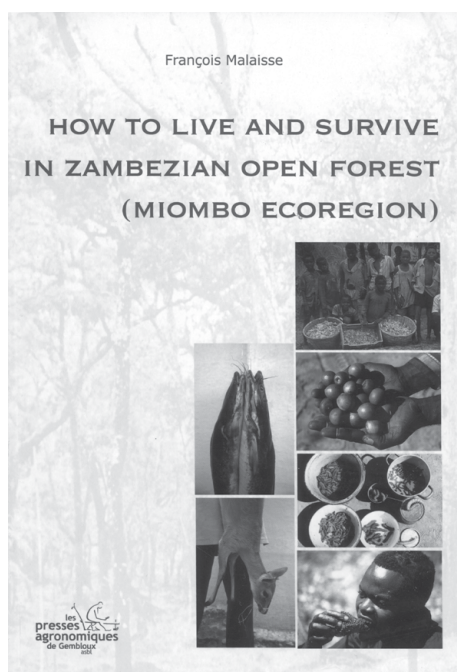


François Malaisse (2010)
How to live and survive in Zambezian open forest (Miombo Ecoregion). 422 pp., Appendices on CD (387 colour figures and 2 determination keys).
Gembloux, Les presses agronomiques de Gembloux. ISBN 978-2-87016-106-7
Translated from the original French title *Se nourrir en forêt claire africaine: Approche écologique et nutritionnelle* (1997).



The use of natural resources in Africa is a hotly debated subject. How such resources are exploited has important consequences for people's health and well-being. Yet resource management it is also important from the point of wildlife conservation. Considering this, it is perhaps surprising that books such as this are so unusual.

François Malaisse's book summarizes the different types of food caught and gathered in the Zambezian open forests. It covers the ecological, nutritional and methodological aspects of the harvest. A variety of foods are considered, including plants, fungi, insects, fish, birds and mammals. The book details the way food is gathered, how it is prepared, its nutritional value, cultural preferences and taboos. In short, it details the extensive bushcraft that people of this region use to live and thrive.

The author has over twenty years of experience working in Africa. In the course of his research he has visited more than twenty different African countries. In particular he has taught and conducted research at Lubumbashi University in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In the preparation

of this work he has worked with many local guides and taxonomists from Africa and Europe.

Before reading this book my impression of ethnoecology was of the historical study of aboriginal peoples and their interaction with their environment. Yet having read this book, it is very clear that ethnoecology is pertinent to large numbers of people in Africa. A large proportion of the diet of many Africans is still harvested from the wild. Were it not for wild food, hunger and malnutrition would be much more common.

The book was originally published in 1997. This new English version has been revised and updated to keep it relevant. In the intervening years the bush meat trade has become a flagship cause for those campaigning against the unregulated and indiscriminate hunting of wild animals. Rather than being subsistence hunting it has become a significant industry providing meat for cities and even international trade. The book discusses this problem though it is generally pessimistic about the chances of an improvement.

Wild food is an important constituent of the diet of many people, but population growth and the availability of guns has resulted in the extinction of many large mammals close to towns. In such places open forests have been replaced by agriculture and savannah. This has not led to a reduction in the amount of wild food consumed, but a shift to other species such as the cane rat that are more abundant in agricultural ecosystems. The book documents these changes and in places suggests potential improvements to the management of resources. Nevertheless, there is little mention of traditional management practises used to conserve stocks of animals and plants. In many cases harvesting is destructive and wasteful; for example, the cutting down of trees to collect caterpillars, the poisoning of rivers to collect fish and the setting of fires to catch cane rats. It is not clear if traditional resource management practises exist, perhaps they have only recently become necessary now that animal populations have declined and human populations have increased.

Although it is not the main focus of the book there is a chapter on agriculture. Farming in the region has changed considerably from pre-colonial times. Traditionally African millet was grown, but the book describes how this has been replaced by Cassava and Maize. While these new crops have brought many advantages, the book makes it clear that these advantages have been quite short term. Newly introduced pests, the cost of seed and fertilisers have reduced the profitability of these crops. Diversification, particularly into native crops, is recommended, but the shortage of any reliable infrastructure makes such initiatives difficult.

While theme of ethnoecology gives me the impression of people living harmoniously with the forest environment, I am left with the overall impression that the current situation is not one of mankind and the environment in balance, but opportunism that consumes resources until they are exhausted

and then finds the next best resource to consume. Certainly, this is the same pattern of resource exploitation we see all over the world, whether it be fisheries, forestry or minerals.

François Malaisse makes a good case for better management of the natural resources in the region. On the one hand he demonstrates how important wild foods are to the people of this region, while on the other, pointing out how over-exploitation is destroying the resource.

The most serious criticism of the book is the translation. It has many faults that make reading the English version difficult. The numerous spelling mistakes, literal translations and wordy sentences mean that you frequently have to reread sentences to decipher their meaning. The author's style is rather unstructured, which together with the translation, makes it often difficult to follow.

A species index is missing, even though there was one in the original version. I find this a surprising omission, particularly as this book will be used for reference. The book is liberally illustrated with black and white photographs and diagrams. The colour illustrations of the original have been put on a CD-ROM and can be browsed on a computer.

While it is frustrating not to have the pictures immediately available, they are easy to browse on a computer. I had hoped that the additional space afforded by the CD-ROM would allow the inclusion of extra illustrations, but this is not the case. They could have also included a digital version of the text on the CD-ROM, which would have made up for the lack of an index.

Ethnoecological books are unusual things and I applaud the initiative to publish this book in English as it will hopefully be used more widely. The central aim of this book is to assemble the collective field knowledge of the Zambezian open forest peoples, which I think has been achieved. This has been done to benefit those peoples, not just out of scientific curiosity. Deforestation and urbanisation mean that traditional knowledge is being lost, yet we can learn from long-established wisdom and it is important that it is recorded.

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