

Safeguarding biodiversity

By MARK ROSE

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MARK ROSE has held the role of Chief Executive at Fauna & Flora International (FFI) for over 20 years. During that time he has been instrumental in transforming FFI from an organisation with a handful of active projects into a multifaceted global conservation charity with a work programme comprising more than 100 projects in over 40 countries. Mr Rose is a zoologist with extensive field experience, gained predominantly in remote parts of Africa and Asia-Pacific.

The nations of the Commonwealth collectively harbour some of the world's most valuable ecosystems, on which people and wildlife depend in equal measure. Fauna & Flora International (FFI) is among the few conservation organisations with a global remit. Working in partnership with governments, local communities and other key stakeholders, it is actively engaged in projects to protect endangered species and their habitats across the Commonwealth, from Australia to Africa, Central America and the Caribbean.

Breaking out of the poverty trap

The Niassa Reserve in Mozambique is arguably Africa's best-kept secret. The second largest national park in Africa, this vast wilderness harbours the highest concentration of wildlife in the country. Niassa is a vital component in the government's post-conflict rehabilitation strategy for Mozambique's parks and reserves, but it faces numerous threats – commercial poaching, illegal subsistence hunting, overfishing, slash-and-burn agriculture, all largely driven by local poverty and a lack of alternative livelihood options. The 40,000 people living in the reserve are among the country's poorest.

The Niassa Conservation and Community Development Programme, established by FFI and

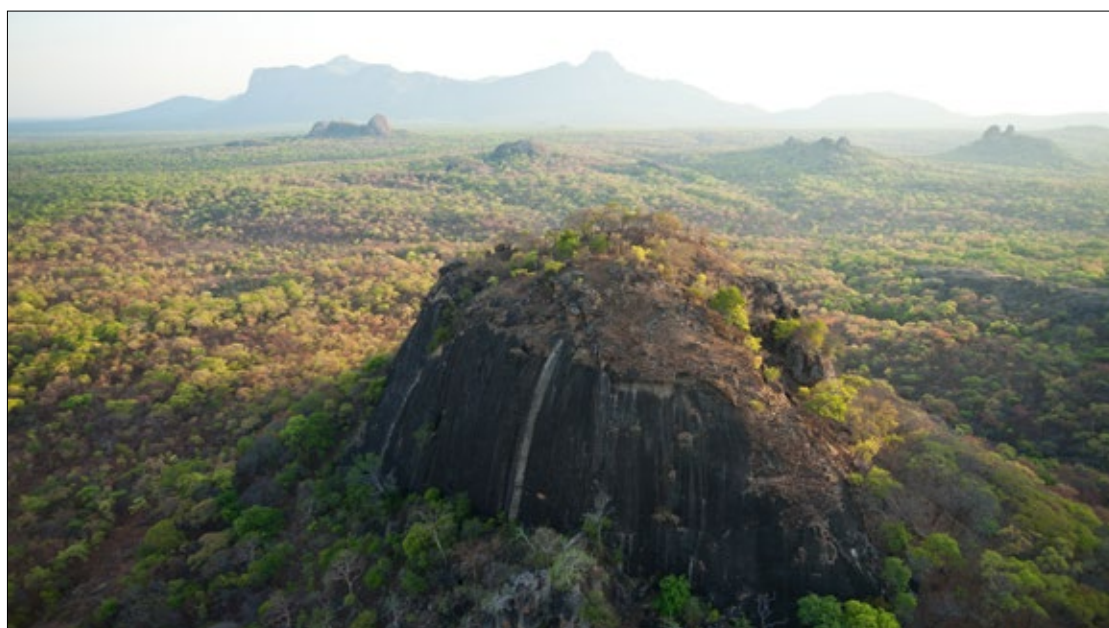
local partner SRN, is a unique public-private sector collaboration. The programme is encouraging community-run alternatives to the unsustainable use of natural resources, and promoting wildlife-based tourism, thereby helping to create a local economy that benefits both people and wildlife. Local communities participate as partners in all decisions relating to conservation management and development activities.

Gorillas in the midst of humanity

The entire world population of the mountain gorilla is confined to two small islands of montane forest, the first in Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, the second straddling the shared borders of Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 1979, FFI was instrumental in establishing the Mountain Gorilla Project to protect these beleaguered great apes. Known today as the International Gorilla Conservation Programme, this is a shining example of a partnership that transcends political boundaries and successfully combines biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation. The programme is renowned for building multi-sector partnerships that promote collaboration between private business, communities and government agencies.

The local communities – mostly subsistence farmers

The Niassa National Reserve in Mozambique harbours the highest concentration of wildlife in the country



– live cheek by jowl with the mountain gorillas in one of Africa’s most densely populated regions. Since their basic survival strategies pose an ongoing threat to gorilla habitat, it is imperative to help them find alternatives. The development of enterprise linked to tourism helps to generate sustainable income. Much of this is reinvested in education and micro-enterprise initiatives, which in turn increases local support for the conservation of gorillas and their habitat. Gorilla tourism is the third biggest revenue earner in Rwanda.

Since the programme began, the mountain gorilla population has increased to an estimated 880 individuals. This success story is all the more remarkable for having been achieved against a backdrop of civil war, unrest and social deprivation.

Community engagement

With FFI support, community-run wildlife conservancies in northern Kenya have played a vital role in protecting endangered species, by demonstrating that habitat conservation can reap economic rewards comparable to, and more sustainable than, the returns generated by habitat conversion for agricultural or industrial purposes. As the community conservancy concept grew in popularity, there was an obvious need for an umbrella organisation capable of supporting such initiatives.

The Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT) was established in 2004 to represent the interests of the pastoralist communities in a region rife with tribal conflict. FFI was a founder-member of NRT, helping to support a variety of initiatives that transform lives, keep the peace and encourage sustainable use of natural resources. Over 500 permanent jobs have been created, and NRT now works with more than 20 community conservancies. These cover a combined area of two million hectares, harbour increasing densities of wildlife, and have generated significant revenue for local communities.

Flower power to the people

South Africa’s Cape Floral Kingdom contains more species of native plant, per hectare, than even the richest tropical rainforest. It is home to around 8,500 plant species, of which a staggering 5,800 are found nowhere else in the world. This entire landscape, dominated by spectacular fynbos vegetation, is threatened by invasive tree species, urban expansion, agricultural encroachment and unsustainable exploitation of wild flowers.

In 1998, FFI prevented a 550-hectare botanical paradise from being sold off and converted into vineyards. Having purchased the land with help from the Arcadia Fund, it set up a local partner, Flower Valley Conservation Trust, which continues to manage

the farm at Flower Valley as a wildflower harvesting and export business. By encouraging its suppliers to practise sustainable harvesting methods, FFI was able to influence the conservation and management of fynbos on a wider scale.

Crucially, the project has created unprecedented economic and educational opportunities for the impoverished local rural communities, thereby reinforcing the benefits of sustainable resource use. Local employment stands at a record high, and the market for ethically sourced fynbos bouquets has soared, with substantial volumes sold in the UK and South Africa itself. All profits are ploughed back into the local economy.

The success of this financial model, whereby social, economic and environmental concerns are addressed simultaneously, has helped to convince landowners, private businesses and local communities that sustainable use of South Africa’s natural heritage offers significantly better long-term economic prospects than alternative agricultural land uses. FFI’s approach at Flower Valley now serves as a blueprint for wider conservation and poverty relief initiatives in the region.

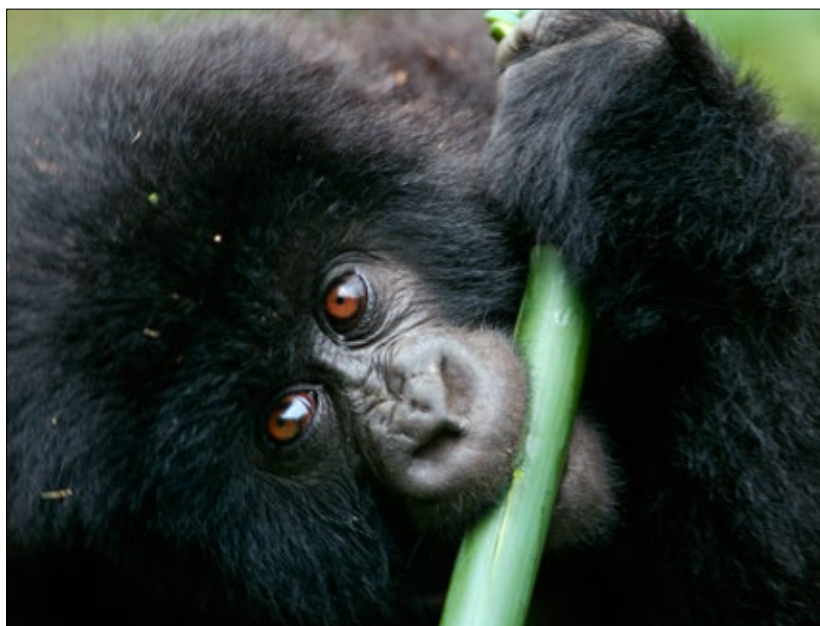
Investing in the future

The Golden Stream Corridor Preserve in Belize, where FFI helped safeguard almost 6,000 hectares of lowland tropical forest, is testament to the importance of providing ongoing support to local partners and sustainable livelihood options to the surrounding communities.

This protected area harbours a rich diversity of plants and animals, including all five wild cat species native to Central America, and forms a vital ecological link between the Maya Mountains and the mangrove

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forests and coral reefs of Belize's southern coast. The entire Golden Stream watershed has now been secured.

Golden Stream is owned and managed by FFI's local partner, Ya'axché Conservation Trust. Ya'axché began as a one-man environmental crusade, but has blossomed into a nationally recognised leader in conservation and sustainable development. This evolution epitomises how FFI nurtures local talent to help communities become effective custodians of their own natural heritage. In 2012, the head of Ya'axché, Lisel Alamilla – who cut her teeth as country director of FFI's Belize programme – was appointed Minister of Fisheries, Forestry and Sustainable Development. The message was clear: the Belize government intends to keep nature conservation at the heart of the country's development plans.

Large-scale impact

On the Caribbean island of Antigua, a project that began as a quest to save the world's rarest snake from extinction has evolved into a multifaceted programme that benefits local communities and the wider economy. Some 20 years after its rediscovery on a tiny offshore islet, the Antiguan Racer population has increased twentyfold, thanks to a recovery programme that included eradication of invasive alien predators, a nationwide public education campaign, and reintroduction to rat-free islands. The snake has become a source of national pride and a scaly standard-bearer for Antigua's biodiversity as a whole, not to mention a valuable source of tourist revenue.

Retaining the snake as its symbol, the project has evolved into the locally managed Offshore Islands Conservation Programme, which was instrumental in the creation of a new protected area covering over 3,000 hectares of Antigua's coastline. Other

endangered species on the offshore islands, including a rare endemic lizard, nesting marine turtles and numerous bird species, have benefitted significantly from activities such as rat eradication and ecological restoration. The Antiguan Racer Conservation Project is one of the longest running and most successful conservation initiatives in the Caribbean.

Cultural value

On nearby Saint Lucia, FFI is helping local partners to protect an endangered tree species that has enormous cultural and economic value for the island community. Resin from the lansan tree is a vital commodity, but traditional tapping methods leave the mature trees susceptible to infection and rot, posing a real threat to the species' survival. With technical support from FFI, forestry staff have developed a new extraction technique that avoids long-term damage to the trees. Resin tappers have willingly embraced this change in the knowledge that sustainable use of the lansan is in their own long-term interests.

Adding global value

Notwithstanding FFI's record of success working with local partners across the Commonwealth for the benefit of people and wildlife, the fact remains that some problems cannot be solved without action on a global scale. Governments throughout the Commonwealth have the opportunity to formulate a collective, collaborative response to problems like climate change. But that window of opportunity is narrowing by the day. What better way to 'Add Global Value' than to give top priority to combating a global phenomenon that affects the lives not just of Commonwealth citizens, but of every person on the planet?

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The Antiguan Racer, the world's rarest snake, has seen its population increase twentyfold

