the local fishermen vanishing into the mist on their *mokoro* made us forget the road behind us.

We reached Ntumbachushi Falls, where the Tracks4Africa GPS map gave us a point of interest (POI) alert for the 'Land of Enormous Termite Hills'. This could have been the set for a Hollywood horror film with termite hills twice as wide as our vehicle and reaching 4-5m in height. Some of them were bigger than the homes people have built next to them.

We collected supplies from Mansa and headed to Kasanka National Park for the evening. There we met a team of Zawa (Zambia Wildlife Authority) scouts polishing their AK47 assault rifles, had a stand-off with an elephant bull on a two-track road

and found a large ancestral tree of great significance to the local villages.

The Kundalila Falls welcomed us with the rising sun as we viewed the vast woodland valley embracing the sunlight and the waterfalls forming an arch. I could not help but think of how long we could preserve this beauty. Will we lose catchment forests to charcoaling and deforestation, as in Ethiopia? Would greed for natural resources result in over-mining? Would urbanisation eventually engulf the river as the forest now does?

In my Defender 110 SWB, I took the road home from Johannesburg to Cape Town, reflecting on life in silence as I view the ever-changing landscapes our beautiful country had to offer.

The vast green woodlands and mighty rivers and waterfalls of Zambia are now but a distant memory as I drove through dry open expanses while listening to national water shortages on the radio and passing one dry riverbed after another. We live in an incredibly beautiful country, waiting for you to explore. Protect it. 🇿🇲