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BIRDLIFE AFRICA NEWSLETTER

A MESSAGE FROM
THE REGIONAL DIRECTOR'S DESK

Welcome to the first issue of the BirdLife Africa Newsletter in 2025. 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 nature-safe energy initiatives in South Africa to sites conservation work in Sierra Leone, our partners continue making great strides in conservation. This year, we welcome the 15th Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP15) to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, which will be held in July 2025 in Zimbabwe. The meeting will be critical to advance wetlands conservation, key priority sites for many of our Partners. 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

AFRICAN PENGUIN

SPHENISCUS DEMERSUS

African Penguins, face the risk of extinction by 2035 due to overfishing, habitat destruction, and climate change. These challenges have drastically reduced their food supply and nesting sites, leading to a steep population decline. Urgent conservation actions, including marine protected areas, sustainable fishing practices, and habitat restoration, are critical to reversing this trend. Learn more about BirdLife South Africa's efforts to save these Critically Endangered birds here

ADVANCING VULTURE CONSERVATION EFFORTS IN ZIMBABWE

BLZ staff and Partners who took part in the vulture monitoring exercise © BirdLife Zimbabwe

By Leeroy G. Moyo

Vultures play a crucial role in the ecosystem as scavengers, helping to maintain ecological balance by consuming carrion. Zimbabwe is home to several vulture species, including the White-backed Vulture (*Gyps africanus*), White-headed Vulture (*Trigonoceps occipitalis*), Hooded Vulture (*Necrosyrtes monachus*) Lappet-faced Vulture (*Torgos tracheliotos*) and the Cape Vulture (*Gyps coprotheres*).

However, these birds face significant threats, primarily from habitat loss, mass poisoning (often linked to the use of toxic chemicals in poaching), illegal harvesting and use of their parts in traditional medicine and lead (Pb) poisoning.

Over the years, BirdLife Partner, BirdLife Zimbabwe (BLZ) has been involved in vulture conservation activities to protect these critical scavengers and address the numerous threats they face.

To this end, BLZ has implemented several initiatives including community education programs to highlight the ecological importance of vultures and dangers posed by poisoning and habitat loss, in addition to collaboration with local communities, conservation organizations and other stakeholders to establish Vulture Safe Zones (VSZs). Further, BLZ's work include anti-poaching initiatives, advocating for the reduction of poison use in wildlife management, and participation in regional and international vulture conservation networks to share knowledge and strategies for effective protection measures.

"Conserving vultures is not just about saving a species; it's about preserving the health of our environment. At BirdLife Zimbabwe, we believe that through education, collaboration, and proactive conservation efforts, we can turn the tide for these vital scavengers and safeguard the ecosystems they support. Every effort counts in ensuring a future where vultures thrive alongside us", says Julia Pierini, BirdLife Zimbabwe's Chief Executive Officer.

In the heart of Zimbabwe's Save Valley Conservancy located on the Southeastern Lowveld of the country, BLZ in collaboration with various stakeholders carried out vulture conservation activities from 24th to 31st October 2024. The activities included vulture capture, tagging, and blood sampling mission to assess lead (Pb) exposure among White-backed vultures.

This effort is part of a broader strategy to advocate for the use of lead-free ammunition, which is crucial for the conservation of these magnificent birds. Sango Wildlife Conservancy, covering approximately 3,600 square kilometres, served as the backdrop for this significant operation.

The ranch is not only a haven for diverse wildlife including giraffes, lions, and black rhinos, but also a focal point for non-consumptive tourism and sport hunting. The presence of artificial waterholes and abundant wildlife made it an ideal location for vulture capture, to collect important data on vulture health, population dynamics, and breeding success.

Additionally, the capture process engaged local communities, raising awareness about the ecological importance of vultures and fostering stewardship. BLZ staff in collaboration with experts from the National University of Science and Technology, Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority, local ecologists and ranger set up capture sites in three strategic locations in Sango Wildlife Conservancy namely Bowblind Pan, Ngongoni Pan, and the Rwenando area. With the support of Sango Wildlife Conservancy Management, bait in the form of buffalo and elephant carcasses was provided to attract the vultures.

The methodology employed for capturing vultures was both innovative and respectful of animal welfare. Using nooses arranged around bait, the team successfully captured four White-backed Vultures and two Tawny Eagles. Each bird was carefully fitted with coloured plastic leg rings and metal SAFRINGs for identification, and blood samples drawn for lead testing.

Despite initial challenges, including vultures breaking free from nooses and ongoing hunting activities affecting capture rates, the team demonstrated resilience and adaptability. By switching to stronger materials for nooses and refining their techniques, they were able to achieve their goals.

"Our vulture capture process is designed with both innovation and respect for animal welfare at its core. By employing humane techniques, we not only gather critical data for conservation but also ensure the safety of these magnificent birds. The resilience of our team in overcoming challenges demonstrates our commitment to protecting vultures and advancing our understanding of their health and ecology. Together, we are taking vital steps to secure a future for these essential scavengers", says Dr Josephine Maringa, researcher at the National University of Science and Technology,

Valuable Insights and Collaborative Efforts

Results from the blood samples indicated that both Tawny eagles showed background exposure to lead within a range of 7-9 micrograms per deciliter (µg/dL), and all tested WBV had a range 13-17 µg/dL indicating mild to moderate subclinical effects on lead on these vultures. The blood samples provide baseline data on lead exposure among vultures in Zimbabwe, essential for future advocacy efforts aimed at promoting lead-free ammunition. Further, the collaborative nature of this project, which involved local ecologists, wildlife management authorities, and university researchers showcased a model of effective partnership in conservation.

Additionally, the involvement of local rangers in the capture process not only enhanced their skills but also fostered a sense of ownership over wildlife conservation efforts.

"Participating in the vulture capture process has not only enhanced my skills but has also deepened my commitment to wildlife conservation. Seeing firsthand the process of vulture capture drives home the importance of our work. Together, we can protect our natural heritage and ensure a healthier environment for future generations", says Simbarashe Chidhakwa Sango Wildlife Conservancy's Ecologist.

BirdLife Zimbabwe's initiative at Sango Wildlife Conservancy exemplifies the power of collaboration in wildlife conservation. By focusing on vulture capture and lead testing, the team has laid a crucial foundation for understanding and mitigating one of the significant threats to these birds. The data collected will be instrumental in advocating for lead-free ammunition, vital for protecting vultures and other scavengers from lead poisoning. Ongoing collaboration, capacity building, and community engagement will be key to ensuring that these majestic birds continue to soar across the skies of Zimbabwe for generations to come.

"This initiative not only highlights the urgent need for vulture conservation but also showcases the power of collaboration in addressing environmental challenges. By working together with local communities, researchers, and conservation organizations, we are not just protecting vultures; we are safeguarding the health of our ecosystems. Our commitment to innovative and humane conservation practices will pave the way for a future where these magnificent birds can thrive once again", concludes Pierini.

"This initiative not only highlights the urgent need for vulture conservation but also showcases the power of collaboration in addressing environmental challenges. By working together with local communities, researchers, and conservation organizations, we are not just protecting vultures; we are safeguarding the health of our ecosystems.

Julia Pierini
Chief Executive Officer, BirdLife Zimbabwe

GIVING A LIFELINE TO THE CRITICAL CHERANGANI WATER TOWER IN KENYA

A picturesque view of the Cherangani Hills forests © Caroline Chebet

By Caroline Chebet & John Mwacharo

Barnabas Ngesemwo stands at the precipice of the valley facing the Kiptaber forest. His face, seemingly lined with tales and time, turns towards a hill perched on the furthest end of the forest.

"On the far end is Kiptaber Hill. It has many stories linked to the existence of the Cherangani as indigenous people. Why we are here as a community", Ngesemwo says while pointing to the hill with his walking stick, a testament to his years as the community's Council of Elders chairman.

Ngesemwo's many tales refer to Kiptaber Hill. His tales seem to paint delicate yet close links to the forest, which he is worried are slowly disappearing in the face of what the community terms wanton degradation.

"We still want to see the fog creeping out of Kiptaber and engulfing the forest in a shroud of white. We want to experience the rains from Kiptaber so our crops can grow, and rivers can flow again. We want to see the forests lush again so that the women can collect the herbs and medicine for the community", says Ngesemwo, his voice trailing off.

Kiptaberr Forest, one of thirteen fragments of the Cherangani Hills Forest water tower spanning Trans-Nzoia, Uasin Gishu, and Elgeyo-Marakwet counties, is partof a montane global biodiversity hotspot and a Key Biodiversity Area (KBA). Cherangani, vital for biodiversity and local communities, provides critical ecosystem services as a water catchment for the Kerio Valley (Lake Turkana) and Lake Victoria Basins, supporting domestic use, irrigation, industry, and hydropower.

Restoration efforts are essential to protect its unique and endangered species, such as De Brazza's Monkey, Crowned Eagle (*Stephanoaetus coronatus*), Mountain Bongo, Bearded Vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*), and to sustain the communities relying on this lifeline.

The situation in Kiptaberr reflects a broader trend across the Cherangani ecosystem. Forest degradation, driven by rising poverty and increased encroachment for settlement, farming, timber, charcoal, firewood, and grazing, threatens the quality and quantity of essential ecosystem services, particularly water resources, despite the Indigenous communities' deep connection to the forest.

Barnabas Ngesemwo, chair of the Cherangani Council of Elders, points out Kiptaber Hill, one of the vital forest fragments that makes up Cherangani Hills forests © Caroline Chebet

Local women say that local herbs, a part of traditional medicine, are slowly disappearing, a trend that they find worrying. "Unlike in the 1970s, 80s and early 90s, where we could easily get the herbs without going deeper into the forests, it is becoming challenging. This is because of rampant felling of trees whose parts are vital to medicine", notes Caroline Kiplangat, the treasurer of the Cherangani Cultural Group,

Caroline says that while the elders dispensed a set of unwritten rules to protect the forests some years ago, the rules are no longer being applied, and illegal tree felling and forest land clearing have led to significant ecosystem degradation.

"The forests are degraded because people are getting in randomly and cutting down trees prohibited by the elders. Some of these rare trees are sadly used to produce charcoal", she adds.

The forests and hills within the Cherangani ecosystem are also sources of food, firewood, and traditional medicine, and they are highly culturally significant to Indigenous communities. To the local communities, not only the disappearing trees and herbs are alarming. They also say unpredictable weather patterns, intense droughts, and floods are worrying.

"Indigenous weather forecasting knowledge is on the verge. Traditional weather forecasters can no longer predict anything right. This is because of the significant changes that have altered the local weather patterns", says Solomon Cherongos, the coordinator of Cherangani Indigenous People.

Solomon says unpredictable weather patterns, coupled with the degradation of the landscapes due to poor farming practices and tree felling in Cherangani, have affected several communities in the past few years.

Almost five years ago, we experienced massive floods that swept several homesteads. People have been clearing parts of the forests for agriculture and felling trees. We have also experienced prolonged seasons of intense droughts, a trend not often common within these highlands," he adds.

Cherangani communities are, however, hopeful as a Global Center on Biodiversity for Climate (GCBC)-funded project takes root to restore rivers and forests in the Cherangani ecosystem. Led by Nature Kenya in partnership with the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), Kenya Forestry Research Institute (KEFRI), Kenyatta University, and the Kenya Forest Service (KFS), the project titled "Understanding Cherangani Links to Human Well-being," examines the ties between people, forests, biodiversity, and climate resilience.

With additional support from TerraFund for AFR100, Nature Kenya is also engaging six Community Forest Associations (CFAs) to plant 400,000 assorted indigenous trees across six state forests in the landscape. As of October 2024, the CFAs had planted 239,165 indigenous trees to restore 239 hectares of degraded forest landscapes. Over 300 locals are directly benefiting from the initiative, with a further 1,965 benefiting indirectly.

Joseph Mzozo, the GCBC-funded project coordinator, says that the consortium of agencies will work together to identify highly degraded areas for restoration.

“We are keen on the Cherangani Hills ecosystem because it is a major water tower that is heavily impacted by impacts of climate change. We are looking at how the ecosystem can balance the needs of the people it serves while maintaining its ability to provide ecosystem services in the face of climate change”, he notes.

He says the research project will also assess the ecosystem services, which will keenly evaluate the services the communities benefit directly from the forest. Restoration Opportunity Assessment and Mapping (ROAM) and Ecosystem Services Assessment (ESA) led by Kenyatta University with inputs from NMK, KEFRI, and Indigenous people have been initiated.

“We want to look at the benefits that people are getting from this ecosystem. Are they increasing or decreasing, and how can we help sustain the steady flow of these benefits? We will then be able to identify approaches to ensure that the ecosystem regains its ability to provide the services and develop an action plan”, says Mzozo.

KEFRI has constituted an implementation team of 29 experts to conduct socio-economic and resource assessments to inform the ROAM, ESA, and Participatory Forest Management Plans. In April, fieldwork and data collection on socio-economic and ecological assessments of the Cherengani landscape were conducted. The National Museums of Kenya, under the leadership of 16 taxonomic experts, also undertook biodiversity studies.

Nature Kenya also conducted a water study in October to identify, map, and understand water dependencies upstream and downstream of Cherangani. The study involved consultative stakeholder meetings, focused group discussions, and key informant interviews with government officials, water and sanitation service providers, Community Forest Associations (CFAs), and Water Resources Users’ Associations (WRUAs) across three counties (Elgeyo Maraket, Trans Nzoia, West Pokot). The participatory approach aimed to gather insights on water utilisation, abstraction levels, and the challenges these groups face regarding the sustainability of water access.

Dr Paul Muoria, the project’s lead expert and a lecturer at Kenyatta University, says that once the cultural, social, and economic values of Cherangani have been established, it will be easy to create awareness among different stakeholders, including the communities.

“Some of the ecosystem services we are evaluating include the water services used in homes and in industries that rely on dams and rivers within the ecosystem. We are also evaluating the goods harvested from the forest, such as firewood and fruits”, says Dr Muoria.

Dr Muoria adds that a report about the ecosystem services provided by the water tower will evaluate and value these services monetary.

Locals are elated about the research currently underway within the ecosystem. The research project relies on them to provide data and indigenous conservation knowledge, which will be fused with science to inform what can be done to restore this ecosystem. Some community members have already been trained in data collection and will undertake surveys of the communities living around the water tower.

The research part of the project is expected to be completed by March 2025.

“This research project involves us as communities, and we are working together with researchers to come up with solutions that will help us conserve Cherangani Hills forests better”, concludes Cherongos.

SMART ISLAND: 4TH GENERATION SOLAR SYSTEM POWERS COUSIN ISLAND SPECIAL RESERVE IN SEYCHELLES

A grant from the German Government made this solar installation possible © Nature Seychelles

By Liz Mwambui

Imagine waking up, glancing at your phone, realising your battery is at 2%. You rush to charge it, only to realise there's no power. Many of us accustomed to 24-hour power would be frustrated. For the conservationists on Cousin Island Special Reserve, this was a way of life for a couple of years.

They dealt with electricity scarcity, working with laptops that functioned for just a few hours, fans that don't run on hot nights, and fridges that don't always keep food cold. The available electricity, powered by an ageing solar system and backup diesel generators, was rationed, and a routine for powering electronics and devices developed.

"You had to ensure you had juice for the important stuff, whether it's entering field data into a database or catching up with the main office or checking emails. Some days, it was all sunshine and solar power; other days, it's sorry, we're on generator time, and you better hope you remembered to charge everything", says Chris Tagg, the island's conservation officer.

But the Reserve has been a pioneer in using renewable energy. The first solar power system for the island was set up way back in 2000, an incredible 24 years ago. Subsequently two other systems were put in place over the years to replace obsolete and damaged technology.

The very harsh environment on the island is not kind to technology and the solar systems age rapidly, as do other equipment.

Now, thanks to a 25,000 Euro grant from the German Federal Foreign Office, through the German Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, a new, modern, and powerful photovoltaic system has been installed on the island by Energy Solutions Seychelles, ensuring a reliable power supply. "It's like night and day, we can charge everything simultaneously", says Christopher Mahoune, the island's chief warden. "It allows our island community to produce our power from natural, renewable resources – and to do so continually."

For many years, before the advent of solar energy systems in Seychelles, the diesel generators ran island life on Cousin Island. To limit fuel consumption and emissions, they were only operated between 6 pm and 10 pm. The generators would chug along like an old trusted friend, but sometimes, they would grumble to a halt and would need servicing in Mahe, leaving the island in darkness for the next few days.

"One of our great successes was launching Seychelles' first crowdfunding campaign a decade ago, which acquired a modern 6 KVa solar array by gathering about US $ 25,000", says Dr Nirmal Shah, Chief Executive Officer of Nature Seychelles.

Ms Tyessen with Cousin Island staff. The new system ensures a reliable power supply for residents © Nature Seychelles

"This was part of our strategy to "green" island operations and make the island carbon-neutral, which we successfully accomplished, making it the first nature reserve in the world to do so."

"Unfortunately, despite constant maintenance, that solar system was failing. While a small system was still operational, diesel generators had to be used for staff, volunteers, and researchers' houses. A new modern solar system was necessary to maintain the environmental and carbon neutral status, as well as to reduce costs associated with generators and repairs of the existing array. We are grateful to the German Embassy for supporting this green investment", Shah says.

"Despite some initial challenges including overheating, it has significantly improved the overall efficiency and reliability of the power supply. The money saved by using free energy from the sun can now be re-invested in the conservation of the Reserve," Shah explains. "This is part of Nature Seychelles' Smart Island initiative, which also includes increased internet through an innovative microwave system and digitalisation of some equipment and Reserve management processes," he concludes.

"This was part of our strategy to "green" island operations and make the island carbon-neutral, which we successfully accomplished, making it the first nature reserve in the world to do so.

Dr Nirmal Shah
Chief Executive Officer, Nature Seychelles

NATURE CONSERVATION EGYPT CEO KHALED NOBY SELECTED AS IMPACT MAKER FOR COP29 COMMUNICATIONS CAMPAIGN

NCE team at Galala Bird Observatory © NCE

By Yassin Rasheed

In November 2024, Nature Conservation Egypt (NCE) CEO Khaled Noby was selected as one of the 50 Impact Makers in a global communications campaign launched by Ms. Nigar Arpadarai, the UN Climate Change High-Level Champion for COP29. This prestigious recognition highlights NCE's pioneering work in safeguarding biodiversity in Egypt, with a particular focus on integrating biodiversity conservation into the renewable energy sector.

Nature Conservation Egypt (NCE) is dedicated to integrating biodiversity conservation into the renewable energy sector. NCE aims to balance the country's growing energy needs with the urgent necessity of protecting its rich and diverse wildlife and biodiversity.

NCE is witnessing the ambitious expansion in renewable energy production in Egypt, driven not only by the growing domestic demand but also by the need to cut climate change emissions from fossil fuels. However, this transition to renewable energy production comes with its own set of negative impacts on habitats and wildlife.

Renewable energy infrastructure has been reported to cause significant fatalities in various wildlife forms, particularly migratory birds. While most conservation efforts have focused on mitigating the impacts within wind farms, NCE has been paying attention to another significant threat that needs to be adequately acknowledged: bird collisions with Overhead Transmission Lines (OHTLs).

Moreover, NCE has effectively advocated for the inclusion of local biodiversity loss in both national and international agendas.

Non-migratory wildlife faces equally severe threats from poorly planned renewable energy infrastructure, yet the lack of data on local species often diverts conservation efforts towards migratory wildlife.

NCE has led a successful national effort to translocate the threatened native reptile, the Egyptian Spiny-tailed Lizard (*Uromastyx aegyptia*), in collaboration with the Regional Center for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency (RCREEE) and SafeSoar. Thirteen individuals of this endangered lizard species were safely translocated from the AMUNET Wind Farm site ahead of construction, exemplifying effective conservation action.

The **Impact Makers campaign** seeks to amplify the voices of leaders who are making a significant impact in addressing the climate crisis. Through his leadership, Khaled Noby has played a crucial role in shaping the dialogue around nature conservation and renewable energy in Egypt. His nomination comes as part of a larger effort to ensure that global climate strategies include biodiversity conservation as a fundamental element of the transition to renewable energy.

NCE team inspecting lizard's burrow to detect the presence of the animal in AMUNETWindPower station © NCE

I am truly humbled to be recognized as an Impact Maker by the High-Level Champions team. This honor belongs equally to my dedicated colleagues at NCE, whose unwavering commitment to nature conservation in Egypt inspires me every day. This is a celebration of our collective efforts I'm simply privileged to represent such a sincere and hardworking team.", said Khaled Noby, Executive Director of Nature Conservation Egypt.

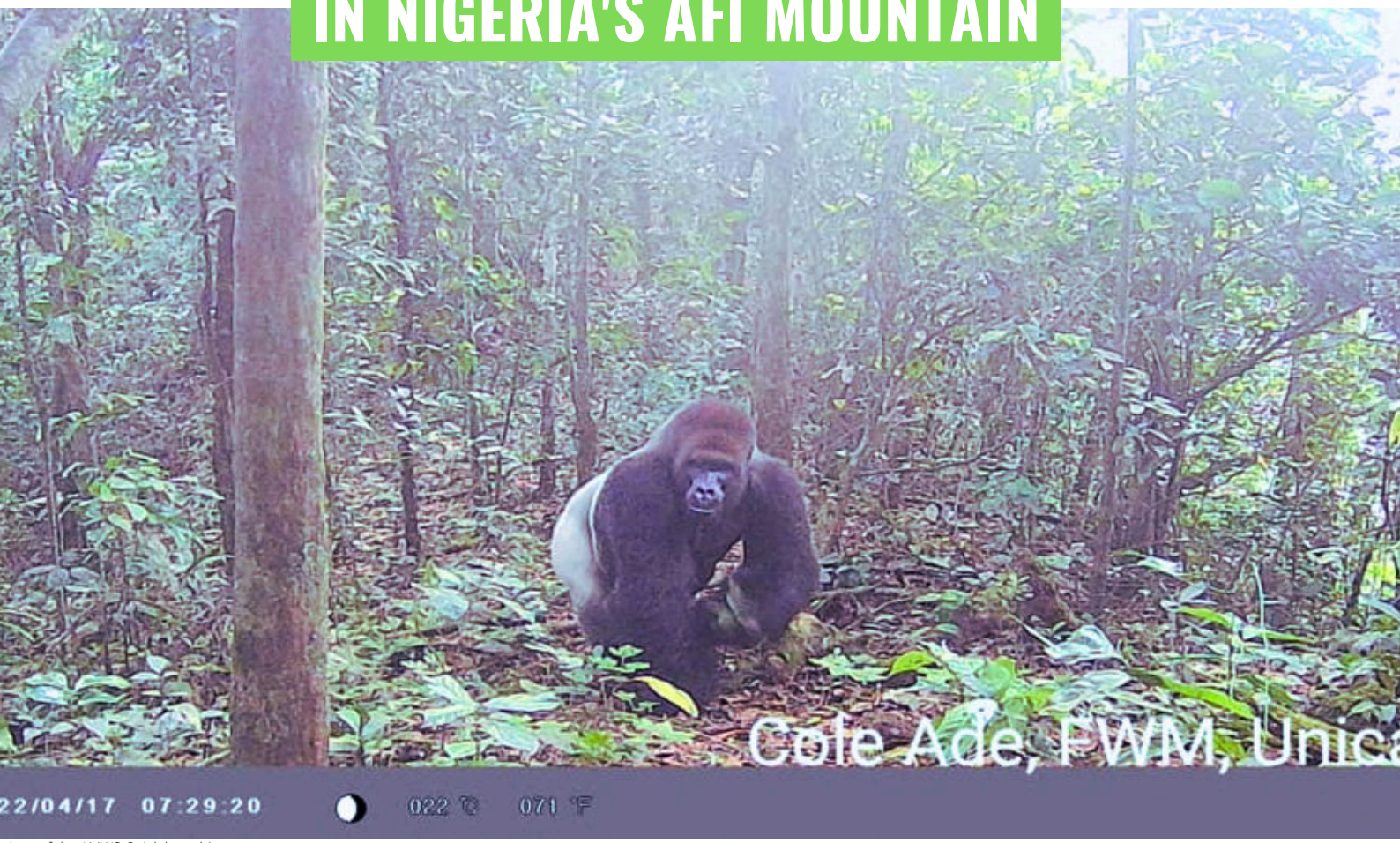
"This recognition of Khaled Noby is very well deserved and reflects his commitment and dedication to advance the conservation of nature in Egypt; it also represents the collective effort of the NCE team and their success, under the stewardship of Khaled, in becoming a leader in the conservation field in the Middle East and North Africa. Congratulations to Khaled, to NCE and to Egypt for this recognition". Sherif Baha El Din, NCE Chairman of the Board,

Noby's inclusion in the campaign places a spotlight on Egypt's unique position at the intersection of biodiversity conservation and sustainable development, highlighting how the country can serve as a model for other regions facing similar challenges.

"I am truly humbled to be recognized as an Impact Maker by the High-Level Champions team. This honour belongs equally to my dedicated colleagues at NCE, whose unwavering commitment to nature conservation in Egypt inspires me every day. This is a celebration of our collective efforts I'm simply privileged to represent such a sincere and hardworking team.

Khaled Noby
Chief Executive Officer, Nature Conservation Egypt

RARE CROSS RIVER GORILLA SPOTTED ON CAMERAS IN NIGERIA'S AFI MOUNTAIN



Area of the AMWS © Adekanmbi

By Uchenna Achunine

In May 2024, trail cameras in the Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary captured stunning footage of the world's rarest great ape – the Cross River gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*). The extraordinary sightings mark the first successful photos since three graduate students at the University of Calabar in Nigeria began studying this elusive subspecies last year as part of the Cross River Gorilla initiative.

The Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary is a protected area in Cross River State, in the southern part of Nigeria, near the Cameroun border, within the Afi River Forest Reserve. It lies adjacent to the Afi Mountains, a series of rugged highlands. It is recognized for its lush biodiversity and importance in conserving endangered species. The sanctuary encompasses about 100 square kilometers of montane and lowland rainforest. It is part of the Cross River Rainforest Corridor, one of the most biologically diverse regions in Africa.

Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary is home to several endangered and rare species, including the Cross RiverGorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*), one of the rarest gorilla subspecies, critically endangered, with less than 300 individuals remaining in the wild, Nigeria-Cameroon Chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes ellioti*), Drill Monkey (*Mandrillus leucophaeus*), Grey-necked Rockfowl (*Picathartes oreas*) and other fauna including various species of antelope, such as the Duiker, and reptiles including snakes and lizards, are also found here.

The sanctuary was established in 2000 to protect the critically endangered Cross River gorillas and other wildlife. It is managed in collaboration with local communities, NGOs like the Nigerian Conservation Foundation (NCF), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), and government bodies like the Cross River Forestry Commission. Popular activities in the sanctuary include guided treks and birdwatching tours. In addition, research and conservation projects are often conducted, providing educational opportunities for visitors and scholars.

In 2022, a 5-years Community Conservation Graduate Student Scholarship Programme for the Conservation of Cross River Gorilla funded by the Wilder Institute - Calgary Zoo, implemented by the Nigerian Conservation Foundation (NCF) in partnership with the Centre for Biodiversity Conservation Research (CBCR) was started at the University of Calabar.

The programme involves supporting graduate research projects in Nigeria, including scholarships for one Ph.D. student and four master's students at the University of Calabar over a period of five years.

"Hiking into the Afi Mountain Sanctuary, I was filled with excitement at the prospect of seeing a Cross River gorilla in its natural habitat. While I may not have encountered one face-to-face, the images and videos captured by the camera traps are an incredible glimpse into the life of these elusive and magnificent creatures." said Dr. Mary Liao, Conservation Manager, the Wilder Institute. "I am incredibly impressed by Cole for his collaboration with local hunters and eco-guards to strategically place the traps, showcasing a perfect blend of scientific and community knowledge and embodying the essence of inclusive conservation", she added.

The two Silverback (mature males) gorilla were spotted in different parts of the sanctuary: one in the southern portion of the sanctuary and one in the northern portion. The sanctuary is in Boki Local Government Area (LGA), Cross River State. Researchers were particularly excited about the capture at the northern portion due to the higher level of human activity in that area.

"This sighting is more than just a visual success," Adekambi Cole Adeyinka, M.Sc student from the Department of Forestry and Wildlife (University of Calabar) said. "It underscores the importance of community involvement and innovative research in conservation. By working closely with local communities, we are not only gathering crucial data but also fostering a deeper understanding and commitment to protecting these incredible great apes and their habitat", he added.

This collaborative initiative extends beyond borders, with a partnership with the Centre for Biodiversity Conservation Research (CBCR) in Ghana to allow an exchange programme for knowledge sharing of the practices that create successful community conservation initiatives.

In early 2023, scholarships were awarded to the first set of postgraduate students; one Ph.D and two M.Sc students from the Department of Forestry and Wildlife Management, University of Calabar.

"As NCF, we appreciate our partners, the Wilder Institute/Calgary Zoo, the Centre for Biodiversity Conservation Research, and the University of Calabar for their invaluable support to this initiative.

Picture showing the researcher setting camera trap in the field © Adekanmbi

The success of this initiative underscores the significance of collaborative partnerships in addressing the challenges faced by wildlife and their habitats and achieving sustainable wildlife conservation. We are also hopeful that this initiative will contribute to the realization of the objectives of our Strategic Pillar of Saving Species in peril", notes Dr. Joseph Onoja, NCF's Director-General.

In line with NCF's vision of conserving the full range of Nigeria's biodiversity, which includes species, ecosystems, and genetic biodiversity, important aspects of the Foundation's strategy and resource mobilization are targeted at conserving some endangered animals, birds, and plants. Working with diverse partners and stakeholders, NCF implements numerous conservation initiatives to save these species that are seriously threatened. Some of NCF focal conservation species include Pangolin, Cross River Gorilla, Nigeria-Cameroon Chimpanzee, Sea Turtle, African Elephants, Vulture, wild cats like Leopard and African Lion, and some Endangered Plant Species.

"These findings highlight the sanctuary's vital role in gorilla protection and the need for more research and collaboration to conserve the Cross River gorilla and the region's rich biodiversity. I am convinced that our graduate students will greatly improve our understanding and protection efforts for these amazing species. I urge the scientific community, conservation organizations, and stakeholders at all levels to support and extend this essential effort to protect one of the world's rarest and most fragile species", concluded Prof Francis Bisong, Faculty of Environmental Sciences, University of Calabar.

PROMOTING COMMUNITY-BASED MANGROVE CONSERVATION IN SIERRA LEONE

Local community members carrying out restoration activities © Paul Musa

By Abdul Kaprr Dumbuya

Mangroves are important nature-based solutions to the climate change crisis. They store carbon four times more than traditional rainforests, serve as shoreline protection against floods and storms, prevent erosion, and maintain water quality and clarity. Further, mangroves are a hub for biodiversity, while providing various economic benefits to communities. In recent years, scientists have cautioned against the unceasing vanishing of mangrove forests worldwide.

The decline is estimated to be reported at 1 – 2% per year with a total loss of around 35% disappearing in the last 20 years. Mangroves in Sierra Leone are amongst the worst degraded globally, with a report released in 2016 showing that 1% of the mangroves in Sierra Leone coastal landscape disappear each year.

Located in the West Coast of Sierra Leone, Yawri Bay is one of nine Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) in the country, recognized in the Guinea Forest Ecosystem Profile and part of the Northern Upper Guinea Ecoregion. The Bay is a marine protected area and covers an area of about of 14573 km² (1457300 ha). The region is also host to various endangered animal species including many invertebrates in mangroves, Red Weaver Ants, African Bees, and Kraus Grasshopper. Also, Forty-six species of Palearctic migrant birds are known to occur in the bay. Four of these species, Pied Avocet (*Recurvirostra avosetta*), Lesser-crested Tern (*Thalasseus bengalensis*), Water Thick-knee (*Burhinus vermiculatus*), and the Damara Tern (*Sternula balaenarum*) were first recorded for Sierra Leone at this site. Its coastalscape incorporates three major creeks: Ribbi Creek, Bompeh Creek and Kagboro Creek and consists of marshes, mudflats, mangroves, and intertidal sand and mudflat at the mouth of the Kagboro Creek. In recent years, the mangrove ecosystems in Yawri Bay have faced significant degradation due to various anthropogenic activities, including mangrove harvesting, to meet the energy needs of coastal communities, salt production, charcoal burning, housing construction and domestic purposes, for cooking and fish smoking. This has exacerbated the increased climatic effects such as erosion, temperature rise and heavy wind surge.

“Since site supports our local fishing industries which supply most of the fish consumed in Freetown, over

exploitation of the marine resources in this landscape without consideration for the attendant negative impact will put the communities and companies and indeed, the world at risk", asserts Edward Momodu Sesay, Head of Programmes at the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone (CSSL).

CSSL realized over the years that the country's marine landscape has been degraded through the cutting of mangroves for commercial and domestic purposes, which has dire consequences on environmental sustainability and livelihoods and community health. In 2021, the organization received funding from the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) to work with communities to do a mapping of the Marine Protected Area since it was initially the boundary was not well demarcated, review existing community bylaws and develop a management plan. Later, CSSL was supported by the Protected Areas Programme for Biodiversity and Climate Change (PAPBio)through Wetlands International to restore 4.2 hectares of degraded land.

To reverse the level of degradation and maintain the integrity of the Yawri Bay ecosystem, Blue Natural Capital Financing Facility (BNCFF) provided funding support to the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone (CSSL) and Green Life West Africa to restore 50 hectares of mangroves in which a total of 285,000 propagules will be planted in 57 degraded sites in selected communities, benefitting over 350 people. The project kick-started in early 2024 with community and stakeholder engagements, biodiversity and socio-economic assessment and alternative livelihood support interventions, which paved the smooth road to the restoration activities.

Between July and August, 2024, the project staff from CSSL and Green Life West Africa worked assiduously with communities and undertook what many described as very successful restoration activities in three communities (Ribbimen, Morchail/Moyambe, Gbankoh).

A critical aspect of site restoration is monitoring and ensuring the growth of the seedlings. The clarity of the messages delivered during the community engagement phase that preceded the restoration enthused community members and made them commit themselves to ensuring the constant monitoring and protection of the newly planted propagules.

"I feel fulfilled to have actively participated in restoring the areas we ourselves were responsible to destroy. As a person and a member of this community, I pledge my fullest support towards the success of this project because this is about our future and the future of our children", says Sulaiman Vandy, a resident of Morchail community.

Preparation of the mangrove plants © Paul Musa

Even though this project is expected to end on 31st March 2025, the capacities of existing site support groups including Conservation Ambassadors, Mangrove Restoration Committees and Monitors have been strengthened to enable them take full responsibility of protecting replanted mangroves to maturity. This will support the project's long term goal of achieving an improved ecosystem where species and other biodiversity can thrive well.

"I am grateful today that our long-deteriorated ecosystem has been restored with mangroves. We will now have an ecosystem that will support fish population and other marine species in our marine ecosystem to flourish for our benefit. This activity is truly a testament that once we come together to support the growth and sustainability these mangroves, our lives will be protected from flooding, excessive windstorms and climate change impact in future", says Ibrahim Bangura, Headman of Morchail village.

"Mangrove restoration is a way of reviving the ecosystem. Collaboration with other organizations in the process is also vital to promote a successful restoration. More importantly, conscientising communities to enable them understand the benefits of mangroves, and incentivizing them are key driving vehicles towards attaining a successful restoration as this was practically evidenced in the entire process", concludes Abdulai Dauda, Project Manager at CSSL.

ADVANCING CONSERVATION EFFORTS IN CABO VERDE

School children taking part in Environmental awareness activities © Biosfera

By Odair Cardoso

"Ilhéu Branco, located between Santa Luzia and Raso, is the smallest of the Cape Verdean islands, measuring approximately 2.8 km² and the highest point at 327 metres. Despite its rugged terrain and difficult access, the island is an important breeding site for five species of seabirds endemic to Cape Verde: the Cape Verde Shearwater (*Calonectris edwardsii*), the Audubon Shearwater (*Puffinus lherminieri*), the Bulwer's Petrel (*Bulweria bulwerii*), the White-faced Storm Petrel (*Pelagodroma marina eadesorum*) and the Cape Verde Storm Petrel (*Hydrobates jabejabe*).

The loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*) also breeds on the island of Branco, with difficulty, due to the lack of suitable beaches. Many turtles climb the dunes to lay their eggs and stumble on their way down, sometimes to their death. The White-faced storm Petrel faces significant threats, including habitat degradation caused by human activities and the accidental destruction of nests by sea turtles.

During the nesting season (June to October), turtles that come to the beach to lay their eggs often destroy the fragile birds' nests that are dug into the sandy substrate. Visitors who are unaware of the nesting sites also contribute to the problem by accidentally stepping on them. Of all the islands in the Barlavento archipelago, only the island of Branco is home to the Blue-winged Stonechat, with a breeding population of only 50 pairs.

Consequently, the survival of the species depends on effective habitat protection and restoration.

"The protection of critical habitats is essential to ensure the survival of some species and to promote a balance between them" notes Isabel Fortes, Seabird Programme Coordinator at Biosfera.

Conservation Measures

To address, this challenge, Biosfera, has been carrying out various conservation efforts in the island. The efforts, include setting up vertical nets to capture/recapture seabirds and conducting random ringing. Biometric measurements such as wing and tarsal length and weight are taken whenever possible.

Further, automatic recorders have been placed on the northern part of the island to detect bird vocalisations or to listen at night to discover new colonies, count seabird species, count turtle nests and observe and identify coastal species.

In 2020, artificial nests were build to increase the number of available nesting sites and protect the Blue-winged Stonechat. These nests, made from durable materials, were strategically placed in safe areas out of reach of the turtles. The initiative aims not only to protect the eggs and hatchlings, but also to ensure the long-term viability of this fragile colony on this island.

Progress and impact

Artificial nests have proven to be a valuable conservation tool. Since 2023, evidence of occupation by the Blue-winged Stonechat and other species including the Bulwer's Petrel and the Cape Verde Storm Petrel has been found. In 2024, seven artificial nests were occupied, indicating a gradual increase in their acceptance by seabirds. This growth highlights the potential of these nests to support different species and reinforces the importance of regular monitoring and maintenance to ensure their effectiveness.

''Artificial nests have proven to be a valuable conservation tool for the endangered species of Ilhéu Branco" says Fortes. Despite progress, conservation efforts on Ilhéu Branco face logistical challenges, such as difficult accessibility, which makes regular monitoring difficult. Biosfera is overcoming these obstacles by carrying out regular monitoring.

The gradual increase in nest occupancy with seven nests currently occupied by different bird species reflects the success of conservation initiatives and highlights the importance of proactive measures such as artificial nesting to protect thretened bird species on Ilhéu Branco, ensuring their survival in the face of natural and man-made challenges.

Sensitization & Awareness Campaigns

Environmental conservation is important for the preservation of species and their habitats for the future, and Cape Verde faces many challenges. To this end, Biosfera has designed and began to implement best practices to raise public awareness of the challenges of environmental conservation in Cape Verde. Since 2018, Biosfera Biosfera has carried out various environmental awareness activities in schools on the islands of São Vicente, Santo Antão and São Nicolau to create awareness on the threats to seabirds in Raso and Branco islands. These activities have reached more than more than 30,000 children and young people of different ages to date, underlining Biosfera's unwavering commitment to environmental education.

Further, Biosfera will explore improving and adopting new environmental awareness techniques in the coming years, to sensitize and train people to preserve Cabo Verde's biodiversity, including working with young people to raise awareness in the need to conserve the seabirds of Raso and Branco Islands.

Conservation in Cape Verde begins with raising awareness of our seabirds. Ensuring the future of conservation depends on deepening this knowledge so that conservation efforts can be even more effective", concludes Fortes.

> *"Conservation in Cape Verde begins with raising awareness of our seabirds. Ensuring the future of conservation depends on deepening this knowledge so that conservation efforts can be even more effective.*

Isabel Fortes
Seabird Programme Coordinator, Biosfera

COMMUNITY-LED INITIATIVE CLIMATE RESILIENCE EFFORTS IN RWANDA

School children who are part of Nature Rwanda's eco clubs © Nature Rwanda

By Joshua Mugisha

Lake Kivu and Rusizi river basin is one of the African Great Lakes and is shared between Burundi, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Rusizi river spans 117 km long, originating from the southern point of Lake Kivu, forming part of the border between Rwanda on the East and DRC on the west, forming part of the border between DRC and Burundi as it flows downstream. The basin is home to two million people who rely on agriculture, fishing, mining, and local trade for their livelihoods.

For years, the region has faced the detrimental effects of climate change, such as heavy rains leading to floods, landslides, and soil erosion. These natural disasters have severely impacted the communities of Bweyeye and Butare sectors in Rwanda's Rusizi District. For families dependent on agriculture, these disasters have resulted in soil erosion and crop destruction; leading to famine and economic hardship.

In response, BirdLife Partner, Nature Rwanda is implementing interventions to build climate resilience in Rusizi River basin. Between 2022 and 2023, 300,000 trees were planted, beginning the restoration of 300 hectares of land in the basin. With the help of dedicated volunteers, known as "Community Tree Stewards" who regularly monitor the planted trees, the survival rate of these trees has reached 85%.

"The importance of trees is not only about anchoring the soil but also enhancing soil productivity. Indigenous trees attract pollinators such as bees, which play a crucial role in fertilizing crops, leading to increased yields and improved crop quality", says Jean Claude Dusabimana, Executive Director of Nature Rwanda.

In November 2024, Nature Rwanda expanded its restoration efforts, launching a transformative tree planting campaign that is underway. However, the campaign faced significant challenges related to inviting community members to the tree planting activities, due to the rugged and mountainous terrain of Rusizi, where settlements are scattered across steep slopes and remote valleys. Traditional communication methods were not effective in such a complex topography, so the team had to adopt innovative approaches to mobilize the community.

To address this challenge, the team developed a unique mobilization strategy focused on education and inspiration. 60 children from Nature Rwanda's ecoclubs in two partners schools were trained on the importance of tree planting.

"In these campaigns, we encourage local communities to plant trees and adopt renewable energy sources. We also specifically urge them to stop cutting trees in the buffer zone of Nyungwe National Park. By adhering to these practices, we can enhance the resilience of our habitats and ensure a safer, more sustainable future for all", notes Claudine, a young environmental ambassador.

These young environmental ambassadors have been speaking in community meetings, encouraging their neighbours to participate in the initiative.

"These students played a crucial role in our community mobilization efforts", says Noel Kwizera, the Climate Change and Landscape Restoration Programme Manager at Nature Rwanda.

"By using the voices of their own children to inspire action, farmers clearly understood their role in contributing to the project's objectives. The students' involvement strengthened the project's outreach and reinforced the practical application of their climate rights training from the previous months", He adds.

Further, three announcers with handheld megaphones travelled through villages for seven days, calling on people to attend the tree-planting activity. Their voices echoed through the hills, spreading awareness and rallying participants. Roadshows also helped spread the message to local markets and small business centers. With music, engaging role-plays, and quizzes offering small prizes such as branded T-shirts and caps, these roadshows attracted arge crowds. Local government leaders also played a key role by leveraging their influence to mobilize community members.

These combined efforts resulted in 700 community members attending the campaign launch, with 181,235 tree seedlings representing 100.7% of the total trees to be planted during this season, distributed to date.

Despite the encouraging progress, challenges remain. Many community members still need to fully understand the crucial role of trees in ecological restoration. However, this initiative is just the beginning. With continued support from local governments, NGOs, private organizations, and committed community members, Rusizi River basin is making steady strides toward a climate-resilient future. Each tree planted is a step toward restored landscapes, secured livelihoods, and a brighter tomorrow.

> *"The importance of trees is not only about anchoring the soil but also enhancing soil productivity. Indigenous trees attract pollinators such as bees, which play a crucial role in fertilizing crops, leading to increased yields and improved crop quality*

Jean Claude Dusabimana
Executive Director, Nature Rwanda

Local community members before a tree planting exercise © Nature Rwanda

MITIGATING SEABIRD BYCATCH IN CABO VERDE'S ARTISANAL FISHERIES

Colorful Fishing Boats in Pedra Lume, Cabo verde © Rob Mowe:

By Ahmed Diame

The first rays of sunlight illuminate the town of Santa Maria, on the island of Sal in Cabo Verde. Like every day, Enio Silva, better known by his nickname Lambaoa, and his fellow fishermen are preparing to brave the waves of the Atlantic Ocean. And, as he does every Monday, Lambaoa straps on a small black bag with mysterious contents.

After 45 minutes of sailing, they arrive at their destination: their fishing zone for the day. Carefully, Lambaoa opens his black bag and takes out a long collapsible rod which he clamps to a device installed at the back of his pirogue. Once the rod was attached, he takes out a black kite from the bag. and hooks the kite's thread onto the rod.

Suddenly, a raptor-like shadow, a large bird, looms dover the dugout like a sentinel. "It's the Scarybird!" he shouts, his eyes gleaming.

Lambaoa is part of a group of local fishermen called the 'Guardians of the Sea' (GOS) who are taking part in a program to test Scarybird in artisanal fisheries in Cabo Verde.

The program, piloted by BirdLife Marine Programme in Africa, aims to assess the effectiveness of the Scarybird in reducing the incidental capture of seabirds in fisheries. "Its effectiveness has already been proven elsewhere, notably in Portugal," says Iderlindo Santos, Cabo Verde Projects Manager at BirdLife Africa. "The results of these trials are eagerly awaited here. This is the first time such technology has been trialed in Cabo Verde and West Africa," he adds.

"Since the launch of the trial campaign, the scarybird has been a hit with fishermen on all the surrounding islands", says Anice Lopes, Sustainable Fisheries Programme Coordinator at Associação Projeto Biodiversidade, a local NGO involved in the project. "Because of its success, more and more fishermen now want to work with us to protect seabirds and improve their daily fisheries activities", adds Anice.

After only a few weeks of trials, the scarybird has won over the hearts of Cape Verdean fishermen. Thanks to the scarybird, seabird attacks on baits have been reduced by 50%. A great relief for "Lambão" and his fellow fishermen: "Before, we wasted a lot of time trying to keep the seabirds away from our nets, without much success.

Many birds were accidentally caught on our hooks. But

A capverdean artisanal hand line fisher, member of the "guardians of the sea" taking part in the scarybird trials © Biosfera

today, thanks to the scarybird, we've taken a big step towards managing this problem", Lambaoa adds.

For the time being, more data is needed to confirm whether the scarybird contributes to reducing seabird bycatch in these fisheries. In the meantime, the first observations give cause for hope. While it's early to draw definitive conclusions, it's safe to say that the artisanal fishermen of Cabo Verde are making steps in finding innovative solutions to protect seabirds in West African fisheries.

> *"Since the launch of the trial campaign, the scarybird has been a hit with fishermen on all the surrounding islands. Because of its success, more and more fishermen now want to work with us to protect seabirds and improve their daily fisheries activities.*

Anice Lopes
Sustainable Fisheries Programme Coordinator, Associação Projeto Biodiversidade

PROTECTING WETLANDS ALONG THE NILE

Fishermen along the Nile at Jinja, Uganda © Yasmine Hafez

By Yasmine Hafez and Micheal Kibuule

The Nile River Basin stretches approximately 2,870,000 km² across 11 countries, from the expansive wetlands near Lake Victoria in Uganda to the extensive Sudd in South Sudan and the fertile Nile Delta in Egypt. This Basin harbors a rich biodiversity, including a variety of plants, mammals, amphibians, reptiles, and birds. It is notably home to migratory and endemic species such as the Kentish Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*), Little Tern (*Sterna albifrons*), Curlew Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea)*, and the Egyptian Plover (*Pluvianus aegyptius*). Further, these wetlands play a crucial role in supporting the livelihoods of millions through vital ecosystem services.

However, climate change is exerting additional pressures on the growing populations around these wetlands, leading to uncertain rainfall patterns, flash floods, and potential droughts. Between 2022 and 2023, BirdLife International Partners, NatureUganda (NU) and Nature Conservation Egypt (NCE) collaborated on a project that aimed to connect communities along the Nile River, promote cross-cultural exchange and share valuable insights into community-based conservation. The initiative, partially funded by the Nile Basin Capacity Building Network (NBCBN) Foundation, was carried out at the Nile's source in Jinja, Uganda, and its mouth at Lake Burullus, Egypt, both renowned for their high bird diversity. The Jinja wetlands are particularly known for their tropical bird species, while the Burullus wetlands attract a mix of migratory species from Europe and Africa.

Degraded Wetlands

Both wetlands face similar environmental issues due to industrial water pollution, which impacts water quality and harms fish populations while promoting invasive species like water hyacinth.Furthermore, significant changes to the landscape and infrastructure, particularly the development of the Bujagali hydropower dam in Jinja and the building of the Cairo-Alexandria Agriculture road and aquaculture ponds in Burullus, have led to the reduction of wetland areas and diminished habitats for birds, causing a decline in bird populations at these sites. As wetlands shrink, local fishing communities experience adverse effects, particularly with reduced fish catch.

Local communities are now hunting migrating birds for income and protein due to rising commercial prices. Data from the 2023 NCE mid-winter bird census revealed a significant decline in species diversity, with only 65 species recorded. Historically, bird hunting at Lake Burullus was primarily for sustenance. However, hunters have recently, engaged in indiscriminate methods such as using guns, traps on telecommunication structures, calling devices, and nets, driven by increasing demand.

In 2017, NCE released a report named "Hunting and Trapping Practices in Egypt's Northern Mediterranean Coast", highlighting illegal bird trapping methods including bird-calling devices. The report indicated that these illegal practices have persisted for years, leading to a decline in bird populations.

At a workshop hosted by NCE targeting hunters in Al-Maqsaba village near Lake Burullus, the hunters reminisced about a time when the lake was abundant with diverse bird species. “I’ve been on this lake since I was 14. Back then, birds flew so close you could almost touch them. Now, speedboats scare them away, and what’s left falls victim to sound traps and nets”, says Bakri Ayman, a hunter.

Traditional practices of licensed and sustainable hunting have been supplanted by fast motorboats and sound devices that lure birds into traps, along with extensive fishing nets. While these methods yield quick profits, they threaten the lake’s fragile ecosystem. The hunters themselves expressed worries, not only regarding diminishing bird populations but also their livelihoods as overhunting worsens. “The birds don’t feel safe here anymore. They stay away from the shores. Without intervention, both the birds and the hunters will vanish”, laments Mohamed Mahrous, a hunter.

“Hunting birds is how I make a living there isn’t any other job for me. It started as a passion from childhood. Most of my family members have fish farms, and before that, they fished in the lake using traps ("gawabi"). I've noticed that bird numbers decrease yearly, and according to our elders, there were far more birds in the past”, he adds.

A trapped bird © Abdelrahman Gamal

“There is need for NCE to effectively collaborate with the community in reducing bird hunting in the region, which is why we are working with communities to transition from hunting birds to bird watching for visitors while maintaining their income”, says Haitham Mossa, NCE’s Conservation Director.

Following the forced relocation of communities linked to the construction of the dam, Bujagali hydropower in Uganda, communities received compensation through the establishment of designated areas for community development. One such area, the Bujagali fishers Area, became a central meeting place for local fishermen. According to a social-cultural assessment by NU, most of the 1,400 fishermen in the region are reportedly considering a transition from fishing to ecotourism. “This trend is likely due to the dwindling fish population in the river and insufficient infrastructure, like shelters for protection during the rainy season”, adds James Ouro, a fisherman.

Moreover, Nature Uganda has provided training to forty local community members in bird guiding as part of its capacity-building efforts. This training covered crucial topics such as ethical considerations, the proper use of birding equipment, and techniques for identifying different bird species. During practical sessions, trainees have observed a variety of bird species, including Fish Eagles (*Haliaeetus vocifer*), Long-tailed Cormorants (*Microcarbo Africanus*), African Open-billed Storks (*Anastomus lamelligerus*) and Terns, among others.

“We believe the training equipped participants with vital skills for identifying various bird species, which is essential for effective bird guiding. Furthermore, it nurtured a greater appreciation for the significance of wetlands and the need for environmental conservation”, says Achilles Byaruhanga, NU’s Executive Director.

Different scales and community dynamics

The study highlighted significant environmental stress at Lake Burullus compared to Jinja. This can be attributed to Burullus wetlands’ proximity to the sea and the large volumes of wastewater contributing to habitat pollution, whereas Jinja's wetlands are primarily affected by industrial effluents and encroachment. In Jinja, local fishing communities regard birds as opportunities for ecotourism, while in Burullus, birds are mainly seen as sources of protein and income, especially during migration seasons.

At Jinja, the fishing community experienced little competition, fostering collaboration through shared meetings. This cooperation enhanced their adaptability to conservation solutions, benefiting both the community and the biodiversity of the region. This communal strategy bolstered the fishermen's socio-economic stability and promoted sustainable practices that safeguarded fish and bird populations. In contrast, the intense competition for resources at Lake Burullus created a different dynamic, pushing communities to find alternative incomes and widening socio-economic disparities. Such fragmentation hinders cohesive conservation strategies and contributes to the depletion of fish stocks, which poses a threat to bird populations.

Lake Burullus in Egypt © Yasmine Hafez

Addressing gaps in community approaches to conservation

The study also illuminated the complex relationship between environmental conservation and socioeconomic growth. While Jinja's communities have adopted ecotourism and are moving toward sustainable livelihoods, Lake Burullus communities are struggling with increased competition and resource depletion, resulting in hunting migratory birds for income. This underscores the need for a holistic approach to biodiversity conservation. Thus, safeguarding the Nile's wetlands and tackling socio-economic challenges necessitates cross border cooperation grounded in knowledge exchange and best practices, as exemplified by the partnership between Nature Uganda and NCE

"Wetlands have a fragile future, pointing to the intricate relationship between ecosystems and human livelihoods. Improved collaboration could involve exchanging data on migratory patterns, tracking ecosystem health, and controlling invasive species to ensure the long-term sustainability of these critical regions. Programs that connect biodiversity conservation with economic development such as eco-tourism, sustainable agriculture, or fishing can greatly improve environmental health and community prosperity, there by safeguarding these precious wetlands, concludes Khaled Noby, NCE's CEO.

> *"We believe the training equipped participants with vital skills for identifying various bird species, which is essential for effective bird guiding. Furthermore, it nurtured a greater appreciation for the significance of wetlands and the need for environmental conservation.*

Achilles Byaruhanga
Executive Director, Nature Uganda

TACKLING VULTURE POPULATIONS DECLINES IN TANZANIA

Champion tradition healer (with gray suit) distributing stickers for vulture conservation awareness raising during the Sukuma event celebration in, Simiyu Region, Tanzania. © Nature Tanzania

By Edwin Kamugisha

Tanzania is home to eight vulture species of which six are classified as Critically Endangered (CR) or Endangered (EN) in 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*).

Over the past 30 years, Tanzania has witnessed a drastic decline in vulture species driven by various factors including poisoning, belief-based use, collisions with energy infrastructure, and habitat destruction, among others.

Since 2022, Nature Tanzania has been implementing "An integrated approach to protecting wildlife from poisoning in Mara-Serengeti" project in Makao Wildlife Management Area (WMA). This three-year project funded by the Darwin Initiative through BirdLife International, aims at addressing wildlife poisoning driven by human-wildlife conflict, and the use of vulture body parts in traditional medicine.

During our reconnaissance survey, we noted that the use of vulture body parts in traditional medicine practices was a significant driver behind poisoning and vulture population declines, consequently the project was designed to address this challenge through various interventions, says Alpha Mfilinge, Project Officer at Nature Tanzania.

Nature Tanzania is working with different stakeholders, including traditional healers, to identify and pilot strategies and solutions towards reducing the demand and supply of vulture body parts in traditional medicine. This is being done through exploring beneficial medicine alternatives e.g. plant-based products and associated business opportunities.

Through these engagements, the traditional healers have identified a plant-based alternative., which has been piloted with positive feedback on the plant's efficacy. To date, Nature Tanzania has engaged 58 traditional who have become vulture champions, raising awareness on vulture conservation among other traditional healers and their customer in and near Makao WMA.

A class session photo during the entrepreneurship training to the small entrepreneurs and and CRF beneficiaries from Makao WMA villages © Nature Tanzania

"Since Nature Tanzania reached out to us with, highlighting the need to conserve vultures, I stopped dealing in vulture parts, and now supply the plant-based alternative. With the increased number of traditional healers who have stopped using vultures, selling the plant-based alternative has become a good business", says Deus Sitta, a trader who supplied vulture heads

The project has also provided two entrepreneurial training to 210 people (109 females) and advice promoting investment in supplemental businesses (including opportunities for women). In collaboration with Makao WMA, Nature Tanzania has established a Community Revolving Fund (CRF), which provides access to finance for sustainable livelihood. A total of 155 community members including 58 men and 97 women have benefitted from the established CRF, so far, and more will continue to do so, even after completion of the project.

Establishing the Community Revolving Fund (CRF) in Makao not only improved people's livelihoods but also enhanced their participation in conservation initiatives. We thank Nature Tanzania for the project as it is approaching its end. We promise to manage and use the CRF fund in accordance with the policy we developed together while we continue to conserve vultures", says Ruth Mgunda, district community development officer and chairperson of the CRF committee.

Building on these successes Nature Tanzania plans to upscale and replicate conservation efforts around Maswa and Serengeti ecosystems,where the belief-based use of vulture body parts in traditional medicine is rampant.

"Collaboration and support from various stakeholders has been critical in ensuring the success of this project. Nature Tanzania will continue working towards conservation of vultures to ensure that we don't lose the vital ecosystem services provided by these birds, concludes Mfilinge.

"Collaboration and support from various stakeholders has been critical in ensuring the success of this project. Nature Tanzania will continue working towards conservation of vultures to ensure that we don't lose the vital ecosystem services provided by these birds.

Alpha Mfilinge
Project Officer, Nature Tanzania

BLADE PATTERNING REDUCING THE RISK OF BIRD COLLISIONS WITH WIND TURBINES IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa Wind turbine © Bildagentur Zoonar

By John Gibbs & Sam Ralston-Paton

In Sub- Saharan Africa, about 600 million people have no access to electricity. As energy infrastructure, including renewable energy continues to be rolled out across the continent, the risk to biodiversity particularly birds increases. BirdLife South Africa recognises the value of renewable energy to help address the global climate crisis and support South Africa's transition to a green economy. However, while renewable energy is relatively benign in environmental terms compared to conventional thermal generation, the technologies involved can have negative bird and biodiversity impacts. Wind energy is of particular concern, given the potentially fatal impact of turbine blade collisions on vultures, raptors and other soaring birds; these long-lived species are often already threatened with extinction due to other anthropogenic pressures and may be unable to sustain additional losses from this technology.

Recent analysis, drawing on operational monitoring reports authored by independent avifaunal consultants at 32 wind farms between 2015 and 2023, highlighted that a total of 202 species have been recorded as fatalities at wind energy facilities, including threatened species such as the Cape Vulture (*Gyps coprotheres*), Black Harrier (*Circus maurus*), Martial Eagle (*Polemaetus bellicosus*), Secretary bird (*Sagittarius serpentarius*) , and Verreaux's Eagle (*Aquila verreauxii*), species which already face potentially unsustainable mortality rates. Furthermore, hidden ecological costs—such as disrupted breeding events if adult birds are killed during breeding season, may exacerbate risks for certain species.

Over the last 18 months, BirdLife South Africa has been working with the South African government, the wind industry as well as with environmental practitioners and avifaunal specialists to encourage the wider use of practical measures that can help mitigate the risk of avifaunal turbine collision, with the patterning or painting of turbine blades an approach that offers promise.

In simple terms, blade patterning is thought to make the fast-spinning blades on utility scale wind turbines easier for birds to see by reducing "motion smear" (an effect humans encounter when looking at fast turning rotors or bicycle wheels) by creating a "flicker effect" that breaks up the "blur".

At the end of 2023, BirdLife South Africa together with the South African Wind Energy Association (SAWEA) published a paper that looked at the science behind blade patterning and a subsequent, very positive, engagement with the South Africa Civil Aviation

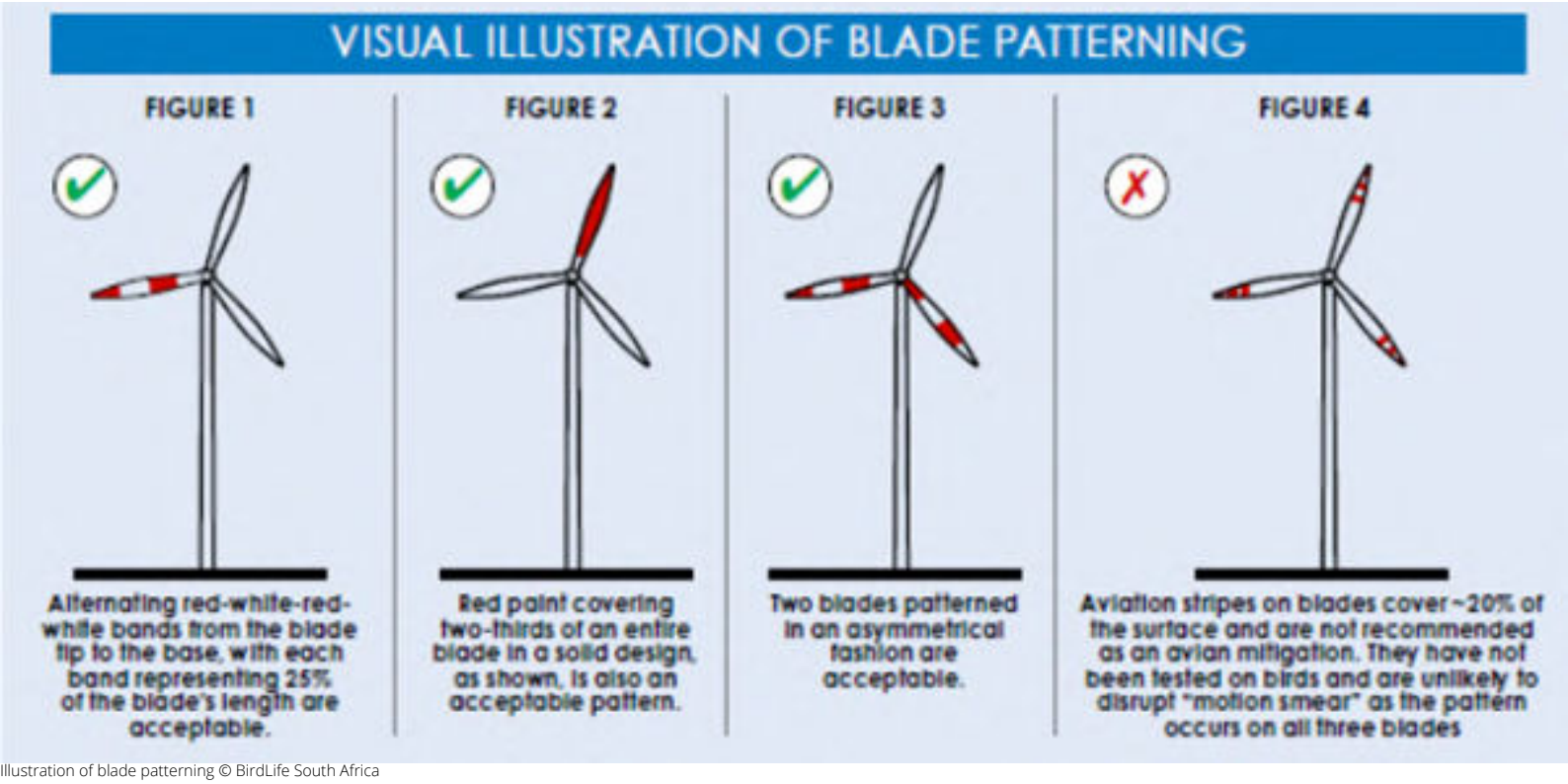


Illustration of blade patterning © BirdLife South Africa

Authority (SACAA) resulted in general approval for the approach to be applied at wind farms in South Africa.

As shown above, blade patterning is applied on one or two (but not all three) blades and covers between 50-67% of the blade with the remainder painted white. In South Africa the patterning must be red to meet SACAA requirements, a colour that is also thought to perform well in South African weather conditions.

Although further studies are required to confirm the science, an ongoing blade patterning pilot involving a limited number of turbines at the Umoya wind farm at Hopefield in the Western Cape has produced promising results, with a statistically significant reduction in fatalities noted at the affected turbines during the initial phase of testing.

Whilst the blade patterning at Hopefield was undertaken post-commissioning using aerial gantries, the costs can be greatly reduced by patterning the turbine blades under factory conditions during manufacture and some developers are already adopting this approach on their upcoming wind farms. Accordingly, and recognising the increasing pace of wind turbine deployment in South Africa, BirdLife South Africa, together with SAWEA have recently published a set of Blade Patterning Guidelines for South Africa to share best practice and facilitate the wider application of the technique.

The Guidelines were prepared with assistance of the avifaunal specialist community, and are intended to be used by environmental practitioners, including bird specialists, to ensure that bird patterning measures take account of the latest available science whilst meeting SACAA requirements.

Long term monitoring of the wind farms at which blade patterning is adopted will, it is hoped, assist in building a deeper understanding of the science behind the approach and verify its effectiveness in limiting bird turbine collisions.

"Assuming that the science bears out the initial promise, blade patterning may well become a standard requirement for all projects where the environmental impact assessment identifies a significant risk of avifaunal turbine collision", concludes Alex Ngari, BirdLife International's Migratory Birds & Flyways Programme Manager for Africa.

> *"Assuming that the science bears out the initial promise, blade patterning may well become a standard requirement for all projects where the environmental impact assessment identifies a significant risk of avifaunal turbine collision.*

Alex Ngari
Migratory Birds & Flyways Programme Manager for Africa, BirdLife International

AFRICELLES: PROMOTING WOMEN-LED CONSERVATION IN EAST AND WEST AFRICA

A bird's eye view of the Amani Nature Reserve in the East Usambara Mountains in Tanzania, one of the six project regions. © Eliya Lawrence

By Beatriz Waldmann & Maik Jerusalem

On 1st November 2024, the project 'AfricElle: Women as champions for agroforestry, biodiversity and nature conservation around protected areas in Africa', was officially launched. The project co-financed by the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)and the Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union (NABU) builds on the results of the successful predecessor initiative 'AfriEvolve', which ran from March 2021 to December 2023 in six countries namely Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Cote d'Ivoire, and Tanzania.

Through the AfriEvolve project, Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA) techniques were piloted, with various impacts including solar- powered irrigation systems for vegetable cultivationin West Africa, and value chain developments in East Africa. In addition, a comprehensive targeted capacity and organisational development programme was initiated for green NGOs in East and West Africa with more than 13 full day digital learning sessions conducted.

Building on these successes, the AfricElle project will aim to develop sustainable agroforestry systems, promote the role of women in conservation while advancing the protection of valuable ecosystems. The project will be carried out in Taita Hills in Kenya, Echuya Forest in Uganda, Amani National Reserve in Tanzania, PONASI Eco Complex in Burkina faso, Mole Ecological Landscape in Ghana and the Comoe National Park in Côte d'Ivoire, working with six BirdLife partners in the aforementioned countries including Nature Kenya, NatureUganda, Nature Tanzania, NATURAMA, SOS-Forêts and Ghana Wildlife Society.

"Through our AfricElle initiative, we aim to empower women to secure, increase and diversify their incomes by using sustainable methods to conserve resources, build the resilience of rural communities and conserve ecosystems, especially forests", says Brit Reichelt Zolho Head of Africa Program at NABU.

In East and West Africa, subsistence farming is predominantly undertaken by women, who face numerous challenges, which include land degradation, resource conflicts, economic instability, and restricted opportunities for income diversification. The proximity of farming communities to protected areas increases the chance of using the resources in an unsustainable manner, resulting in environmental degradation and conflicts with wildlife and conservation authorities.

Thus, the project will focus on strengthening women as key actors in environmental and resource protection to ensure inclusive participation through institutional capacity-building in areas like gender equality, financial management, and resource access.

A series of training courses for 900 participants across the six countries will address women's needs using participatory methods. Thirty women (5 per country) will be selected for a cross-border Champions program

focusing on climate resilience and sustainable practices. Participants will undertake exchange visits to share knowledge and expand networks through regional clusters and workshops in addition to leading national campaigns on biodiversity conservation and climate resilience through tailored training and mentoring programmes.

Climate-resilient agroforestry systems not only protect valuable ecosystems but also create sources of income for rural communities. Consequently, the project will support development of green value chains such as macadamia cultivation, sustainable shea butter and honey production, thus promoting the climate-resilient crop production in agroforestry systems. Further, this agroforestry crop production will be improved through grafting and sustainable cultivation, in addition to acquisition of seedlings and carrying out training sessions for local communities.

"In Echuya Forest Landscape, Women till the land and provide for the family livelihoods, they are the backbone of families and the most impacted by climate variations. The project will support improved climate change resilience solutions and capacity through innovative learning, nature-friendly and value-added chain production", says Achillies Byaruhanga, Executive Director of Nature Uganda.

"Our goal is to empower women leaders and smallholder farmers with the skills, networks and opportunities they need to advocate for gender equality, participate in decision-making and drive women-led biodiversity, climate and conservation initiatives", says Richard Appoh, Director of Conservation Programmes at Ghana Wildlife Society.

Another core objective of the project is restoring degraded ecosystems in and around protected areas through community-based restoration efforts in each country. This will be implemented through sustainable agroforestry practices by community-based groups. Further, educational campaigns and trainings on biodiversity will be carried out to promote community ownership of the project.

With this holistic approach, AfricElle combines ecological, social and economic goals, thus laying the foundation for more resilient livelihoods and the long-term protection of biodiversity in the project regions.

The project focuses on empowering women as key actors in environmental and resource protection. © Eliya Lawrence

"Through our AfricElle initiative, we aim to empower women to secure, increase and diversify their incomes, by using sustainable methods to conserve resources, build the resilience of rural communities and conserve ecosystems, especially forests.

Brit Reichelt Zolho
Head of Africa Program at NABU

A Tribute to Dr *Dr Souleymane Zeba*

It is with heavy hearts that we honour and say goodbye to Dr Souleymane Zeba, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Fondation des Amis de la Nature (NATURAMA) - BirdLife Partner in Burkina Faso, who passed away on Sunday, October 13, 2024.

Souleymane was a highly respected and dedicated advocate for the environment, who made conservation in Burkina Faso truly a national pursuit, as part of the country's sustainable development for over 35 years. His personality brought many a smile to all who knew him. Souleymane's blend of skills was unique, and his passing is a terrible blow to conservation in Burkina Faso, and indeed Africa.

A trained ecologist and forest engineer, he was widely known, having founded NATURAMA 1991 when he founded the organization. He had extensive national, regional and international experience including as National Director of Forests and Wildlife in the Burkina Faso's Ministries of Environment. He also held roles with WWF, Oxfam, and ECOWAS.

Souleymane has left an indelible mark in Burkinabe's conservation sphere: As Idrissa Zeba, Director of Conservation at NATURAMA notes:

"*For over 35 years, Dr. Zeba dedicated his life up to the very end to building NATURAMA. He worked tirelessly to shape the vision of the organisation as the Founder and the Chair of its board, establishing a network of 42 nature clubs across 45 provinces in the country.*

He stood as a pillar of conservation not only at home but also abroad and particularly within the BirdLife Africa Partnership in which he was very active.

He served as the Council for the Africa Partnership (CAP) Chair in 1999, he had also wanted to be part of the CAP 2024.

"He served on boards of the COPs and at higher levels on global environmental conventions. He is not with us anymore but has left behind a legacy of leadership and commitment to conservation in Burkina Faso and beyond. " Having worked closely with Souleymane, Luitzen Santman from Vogelbescherming Netherlands (VBN) remembers him:

"For over 20 years Dr Souleymane Zeba has played an important role in the relationship between NATURAMA and Vogelbescherming Netherlands (VBN). Dr Zeba's continuous efforts for conservation in Burkina Faso have reached far beyond, we will remember Souleymane as an inspiring professional who has connected and encouraged so many of us. His legacy will live on through the people, biodiversity and birds he contributed to".

Souleymane was instrumental in contributing to the efforts of the BirdLife Partnership in Africa, Dr Kariuki Ndang'ang'a, the Regional Director for Africa at BirdLife International remembers him:

"Souleymane was a pillar of BirdLife, especially in Burkina Faso and West Africa region as whole. His ever-jovial nature, humour and passion for nature will be missed. His influence, and expertise over the decades leaves a strong imprint on conservation in Burkina Faso and Africa.

The conservation movement in Africa has suffered a great loss, but Souleymane's love for nature legacy will live on, remembered through the landscapes he helped protect. Soar with the eagles Souleymane, you will be greatly missed and fondly remembered.

Help safeguard African Penguins !

The African Penguin is on the brink of extinction, with populations plummeting by 97% in the last century. Urgent action is needed to save this iconic species! Together, we can protect their future.

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