JUNE 2024 | ISSUE 11

BIRDLIFE AFRICA NEWSLETTER

A MESSAGE FROM
THE REGIONAL DIRECTOR'S DESK

Welcome to the first issue of the BirdLife Africa Newsletter in 2024. As Africa continues to grapple with the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss, our work to save Nature is more important than ever. From our site protection work in Malawi to marine conservation in Seychelles our partners continue making great strides in conservation. The need for closer collaboration remains paramount, and we are delighted to be part of the Coalition for Fisheries Transparency, joining other international organizations to advocate for the sustainable use of marine resources. We also look forward to the Council for the Africa Partnership (CAP) meeting later this year in September, to take stock of our implementation of the BirdLife Strategy and plan ahead. We hope you will enjoy our Partners' stories from around the continent, and that you will share this newsletter with your friends and supporters. Happy reading and thank you for your continued support.

Kariuki Ndang'ang'a
Regional Director for Africa, BirdLife International

ENDANGERED BIRD

THE DWARF IBIS
BOSTRYCHIA BOCAGEI

Listed as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List, the Dwarf Ibis is an endemic species found exclusively on São Tomé Island in the Gulf of Guinea. These species have experienced significant population declines primarily due to habitat destruction, human disturbance, and predation by introduced species. The main threats to the Dwarf Ibis include deforestation for agriculture, illegal hunting, and the degradation of wetland habitats. To combat these challenges, conservation efforts in São Tomé are focusing on habitat protection, strict enforcement of hunting regulations, and community engagement initiatives.

BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL JOINS THE COALITION FOR FISHERIES TRANSPARENCY

Fishing boats at a port in Cabo Verde © BirdLife

By Ahmed Diame

BirdLife International is the latest member to join the Coalition for Fisheries Transparency (CFT), a coalition of civil society organizations co-chaired by Oceana and the Environmental Justice Foundation with about 50 members currently, including the Regional Partnership for Coastal and Marine Conservation (PRCM) and the WWF Network, among others.

CFT seeks to advance transparency in the fishing sector through advocacy and strengthened collaboration. The Coalition provides a platform that enables member organizations to collaborate on joint strategies and maximize their advocacy work's impact. Ultimately, CFT aims to support member NGOs in their advocacy efforts to encourage governments to adopt fisheries policy principles, like those featured in the Coalition's Global Charter for Transparency.

The Coalition is guided by the steering committee of selecting civil society leaders in fisheries transparency who provide support on defining its priorities and developing necessary policies. Co-chaired by the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) and Oceana, the committee consists of six other members including Accountability. Fish, Global Fishing Watch (GFW), Indonesia Ocean Justice Initiative (IOJI), PRCM, Seafood Legacy, and the WWF Network.

Seafood is the world's largest globally traded food commodity and the last food that humans still exploit on a global scale. However, lack of openness and accountability in fishery information, activities, and decision-making has enabled fisheries mismanagement; illegal fishing; human rights and labor abuses; unfair access to resources; and fraud and corruption. The result is overexploited stocks, jeopardized livelihoods, food insecurity in coastal communities, and threats to the safety and security of fishery workers. This coupled with patchy international fisheries management systems, has allowed illegal fishing to continue unchecked.

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, more than 90% of global fisheries stocks are being fully exploited, overexploited, or depleted, further underlining the need for transparency.

Thus, there is a need for global transparency policies to ensure effective ocean governance. For example, information about who is catching what, where, when, and how should be freely available and directly accessible to all. Transparency enables all stakeholders including fishers, coastal communities, seafood buyers, governments, regional organizations, journalists, and civil society organizations to play a part in ensuring that fisheries are legal, ethical, and sustainable.

Participants at a CFT regional workshop held in Accra in February 2024 © Coalition for Fisheries Transparency/urbanphlicks

"Through its important work around the world, BirdLife International is a vital member of the Coalition for Fisheries Transparency. In the West Africa region, BirdLife's activities aim to ensure transparency, inclusivity, and sustainable practices as is reflected in their efforts to advocate for transparent EU fisheries agreements, foster collaboration, and information sharing, and build capacity to empower fisheries sector stakeholders", says Maisie Pigeon, Director of the Coalition for Fisheries Transparency.

"We are very excited for BirdLife International to have joined the Coalition and to work closely with the other members as collaboration strengthens advocacy and helps promote positive change. Ultimately, we believe that transparency is a tool to support more open and equitable fisheries, which is vital for the sustainable use of marine resources", notes Oliver Yates, Head of Marine Programme at BirdLife International.

In Africa, BirdLife through its marine programme is engaged in various initiatives and activities with the aim to ensure transparency, inclusivity, and sustainable practices, particularly in West African fisheries. This is done among others through policy advocacy and stakeholder engagement such as regarding fisheries agreements, fostering of collaboration and information sharing and capacity building based on an ecosystem approach to fisheries and data collection.

These activities aim to foster responsible and equitable resource management while safeguarding the interests of all stakeholders.

In February 2024, BirdLife took part in the CFT regional workshop for West Africa in Accra, Ghana which brought together about 30 other organizations from the region. During this workshop, the participants deliberated on the 10 Principles of the Global Charter for Fisheries Transparency, mapped related activities which are currently underway in the West African region, and shared fisheries transparency policy priorities of West and Central African Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Further, the participants highlighted obstacles and solutions to advancing transparency policy, national and regional policy priorities, and collaborative action opportunities.

"BirdLife International believes that transparency is vital for sustainable and equitable fisheries", concludes Tabea Zwimpfer, Africa Marine Coordinator at BirdLife International.

"Through its important work around the world, BirdLife International is a vital member of the Coalition for Fisheries Transparency. In the West Africa region, BirdLife's activities aim to ensure transparency, inclusivity, and sustainable practices as is reflected in their efforts to advocate for transparent EU fisheries agreements, foster collaboration, and information sharing, and build capacity to empower fisheries sector stakeholders

Maisie Pigeon
Director of the Coalition for Fisheries Transparency

TACKLING LEAD POISONING IN VULTURES IN ZIMBABWE

A White-backed vulture (*Gyps africanus*) soaring high in the blue sky over Zimbabwe, showcasing the majestic flight of this critically endangered species. © David Beadle

By Lewis Kihumba

Across Africa, vultures are amongst the most threatened bird species. Although vultures play a vital role in cleaning thereby reducing the potential spread of diseases, their populations have drastically reduced in recent years, driven by various factors including poisoning, belief-based use, electrocution and collision with energy infrastructure and habitat loss among others.

In Southern Africa, poisoning and belief-based use are the leading threats to vulture populations. To tackle this threat, conservationists and other stakeholders converged at the Cresta Lodge Hotel in Harare, Zimbabwe, from 9-10th April 2024 to discuss the threat of lead poisoning in vultures from lead ammunition. Lead (Pb) has serious impacts on vultures and other wildlife. In vultures, it affects all the main organs leading to death. It also affects their capacity to breed effectively.

The Vulture Lead Advocacy Workshop, co-organised by BirdLife Zimbabwe (BirdLife Partner in Zimbabwe) and Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZPWMA), brought together participants from Rural District Councils, universities, the Zimbabwe Republic Police, Zimbabwe Professional Guides and Hunters Association, retailers of arms and ammunition, Veterinarians and Civil Society Organizations.

During the first day of the workshop, presentations were made on the importance of vultures as nature's clean-up crew and the threats they face, particularly from lead in ammunition. Links between the impacts of lead on human health were also ably demonstrated.

While opening the meeting, Roseline Mandisodza-Chikerema, Chief Ecologist for Terrestrial Ecosystems at Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority said collective efforts during the workshop would not only benefit Zimbabwe but would also play a pivotal role in shaping a broader Southern African Development Community (SADC) strategy for wildlife conservation across the region.

"Let us seize this opportunity to collaborate, innovate, and drive positive change to benefit our vultures, wildlife, and ecosystems. We must develop an actionable vulture lead plan backed up by a sustainable financing plan," she added.

"Julia Pierini, the CEO of BirdLife Zimbabwe emphasized the need for concerted effort to tackle the vulture crisis in Africa and in Zimbabwe.

"I am encouraged by the ongoing support and collaboration of Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority and the committed participation of the varied stakeholders represented here at this meeting. Lead affects vultures, other wildlife, and humans. We should all work together to identify a pathway towards the phasing out of lead in the environment, especially in ammunition," she noted.

Vultures in Asia faced a single threat – poisoning from a veterinary drug, diclofenac, but their numbers plummeted. Vultures in Africa face several threats including belief-based use and poisoning, including lead poisoning from ammunition and therefore the need for urgent action," said Lovelater Sebele, Senior Vulture Conservation Officer for Southern Africa at BirdLife International.

"Studies have shown that lead in carcasses shot with lead ammunition is poisoning vultures. It is negatively impacting vulture population growth and neurological development. Human health is also being impacted as humans are exposed to lead from ammunition in several pathways. Addressing this threat will require a One Health approach," she added.

The One Health approach is unified action that seeks to find solutions for people, animals, and the environment. Participants at the workshop agreed to develop a Wildlife Lead Action Plan to help Zimbabwe address the dangers posed by lead, emphasizing collaboration and a multi-stakeholder approach as key to success.

The workshop also identified key issues – prerequisites for accelerating the removal of lead as a threat to vultures – which will also benefit other wildlife and people. They include the need for more research, education and awareness raising, establishment of strong policies and legislation to regulate lead use, identification of feasible alternatives and provision of sustainable financing to make the switch from lead ammunition.

Other global initiatives like the Minamata Convention to address mercury poisoning, the ban on lead fuel and ongoing efforts to ban lead paint and lead batteries demonstrate that success is possible.

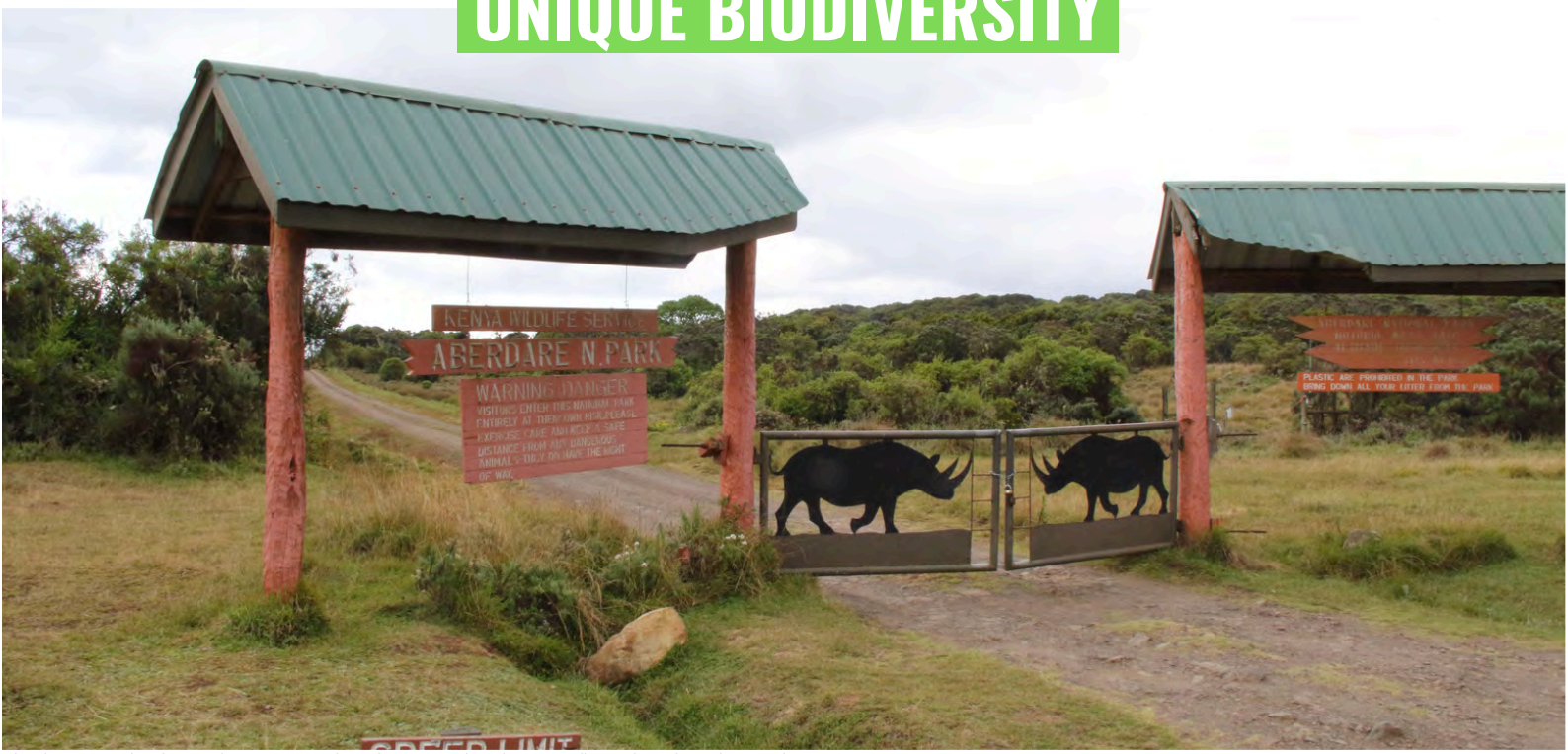
"Phasing out of lead ammunition in Zimbabwe, Africa and the rest of world is possible. The approach must be science-led and collaborative. It must also recognize the urgency and move with speed, establish an efficient delivery mechanism, be strongly anchored in policy and legislation, and have a global accountability mechanism," concluded Ken Mwathe, the Policy, Climate and Communications Coordinator for Africa at BirdLife International.

"

Let us seize this opportunity to collaborate, innovate, and drive positive change that will benefit our vultures, wildlife, and ecosystems. We must develop an actionable vulture lead plan backed up by a sustainable financing plan.

Roseline Mandisodza-Chikerema
Chief Ecologist for Terrestrial Ecosystems at
Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority

ROAD PROJECT ACROSS ABERDARE MOUNTAINS THREATENS UNIQUE BIODIVERSITY



Aberdare National Park's Mutubio West Gate where the proposed road section will pass through © John Mwacharo

By Caroline Chebet

Often, the earthly scent of damp vegetation mingles with buzzing insects to punctuate the silence between the rhythmic crunch of tyres on gravel as one drives through Aberdare Forest Reserve and National Park on a regular safari through the Matubio West Gate. At elevations over 3,000 metres above sea level (MASL), the picturesque scenes on this narrow road are often swallowed by the dense fog that frequently hangs heavy in the cold forest air. The kind of cold that turns breath into puffs of white mist.

But now there are renewed concerns that these pristine scenes within the delicate Aberdare ecosystem could soon be forgotten if the Kenya National Highway Authority (KeNHA) pushes on to upgrade the road from a park murram road, accessible to park visitors only, to a national highway open to all traffic.

On January 5 this year, the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) gave KeNHA the green light to construct the Ihithe-Ndunyu Njeru road. A section of the road cuts through the Aberdare Forest Reserve and National Park. Nature Kenya and other conservation stakeholders object to this decision.

Across Africa, the development of major infrastructure including railways, roads, and ports has had negative impacts on natural ecosystems, leading to a decrease in wildlife abundance, restricting wildlife's distribution range, and intensifying human-wildlife conflict among others.

Nature Kenya is perturbed by NEMA's ill-advised decision to issue an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) license for the controversial road project. NEMA approved a poorly formulated EIA and went ahead to issue a license to implement a project that is ecologically deleterious and economically unviable when there is an alternative route available," says Dr Paul Matiku, Nature Kenya Executive Director.

Dr Matiku adds that the move is irresponsible, and a breach of the trust bestowed to the authority, warning that the impact of the proposed 49-kilometer road will be detrimental to the delicate Aberdare ecosystem.

One of the wetlands in Aberdare Forest © John Mwacharo

The Aberdare Mountains Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) in the central Kenya highlands, forms part of the eastern escarpment of the Rift Valley. It is a stunning landscape where lush forests, sweeping grasslands, bamboo thickets, montane moorlands and misty peaks converge to create a sanctuary like no other. It comprises 76,600 ha of National Park and 108,400 ha of Forest Reserve.

The ecosystem is amongst the five main 'water towers' of Kenya, forming a catchment area for dams supplying water to Nairobi City, the Athi-Galana-Sabaki River draining into the Indian Ocean, the Ewaso Nyiro River draining into Lorian Swamp, and the Malewa River draining into Lake Naivasha.

The ecosystem is critical for many communities who depend on agriculture to improve their livelihoods. Being a water catchment area, it is critical for communities living downstream in Aberdare and other areas.

Besides the social, cultural, and recreational opportunities it offers, the Aberdares KBA boasts a diverse array of wildlife, including the critically endangered Mountain Bongo. Over 300 bird species have been recorded, including the rare and globally threatened Aberdare Cisticola (*Cisticola Aberdare*) Abbott's Starling (*Arizelopsar femoralis*) Jackson's Widowbird, (*Euplectes jacksoni*) and Sharpe's Longclaw (*Macronyx sharpei*)

Endemic species such as the Aberdare mole shrew and the Aberdare frog highlight the area's evolutionary importance. A hotspot for biodiversity, the KBA serves as a living laboratory for scientists, offering insights into ecological processes, species interactions, and the intricate web of life that sustains this remarkable ecosystem.

The road is planned to cut through the KBA, including its most sensitive areas like the wilderness activity zone, a decision which Dr Matiku argues did not consider ecological, social, and economic attributes of the water catchment and KBA.

As per the NEMA license, some 255 acres comprising 185 acres (75ha) of bamboo, 35 acres (14ha) of montane forest, and 35 acres (14ha) of moorland will be affected by the road section passing through the Aberdare Forest Reserve and National Park.

A study conducted by the universities of Nairobi, Oxford and Amsterdam to look at the potential socio-economic benefits of the proposed road in 2020 revealed no socio-economic benefit of building the road.

The study report titled, "Evaluating the socio-economic potential of road development projects around the Aberdare range" revealed that there is no evidence that the proposed reduces travel times to the market as vehicles will have to climb steep gradients


Abbott's Starling, one of the threatened birds found in Aberdare Forest © Peter Steward

to an altitude of 3,203 meters at Mutubio Gate to reach the moorlands and descend steep gradients from an altitude of 3,000 metres at Kiandingoro Gate on the other side of the park.

“Despite experts' and scientists' advice that the road through the Aberdares is not ecologically, socially and economically viable, the government intends to pursue the project. Ecosystem services offered by the Aberdare Forest will be compromised for future generations,” he says.

Kenya is a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which obliges party states to protect all globally threatened species within their borders. The construction of the road poses a threat to the critically endangered and threatened species in the Aberdare ecosystem, including the Mountain Bongo, which is estimated to have only about 100 individuals in four isolated locations in Kenya.

Aberdare National Park currently hosts the largest group comprising 40-50 individuals, which experts say warrants attention.

“The road project works against the national government's obligation as stipulated in the Constitution of Kenya 2010, the National Wildlife Strategy 2030, and in Multilateral Environmental Agreements,” Dr Matiku argues.

Higher traffic usage of the proposed upgraded road is expected to result in frequent collisions with wildlife, impacting threatened and endemic species, and increasing road accidents.

With the current Aberdare elephant population estimated to represent nearly 10 per cent of the total elephant population in the country, the elephant density in the forest and park areas crossed by the proposed road is high

This means the proposed road will have a significant long-term impact on this important elephant population through habitat destruction and disturbance during the road's construction and traffic, and road killings.

“Goal A of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework calls for halting human-induced extinction of known threatened species and reducing extinction rates and risks of all species tenfold by 2050. The framework targets to halt extinctions, decrease biodiversity loss, and protect 30 per cent of the planet by 2030. It is unfortunate and ironic that the untenable road project is happening now,” says Dr Matiku.

With global efforts to address the triple planetary crisis, including climate change and biodiversity loss accelerating, we call upon Kenya to reject the planned road through Aberdares. Kenya has always ably played a key environmental leadership role regionally and internationally. We hope it will maintain this leadership by protecting this critical ecosystem for climate, biodiversity, and for this and future generations,” adds Ken Mwathe, Policy, Climate and Communications Coordinator for Africa at BirdLife International.

Being a continental leader in addressing climate change, with priorities aligned to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation through afforestation and reforestation initiatives among other priorities, Kenya seems not to demonstrate these commitments as the construction of the road will lead to the felling of a large number of indigenous trees, in particular within the Forest Reserve, and also in the National Park.

“While the government leans on the opinion that the road will spur economic growth between Nyeri, Nyandarua and Kirinyaga counties, scientific studies have shown that there is no evidence of socio-economic benefit to building a road over the Aberdare Mountains through the Aberdare National Park and the Forest Reserve.

Conservationists argue that the proposed road will not bring people closer to the main roads as it will cross a forest reserve and an uninhabited park. The proposed road will also not reduce travel time to markets.

“From the foregoing, it is clear that the rationale presented for the proposed Ihithe – Aberdare Forest–Aberdare National Park - Ndunyu Njeru road is fundamentally flawed. The proposal ignores the solid weight of evidence, expert opinions,

The Queen's Cave Waterfalls in Aberdare Forest © John Mwacharo

international commitments, national policies, and laws concerning a most critical resource. Prudence dictates that the proposal is permanently set aside," Executive director for Rhino Ark, Christian Lambrechts says.

Collaboration is essential for safeguarding this vital site. Conservation organizations, local communities, and other stakeholders must work together to protect the biodiversity of the area. The Conservation Alliance of Kenya, made up of 73 member organizations, including Nature Kenya, has filed an appeal at the National Environment Tribunal.

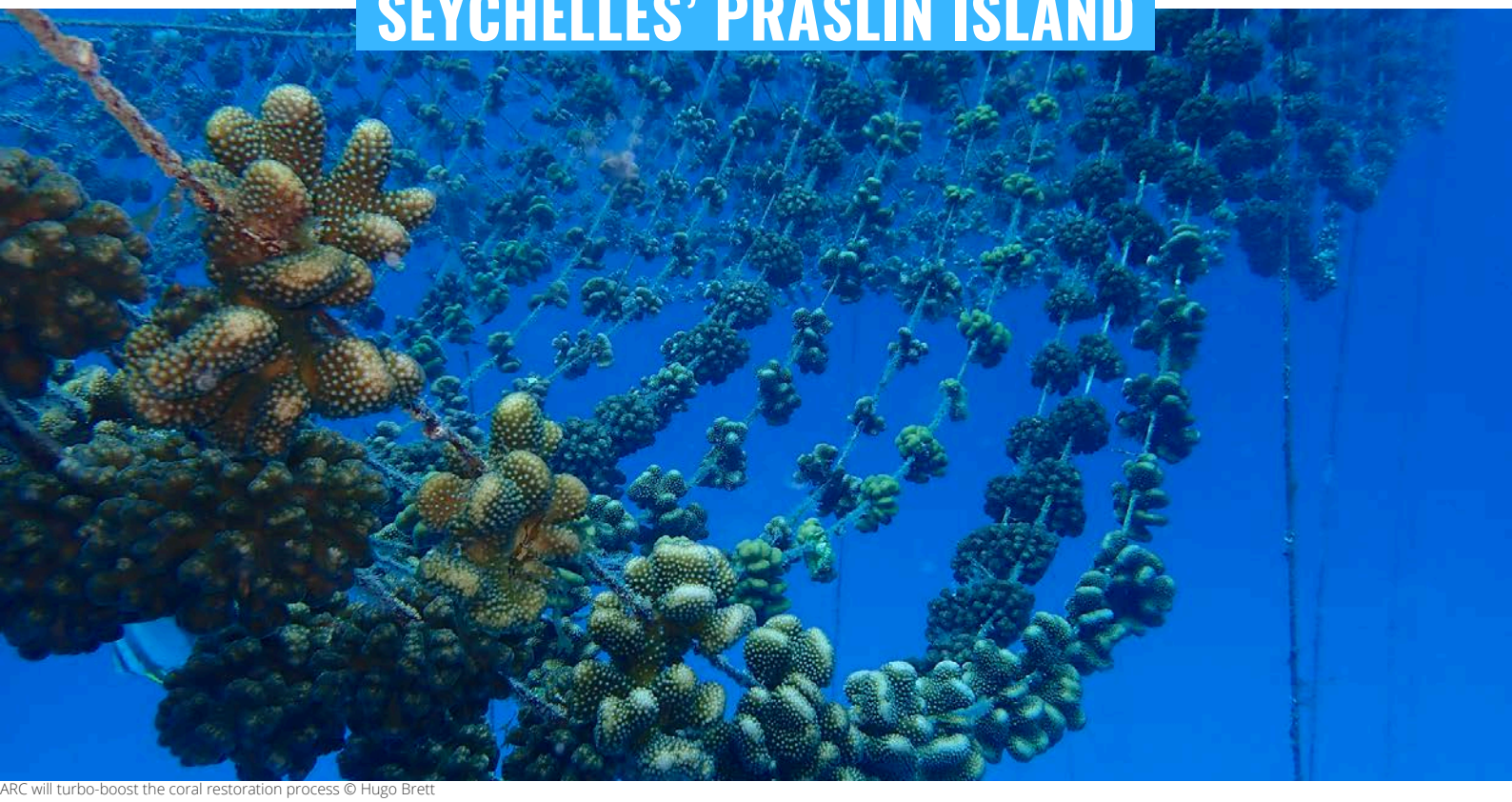
They are seeking to stop the construction of a controversial road section that would harm the Key Biodiversity Area (KBA). The Alliance has proposed an alternative route for the road that would have minimal impact on biodiversity and be just as effective for travel.

On 15th April 2024, the Nyeri Environment and Land Court issued a conservatory order suspending the construction of the road, pending an application hearing on 29th April 2024. Nature Kenya and partners will continue monitoring the situation, as they fight to protect the Aberdare.

> *"Kenya is a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which obliges party states to protect all globally threatened species within their borders. The construction of the road poses a threat to the critically endangered and threatened species in the Aberdare ecosystem*

Dr Paul Matiku
Executive Director, Nature Kenya

CONSTRUCTION OF AFRICA'S FIRST REGENERATIVE CORAL AQUACULTURE FACILITY BEGINS IN SEYCHELLES' PRASLIN ISLAND



ARC will turbo-boost the coral restoration process © Hugo Brett

By Liz Mwambui

Construction of Africa's first on-land regenerative coral aquaculture facility designed to mitigate the adverse effects of climate change on coral reefs has begun on Praslin Island, Seychelles' second largest island.

The ambitious project, spearheaded by the environmental non-profit Nature Seychelles, is set to revolutionize coral reef conservation and restoration.

The building of the facility, known as the Assisted Recovery of Corals (ARC), commenced in November 2023 after all necessary permits and rigorous requirements, including community engagement, environmental impact assessment (EIA), planning approval, road cutting for pipes, aquaculture license, and donors' social and environmental screening, were secured.

The facility financially supported the Adaptation Fund through UNDP and the Government of Seychelles, the global shipping and logistics company CMA CGM, and the Seychelles Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust (SeyCCAT), is scheduled to be completed in June 2024.

Situated at the Nature Seychelles' CORAL complex at Amitie, Praslin, ARC will act as a coral bank to preserve the genetic diversity of corals in Seychelles.

Importantly, it will turbo-boost the restoration process by producing thousands of corals through a revolutionary technique known as micro-fragmentation to supplement the ocean-based nurseries already in use.

Micro-fragmentation breaks corals into tiny pieces, which are cultivated under optimal conditions that help them grow faster than the normal rate and exponentially increase the numbers produced. This is especially significant for slow-growing corals that are often not used in reef restoration activities. It also reduces coral collection in the wild.

Construction of Africa's first on-land regenerative coral aquaculture facility has began © Hugo Brett

Nature Seychelles hired renowned coral restoration expert Dr David Vaughan, who discovered micro-fragmentation, to produce the facility's technical design. The facility includes coral micro-fragmentation and public education areas. Specialist equipment has been procured and delivered to the site for this purpose.

The facility will be powered by renewable energy, with solar panels mounted on the roof. The project team is actively working with the Public Utilities Company to determine the size of the rooftop photovoltaic (PV) array that can be installed.

As construction progresses, anticipation is building with Praslinois curious to see the result of the building that is taking shape before their eyes.

"The construction of this facility is momentous for Seychelles and Africa as a whole. It will not only serve as a model for coral aquaculture but will also provide valuable insights into innovative approaches to combating climate change impacts for the region. We have a sustainability plan in place to produce at a large scale to supply corals to other coral reef restoration projects," says Dr Nirmal Shah, Nature Seychelles Chief Executive.

Watch this space for updates on Africa's first coral aquaculture facility.

"The construction of this facility is momentous for Seychelles and Africa as a whole. It will not only serve as a model for coral aquaculture but will also provide valuable insights into innovative approaches to combating climate change impacts for the region. We have a sustainability plan in place to produce at a large scale to supply corals to other coral reef restoration projects,

Dr Nirmal Shah
Chief Executive, Nature Seychelles

CAPACITY BUILDING FOR CONSERVATION IN MALAWI

KBA Training in Malawi © Fred Barasa

By Fred Barasa

As governments negotiate the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework to tackle the biodiversity and climate change crises, there is a strong and growing support for effectively protecting and conserving at least 30% of the earth's land and sea by 2030, particularly areas of importance for biodiversity i.e. Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs), to tackle the biodiversity and climate change crises.

KBAs are defined as sites that contribute significantly to the global persistence of biodiversity. Many are irreplaceable, and all are critical to sustaining life on our planet. KBAs are also particularly important for Indigenous Peoples and local Communities (IPLCs), with 36% of the extent of existing KBAs found in IPLC lands.

KBAs are identified nationally, through highly inclusive, consultative, multi-stakeholder, bottom-up processes. Over 16,000 KBAs have been identified to date, in all countries and ecosystems, including through BirdLife's Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs) programme. In Africa, over 1350 KBAs have been identified so far, with 38 of them being found in Malawi. However, there are crucial gaps in geographic, taxonomic, and ecosystem coverage, and many sites now have outdated information

Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) in Africa face a multitude of threats, many of which are intensified by human activities and climate change. Some of the common threats include habitat loss and degradation, climate change, invasive species, overexploitation, illegal wildlife trade, pollution, fragmentation, and damaging infrastructure development among others.

To effectively address the global biodiversity crisis and ensure the survival of our planet's unique and irreplaceable natural heritage, its prudent to identify, map and monitor these KBAs.

Consequently, there is now urgent need and critical time-window to support implementation of such efforts and ensure they are effective. This requires expanded protected and conserved area networks to be in the right places to effectively conserve biodiversity, because it is not distributed evenly across the globe.

Further, ensuring that decision-makers from government, the private sector and civil society know where key sites are and have easy access to site information is essential to the effective planning of investments in conservation, infrastructure, and sustainable economic development.

In March 2024, a KBA training was held in Malawi in collaboration with the Wildlife and Environmental Society of Malawi (WESM). The training, which brought together 18 participants from various sectors was part of the project that is implementing activities of the Dawin Funded 'Community Approach to Waterbird Resource Management, at Chia Lagoon, Malawi's largest lagoon.

The project aims at reversing vulnerable bird declines, establishing bird sanctuaries, restoring habitats, and providing biodiversity data for monitoring and site assessment while improving livelihoods in the lagoon which supports more than 7800 households. Further, Chia Lagoon is expected to be assessed against the Key Biodiversity Area criteria (birds, fish and at least one other taxa) and in discussion with the National KBA Coordination Group.

Chia Lagoon is a critical KBA in Malawi, home to important biodiversity while supporting the livelihoods of thousands. Collaborations between various stakeholders including local authorities and community members will be critical in restoring the lagoon, says Blessings Chingagwe, WESM Programme Manager.

As part of the workshop proceedings, participants undertook a training and capacity-building exercise on the identification, proposal and review of KBAs to the National Coordination Group. National Coordination Groups (NCGs) have been prescribed as the institutional mechanisms in each country for overseeing the process of identifying and monitoring KBAs.

Their structures generally involve a mixture of governmental, and non-governmental organisations, local communities, and academics. This mechanism of establishing an NCG encourages national cooperation for overseeing the conservation of biodiversity and brings together different sectors of society fostering inclusive governance and exchange of experience and co-learning.

In addition, the workshop sought to raise awareness of the 38 KBAs in Malawi and establish taxonomic working groups within the NCG. The various taxa that were represented during the workshop were from the Birds, Plants, Insects, Plant genetics, Herpetofauna, Orchids, Aquatics, and representatives from the National Parks and CBD focal point for Malawi.

"Following the workshop, I have a better understanding of the KBAs in the country and the need to protect them. I look forward to being part of the Malawi National Coordination Group, and working with other stakeholders to ensure that these biodiversity-rich areas are protected", said Dr Emmanuel Vellemu, Freshwater Biodiversity Expert at Malawi University of Science and Technology (MUST).

With the concluded training, the mapping of new KBAs, re-assessment of the legacy KBAs and their monitoring in Malawi is expected to be carried out by the team leading to the updating of the information in the World Database of Key Biodiversity Areas. More accurate information is expected in the database, crucial for policy engagements henceforth. Additionally, a work plan to achieve these was developed at the workshop.

"The WESM team is grateful for this training which not only brought together various experts but also rejuvenated the NCG. We look forward to further collaboration to ensure Malawi's biodiversity is preserved", concludes Chingagwe.

CELEBRATING WORLD WETLANDS DAY IN MAURITANIA

Group picture © Nature Mauritania

By Nouma Watt

Every year, the world celebrates World Wetlands Day to commemorate the adoption of the Convention on Wetlands on February 2, 1971, in the Iranian city of Ramsar. This day serves to raise awareness of the vital role of wetlands for humanity and the planet. Mauritania is home to various wetlands including coastal and continental wetlands, including the 12000 square kilometre Banc d'Arguin National Park. Banc d'Arguin has the largest concentration of West African birds hosting over two million migratory or resident birds. In addition, Mauritania's wetlands are of great economic and socio-cultural importance to local populations, supporting fishing, agriculture, livestock farming and tourism, providing livelihoods for local communities and contributing to the national economy.

In 2024, Nature Mauritania marked WWD 2024, combining it with the Spring Alive program; which is a project organized by BirdLife International, and made possible through the generous support of Heidelberg Cement, the project aims at inspiring and educating children across Africa and Eurasia about the wonders of nature and bird migration through workshops, school activities and family events,

This initiative aims to create the next generation of conservationists. Spring Alive seeks to encourage the wider community to become more involved in nature conservation by establishing a framework for the exchange of experience in environmental education.

The celebrations, which brought together over 40 participants, from Heidelberg Cement, PRCM and Noura School in Nouakchott featured various activities, including birdwatching on Nouakchott beach, bird migration games and beach clean-ups, among others. Participants were able to identify various bird species, including Grey gulls (*Larus modestus*), Brown-hooded gulls (*Larus maculipennis*) and Caspian (*Hydroprogne caspia*) and Royal Terns (*Thalasseus maximus*).

To better illustrate bird migration, a game was designed and played by the schoolchildren on the Birdwatching website. Thanks to this game, schoolchildren and other participants were able to get a clear idea of the different pressures and threats faced by birds during migration.

As well as the different threats to our wetlands and, consequently, the need to work together along the flyway to better manage key sites.

“Bird games are lessons in migration in disguise, where every flap of the wing is a step into the unknown. They remind us of the importance of following our instincts, exploring new horizons, and finding our own way to uncharted lands”, said Amady Ndiaye, Head of IBA Programme, Nature Mauritania

Participants also took part in a listening game where they connected with nature and expressed their feelings and what they heard about the environment around them.

Like many beaches around the world, Mauritania's beaches are in danger of becoming veritable rubbish dumps, threatening the biodiversity of the marine and coastal environment. To this end, participants took part in beach clean-up exercises throughout the day.

“Cleaning a beach means erasing traces of human neglect and painting a picture of purity and respect for our environment. Every piece of garbage collected is a promise to preserve the natural beauty of our coasts, and every gesture counts to preserve the ocean that connects us all”, concluded Zeina Diouwara, a student at Noura school.

Game on bird migration © Nature Mauritania

PROMOTING A SUSTAINABLE BLUE AND GREEN FUTURE IN SAO TOME AND PRINCIPE

Capacity training on sustainable finances with local institutions © BirdLife

By Marquinha Martins & Vânia Trovoada

Despite Sao Tome and Principe's small size of 1001 Km², the archipelago is a true biodiversity gem encompassing an exceptionally high number of endemic species, including eight mammals, eight amphibians, 17 reptiles and 28 bird species found nowhere else on earth, like the beautiful African Emerald Cuckoo (*Chrysococcyx cupreus*) and the famous Splendid Starling (*Lamprotornus splendidus*).

Further, the islands' tropical climate and mountainous relief as well as their geographical location and isolation from the African mainland, provided a remarkable richness in biodiversity, making the country worthy of being recognised as a biodiversity hotspot in the Gulf of Guinea.

However, the country's terrestrial and marine ecosystems are now threatened by human activity and natural events, such as illegal extraction of aggregates, or the increase in floods due to extreme rains. Further compounding the situation is the lack of adequate technical and financial resources needed to manage protected areas in the country including the Obô Natural Parks, 21 Special Reserves established in 2023, in addition to Principe Island which has been nominated as a UNESCO biosphere reserve for over 10 years.

The EcoTela Fund

To address these issues, Sao Tome and Principe is now turning to sustainable financing mechanisms for biodiversity, creating and operationalising a conservation trust fund, named STP EcoTela Fund.

EcoTela (loosely meaning "Eco Land" in the local dialect) funded by European Union (EU) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF) began implementation in 2023 with the government's leadership and BirdLife International's technical support on this process, which includes supporting the conception and operationalization procedures of the Fund and advocating for higher national appropriation by supporting the inception of the Interministerial committees which plays an oversight role in the Fund's establishment.

"It is envisaged that the EcoTela Fund will be a strategic vehicle to mobilize and centralise long-term financing resources and channel them towards conservation-based actions as well as sustainable forest and landscape and climate management", says Agostinho Fernandes, Head of BirdLife Office in STP.

Further, the Fund will promote social development through integrated blue and green economy, using the following main capitalization schemes including an endowment scheme which may include resources from debt swaps and grants from major donors; a sinking scheme, that may receive grants from bilateral, multilateral, or private foundations and a revolving scheme, that may receive revenues from taxes, carbon financing and payment for ecosystem services.

It is envisaged that the fund will be fully operational by 2026 and will target spending of at least 1.5 million EUR a year needed to effectively manage the country's protected areas.

The EcoTela fund will cover the management cost of the Protected Areas network including the sustainable management of recently created 21 special reserves (one of many BirdLife successes in the country), finance local conservation initiatives and projects from local NGOs, and foster blue and green economy by supporting the private sector that showcases positive impacts on the nature.

"When fully operational the STP EcoTela Fund will have the potential to cover most protected areas and biodiversity funding needs in São Tomé and Príncipe. Considering the lessons learned from other successful Conservation Trust Funds such as the BIOFUND in Mozambique and the FAPBM in Madagascar (among others) will be critical to shape a domestic financing mechanism that will contribute to building a sustainable green and blue economy", says Ludwing Liagre, Managing Director of Rio Tinto.

Achieving EcoTela's full capacity

To achieve such ambitious objectives, the structure of the fund is designed to have administrative and governance independence aiming to capitalise not only external funding but also public and private national revenues.

Work on the fund's implementation continued with the formation of the interministerial committee in 2023, which will provide technical support and oversee the implementation of the sustainable finance instruments. This will be followed by a legal analysis of the governance structure and the development of a 10-year capacity-building plan, as well as the development of the Fund's national visual identity, which should all be finalised by 2026 for full operationalization.

"Sustainable finances are a prerequisite to achieving the "Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)" and obliges us to finance the transition to a sustainable socio-economic path, in a country dependent on foreign aid where its public resources alone are not enough to close the existing financing gap", notes Genesio da Mata, STP Minister for Planning and Finance.

What will happen next?

The first-year milestone was the promotion of dialogues and consultation among the local stakeholders getting them on board as well as creating a multisectoral committee created by the Decree N° 43/2023. As it is now in the second year of the fund's implementation, there are various legal steps to be developed towards its operationalisation, including the validation of the concept note by the interministerial committee in April 2024, registration of the national foundation and endowment fund and the development of a marketing and communications plan.

In parallel to a training session directed at public institutions, civil society and private sector representatives, fundraising efforts are already underway to showcase the implementation process of the fund to possible donors.

Despite being an innovative tool still in its early stages, the EcoTela Fund is already attracting much interest. The Santomean government has demonstrated intention of using debt-for-nature swaps to negotiate with bilateral partners, which could in turn redirect potential values through the EcoTela Fund, towards the development of the blue and green economy in STP.

LEVERAGING DIGITAL INNOVATIONS FOR WILDLIFE CONSERVATION IN UGANDA

Participants at the Digital Innovations Conference © Phionah Mwesige

By Phionah Mwesige

In a world where digital connectivity shapes every facet of our lives, it's imperative that we extend this connectivity to the realm of wildlife conservation. This was the central focus of the National Wildlife Conservation Conference, held in Uganda on February 22nd, 2024, as part of the World Wildlife Day 2024 celebrations.

Uganda's biodiversity is faced with complex challenges that range from unsustainable resource use practices to high poverty levels, which inevitably lead to habitat degradation and biodiversity loss. Habitat loss accounts for the biggest factor to biodiversity loss mainly driven by human activities including agriculture expansion, urbanization, and infrastructure projects, among others.

Since the 1960s, Uganda has witnessed a staggering loss of over 6 million hectares of forests, dwindling from nearly 10 million hectares (49%) to less than 3.5 million hectares (8%). Presently, the country is losing forests at an alarming rate of 100,000 to 200,000 hectares annually, suggesting that Uganda's natural forests could vanish within a mere 15 years.

Similarly, wetlands are experiencing a decline, with their coverage decreasing from 15% in the 1970s to less than 8% today. Further, the country is estimated to lose 1% of its biodiversity annually. Although the country boasts of comprehensive environmental legislation, implementation and enforcement remain weak.

Themed ***Connecting People and the Planet: Exploring Digital Innovations for Wildlife Conservation***, the conference organized by BirdLife partner, NatureUganda (NU) in collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and the Uganda Wildlife Research and Training Institute (UWRTI), brought together stakeholders from various sectors to explore the transformative potential of technology in safeguarding biodiversity and preserving our natural heritage.

The conference featured a diverse array of presentations and discussions, each shedding light on different aspects of digital innovation in conservation. One of the key objectives was to showcase the latest applications of digital technologies, including space technologies, data analytics, and citizen science initiatives, in wildlife management and biodiversity conservation. Presenters highlighted the role of digital tracking devices, such as SMART technologies, in monitoring and combating illegal wildlife trade and trafficking. They also emphasized the importance of capacity building and collaboration in implementing these solutions effectively.

Dr Chris Baryomunsi, Minister of ICT and National Guidance, underscored the indispensable role of technology in enhancing efficiency in wildlife conservation and natural resource management. He reiterated the government's commitment to promoting accessibility to technology across all segments of society, recognizing its pivotal role in advancing conservation efforts. 'We must do everything possible to integrate technology and make technology central in the management of wildlife conservation and other natural resources.' he noted.

The conference explored the vital role of citizen science facilitated by mobile applications in generating wildlife data at the local level, emphasizing the importance of grassroots involvement with a key presentation on local-based monitoring by Jimmy Muheebwa, Nature Uganda's Director of Conservation and Partnerships.

For over 20 years, NatureUganda (NU) has implemented conservation projects based on priority species, sites and habitats with people because it recognizes their custodianship role and Indigenous knowledge. Further, NU implements research, conservation and advocacy programmes on these priorities, achieved through conservation projects, environmental education together with government lead agencies, local government and local communities, and membership programmes activities such as Public Talks, conservation conferences, excursions, and Nature-walks that are key advocacy and public awareness tools.

"There is a need for collaboration and inclusivity through multi-stakeholder engagements. This will be instrumental in helping us achieve our common conservation goals", says Achilles Byaruhanga, Nature Uganda's Executive Director.

Similarly, Mr. Sam Mwandha, Executive Director of the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), outlined UWA's strategic plan to leverage technology for real-time monitoring and data management to protect endangered species and their habitats.

Throughout the conference, participants engaged in robust discussions on harnessing technology to address pressing conservation challenges, ranging from habitat loss to wildlife poaching. While acknowledging the immense opportunities presented by technology, they also highlighted the need for concerted efforts to overcome barriers such as high costs, limited human capacity, and the necessity for continuous innovation.

Additionally, the conference raised awareness about the latest applications of digital technologies in wildlife conservation and trade and about the impact of digital interventions on ecosystems and communities around the world while putting light on the bottlenecks in the drive to human-wildlife coexistence in an increasingly connected world. Michael Kibuule, Program Manager, NatureUganda, highlighted the importance of data sharing and collaboration platforms, with a focus on best practices in conservation networks to foster collective efforts towards wildlife conservation

The National Wildlife Conservation Conference served as a rallying point for stakeholders to unite around the common goal of leveraging digital innovations for wildlife conservation. By fostering collaboration, sharing knowledge, and advocating for inclusive approaches, the conference laid the groundwork for a more technologically empowered and sustainable future for wildlife and ecosystems.

"As conservationists navigate the digital age of wildlife management and conservation, there remains significant work to be done in raising awareness within communities and aligning their actions with conservation goals. The government, private sector, and members of the public must collectively acknowledge the importance of addressing challenges of wildlife conservation and devise effective strategies for improving the current situation. Only through concerted efforts can we effectively conserve our country's remaining natural resources and foster harmonious coexistence between humans and wildlife", concludes Byaruhanga.

IN THE FIELD WITH MWF'S MAURITIUS KESTREL TEAM

Josua Hollandais repairing and fixing a broken nest box © Thierry Runghen

By Thierry Runghen

The Mauritius Kestrel (*Falco punctatus*) is unique to Mauritius and is one of the nine surviving endemic birds on the island. Following the colonisation of Mauritius by humans, the bird declined dramatically due to habitat destruction, the introduction of invasive competitors and predator species in addition to the use of pesticides. By 1974, only four known individuals existed in the country, including one breeding female remaining, thus it was considered one of the rarest birds in the world. Emergency measures were taken to save the species. Intensive conservation management actions were initiated in the late 1970s by the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation (MWF) with the aid of its partners such as the Government of Mauritius and Peregrine Fund (US).

When the Mauritius Kestrel breeding season comes to an end in February, the MWF Mauritius Kestrel team begin cleaning and maintenance work on their network of nest boxes which consists of some 138 nest boxes installed in the Black River Gorges National Park in the country's west coast and in surrounding areas, mainly, Brise Fer, Black River, Case Noyale, Chamarel and Bel Ombre and in the East Coast subpopulation in the Bambou mountain range.

The Mauritius Kestrel is a secondary cavity nester i.e., it uses naturally occurring cavities in cliffs and trees for breeding. These naturally occurring cavities are limited in Mauritius as invasive alien species will compete for cavities and exclude the Mauritius Kestrel,

Also, mature cavity-forming endemic trees are rare (and in decline) due to habitat loss and degradation.

The advantage of nest boxes is that they provide a place for the Mauritius Kestrel to breed when natural cavities are limited. They are also weatherproof meaning that the species has somewhere safe and secure to breed, further, natural cavities can be prone to flooding or can be too exposed to the weather.

Additionally, the nest boxes also reduce the impact of predation by monkeys as they are long, meaning that it is difficult for monkeys to reach in and remove eggs or chicks. Nest boxes are also advantageous as they are easily accessible for our field teams, which facilitates our monitoring and management of the species.

Nest boxes must be as clean and hygienic as possible, should be securely fastened to the tree and should provide shelter from the weather.

The recovery of the Mauritius Kestrel population from a handful of individuals to a few hundred would not have been possible without the use of nest boxes. Good quality breeding sites are too limited within Mauritius, without nest boxes breeding productivity would have always remained too low in the wild. Nest boxes have also been beneficial to our field teams as they facilitate the monitoring and management of the species", says Sion Henshaw, Fauna Manager of MWF.

The nest boxes provided by the team are specifically designed to exclude certain predators, for instance, the length of the nest box prevents monkeys (*Macaca fascicularis*) from reaching into predate eggs or chicks.

These maintenance works are critical as they lay the foundation for the success of the next breeding season. We followed MWF staff Josua Hollandais, Mauritius Kestrel Project Assistant Coordinator, and Jauffrey Maurer, Mauritius Kestrel Project Conservation Biologist, on one of these trips.

Early morning, Josua and Jauffrey are already in the field, slowly but surely driving off-road on difficult dirt tracks in the 'Bon Courage' (southwest Mauritius) deer hunting grounds towards the few Mauritius Kestrel nest boxes in the area. As they arrive near the first site, they notice that the box has fallen out of the tree. "It might be due to strong winds which the country has experienced during this cyclonic season", says Josua. Without delay, both staff remove some equipment from the van and start working on replacing the nest box, in a space between the trunk of the tree and one of its main branches.

Josua proceeds to climb up the tree. He then nails, some pieces of wood to the nest box, to strengthen it and makes sure that it is prepared to face strong winds. Jauffrey helps by handing his field partner the equipment needed. A battery-powered drill is also used to fix the nest box in its place. As soon as it is secure, Josua cleans the box inside and adds some fresh coral sand (nesting material that mimics the substrate found in cliff cavities where the Mauritius Kestrel breeds naturally).

As the maintenance work is completed in the first nest box, the team moves to the next one. A quick observation makes the staff suspect that there might be other species inside the box. Josua takes a cautious look and notices honeybees flying in and out of the nest box, a common observation for the team.

"This is not unusual; bees often use nest boxes. We will have to come back another time equipped with bee suits and a smoker to smoke the nest box to remove the bees. We will also remove the honeycomb. Then, we will make a follow-up visit to confirm that the bees have not returned. If they do return, we would then have to keep repeating the process until complete bee removal is successful", explains Jauffrey.

The last nest box visited on the day, on the way to Case Noyale, is upsetting. An empty unhatched egg lies in the nest box, representing a failed breeding attempt from the known Mauritius Kestrel pair which had been observed in the area.

MWF staff climbing to access nest boxes placed on trees © Thierry Runghen

A reminder that the survival of endemic species relies on many and sometimes independent factors. The unhatched egg is noted for reporting and the nest box is cleaned and filled with coral sand in anticipation of the next breeding attempt later this year.

All the 138 nest boxes placed across Mauritius will have been cleaned and repaired the natural cavities visited needed to ensure that Mauritius' National Bird has appropriate sites to keep breeding and for the species to continue to thrive.

Having experienced a severe population bottleneck, and to counter the impact of inbreeding depression, in the future, MWF is exploring implementing genetic management of the Mauritius Kestrel. “Genomic research has started for the Mauritius Kestrel, and this will inform the genetic management of the species. Genetic management will likely involve locating individuals that have beneficial genetic traits and deliberately breeding those individuals in a captive setting and releasing their offspring back in to the wild”, concludes Sion.

Nest boxes have been installed across Mauritius © Thierry Runghen

RESTORING MALAWI'S ICONIC CHIA LAGOON

Part of the Chia lagoon pictured during the bird Sanctuary Mapping exercise © Gift Maluwa

By Temwanani Kalulu

Meet Ali Maulidi, the 30-year-old chairperson of the Chimpini Bird Hunting Club in Chimpini Village, Nkhotakota District, Southern Malawi. Since 2017, Ali has been hunting birds for food and sale around Chia Lagoon. Located approximately 24 kilometers south of Nkhotakota town in Central Malawi, Chia Lagoon is the largest lagoon in Malawi. The lagoon covers an impressive 17 square kilometers in the middle of a watershed that stretches across approximately 989 square kilometers.

Chia Lagoon supports diverse ecosystems and is home to various species, including Banded Tilapia (*Tilapia sparrmanii*), and a wide variety of bird species such as Ring-necked Dove (*Streptopelia capicola*), Lesser Masked Weaver (*Ploceus intermedius*), Black Heron (*Egretta ardesiaca*), as well as marsh reeds and shrubs. Further, it supports the livelihoods of more than 7,857 households, including farmers, fishermen, and bird hunters.

"Hunting has been the main economic activity for us. In a good month, we earn about Malawian Kwacha MK100,000 (US$57) from bird hunting. We use this money to purchase food, agricultural inputs, and pay for school fees for our children", says Ali.

Over the years, Ali and many others have observed a gradual decline in bird populations at Chia, significantly affecting their livelihoods.

"Chia Lagoon had plenty of birds that made our hunting very easy and quite enjoyable, but the catches have fallen dramatically with each hunting trip. It is really frustrating because the sales we make from the little catch we get are not adequate to cover our needs. To make matters worse, most bird hunters have no other skills apart from bird hunting, so this is the only way they know how to make money and fend for their families. In my case, I have to travel far distances just to sell the few birds I catch to make ends meet", he adds.

In addition to unsustainable hunting practices, other factors such as habitat destruction and climate change have contributed to this decline.

Ali Maulidi makes a point during a community meeting © Gift Maluwa

In 2023, BirdLife International's partner in Malawi, the Wildlife and Environmental Society of Malawi (WESM), in collaboration with Malawi University of Science and Technology (MUST) and the Micro Loan Foundation, began implementing the "Community Approach to Waterbird Resources Management at Chia Lagoon" project. This three-year project, funded by the UK government through the Darwin Initiative, aims to restore the vital Chia Lagoon ecosystem, reverse declines in vulnerable bird species, and improve local livelihoods. As part of the project implementation activities, WESM has established community-based sustainable hunting groups to better conserve waterbirds through the establishment of bird sanctuaries and habitat restoration activities.

"The project will work with communities to better manage and restore the vital lagoon ecosystem, reverse the decline in vulnerable and declining bird species, and improve livelihoods in the communities. Provision of biodiversity data for monitoring and the site's assessment as a Key Biodiversity Area form key components of the project. Supplemental, sustainable livelihood opportunities will be supported through a micro-lending institution", says Blessing Chingagwe, WESM Programs Manager

Chimpini Hunting Club is working with WESM to implement sustainable bird hunting management, avitourism, monitor and document bird populations, as well as establish bird hunting protocols. As part of these efforts, bird hunting club representatives and traditional leaders participated in an exchange visit to Lake Chilwa in southern Malawi, which focused on key areas including hunting management, bird census, and record-keeping and management.

In March 2023, the project facilitated the first bird guiding training, with 180 hunters trained on how to identify and record bird species as part of capacity building in avitourism. Additionally, the project procured, distributed, and supervised the planting of 6,000 tree seedlings as part of restoration activities of degraded areas around Chia Lagoon, covering 8.1 hectares. Two village Natural Resources Management Committees and eight Bird Hunting Clubs from 10 villages around the lagoon participated in the exercise.

"Participating in the project activities has been truly life-changing for me and my fellow bird hunters. Through our collaboration and meaningful engagement with WESM in this project, we have gained invaluable knowledge in hunting management, environmental conservation, tour guiding, and business management. This has inspired me to utilize the natural resources around Chia Lagoon responsibly", Ali notes.

As part of project implementation activities, a bird sanctuary mapping exercise was conducted in February 2024 in collaboration with the Malawi University of Science and Technology (MUST) and the Fisheries Department. Following the exercise, 15 bird sanctuaries were mapped out within the lagoon.

The exercise not only provided invaluable data for conservation planning but also empowered local communities to take an active role in safeguarding their natural heritage through involvement in the mapping exercise.

Further, it facilitates education for local communities about their natural environment, and builds capacity for members through skill development in mapping techniques and data collection, in addition to fostering a sense of ownership and collective responsibility towards the protection of waterbird habitats.

MUST Team during Bird sanctuary mapping exercise © Gift Maluwa

Improving Livelihoods

Supporting and promoting sustainable livelihood is a key aspect of the project. This is being implemented through supporting enterprises, establishing a microfinance facility supported by the Micro Loan Foundation for 150 beneficiaries - 90% of whom are women, training in financial management and business in addition to promoting avitourism opportunities through materials and outreach to wildlife tourism enterprises.

Through a participatory process with community members, viable sustainable enterprises were identified including fish business, irrigated rice farming, beekeeping, and avitourism/ecotourism. In March 2024, the project organized a two-day training focusing on business management, bird identification, and recording as part of the enterprise and avitourism support.

A total of 180 participants attended the training, including 79 women and 101 men from all the hunting clubs around Chia Lagoon.

“This training has been a great eye-opener for us because up until now we just hunted and sold birds without any knowledge of business management. In my case, I did not even know that I could start an ecotourism business and guide tourists who visit Chia Lagoon for bird watching. This is really life-changing for me. I am very excited to use the knowledge I have acquired”, said Alatiya Mponda, a participant from Bwanakaya Bird Hunting Club who attended the training.

Looking ahead, the project intends to achieve remarkable strides in 2024, including conducting an assessment of the Chia Lagoon against Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA)/Ramsar criteria, producing and distributing a bird ID guide to schools, WESM branches, and visitor lodges, providing comprehensive training and support for livelihoods to community members, and continuing restoration activities including the establishment of tree nurseries and removal of invasive alien species.

“By establishing and promoting livelihood opportunities through the engagement of bird hunters and other key stakeholders, as well as carrying out restoration activities, this project is holistically addressing the most pressing issues that affect Chia Lagoon’s biodiversity and surrounding communities”, says Chifundo Dalireni, WESM Project Coordinator.

“With the capacity building for enterprise support among the community living around the lagoon, exposure to Chilwa for benchmarking on responsible bird hunting, new information and knowledge generated from ecological assessments, the establishment of bird sanctuaries, support for restoration activities among other project interventions, the community will take up its rightful central place in sustainably managing Chia resources”, adds Alex Ngari, the Project Leader and BirdLife Africa’s Flyways Programme Manager.

> *“The project will work with communities to better manage and restore the vital lagoon ecosystem, reverse the decline in vulnerable and declining bird species, and improve livelihoods in the communities. Provision of biodiversity data for monitoring and the site’s assessment as a Key Biodiversity Area form a key component of the project. Supplemental, sustainable livelihood opportunities will be supported through a micro-lending institution.*

Blessing Chingagwe
WESM Programs Manager

EMPOWERING COMMUNITY-DRIVEN VULTURE CONSERVATION EFFORTS IN TANZANIA

Community outreach meeting © Nature Tanzania

By Vincent Otieno

Across Africa, vulture populations have drastically declined in the last 50 years driven by various threats including poisoning, belief-based use, electrocution, and collision with energy infrastructure and habitat loss. In East Africa, major threats to vultures include unintentional poisoning, electrocution & collision with energy infrastructure, habitat loss and decline of food availably.

Tanzania is home to eight vulture species of which six are classified as Critically Endangered (CR) or Endangered (EN) on the IUCN Red List including the White-backed Vulture (*Gyps africanus*), Ruppell's Vulture (*Gyps rueppelli*), Lappet-faced Vulture (*Trogos tracheliotos*), White-headed Vulture (*Trigonoceps occipitalis*) Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) and the Hooded Vulture (*Necrosyrtes monachus*).

Poisoning linked to human-wildlife conflict and harvesting of vulture parts for belief-based use are major drives of vulture population declines in the country.

Since 2022, BirdLife partner Nature Tanzania has been carrying out a vulture conservation project funded by the Darwin Initiative in the 788 km2 Makao Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Northern Tanzania. Makao WMA is an Important Bird Area (IBA) hosting more than 185 bird species, including five vulture species namely White-backed Vulture, Ruppell's Vulture, Lappet-faced Vulture, Hooded Vulture and White-headed Vulture.

As part of project implementation activities, Nature Tanzania has engaged traditional healers from Makao WMA who use vulture body parts for belief-based use. Awareness creation has been conducted through traditional healers' group meetings, in addition to one-on-one meetings. Following these outreaches, traditional healers have identified *Biophytum crassipes*, locally known as *kiloto* as a plant-based alternative to vulture body parts,


Matumaini Group sunflower farm © Nature Tanzania

"Vulture populations are still declining. To reverse this trend, especially in the use of vulture body parts in traditional belief practices, it is critical to engage traditional healers in vulture conservation efforts" says Alpha Mfilinge, Species Conservation Officer at Nature Tanzania.

A Community Revolving Fund (CRF) was established to support the community in establishing nature-friendly businesses to improve their livelihoods and raise awareness about the importance of vultures in the ecosystem. Seed funding of 5000 GBP was used to start the CRF which has benefited five groups with a total of 62 people (39 women and 23 men) first batch of CRF loaning in Makao WMA.

In April 2024, a team from BirdLife International and Nature Tanzania visited Makao WMA engaging with two community groups that benefited from the CRF. These groups include the 22-member Matumaini Group and the 15-member Mbuyuni Women Group. Matumaini Group is engaged in sunflower farming, made possible by the CRF. Further, the group is eyeing further expansion into sunflower value chain and beekeeping, thus embracing a holistic approach to conservation, and improving livelihoods.

"The money we borrowed from the CRF helped us practice modern agriculture on our sunflower farm. From what we did, we are expecting more yield this season compared to other previous seasons; hence, we are planning to add value by processing the harvested sunflowers into cooking oil,", says Getruda Sengwa, secretary of Matumaini Group.

In addition to being a member of Matumaini Group, I am also a vulture champion, involved in raising awareness about the importance of vultures in Makao WMA, particularly in my local community", says Yohana Sagika, a member of Matumaini Group

Mbuyuni Women Group specializes in tailoring activities. Through their business, the group is raising awareness about vulture conservation to their clientele using posters mounted on their business premises. demonstrating how entrepreneurship can intertwine with conservation advocacy.

"Without the CRF, we wouldn't be able to expand our business by purchasing two additional modern sewing machines. We are now completing our customers' orders in time, hence building trust with us, and the number of our customers increased, as we also continue to raise awareness about vultures", says Jane Nchambi, Mbuyuni Women Group treasurer.

Additionally, there is a willingness of traditional healers to adopt the use of the plant-based alternative to vulture heads for traditional belief practices. This was evident from a pivotal encounter with Deus Sitta, a traditional healer who was selling and using vulture heads in traditional belief practices. Following Nature Tanzania's outreaches, Sitta is now using and selling *kiloto*. Further, he is now a vulture champion, raising awareness about vultures to other traditional healers.


The BirdLife Team interacts with Matumaini Women Group © Nature Tanzania

"Since I stopped linking hunters who kill vultures to traditional healers who use vulture heads for traditional medicine, the traditional healers are now coming to buy kiloto from me, which is good for vulture conservation efforts", notes Sitta.

Through the project, several CRF beneficiaries and traditional healers have become vulture champions, creating awareness about the importance of vultures in the ecosystem, and the threats, they face in Makao. Additionally, the capacity to respond to wildlife poisoning has been increased through Village Game Scouts (VGS).

The scouts carry out regular monitoring activities in Makao and are trained and equipped to respond to potential wildlife poisoning incidents.

'The solutions to vulture declines in Africa lie in engaging communities and empowering them to be vulture champions. Lessons coming from the work taking place in Makao WMA are a demonstration of exactly that", concludes Fadzai Matsvimbo, Preventing Extinctions Programme Coordinator for Africa at BirdLife International.

"The solutions to vulture declines in Africa lie in engaging communities and empowering them to be vulture champions. Lessons coming from the work taking place in Makao WMA are a demonstration of exactly that.

Fadzai Matsvimbo
Preventing Extinctions Programme Coordinator for Africa at BirdLife International

LILAC-BREASTED ROLLER PHOTOGRAPHED IN LEWA CONSERVANCY IN KENYA IN EARLY MORNING LIGHT. © DAVID CLODE

birdlifeafrica BirdLifeAfrica birdlife.africa www.birdlife.org