Room to Roam: A visionary approach to conservation in Africa

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Bold action for animals, people, and the planet

Cover photo: © Donal Boyd

Room to Roam is an ambitious and urgent vision for Africa's surviving savannah elephants and the human communities with which they share the land and its resources. But we cannot do this alone. To secure a network of connected, critical landscapes enabling wildlife and people to flourish, we must forge lasting partnerships with communities, traditional leaders, governments, private sector actors, and other NGOs.

The power of connectivity

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Protecting wildlife and healthy ecosystems is critical for the planet's health. Robust and resilient biodiversity holds immense potential to provide essential life support services for people and animals and slow the effects of climate change. Yet, Africa's wildlife faces many threats, including loss and fragmentation of habitat, erratic weather patterns, and growing competition for resources between wildlife and the people sharing space with them.[1]

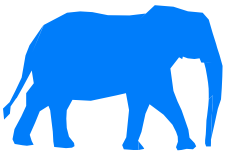
To thrive, wild animals need safe routes to move freely through countries, over borders, and at a distance from humans. They need access to healthy habitats for food, water, and natural space to stabilize and succeed.

Connecting habitats is critical. When habitats are connected and wild animals can roam freely across their landscapes, populations become resilient to changes in their environments and extreme climatic variations, which ultimately buffers species against the threat of extinction. Likewise, communities become more resilient.

A new vision backed by science

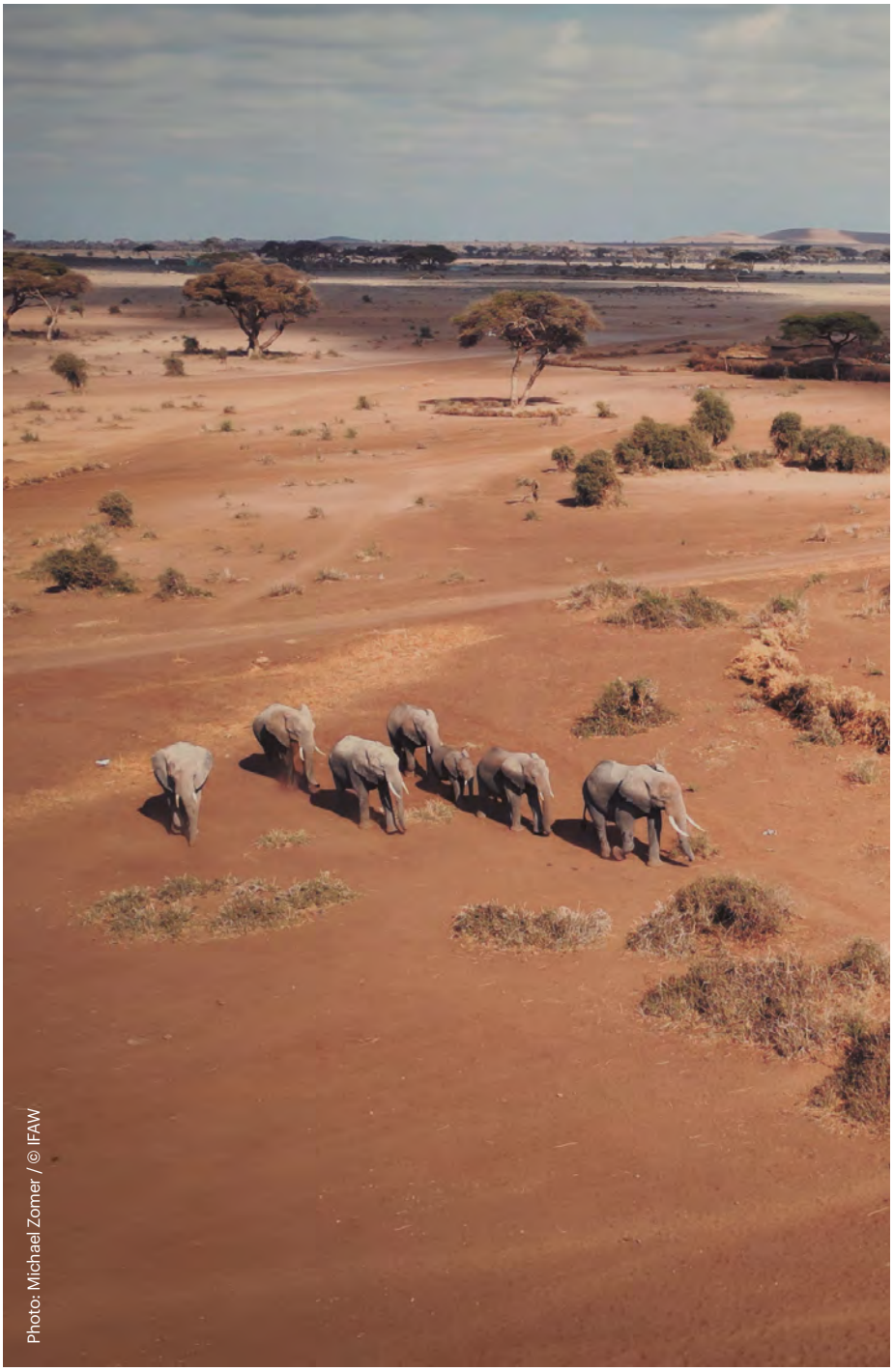
For decades, wildlife conservation efforts have relied on often costly and unsustainable human interventions. IFAW's Room to Roam offers a better solution, a visionary approach to African conservation that includes humans as part of the solution. At its crux is connectivity, which is critical for animals, people, and our planet.

Backed by 20 years of science and engagement with local communities, IFAW's Room to Roam is securing and connecting habitats, creating safe passages for wildlife to travel freely through their home ranges in East and southern Africa. The positive outcomes of this far-reaching initiative will be greater biodiversity, natural resilience to climate change, and a future where animals and people can coexist and thrive.



330,000

savannah elephants roam the increasingly fragmented landscapes of East and southern Africa.



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Biodiversity and climate change: the connection

The term biodiversity embraces all life—the millions upon millions of animals, plants, and other life forms sharing our planet. It helps critical biological communities, or ecosystems, maintain their resilience for the benefit of people and the planet. It is one of the best and most cost-effective solutions to slowing climate change.

How so? Well, healthy, more diverse ecosystems are better equipped to draw and store climate-warming carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. For example, studies show that effective nature conservation results in healthy ecosystems capable of providing approximately a third of the carbon mitigation needed to meet the Paris Agreement, a legally binding international treaty on climate change adopted by 196 countries in 2015. The agreement embraces three key elements—mitigation, adaptation, and finance.

A future for Africa's wildlife

IFAW is working to conserve Africa's wildlife through connectivity so animals and people can thrive. In so doing, we embrace the role elephants serve as a keystone species in the ecological health of the savannah landscape.[2]

Because of the critical role elephants play as ecosystem engineers, protecting them and the landscapes in which they roam indirectly protects the other wildlife and plants sharing their habitats. For example, research shows that elephant presence correlates with the richness of other large mammal species, including lions, leopards, zebras, wildebeests, warthogs, and giraffes.[3,4]

Elephants are also critically important in addressing climate change. Over 330,000 elephants roam the increasingly fragmented landscapes of East and Southern Africa, often beyond formal protection and exposed to human threats. Broken habitat forces elephants to take life-threatening risks as they travel farther than ever for water and food. Meanwhile, climate change, conflict with people, poaching, and other conflicts relentlessly drive their numbers down.

If habitat loss, fragmentation, climate change, and poaching rates continue, Africa's elephants risk extinction. And so, Room to Roam benefits the entire planet through its vision of conserving African biodiversity.

Photo: © Donal Boyd

Elephants as ecosystem engineers

Wild animals in robust ecosystems play a critical role in mitigating global warming. Some species, such as elephants, have a particular relevance. They are considered 'ecosystem engineers', keeping savannahs healthy and thriving in their crucial role as carbon sinks.

Elephant dung, for example, is an excellent fertilizer, enabling seeds to germinate and grow. And because elephants move across great distances, seeds are widely dispersed, increasing the diversity and abundance of plant species in the ecosystem.

Elephants consume as much as 150 kilograms of vegetation daily, and their carbon-rich dung is taken up by the soil, helping address climate change.[5]

Elephants also tear down the brush and trees that block their paths as they move through landscapes. By uprooting thorny bushes, they prevent open plains from becoming overgrown. And, as they thin out young trees competing for light, gaps in the woodland canopy open, encouraging new plants to colonise the areas, creating new habitats and food sources for other animals.

Photo: Jason Bell / © IFAW

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Africa's wildlife—a nexus of threats

Africa's wildlife, including elephants, face complex, interconnected threats that need innovative and sustainable solutions.

Fragmented landscapes

Broken landscapes have devastating impacts on roaming animals like elephants. Increasingly they find their home ranges cut off by new villages, farms, cities, highways, or industrial growth, including mining.

When judiciously placed, fences can play a positive role in protecting people and wildlife. But they can also negatively impact elephants, sometimes entangling and injuring them and forcing them to travel longer distances for food and water. Wire fences also provide poachers with the material used to trap wildlife, although such behaviour is less likely where conservation and communities share common goals.

Land where elephants once foraged is now planted with food for human use, while villagers and farmers increasingly block access to water needed for their livestock and crops.

Fragmentation also happens when marginalised communities are pushed into small patches of land with nowhere to expand. Meanwhile, businesses, wealthier elites, and other more powerful individuals grab land for their own economic benefit. Frequently, poor households hold few options regarding the tenure of their land as they face destitution and ruin due to climate change and other factors.

Poverty and poor governance (including the lack of adequate investment in alternative livelihood opportunities) exacerbate the problem, limiting options for households needing to generate extra income. Adding a further burden, exhausted land due to poor agricultural practices forces farmers to open new land when what is indeed required is improved farm management techniques.

Photo: © Donal Boyd

Conflict and poaching

Human-wildlife conflict is a constant risk when wild animals and people live in close proximity.[6] The most common forms are crop raiding (when wildlife eats or destroys crops), property destruction, or simply people and wildlife getting too close and triggering defensive behaviours that may lead to injury or death of either party.

Such encounters foster resentment against wildlife, which is seen as a potentially dangerous nuisance and often killed. Wild animals like elephants face constant threats from poaching gangs funded by international criminal networks exploiting a global demand for ivory and other products. Male and female elephants are slaughtered for their tusks, but when females are killed, the tragedy is heightened—often, they leave behind calves, many of which fail to survive. Every elephant death drives the species closer to a point of no return.

Recent censuses place the savannah elephant population at 330,000. Yet, scientific modelling suggests that this is only 25 percent of what it would be without poaching.[7]

Photo: Luckmore Safuli / © IFAW

Climate change

As global temperatures rise, rainfall patterns fluctuate, and weather patterns change, many wild species struggle to adapt. Some face extinction, particularly those already under pressure due to habitat loss, fragmentation, hunting, and other human activities.

Food and water insecurity often ensue, forcing wild animals to explore new areas in search of water and forage where they may encounter humans and the risk of conflict.[8] Extreme weather events are growing increasingly frequent and severe. Disasters like droughts, heatwaves, storms, floods, and fires are seldom out of the news and have increasingly harsh impacts on ecosystems and the wild animals they harbour. Deaths and large-scale die-offs are often tragic consequences.

Inadequate conservation funding

The massive gap in financing conservation initiatives is a serious underlying obstacle to protecting biodiversity and nature. Indisputably, natural ecosystems are critical in removing carbon, filtering water, providing productive soil, pollinating, and protecting people from disaster. The economic value of nature is vast. It is worth nearly US$44 trillion, driving at least half of the global economy, according to the World Economic Forum.[9]

Presenters at the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) acknowledged investment in nature as our most effective tool to address the climate crisis.[10] Yet, there is an estimated US$700 billion gap in nature conservation funding—a gap nowhere near met by current governmental and philanthropic conservation funding, which totals well under US$100 billion a year.[11,12]

Photo: © Donal Boyd

Our solutions

Against this background, investing in initiatives like IFAW's Room to Roam can yield significant dividends. Its four thematic pillars—science, climate resilience, coexistence, and rescue to release—offer myriad solutions to protect elephants and other wildlife across East and southern Africa and ultimately mitigate climate change.

Science

Based on more than 20 years of science, Room to Roam aims to maintain persistent elephant populations in a matrix of connected habitats in East and southern Africa. To assess the health of elephant populations, their potential to persist in the long term, and their ability to respond to disturbance and/or management interventions, IFAW uses methods established by the University of Pretoria's Conservation Ecology Research Unit.[13] A deep understanding of elephant population dynamics and demography informs this work.

Our studies show that some local elephant populations have declined throughout their fragmented landscapes to the point that they are vulnerable to extinction. Other populations, however, appear to thrive.

These 'populations of populations'—metapopulations—require massive space. Room to Roam's scientific foundation validates the need to secure space and connectivity to link these isolated populations, stabilising elephant numbers naturally and making the species more resilient to climate change and other threats.

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Climate resilience

Room to Roam endeavours to build climate-resilient landscapes in East and southern Africa where human communities and wild animals can thrive together, despite the challenges they face from climate change.

Protecting, restoring, and effectively managing biodiverse ecosystems and landscapes highly vulnerable to climate change, land-use change, and environmental degradation helps maintain existing carbon stocks. These actions also capture and store atmospheric carbon dioxide, further restoring and increasing biodiversity and improving the long-term availability of the ecosystem services upon which people and wild animals depend to flourish.

Therefore, by supporting vulnerable communities, local businesses, and local authorities to adopt low-carbon practices and appropriate forms of renewable energy, we help people reduce their environmental impact and build landscapes resilient to climate change. As households and communities transition away from environmentally incompatible livelihood practices, the drivers of biodiversity loss that threaten endangered species and contribute to climate change are mitigated.

Landscapes benefit in many ways through climate-smart agriculture, embracing regenerative farming techniques, agroforestry, beekeeping, and improved livestock management. These include increased biodiversity, soil and water conservation, improved ecosystem health and landscape resilience, and climate change mitigation through avoided deforestation and carbon sequestration.

People as part of the solution

Room to Roam acknowledges that elephants and other wildlife need access to vast areas outside formally protected areas as they seek food, water, safety, and other wildlife. As they do so, however, they are more likely to interact and even come into conflict with local communities.

At its core, Room to Roam embraces community involvement as the key to conservation success. Therefore, IFAW works with people closest to the animals and habitats we strive to protect. Our approach is to work with local communities to develop and implement case-specific, co-designed strategies that promote human-wildlife co-existence.

IFAW's experience clearly shows that when communities are engaged as key stakeholders, they are more likely to participate in wildlife protection programs benefitting their daily lives, even if those benefits are only indirectly linked to wildlife. This is why IFAW is committed to providing communities with wide-ranging support.

Key elements are:

- improving literacy
- improving money management skills and access to banking for income generated by land leases, small businesses, and investments
- developing appropriate and compatible land-use policies
- promoting climate resilient agriculture
- creating frameworks and governance for land trusts and conservancies
- developing skills and promoting alternative, sustainable livelihood practices that do not solely rely on exploiting wildlife

In doing so, we acknowledge that supporting the increased devolution of wildlife conservation primarily overseen by central government agencies towards community-led management, often with oversight by traditional leaders, comes with challenges and political sensitivities. Managing this transition is one of the key reasons we've established the Conservation Network of Traditional Leaders in Africa to amplify their participation in ambitious conservation efforts.

Photo: © GRI

Empowering women in conservation

Today, more and more women are playing visible and vital roles in community-led solutions that protect wildlife. The following are two crucial IFAW initiatives that empower women to become local leaders.

Team Lioness

Team Lioness, the first all-women ranger unit in East Africa, was created in 2019. Chosen for their leadership strengths, academic achievements, and integrity, the team of 16 young Maasai women defies constraining social norms in creating new opportunities for women.

Jenga Mama

Jenga Mama is Kiswahili for 'Empower a Woman'. IFAW and the German foundation Margarete-Breuer Stiftung (MBS) support 60 women in the Amboseli community in learning trades and setting up microenterprises that will generate sustainable, wildlife-friendly incomes for their families and communities. Over three years, the women receive a year of vocational training, a year of support to help them establish a business, and a year of mentorship and follow-up.

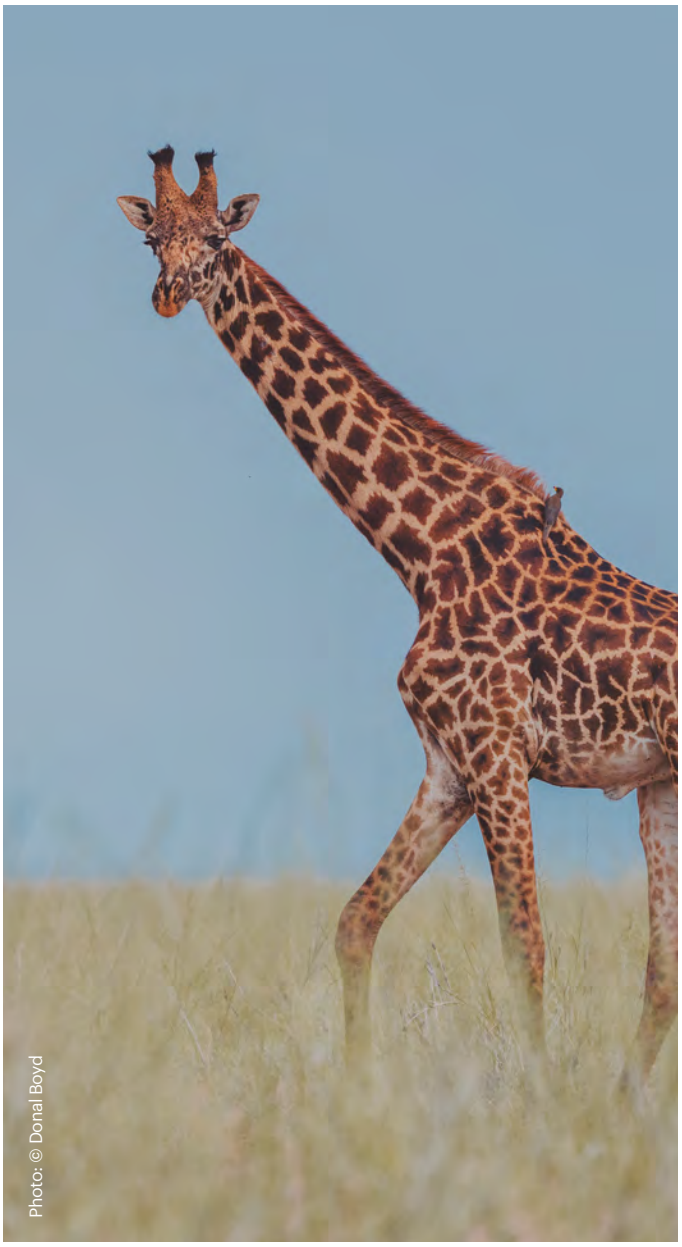
Photo: Steven N'gomba / © IFAW

Rescue to release

Every elephant is crucial to the survival of the species. That's why IFAW works with elephant nurseries in Zimbabwe and Zambia that rescue and rehabilitate calves orphaned through human-wildlife conflict and poaching, giving them each a second chance at life in the wild. When the orphans reach three to five years of age, they are often ready to be transferred to a reintegration site, where they interact with free-roaming wild elephants. Their final release completes our rescue-rehabilitation-release cycle, but we also support the post-release monitoring of animals to track their movements and understand their behaviour as part of wild families as well as to ensure their safety.

Where we are implementing Room to Roam

Room to Roam aims to secure and connect 12 critical landscapes, each home to at least 10,000 elephants. These anchor areas define the most significant habitat fragments in their regions, all crucial to continuity across the savannah elephant's range.[14] Not only are they elephant strongholds but biodiversity havens at large. As such, they are vital targets for conservation efforts. In this initial stage of introducing the Room to Roam vision, IFAW is already working in several anchor areas strategically positioned for cross-regional connectivity from East to southern Africa:



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Zimbabwe

Through our conservation partnership with the Government of Zimbabwe and critical private-sector partners on the ground, we are helping to manage an anchor landscape of 40,000 km² which is part of the Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA TFCA)—the second-largest TFCA in the world, covering five countries, and home to Africa's largest elephant population.

This anchor landscape includes the iconic Hwange National Park and the Panda Masuie Forest Reserve, where rescued and rehabilitated orphan elephants are released back into the wild in a healthy, secure space.

Malawi-Zambia

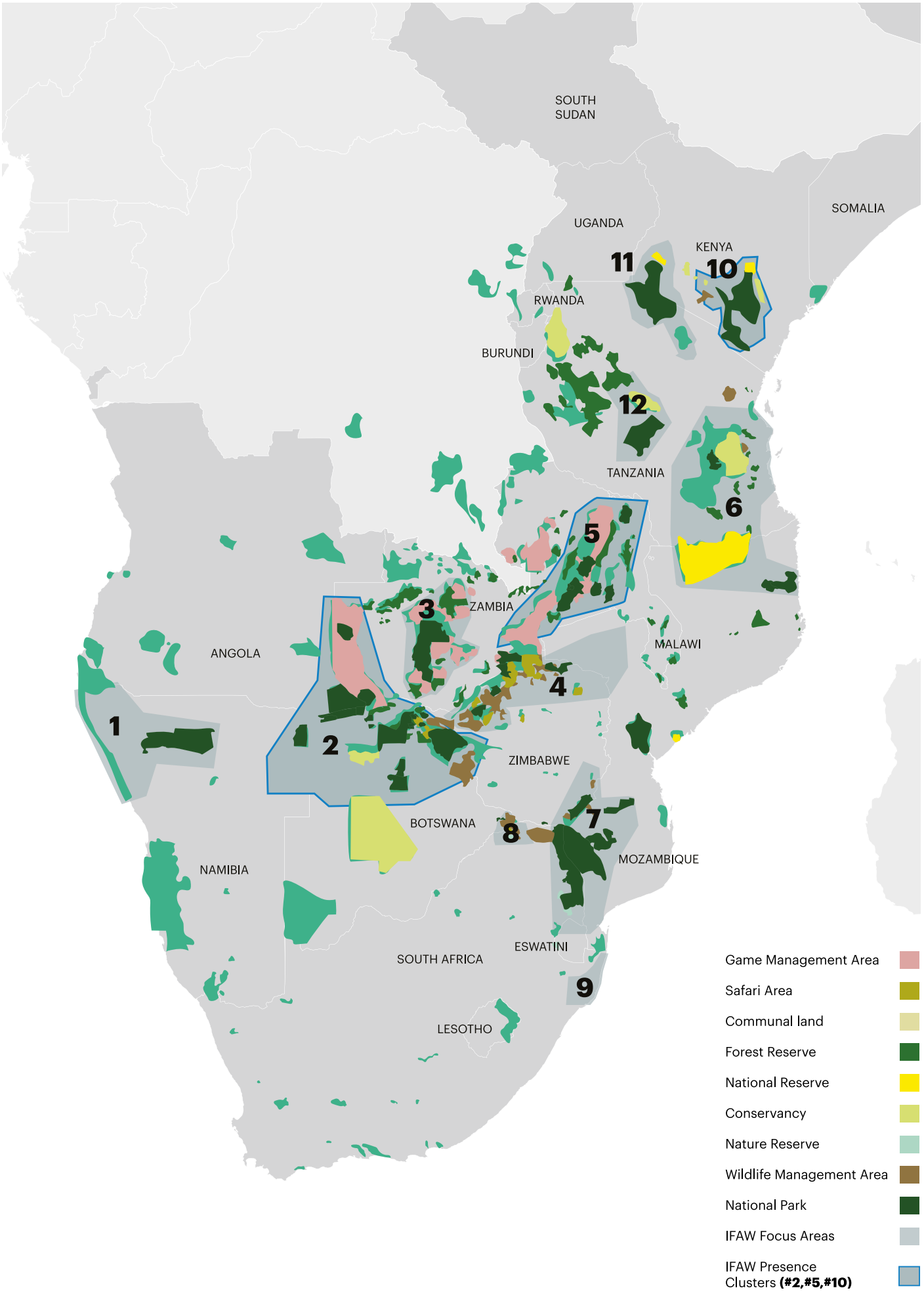
The Malawi-Zambia Transfrontier Conservation Area embraces 32,278 km², centred around the North Luangwa National Park in Zambia and the Nyika Plateau in Malawi. Our partnerships in this vast landscape help secure the protection of a crucial swathe across the Luambe, Lukusuzi, and Kasungu national parks, where we support 178 wildlife rangers.

In the communal areas surrounding Luambe and Lukusuzi, we are partners on a climate change resilience agricultural initiative. These small-scale farming projects help communities and individuals increase their income and reduce reliance on wildlife poaching. Non-farming projects are also important, and we support a tailoring workshop that now provides uniforms for every ranger in Malawi.

Furthermore, in partnership with the Malawi Department of National Parks & Wildlife, we are working to restore Kasungu National Park by addressing wildlife crime and law enforcement, as well as infrastructure development and capacity within the park. We are also collaborating on constructing an important boundary fence to prevent conflict between wildlife and the surrounding communities. Environmental education outreach to schools continues to raise awareness of the importance of nature conservation.

Kenya

The Amboseli-Tsavo-Kilimanjaro landscape is a vital habitat for elephants and other wildlife in the Greater Kilimanjaro Trans-Frontier Conservation Area. Thousands of people also live on communal lands in this region, making it crucial to promote human-wildlife coexistence. Our close ties with the Olgulului-Ololorashi Group Ranch (OOGR) have guided us in identifying livelihood projects that support women and children. One of these is Team Lioness (see box) which protects almost 607 km² of traditional Maasai community lands encompassing Amboseli National Park.


SOUTH SUDAN
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Game Management Area
Safari Area
Communal land
Forest Reserve
National Reserve
Conservancy
Nature Reserve
Wildlife Management Area
National Park
IFAW Focus Areas
IFAW Presence Clusters (#2,#5,#10)

Photo: Michael Zomer / © IFAW

Photo: Michael Zorner / © IFAW

Working together for bold action

Protected areas are governed by agencies and other arms of government, while buffer zones and lands connecting protected areas are managed and co-owned by local communities and individuals. In this context, Room to Roam encompasses large-scale, ambitious conservation goals requiring partnership with various interested parties. With over 50 years of global conservation impact, IFAW is uniquely positioned to serve as a convener for this initiative.

We recognise the problems we're up against are complicated, requiring fresh thinking and bold action. From rescue and rewilding to combatting climate change, we're affecting policy and preserving land and its inhabitants for generations to come.

Other stakeholders in these endeavours include investors, donors, and NGOs. IFAW is forging partnerships with all of them in a long-term plan to reconnect critical landscapes and allow wildlife to flourish. In this, we are guided by the following pillars:

- long-lasting relationships
- integrity
- value-based and principled
- consultation and public participation
- equality and equity
- documentation and learning

Our major donors & partners

To our major contributors, the ones who belive in us and what we do, thank you!

munchkin it's the little things

DAVID RIO CHAI & TEA

- Margarete-Breuer-Stiftung (MBS)
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- Robert Cotton
- David Rio Chai & Tea
- Daidone SF Foundation

Endnotes

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