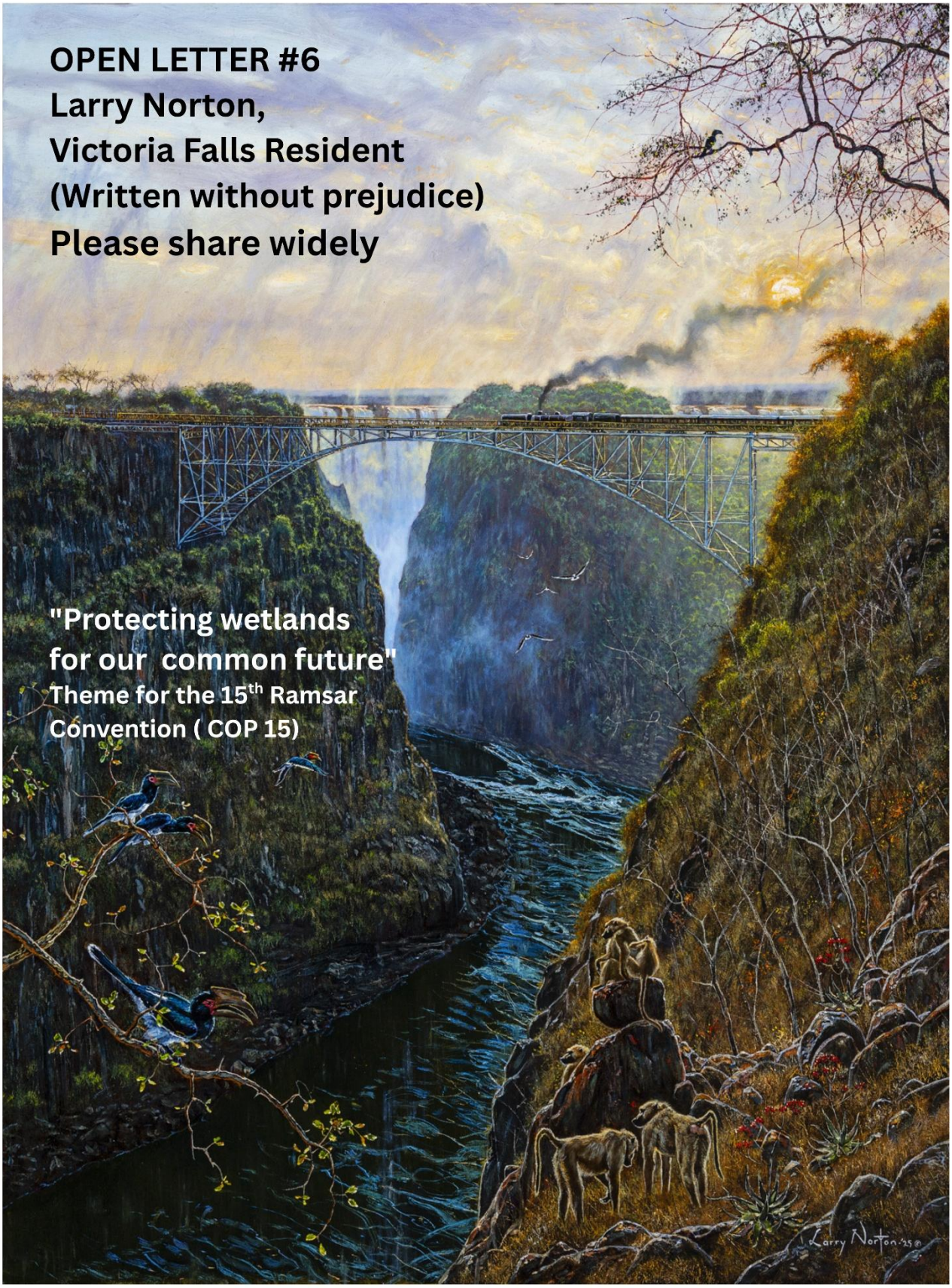


Arc Across the Banks (The Victoria Falls Bridge between Zimbabwe and Zambia

© Oil painting by Larry Norton

Dear All,

Victoria Falls recently became one of 31 Wetland Cities of the world and will host this massive international event.

Whilst hundreds of delegates hold discussions and wine and dine at the Elephant Hills Resort, overlooking the Victoria Falls World Heritage Site, this iconic wetland area faces substantial challenges from commercial development.

Unesco Report :
The threat of over development to the World Heritage Site was verbalized by the World Heritage Site Action Report 9-13th Feb 2022
"The property is facing increasing threats from individual and cumulative infrastructure developments, whose footprints are inside the property, its buffer zone or in its wider setting...Loss of any of these values would constitute a loss of Outstanding Universal Value and therefore it is vital to comprehensively assess and understand the impacts of each project on the attributes of the property ".

Like an environmental cavalry, COP 15 will roll prominently into town, amidst speeches and ceremonies ....and it will quickly roll out again.

It remains to be seen if this auspicious gathering will have the courage to address the real issues here. Despite the recognition and certificates that may be a part of the occasion the issues and challenges will remain long after the dignitaries are gone.

Case HC 3797/22 against the construction of Baines restaurant in the Highly Ecologically Sensitive (HES) Red zone of the Victoria Falls and the commercialisation of Cataract Island, in full sight of the viewing point of the Main Falls, remains unresolved.
Filed over 3 years ago this was an urgent application to stop restaurant construction. It should have been heard in 3 days.

Baines was constructed, at risk, in the face of a petition with over 17 000 signatures, appealing for it not to be built and for this area to remain untouched by commercial activity.

Also cited in the same case and petition was the Cataract Island operation. Adage Success P/L, the operators, have proceeded, despite an earlier petition and a total of over 37 000 signatures opposing their activities.

I and my fellow applicants are not alone in thinking that these operations are bad for Victoria Falls.

A new case (Case HCH 114/25) to have Baines restaurant development demolished and removed for flagrant abuse of the HES Red zone was launched earlier this year.

The response from the Baines restaurant developers has been to sue the author for $2.22 million US Dollars (Case HCH 2294/25).

The ardent battle here has been to try to protect and preserve the Victoria Falls World Heritage Site for future generations. That is why it has been necessary to speak out and to pursue legal avenues, to ensure that the law and due process are followed. The legal defence team have instructions to

defend the matter as all suggestions of falsehood and malice are not true. The matter is now in their hands and the law will take its course.

Such are the challenges, it seems, of bringing these critical matters of the vulnerability of the Victoria Falls World Heritage Site to public attention.

*Note :
As of a Friday 11th July deadline, the Baines restaurant development legal team failed to produce requested evidence to substantiate their fantastic damages claims (2.2 million USD).

MASTER PLAN
Hand in hand with Victoria Falls attaining city status came a long overdue effort to complete a Master Plan for the future of the city.
Engagements were made and meetings held.

Feedback from master plan consultations in Victoria Falls has delivered a clear message. The people in Victoria Falls want the World Heritage Site, the buffer area and red zone protected from assault by the ruthless commercialisation, which is seen as destroying the very thing that brings people here.

Acknowledgement of this, is the Masterplan mission statement, read out in a public meeting, which states :-
" PROTECT OUR WORLD HERITAGE SITE.
IT IS THE KEY TO OUR FUTURE ".

CONCERNS RE ZAMBEZI DRIVE AND FALLS BUFFER ZONE
The above masterplan statement, generated from the grassroots of the city and its surrounds, leads one to the concerning situation on Zambezi Drive and around the Victoria Falls itself.

In the context of the much vaunted Master Plan, and in the interests of transparency, it is hoped that the essential bodies, including :-

Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Authority
Victoria Falls City Council
National Railways of Zimbabwe (who own much of the land around the Falls)
Government authorities
Can coordinate and issue a statement or direction or explanation to the Zimbabwean and international public, as to what is happening along Zambezi Drive? (NB Much of this land is in a national park).

This area , described in written descriptions as Red zone along the Riverine/Riparian edge and orange zone up to the road in various Joint Integrated Management Plans and Zimparks General Management Plan, which had for decades, been an area protected from commercial development. The current ZimParks Plan (page 22) shows the HES red zone as including ALL land between the city boundary and the Zambezi river. It is shown again on the zone map (page 65 of that report).

This Zambezi Drive area now lists :

*__Baines Restaurant__ (in riverine wetland fringe, bounded by the Zambezi river and a wetland drainage stream line, in a game corridor, adjacent to the Rainforest fence.



Zambezi Riverline, Wetland Drainage Line , Rain Forest Fence, Devil's Cataract (arrow)

*__Cataract Pool Activities__
On Cataract Island, at the edge of the Falls itself , with pool activities in full sight of the Main Falls Viewing area)



*__Rock Pool__
Scenic view into the Rock Pool Kitchen from Zambezi Drive.



*__Proposed Tree Lodge Development__

Along 1km of pristine wetland river front extending from near the Big Tree to the Pump station upstream.



Derelict bulldozer near The Big Tree visitors site.
Abandoned after road clearing for this project.

*__Cataract Pool Launch Site__
Cataract Pool operators now have their own site on Zambezi Drive, upstream of the Rock Pool Development.

How much land and river frontage has been allocated to this site ?
What might this site develop into ?



NO ENTRY - Cataract Pool Launch Site.



Cataract Pool Launch Site Structure and Water Tank.

*__Overhead Powerline__

A glaring overhead powerline has recently been erected , running from the city , through the bush, to service Rock Pool and I suspect other operations along Zambezi Drive.

It is my understanding that in sensitive wildlife areas, operators are required to install underground power lines for aesthetic reasons ?

How this eyesore, on Zambezi Drive, in the buffer area around the World Heritage Site, can be approved is hard to fathom ?

What else might this powerline facilitate; there was a recent proposal (strongly opposed by the public, I understand), to light up the Falls at night with holograms of animals.



*__Long Term Vision__

What is the long term plan for this riverine stretch of Zambezi Drive ? (Bearing in mind that we are now a Wetland City) .

Is this the beginning of a Riviera - type development along the Zambezi upstream of the Falls itself ?

If so, does this development extend south of the Zambezi Drive road , towards the city ?

If this is going to happen , who will benefit from this ?

Why has this development plan and process (to the best of my knowledge) not been publicly disclosed or discussed with stakeholders and the wider public ?

Why not entrench our Wetland commitment by securing Zambezi Drive as a Conservation/Green area buffering the Falls from a growing and developing city ?

How is this development a part of the current Master Plan ? Especially in light of the mission statement : Protect Our World Heritage Site. It is the key to our future .
The land in question here, according to the Zim Parks General Management Plan, is designated parks estate and not city land.

Surely Conservation and Preservation , not Development, should be the priority in this critical tourism space near the World Heritage Site ?

Cultural and Spiritual Value

This area bears significant spiritual and cultural value . It is essential that we are cognisant of these values, especially in the face of commercial pressures from developments and tourism enterprises vying for opportunities in and around the World Heritage Site.

Sacred Site

The Zim Parks General Management Plan 2023 - 2024 Report, Page 89
3.3 Sacred and Spiritual Sites Documentation and Access" states :
"The Toka-Leya ...are likely to have been resident in the area since the sixteenth century... There are a number of spiritual and sacred sites around the Falls.. At several points along the lip of the waterfall...ceremonies were (and in some cases still are) held....Known sites include ..Cataract(or Devil's) Island.
This site bears great cultural significance to indigenous tribes; it should not be exploited for the sake of foreign viewership.

A Zambian author, Mr John Zulu , reports on the Management and conservation of the Mosi-oa-Tunya/Victoria Falls World Heritage Property :

Cultural value mapping

The Mosi-oa-Tunya/Victoria Falls World Heritage property is not just a natural geological feature but a place to encounter and access the supernatural (Zulu, 2020).

This transnational property has connected communities worldwide of differing religious views with a single, undivided ritual landscape. It is considered to be a 'place of power' (McGregor, 2003, pg. 722); a sacred site. While the State Party of Zambia is active in mapping cultural values, this is not the case for Zimbabwe. However, it is undeniable that cultural values, especially spiritual, are prominently embedded in the property. Borders and boundaries with a 'divided management system' have limited the full appreciation of the spiritual values of the property. The two States Parties must facilitate access to the entire property and learn from the communities living around it, including tourists who mainly visit the property for spiritual reasons.

Zoning

The map below and the descriptions from the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority ZAMBEZI - VICTORIA FALLS NATIONAL PARKS GENERAL MANAGEMENT PLAN 2024 - 2034

The WHP is subdivided into three zones namely

(i) High ecologically sensitive (Red)

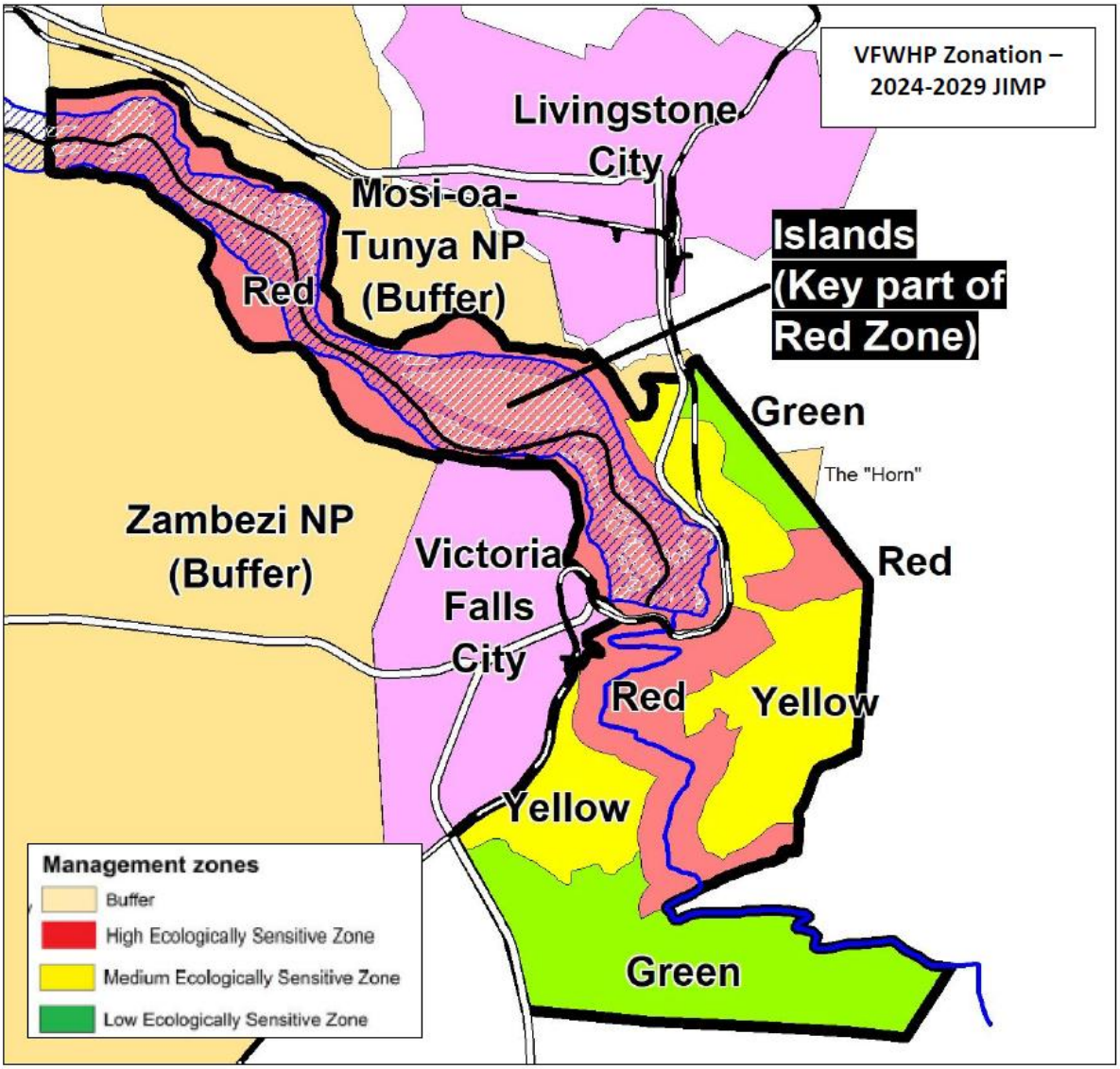
(ii) Medium ecologically sensitive (Yellow)

(iii) Low ecologically sensitive.(Green)

According to the 2016 Joint Integrated Management Plan

Red Zone : No further infrastructural developments allowed

Yellow Zone : No permanent structures allowed



Conclusion -

“ But the Falls will never be another Niagara - there will be no gaudy lights here”.
Minister of Tourism and Information, Dr Nathan Shamuyarira (Herald, 1987).

It is my opinion that unless concrete decisions or legal rulings are made to ensure absolute boundaries to developers, operators and those opportunists who might benefit from this process , the attrition of the Outstanding Universal Value of Victoria Falls will continue at an alarming rate.

The wild and natural elements of the Victoria Falls and its wetlands and surrounds that have attracted visitors will be eroded and will diminish further (as is happening now).

Inevitably, this will lead to diminishing interest from international tourism which will have a terrible effect on the prospects of the inhabitants of this emerging 'Wetland City'.

It requires both will and courage from the authorities to secure the heritage of this wonder of the world for future generations.

The option of reversing poorly planned and damaging leases and developments in the area around the Falls itself exists and must be considered in the context of the long term preservation of this World Heritage Site, Wetland City Status and the future prosperity of the city.

With thanks for reading,

Larry Norton
(Victoria Falls Resident and Zimbabwean Citizen)