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A CLIMATE CHANGE-STORY

UNDERSTANDING THE RISE IN HUMAN–WILDLIFE ENCOUNTERS THROUGH PUBLIC DISCOURSE: INSIGHTS FROM LIVINGSTONE, ZAMBIA

Context

Livingstone district is in Zambia's Southern province and borders the Mosi-oa-Tunya national park and other wildlife corridors linking to Botswana and Zimbabwe. Communities around Dambwa site, Mulala and Nyanzabili live near elephant ranges and rely heavily on substance farming for their livelihood.

Recently, droughts, deforestation, and urban expansion into elephant corridors have expanded and has intensified competition for water and land, giving a rise to human and wildlife encounters. Between December 2024 and October 2025, the discourse on human–wildlife encounters in Zambia grew increasingly urgent. The country saw rising toll of fatal elephant attacks with communities expressing concerns around their safety but also their livelihoods. In the media, this phenomenon was termed "human-animal conflict" or "human-wildlife conflict". However, for the purpose of this research, we use the term "human–wildlife encounters". This terminology better captures the range of interactions taking place, many of which are not inherently conflictual, and allows us to focus on the causes and conditions of encounter, and the dynamics of coexistence, rather than framing all interactions as conflict by default.

The Study

In this study, we examine the discourse surrounding these encounters because we recognise that discourse shapes behaviour. We look at the stories people tell, the explanations they share, and the beliefs they hold about what attracts or deters wildlife. Together, these narratives influence how people respond during an encounter and how they deal with the issue more broadly. By unpacking these narratives, we aim to better understand people's day-to-day experiences and the solutions they have sought so far. This understanding will help us provide residents with practical information that supports safer behaviours and practices during these encounters. It will also help us dispel myths that may harm both community members and wildlife. Finally, it allows us to lead the discussion and debate around the urgent needs of both communities and wildlife.

Another objective was to identify changes in the direct natural environment as observed by local residents. This included soil quality, water availability, wildlife movements, livestock, livelihoods, farming spaces, and harvesting outcomes. Importantly, the study avoided framing questions around "climate change" to focus on practical, observable changes affecting daily life. The purpose of this is to understand how residents perceive the impacts on their livelihoods and lives, and to identify the concerns that should be brought into governance processes and civic forums. The study used a qualitative mixed-method approach, combining fieldwork and digital social listening. Fieldwork was conducted in October 2025, in three hot spots, Dambwa site, Mulala and Nyazabili. These areas were identified for their frequent human-wildlife encounters, particularly involving elephants.

Research Methodology

Three FGDs were conducted separately with men, women, and youth to explore lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and perceptions of institutional response. In addition, two IDIs were held with a Ward Councillor and a village headman, providing insights into solutions implemented so far. Discussions were held in Tonga and English, transcribed, translated, and thematically analysed.

To compliment field insights, the research also analysed online public discourse using Brandwatch (a social listening and analytics software that tracks and analyses social media and online content across multiple platforms). Mentions and discussions relating to human–wildlife encounters in Zambia were tracked from January to October 2025, with a focus on Livingstone and Southern Province. The analysis examined sentiment, key narratives, and public reactions to wildlife-related incidents.

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KEY FINDINGS - COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES

Rising human and wildlife encounters.
"*Over the past few years especially 2023-2025, we've seen a major change. Elephants no longer remain in the park. but now roam through our villages and fields. Almost every week, they come into our area, destroying our crops and putting our lives at risk."[1]*

This was what one of the participants of the Focus Groups Discussions told us about their perception of the increase in encounters. Other participants added that, *"We also have little knowledge or support on how to safely manage these encounters."*

Participants shared first-hand experiences describing encounters with elephants as terrifying for some sections of the community. They also shared stories about a grandfather who became ill and, while out walking, encountered a hippo. The hippo attacked and killed him, which was deeply traumatic for the family. Community members believe hippos are attracted to their planted cabbages. These incidents occurred in the Dambwa area, also known as the Dambwa Forest Reserve, on the northern boundary of Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park.

People who have settled there do so because the area offers potential livelihood opportunities through both farming and tourism. In response to wildlife threats, some residents try to defend themselves by throwing objects to scare the animals away, actions that, in some cases, have led to further tragedy. Many residents have stopped farming, despite the fertile soil, because the crops attract wildlife. Yet no alternative livelihoods have been provided. Some people said they have shifted to casual labour, taking small jobs in neighbouring villages whenever opportunities arise.

Drought and resource scarcity as catalysts for human and wildlife encounters: Residents explained that ongoing droughts have intensified competition over shrinking natural resources, pushing wildlife into community areas and increasing encounters. When people first settled near the park, they recalled having access to abundant resources. However, in recent years, prolonged dry spells and unstable rainfall have reduced vegetation, even the grass has dried, and indigenous trees are said to be disappearing.



Mixed FGD with community members in Mulala

Traditionally, communities used the succulent plant Euphorbia to build protective fences that kept wildlife away, they told us. Recently, elephants have been seen eating this plant due what they believed was the lack of other grazing options. Community members also believe elephants are now feeding on guavas, mangoes, and papayas, and that they may even drink locally brewed Chibuku beer. While these claims cannot be verified, they shape local narratives about wildlife behaviour, and such narratives influence how people respond to encounters with animals.

"*The problem is no longer just about space. Elephants come into our areas because there's nothing left for them in the park, no food, no water. We are all struggling for the same resources now, and that's why the competition for resources keeps getting worse*"[2] said one of the participants. Depleted water sources and reduced vegetation have made farming increasingly unpredictable, while elephants and other wildlife enter fields in search of food and water. Shared scarcity has intensified human–wildlife competition over resources. As one participant in a focus group discussion put it: "When the rivers dry up, even the elephants come to our boreholes. Sometimes we wake up to find our crops destroyed because the animals are just as thirsty and hungry as we are." Participant, Focus Group Discussion.

Many residents said that in the past, people went into the park to see wildlife, whereas now wildlife increasingly comes to them. Young people are viewed as particularly at risk because they are perceived to lack the knowledge older generations had about living alongside wildlife. Concerns were raised around children who walk long distances home from school and may encounter animals at dusk.

[1] Mixed FDG with people in Livingstone.
[2] A village headman stated that frequent encounters with wildlife is a direct consequence of uncontrolled human expansion.
"People have started settling and farming in areas where elephants used to move freely. Now we are sharing the same space and competing for the same land and water. "]
[3] In-depth Interview with village headman Ngwenya.

KEY FINDINGS – BARRIERS TO COEXISTENCE

The study identified several perceived barriers to coexistence between communities and wildlife in Livingstone. These barriers limit the effectiveness of conservation efforts.

One major barrier is the reliance on agriculture and limited alternative livelihoods, coupled with financial losses, is leading to a negative perception of wildlife encounters as a dangerous and costly encroachment that only amplifies injustice.

Communities living adjacent to conservation areas in Livingstone remain heavily dependent on farming for their livelihoods. This reliance on agricultural land places them directly in the path of wildlife, particularly elephants, leading to frequent crop raiding and property damage. With few viable alternatives for income, these challenges contribute to growing frustration and negative perceptions of wildlife, as animals are seen as a threat to survival rather than part of the shared environment. "*Farming is all we know, but every year elephants destroy our crops. We have no other way to earn a living, so it is hard not to see them as a problem*."[1]

Since local people bear the direct cost of crop damage, property destruction, injury, loss of life, this economic exclusion is perceived as an institutional injustice. "*When we call the wildlife officers for help, the response we get is often that there is no fuel. By the time anyone arrives, the elephants have already destroyed our crops, and we are left to deal with the damage ourselves.*" – Participant, Mixed Focus Group Discussion

Communities also noted how well elephants remember routes to previous food sources, such as wild mango trees that have since been cut for construction or tourism-related uses. They contrasted their own limited protection with the stronger fencing and resources available to private companies operating in the elephant corridor who are better able and resourced to protect themselves against wildlife. There is also a sense among communities that solutions sought do not include them, and that their realities are not well understood.
"*They don't understand what really happens in our fields, and we are left to handle the elephants on our own*."[1]



Mulala area

Limited knowledge of safe wildlife management practices is another barrier. Community members reported that they lack information on safe and effective ways to deter wildlife or protect their crops without putting themselves, or the animals, at risk. This knowledge gap increases the likelihood of dangerous encounters and can lead to retaliatory actions that harm both people and wildlife.

As one participant explained:
"We don't know the best way to chase elephants or protect our farms safely. Most of the time we just try to scare them away, but it doesn't always work and can be dangerous."[1]

Residents said they have only received a few, inconsistent tips on how to protect themselves. Some were told not to wear white T-shirts, while others were advised to tie empty crisp packets to their fences to reflect light and deter animals. Many have tried banging pots and pans, although they shared a local belief that non-Zambian elephants crossing from neighbouring countries may be attracted to the noise, while local ones are more likely to be scared away. Some households have planted chillies as a deterrent, but they reported mixed results and uncertainty about whether they are using the right type or the right methods.

[1] Mixed FDG with people in Livingstone.

KEY FINDINGS - ONLINE DISCOURSE AND SENTIMENT

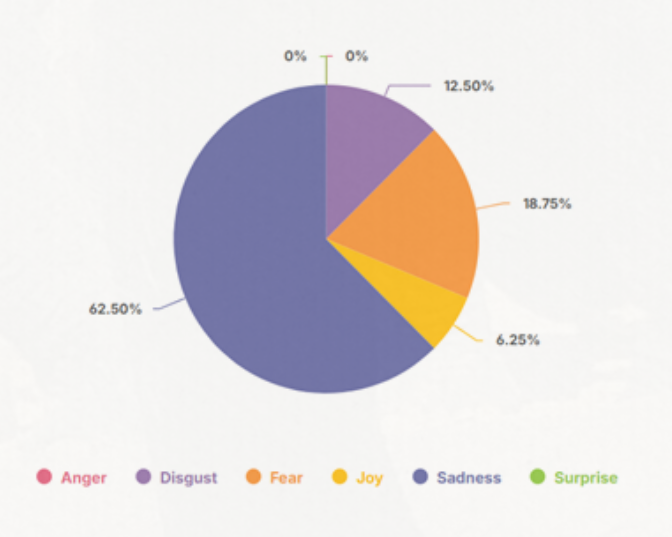
To complement fieldwork insights, the study analysed online public discourse using Brandwatch, a social listening and analytics platform.

Conversation volume peaked during the week of 8 September 2025, following news reports of fatal elephant encounters.

Posts such as "*Another suspected elephant attack claims life in Livingstone*" and "*Boy killed by elephant in Livingstone, highlighting conflict concerns*" drove a sharp rise in engagement[1].

These incidents triggered public empathy and alarm, with users urging government and conservation authorities to "*act before more lives are lost.*"

The digital conversation framed the situation as both a human-safety crisis and a failure of wildlife management. Most sentiment tilted towards sadness rather than anger – which may reflect the reaction to the loss of lives. This was followed by fear and disgust.



Posts expressing fear highlighted growing anxiety among communities and echoed demands for non-lethal deterrent methods. Users repeatedly cited the Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) and local authorities, urging adoption of tools such as chilli guns to deter elephants safely.

This discourse aligns with on-ground community views that co-existence is possible only if preventive measures are strengthened.

"*We don't want elephants killed — just keep them away from homes and fields.*" — X (Twitter) user, September 2025

Mentions of practical solutions to deter animals and protect communities such as "chilli guns", community alert systems, and education campaigns suggested a shift toward a solutions-focused approach that protect both wildlife and people. However, the conversation is still missing what are the long-term solutions to also deal with the needs of the wildlife impacted by the climate change.

Common themes included:

- *F*rustration over repeated fatalities and perceived government inaction.
- Sympathy for affected families and calls for compensation.
- Criticism of weak protective measures around wildlife zones.

"Every month we lose someone to elephants — when will this stop?" — Facebook user, September 2025[1]

[1] Brandwatch

KEY IMPLICATIONS

The study of discourse around human–wildlife encounters in Livingstone shows that many adaptive measures taken by residents are shaped by fear and limited access to reliable information. This often traps communities in a cycle of negative outcomes, from crop losses to loss of life. Addressing these challenges requires responding to two major barriers identified in this research: knowledge gaps and structural inequalities – but also address the key drivers identified.

In addressing the barriers this research have identified, there is a need for improving knowledge, safety, and practical skills for everyday human-wildlife coexistence. The media with the support of authorities and drawing on the knowledge and beliefs of communities, should be able to provide clearer, accessible guidance on safe, non-lethal deterrent strategies and the risks of retaliatory actions while debunking myth.

Information can also support farmers with practical methods to protect themselves and their crops, while also helping them diversify their income sources. Any content must primarily value and build on community knowledge, weaving traditional practices and beliefs into communication outputs, rather than sidelining them.

There is also a need for responding to the structural injustices communities experience or feel. Efforts should engage residents meaningfully in decision-making; solutions must reflect their realities, priorities, and lived experience. Reporting of these encounters and compensation systems must be strengthened as community currently views these as inadequate and unfair, reinforcing existing inequalities. The capacity of wildlife and land-management institutions be taken into account. Better staffing, equipment, and rapid-response mechanisms would reduce the burden on communities and build trust.

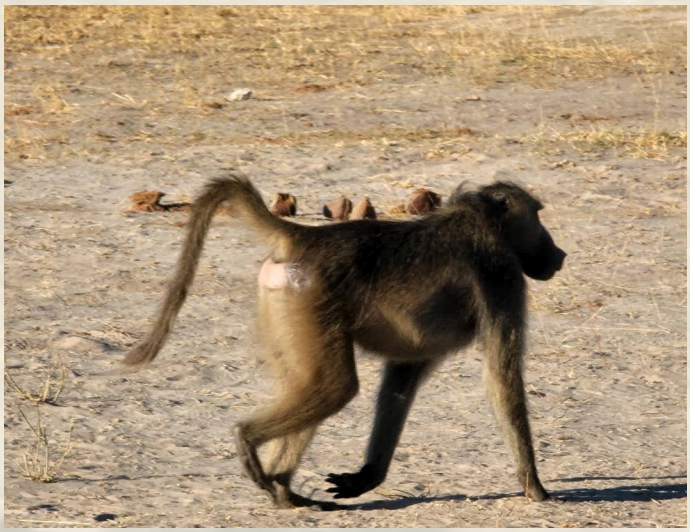


Photo by Miriam Syamakata - Community Journalist at partner media outlet Zambezi Radio in Livingstone

But most of all, there is a need for addressing the deeper drivers behind rising encounters. Human encroachment into wildlife corridors and habitats remains a major driver of encounters. Land-use planning and regulation must better protect key migratory routes and water sources, while still supporting sustainable development.

A missing piece in the current discourse is the needs of wildlife themselves. Strategies must ensure that conservation efforts support animal wellbeing while also protecting community livelihoods.

Finally, deforestation, drought, and climate change intensify competition over scarce resources. These environmental pressures must be central to future planning and dialogue: What mitigation strategies are available? How do we protect both ecosystems and the people who depend on them? And who is responsible for long-term planning of these mitigation strategies? These are the discussions that should be taking place in the media, and in the governance spaces.

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