

Asilia

GENUINE SAFARIS | GENUINE DIFFERENCE

USANGU HISTORY AND IMPORTANT FUNCTIONS

USANGU WETLANDS, RUAHA NATIONAL PARK



History and Important Functions

In terms of grandeur and stature, Ruaha National Park is one of the largest National Parks in East Africa. It's a hub for wildlife, migrating bird species and a fundamental crossover zone where southern African and east African vegetation integrate, creating a unique overlap in biodiversity. However, the Ruaha ecosystem would not be what it is today without the presence and function of the Usangu Wetland.

The intricate waterways of the Usangu, filtered through deep rock and stone of the highlands, feed mostly into the Great and Little Ruaha rivers, making their way into the mighty Rufiji River system in the Selous Game Reserve. Thousands of kilometres of pristine wilderness rely on the contributions of this water source, making the Usangu Wetland the essential beating heart of southern Tanzania's wildlife areas.

Not only has Usangu served as a lifeline for the volumes of wildlife populations that depend on its functionality, but it has also played a vital role in human history. Before national parks were gazetted and wetlands protected, the Usangu Wetland served as a desirable stopover for travellers and traders who passed through the continent with hordes of goods to be shipped from the coast of Tanzania.

As Tanzania changed hands from German to British rule, Ruaha continued in its role as a hunter's playground where large populations of roan and sable, lion and elephant were slowly depleted. It was only in 1964, three years after Tanzania gained independence from British rule, that Ruaha National Park was gazetted. Sadly, Usangu was still not recognised, and the hunting continued.

However, uncontrolled hunting was not the only ill wind blowing across the vast wetland. In 1993, the Great Ruaha River ran dry for the first time during the dry months. For as far as history can reflect, the Great Ruaha River flowed year-round, providing the much-needed flow of water for hundreds of ecosystems to thrive, as well as small local farms. The change was a result of a 3,000 hectare rice farm that was established upstream, adjacent to the Usangu Wetland. The enormous demand for water caused the wetland to falter and dry up, and it was unable to feed into the rivers. To this day, unmanaged water trenches allow the rice to thrive throughout the year, leaving the Usangu Wetland bare and the rivers parched, beginning a domino effect of events impacting both the ecosystem and local communities.

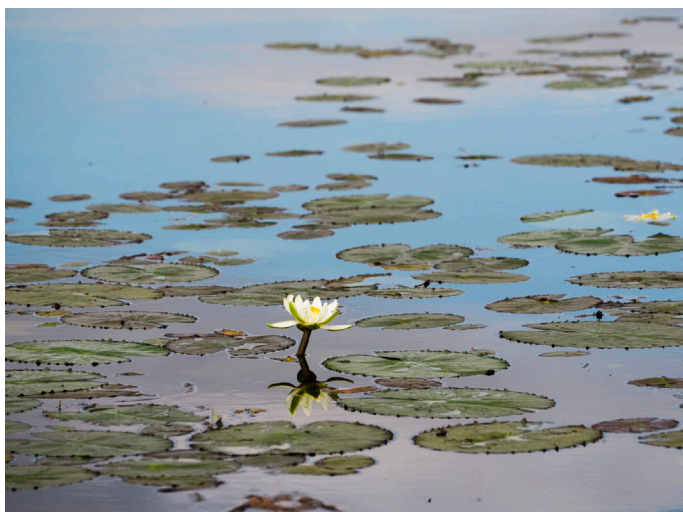


The Usangu Wetland is an essential feature to the Ruaha-Rungwa ecosystem, with major implications for ecosystems thousands of kilometres away from the wetland itself. Its features are unique and under the proper conditions and health, the biodiversity of species is undeniably a treasure trove. Herds of roan and sable roam the vast wetland, and wild dogs run wide along rivers. Hundreds of ostrich congregate in a way that is not often seen in other places in Africa. Thousands of migratory bird species pass through the wetland as well as unidentified amphibians, still waiting to be discovered.

While admirable efforts have been seen to start the much-needed protection of the Usangu Wetland, namely the relatively recent add on to Ruaha National Park protection in 2006, Usangu still suffers periods of drought through the dry months of the year. Mismanaged water plans feeding into vast rice farms leave the wetland depleted, and every year the waters return ever so slightly less than previous years. In 2007

an experiment was undertaken, closing just one of the main water trenches that diverts water from the Usangu wetland to the rice farms. For the first time since the Great Ruaha dried out in 1993, all the rivers flowed steadily year-round.

Engaging and supporting the communities around Usangu will be key in protecting the area and ensuring the success of any tourism project. The development of tourism creates employment opportunities for the surrounding communities, reducing the need for individuals to rely on illegal poaching for income. Additional community development actions include the sponsoring of schools and educational equipment to further improve the understanding of the environment and the importance of areas like the Usangu Wetland. Coupled with the ongoing census of wildlife numbers, a stay in Usangu contributes to the vitally important process of ensuring the protection of this region and the crucial water source it provides.



Asilia

GENUINE SAFARIS | GENUINE DIFFERENCE