

## LTBP Visits Lake Malawi for Wrap-Up Conference

by *Gaspard Ntakimazi and Muderhwa Nshombo*

A delegation from the Lake Tanganyika Biodiversity Project (LTBP) participated in a conference from 4-5 March 1999 organised by its sister project on Lake Malawi/Nyassa. The delegation, led by Dr A. Menz, LTBP Co-ordinator, also included Dr K. West, LTBP Scientific Liaison Officer; Dr F. Chale, PSS Co-ordinator for Tanzania; Dr M. Nshombo, BIOSS Co-ordinator for DR Congo; Dr G. Ntakimazi, BIOSS Co-ordinator for Burundi; and Mr L. Mwape, PSS Co-ordinator for Zambia.

Called Nyassa in Tanzania and Niasa in Mozambique, Lake Malawi has its largest area in the country which bears its name. Formed under similar conditions as Lake Tanganyika, i.e., as a part of the East African Rift, Lake Malawi is also a centre of interest for both the riparian populations and the international scientific community because of the extraordinary diversity of its fauna.

The SADC/GEF Project for Conservation of Biodiversity in Lake Malawi started in 1995 and ended in July 1999. Before winding up, the Project Management organised an international conference on the present state of knowledge about the lake. This was an opportunity to publicise project results and outputs and include a larger group in the deliberations over future projects for Lake Malawi.



Drs. Gaspard Ntakimazi, Kelly West, and Muderhwa Nshombo at Senga Bay, Malawi

After the opening ceremony chaired by the Malawian Minister for Forests and Fisheries, the Project Co-ordinator, Mr Tony Ribbink, presented an overview of Lake Malawi and the main research activities carried out so far within the project.

Using varied means such as sampling surveys on the lake for different studies, aerial observations, and remote sensing, the project completed a tremendous amount of research, and presented unique results in the fields of fish taxonomy and systematics, ecology of coastal and benthic fishes, and limnology and lake water quality. Activities were also undertaken in the fields of 'training and awareness' and environmental education

within the riparian communities to promote conservation of the biological riches of the lake, in order to fight poverty and promote tourism.

The scientific presentations that followed were grouped into five themes:

### *Systematics and Taxonomy of Fishes* (8 presentations).

It was revealed that about 300 species of fish have been identified and studied to date, but that an enormous amount of work remains, as the lake is expected to host about 600 species.

*Ecology of Coastal and Benthic Fishes* (4 presentations). Current knowledge, again, covers only a limited area of the lake and only the most common species in the captures. Much work remains to be done.

### *Education and Implication of Riparian Communities* (4 presentations)

### *Limnology and Water Quality* (11 presentations).

Researchers from the Canadian Centre for Inland Waters conducted many of the studies in this theme. One result of particular interest was the noted change in the composition of algal communities toward a less desirable species indicative of a reduction in water quality.

### *Geography and GIS Applications* (6 presentations).

This theme received most of its contributions from researchers belonging to the Centre for Earth Observation Science of Canada.

After the scientific presentations, the delegation from Lake Tanganyika was able to visit the project laboratories, library, and fish collections. The Biodiversity Conservation Project for Lake Malawi has different objectives than those of our Lake Tanganyika Project. While LTBP essentially aims at establishing a regional programme for long term management of the lake by formulating a legal framework and a Strategic Action Programme (SAP) to conserve and maintain biodiversity in the lake, the Lake Malawi Project has consisted mainly of carrying out scientific research for a better knowledge of its resources.

Whereas LTBP contracts national institutions to execute work programs, the majority of work in the Malawi project was conducted by teams of expatriate researchers with African counterparts. The African counterparts were receiving on-the-job training and in many cases conducting research for graduate degrees.

In discussions on the objectives for a second phase of the Lake Malawi Project, it was noted that, similar to LTBP, they will move more towards targeting local stakeholders in the management and conservation of the lake's resources.

*Dr. Gaspard Ntakimazi is a professor of biology at the University of Burundi. Dr. Muderhwa Nshombo is Directeur Général of the Centre de Recherche en Hydrobiologie at Uvira. They are the National Co-ordinators for the Biodiversity Special Study in Burundi and Congo, respectively.*