**Man’s worst enemy (Zimbabwe)**

19 Dec, 2012 - 22:12

<https://www.herald.co.zw/mans-worst-enemy/>

providing pasture to living organisms.

To animals and birds, rains instinctively suggest an opportune time to migrate to greener pastures.  
And for humans the rains imply the beginning of tilling and planting the land in preparation for a good harvest.

Hooray it is to the urbanite or “town fella” as the neighbour’s borehole will now have sufficient water for community sharing.

Yet despite the new life brought by the rains, the season is accompanied by one of the deadliest natural phenomena known to humankind — lightning.

Lightning has had a fair share on human and animal culling in particular Zimbabwe which has the highest lightning incidence in the world.

On December 23, 1975, callously, lightning entered Zimbabwe into the Guinness Book of World Records after bolting 21 people in the Eastern Highlands village of Chinamasa.

Alas, it also brings with it memories of the death of loved ones.

On March 8, 2012, The Herald reported of 13 head of cattle which were struck and killed by lightning in Msengezi District.

It is on record that lightning is an atmospheric discharge of electricity that is frequently accompanied by thunder when it occurs during a thunderstorm.

According to [Universetoday.com](http://Universetoday.com), lightning is a powerful force of nature, but few truly understand exactly what it is.

Lightning is electricity that is discharged from a cloud.

It can also occur during volcanic eruptions and dust storms.

The front end of a bolt of lightning can travel 60 000 miles per second and reach 30 000 degrees Celsius, the website says.

That is hot enough to turn silica sand into glass.

[Universetoday.com](http://Universetoday.com) also adds that lightning can have a positive or negative charge, but is overwhelmingly negative.

An average bolt of negative lightning carries a current 30 000 amperes (amps).

Positively charged lightning has about 3 000 000 amps.

Lightning rapidly heats the air in its immediate vicinity to about 20 000 degrees Celsius.

This is about three times the temperature of the Sun’s surface. This compresses the surrounding clear air and creates a supersonic shock wave that decays and becomes an auditory wave we call thunder.

Lightning is known referred locally as “mheni” in Shona and “umbane” in Ndebele.

In the African tradition there is a general belief that there are people, especially from Manicaland Province, who have the power to manufacture mheni.

Those who possess such powers use mheni to demonstrate their strength to would be adversaries.  
“It is true that mheni exists according to the African culture and can be made by humans,” lambasted Caiphas Shutu Sithole, a renowned herbalist from Mbare. In 1992, I was approached by a traditional healer known as Matemba while I was working in Chipinge.

“Matemba offered me four small sticks saying to me . . . ‘unofanira kusimba’ (you must be strong). I did not know what the sticks were for. He then demonstrated to me by rubbing the sticks together and throwing them on the ground. The sticks immediately disappeared and there was a huge flash of lightning in the sky. “Ndozvandinoreva kana ndichiti unofanira kusimba” (This is what I mean when a say you must be strong),” narrated Sithole.

He added: “I have never actually seen mheni but I have treated survivors of lightning who allege that it looks like a lamb with wings.”

Edison Banda, a vendor in Emabutweni (Bulawayo), seems to be a religious follower of the “survival of the fittest” law. The man confessed to unsuccessfully employing forces of supernatural world (lightning) to kill a fellow vendor whom he accused of attracting more customers than him.

Max Van Olst from the University of Zimbabwe’s Electrical Engineering Department, in 1987, said he had discovered that Zimbabwe’s fertile soil plays a role in causing the lightning deaths.

“A lot of Zimbabwe’s soil is a poor conductor of electricity, meaning that the charge from a lightning bolt, instead of dispersing evenly, can stream with concentrated force hundreds of yards from the strike point as it follows narrow paths of easy conductivity,” he said.

Explained Max Van Olst: “High altitude, high humidity and high temperatures combine to affect the density of the air and thus the ease with which lightning can occur.”

Most victims are peasants living in thatched huts in rural areas. Findings indicate that many victims are sitting or sleeping on the ground in their huts when struck.

This could well account for the story on January 16, 2006 in The Herald where 10 members of Johanne Masowe were struck and killed by lightning and 61 others hospitalised during an open-air prayer session in Seke, Chitungwiza in 2002.

Another story appeared in the same paper on December 6 2012, where four family members including three minors were struck by lightning. The four who died were all burnt beyond recognition when the hut they were sleeping in caught fire.

It is a misconception that if it is not raining and there are no clouds overhead, one is safe from lightning.

The truth is lightning often strikes more than three miles from the thunderstorm, far outside the rain or even thunderstorm cloud.

Bolts from the blue can strike 10-15 miles from the thunderstorm. Lightning in clouds can travel over 100 miles from the thunderstorm.

It is not true that rubber tyres offer protection from lightning in cars by insulating one from the ground.

However, most cars are reasonably safe from lightning.

The metal roof and sides become shield, not the rubber tyres.

Thus convertibles, motorcycles, bicycles, golf carts and cars with plastic or fibreglass shells offer no lightning protection.

Likewise, farm and construction vehicles with open cockpits offer no lightning protection.   
But closed cockpits with metal roofs and sides are safer than going outside.

Many lightning victims die within sight of onlookers as they are denied first aid on assumption that by merely touching a victim one will be electrocuted.

The human body doesn’t store electricity.

It is therefore safe to touch a lightning victim to render first aid.

It is not safe if outside during a thunderstorm, to go under a tree.

Trees pose being the highest objects within a locality and are prone to lightning strikes.

Another misconception is, if trapped outside and lightning is about to strike, lie flat on the ground.   
While lying flat on the ground gets you as low as possible, which is good, it increases your chance of being hit by a ground current.

However, it is advisable to use the “lightning crouch” that is, put your feet together, squat low, tuck your head, and cover your ears.

Lightning induces electric currents along the top of the ground that can be deadly over 100 feet away.   
The best combination is being low and touching the ground as little as possible.

So much folklore exists about lightning which are not obligatory to believe but what remains fact is, when lightning strikes an individual, it either maims or kills.

There is no way to completely stop lightning, but if you’re careful, you can avoid injury or death.  
Lightning is somewhat lazy, and will take the shortest path, striking the tallest object.