

LOWER ZAMBEZI VEGETATION

By Mike Bingham

Zambia's Lower Zambezi Valley is part of the East African Rift System. The Vegetation Map of Zambia shows Mopane Woodland as the dominant vegetation type of the valley alluvium. Ground surveys reveal that mopane is almost restricted to the far eastern end of the Lower Zambezi National Park

During the night of 2nd January 1996, a storm on the escarpment created a flash flood of the Chowe River, one of the tributaries draining the Zambezi Escarpment in the Lower Zambezi National Park. Chiawa Camp at the confluence was closed for the rainy season, and only a few guards remained in the camp. One man got up at 2h to see what all the noise was about and was just in time to warn the others. They escaped with a few items of clothing before the bank collapsed into the river, and the camp was washed away. Events such as this, which carve out steep-sided gorges in the escarpment and dump the eroded material in the Zambezi River, are what have shaped the terrain of the Valley.

Alluvial terraces

The alluvial terraces of the Zambezi valley floor are composed of material brought down from the plateau, escarpment and foothills, by tributaries and numerous seasonal streams, but not by the Zambezi itself, which has not flooded its banks since the closure of the Kariba Dam.

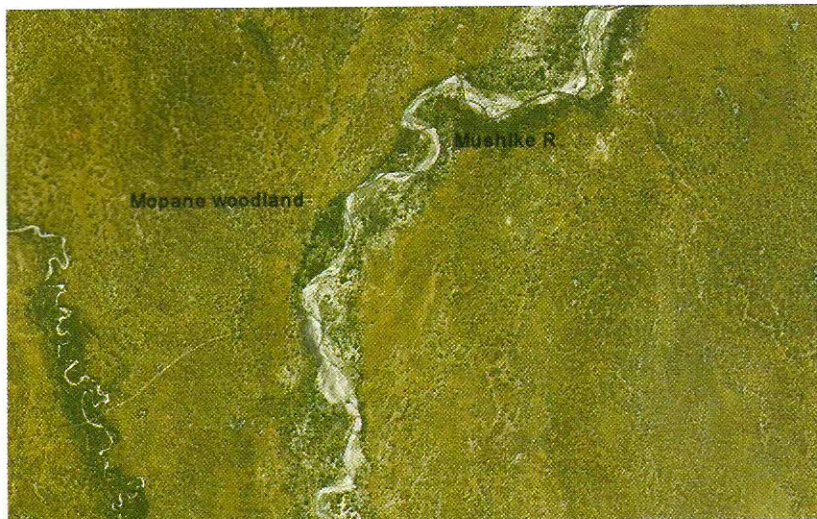


Figure 2. The interfluvial vegetation in this Google Earth image is a mosaic of deciduous thicket (smaller trees in brown matrix) and mopane woodland (larger, more spaced trees on paler background). S15°33'23" E29°44'06"



Figure 1. Chongwe River confluence: Extensive blocks of deciduous thicket occupy the higher ground on either side of the Chongwe. The vegetation of the Chongwe floodplain is munga woodland, consisting of larger trees in a matrix of shrubs and grass. In this section the Zambezi is eroding its bank on the Zambian side. S15°42'54" E29°20'21"

The *Vegetation Map of Zambia* (Edmonds & Fanshawe, 1976) shows the vegetation of the valley floor within the Park to consist of:

I.	CLOSED FOREST (rough estimates)	
6	Dry deciduous forest	20%
10	Riparian forest	3%
II.	OPEN FOREST WITH GRASS	
14	Mopane woodland on clays	65%
15	Munga woodland on heavy soils	10%
IV.	GRASSLAND	
17	Grassland	2%

The actual composition of the vegetation is very different.

Dry deciduous forest

This type is more commonly referred to as thicket, but the difference between forest and thicket is an arbitrary canopy height, sometimes given as 6m. Since they cannot be separated by remote sensing, there is little point in maintaining a distinction. What remote sensing does reveal is whether the canopy is closed or

