

Conservation news

Community-led sustainable finance mechanism for conservation in Uganda

Since 2013, Fauna & Flora International (FFI) has been working with Bulyango, Kasenene and Kidoma-Bulimya Private Forest Owners Associations in the Northern Albertine Rift, Uganda. The focus is to empower local communities and strengthen community-based natural resource management through reforestation of two wildlife corridors for chimpanzees (Budongo–Mukihani and Bugoma–Wambabya forest linkages) and improved monitoring of chimpanzees and any threats to them.

Within the Private Forest Owners Associations, several Village Savings and Loan Associations have been established as an incentive for communities to engage in conservation activities, and to provide access to affordable microcredits that enable community members to invest in conservation-friendly enterprises. At the project outset, FFI provided capacity building for community members to enhance the governance and management of savings and loan groups. Groups that demonstrated sufficient capacity were provided with additional seed funds through the Private Forest Owners Association, to enable grants through a revolving fund mechanism.

Seed funding for the revolving fund mechanism was transferred to the bank accounts of the Private Forest Owners Associations so that they had ownership of this capital. Terms and conditions for the savings and loan groups to access the capital were mutually agreed through community-level discussion: (1) savings and loan group members can access the capital at a 20% annual interest rate, which is 4% lower than the market rate, with no collateral and minimal paperwork; (2) from the 20% interest, 12% will be for the operating costs of the saving and loan operations; and (3) the remaining 8% interest will provide a sustainable financing mechanism for chimpanzee and other wildlife conservation.

As of February 2022, 450 community members have accessed microcredits to pursue conservation-friendly agriculture and c. USD 1,900 were raised as sustainable financing for chimpanzee conservation, covering at least 40% of wildlife patrol costs. This has translated into more positive community attitudes towards conservation activities and provoked an influx of additional community members wanting to join the Private Forest Owners Associations, participate in conservation activities and benefit from opportunities for sustainable livelihoods.

Given these promising results, FFI aims to scale up the current savings and loan group model by increasing the geographical scope of the project, reducing the transaction costs associated with loan operations by adopting finance technology innovations, and exploring private sector finance

partnerships to reduce the dependency of seed funds on grant funding. By improving the capacity of Private Forest Owners Associations to function effectively as grassroots organizations and strengthening the sustainability of these initiatives, FFI continues to champion community-led conservation within the Northern Albertine Rift.

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New database enhances the accessibility of global biodiversity information for conservation monitoring

To monitor the progress of conservation and sustainability projects, governments, civil society organizations, businesses and other stakeholders need data on the state of species and habitats, the pressures they face and responses to mitigate those pressures. Although project staff need to collect primary data, complementary data from global databases can help monitor key indicators (Stephenson et al., 2015, *Biodiversity*, 16, 68–85). There are several well-known global databases, such as the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (iucnredlist.org), the WWF/ZSL Living Planet Index (livingplanetindex.org) and the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (gbif.org), but many managers do not know where to find other data.

In 2020, the IUCN Species Survival Commission Species Monitoring Specialist Group, in partnership with Re:wild, conducted the first global inventory of biodiversity data sources to identify those of potential use for conservation monitoring. Although there were challenges identifying the origins, usefulness and accessibility of the data, the study published a preliminary list and a review of factors affecting data availability and use (Stephenson & Stengel, 2020, *PLOS ONE*, 15, e0242923).

In January 2022, as part of a multi-stakeholder collaborative project led by the University of Lausanne and funded by the Swiss Network for International Studies, we updated the database to include data sources identified by specialist group members and a new literature review. Data sources were selected if they had potential relevance for monitoring at the global level, included at least some time-series data, and had data added in the previous 5 years.

The revised database includes a total of 167 data sources (speciesmonitoring.org/data-sources.html). We also updated the list of 29 reports published regularly to synthesize global data. We briefly describe each data source (50 relevant for monitoring biodiversity states, 48 for pressures, 34 for responses and 35 with multiple uses), identify the lead organization, and provide a link to the website. We flag the 88% of data sources that make at least some data or data products freely accessible, although some have additional restrictions for commercial use. We encourage data source managers to send us any additional information or updates to help improve subsequent versions.

This is the only initiative we are aware of that summarizes the known global biodiversity data sources. We hope it will be communicated and shared widely in relevant scientific, conservation and business communities, to help data users find the information they need to enhance biodiversity monitoring for conservation.

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Thousands of pastoralists seek refuge in Waza National Park, Cameroon

In December 2021, a decades-long conflict between Musgum fishers and Shuwa Arab pastoralists escalated at the Logone floodplain in Cameroon, resulting in 112 villages burned, 66 deaths, and 100,000 displaced people (news.un.org/en/story/2021/12/1108242). What has not been reported is that 2,500 pastoralists, with an estimated 35,000 cattle, sought refuge in Waza National Park, on the west of the floodplain. The incursion of cattle into conservation areas has become common in Central Africa (Scholte et al., 2021, *Conservation Biology*, doi.org/10.1111/cobi.13860). But this is the first time the inhospitable Waza National Park has served as a refuge for pastoralists and their families. To assess the situation, one of us visited the Park during 29–31 December 2021.

Waza National Park, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in the Sahelian savannah of Cameroon, has large populations of savannah elephants *Loxodonta africana*, kob *Kobus kob* and topi *Damaliscus korrigum* antelopes, and lions *Panthera leo*, and exceptional birdlife. It was the most visited park in Central Africa until the 2000s, but tourism ended abruptly when a visiting French family was kidnapped by Boko Haram in 2013. It marked the beginning of a long period of insecurity from which the Park has not

recovered: tourists have not returned, funding has diminished and wildlife has declined sharply.

Our investigation found that at the height of the clashes between fishers and pastoralists on 9 December, Shuwa Arab elders consulted each other and contacted Park guards by phone before deciding to enter the Park. The following day, Shuwa Arab men, women and children walked 20 km to the centre of the Park, continuing 2 days later to a nearby water-hole. There they were initially summoned by the Park warden to leave the Park but allowed to stay to recover from their journey. After 1 week, pastoralists continued through the inundated part of the Park to the north-east where they stayed until 20 January, when all but two of the 17 groups left the Park. The Park offered safety for the pastoralists, but the conditions were harsh for families and livestock, resulting in considerable loss of sheep and donkeys; three cattle were predated by lions.

Apart from some disturbance—only six kob antelopes were seen during the 3-day visit—we expect that the direct impact of pastoralists on the Park's wildlife was minor. By offering refuge in time of distress, the Park may have laid the foundation for future partnerships with pastoralists. The ecological and hydrological interdependence of Waza National Park and the Logone floodplain is recognized in the nomination of Waza–Logone as a Ramsar Site (rsis Ramsar.org/ris/1609). The recent events indicate that the Park and the floodplain are also socially and politically interdependent. The governance structure that was recently created to coordinate development policies and humanitarian interventions in the floodplain should be extended to Waza National Park as the security and future of both are tightly connected.

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The African softshell turtle *Trionyx triunguis* in Senegal

The African softshell turtle *Trionyx triunguis* is the continent's largest freshwater turtle species. It occurs from Senegal in the west to Turkey at the easternmost extent of its range. It is categorized as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red list, although anecdotal reports suggest a 98% decline in catch per unit effort in West Africa over approximately the last 50 years, and assessors have suggested listing this regional population as Critically Endangered (van Dijk et al., 2017, dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2017-3.RLTS.T62256A96894956.en). This species has been the focus of few studies, particularly in Africa.

During the course of surveys in February–March and July–August 2021, and January 2022, I spent a total of 12