

# Chinhoyi Caves Ramsar Site

## Introduction

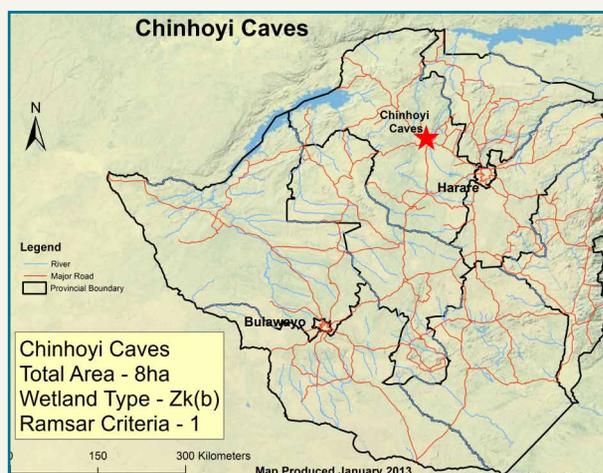
The Chinhoyi Caves are located about 9 kilometres north-west of the town of Chinhoyi, in the Mashonaland West administrative province, 120 kilometres from the capital city of Harare in Zimbabwe. The Chinhoyi Caves are one of Zimbabwe's seven Ramsar sites. The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands provides a framework for wetland conservation and asks that nations promote the sustainable utilization and conservation of wetlands.

The site is approximately 8 hectares in size. It is a rare, unique near natural Karst wetland. The Caves consist of a system of tunnels and caverns and are the most extensive cave system in Zimbabwe that the public can access. The cave has a "Wonder Hole", which is the main feature, and is in fact a "Swallow Hole" or a large cavern with a collapsed roof. The walls or sides of the Wonder Hole drop vertically down for approximately 150 feet to the Sleeping Pool. The water in the Sleeping Pool remains at a constant 22 degrees Celsius throughout the year. It is so phenomenally clear that silver-hued fish and underwater rock formations can be seen many metres below the surface.

## Biodiversity

The cave system is composed of limestone and dolomite. The surrounding area is mainly *calcareous* rocks, on sandy loam soils, with a vegetation dominated by *Brachystegia* and *Julbernardia* species.

The Chinhoyi Caves flora is made up largely of indigenous species and a few exotics. They include: Mukwa (*Pterocarpus angolensis*), Cape Fig (*Ficus sur.*), Combretum species, Terminalia species, Msasa (*Brachystegia spiciformis*), Violet tree (*Securidaca longepedunculata*), Yellow wood (*Podocarpus latifolius*) and Pink Jacaranda (*Stereospermum kunthianum*).



Map of Chinhoyi Caves Ramsar site



The underground limestone formations at Chinhoyi Caves



Some exotic and indigenous trees at Chinhoyi Caves

Chinhoyi Caves supports various aquatic and bird species. The following birds have the wetland as their habitat: Arnot's Chat, Angola Rock Thrush, Mocking Chat, Large Striped Pipit, woodpecker species, Black Tit, Redwing Starling, batis, flycatcher, Penduline Tit, Glossy Starling, Bat Hawk, Tree Creeper and the Familiar Chat. The cave is also home to many bats with one of the smaller caves commonly called the, "Bat Cave."

The fish species found are bass, bottle fish, bream, and catfish. Goldfish were introduced to the Sleeping Pool to address the escalating mosquito population in the cave. Some other small mammals found in the area include; monkeys, baboons, bushpigs and rock hares.



Left: Some fish found in the Sleeping pool Right: The Wonder Hole

## Cultural Values and Tourism

The Caves have a historical cultural significance. In the 16th century they were used by the local Shona tribes for storing grain and as a refuge from invading tribes. In the 1890's Chief Chinhoyi and his followers used the Caves as a refuge from raiding tribes such as the Matebele. Until a few years ago the remains of Chief Chinhoyi's grain bins could be seen in some of the underground passages. The locals still hold their cultural rituals on the site.

Chinhoyi Caves has a visitors' centre with observation hides and nature trails and offers information booklets making it an ideal location for school visits. The wetland is also used as a camping site and recreation facility. Scuba diving is a big recreational activity in the caves, which brings many visitors both local and international. In 1992 a team of US Navy divers reached a depth of 135 metres in the Sleeping Pool. In July in 2013 another team of divers reached a depth of 191 metres.



Divers in the Sleeping Pool



The picnic and camping site at the Caves

## Threats

The major threats to the wetland stem from the surrounding area and consist of expansion in agricultural land, underground water utilisation by increasing borehole sinking and nearby dolomite mining.

## Conservation measures

The site was designated as a National Park in 1955. It falls under the Ministry of Environment, Water and Climate. The Parks and Wildlife Management Authority is directly in charge of the wetland.

National Parks and Wildlife Research Unit is responsible for monitoring the human population influx, avoiding disturbance of the water in the Chinhoyi Caves and avoiding wetland water pollution.



Top: A tree nursery that Parks and Wildlife Management Authority has established at the site. Above: The blue waters of the Sleeping Pool

For more information on The Ramsar Convention or Chinhoyi Caves contact:

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