

don't fence me in

Whether designed to keep people or animals in or out, fences were long considered essential in conservation circles, especially in southern Africa. But new insights are indicating otherwise, and **Ian Michler** highlights a recent report that pulls together the latest research.



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WHEREVER THERE ARE concentrations of wild animals in southern and East Africa, game and veterinary fences stand as a stark reminder that they are one of the most contentious issues in wildlife management. They are highly visible and never inconsequential, and their presence – or absence – has become significant on both the social and the environmental fronts since human populations began expanding in these regions in the mid-1900s.

Two challenges in particular have arisen from the growing numbers of people: how to reduce their progressively destructive impact on the general environment; and how to curb the escalating level of human–animal conflict.

In the past, constructing a fence was the immediate and often most practical means of providing protection to either humans or animals, or both. It was achieved with varying degrees of forethought and enthusiasm, and was sometimes successful, sometimes spectacularly disastrous. In South Africa, the core priority is usually to put a physical boundary around private property and restrict access, so almost everything has been fenced in or out by private and State landowners. There is a lot more open land in Namibia and Botswana, but even there veterinary fences are prevalent, at the behest of the likes of the European Union and other beef-buying nations. Concerned about the containment of animal diseases, these trading partners include a demand for fencing in their contracts for beef. Further north, in countries like Kenya and Tanzania, the notion of physical boundaries is largely absent, but humans are increasingly taking advantage of this less restrictive environment.

Fortunately, most of today's fencing choices are made with more circumspection than

in the past, for which we can thank the substantial body of scientific and ecological work done by many individuals and organisations over the past few decades. Initially attention was focused on the horrors of veterinary fences, as shown by documentaries depicting tens of thousands of migrating wild animals dying against the wire strands, but over time the more subtle and longer-term impacts of barriers as a whole have been studied and recognised. We now understand that the effects of fencing are multidimensional, and that far more is at stake than the immediate concern that prompted it in the first place.

Much of this important work has recently been made available in an in-depth document, *Fencing Impacts*, put together by Ken

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Ferguson of the Mammal Research Institute at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, and John Hanks, a highly regarded consultant on ecological issues and a regular columnist for *Africa Geographic*. They have compiled 45 contributions on game and veterinary fences from a wide variety of scientists, ecologists and other experts, highlighting many of the social, environmental and economic impacts of fencing across Africa. 'We believe that this truly multidisciplinary effort will help to positively address some of the complex questions that have arisen with regard to "fencing matters" over the past few decades,' comment the editors in their introduction.

No matter how big the 'cage', fences restrict the movement patterns essential to most forms of wildlife.

Central to most of the new thinking is the concept of corridor conservation, as represented by Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs), a strategy not yet considered when many of the region's fences were first constructed. Working on the principles that migration (or at least mobility) is the key to survival for many species and that wildlife and ecosystems do not conform to international political boundaries, corridors envisage a landscape with fewer fences. Ferguson and Hanks's document refers specifically to the Great Limpopo and Kavango–Zambezi TFCAs, but other corridor initiatives are also mentioned.

Another theme apparent in *Fencing Impacts* is the importance of a comprehensive consultative process that involves all stakeholders. The suggestion is clear: conflicts over land use often considered to be irreconcilable are probably not as problematic as always thought, and as a result the need for a fence falls away.

This is an immensely informative document for anyone involved in ecology, conservation or ecotourism, who is likely to find the sections 'Fencing impacts on ecosystems and populations' and 'Land-use options and fencing strategies' of particular interest. Readers wishing to access it will find it at www.wcs-ahead.org/gltfca_grants/pdfs/ferguson_final_2010.pdf or www.wcs-ahead.org/gltfca_grants/grants.html **AG**

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