

# Bringing wildest Africa back to life

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**Keywords:** biodiversity; conservation; rewilding; species reintroductions; wildlands

**Citation:** Greeff-Villet LM (2023) Bringing wildest Africa back to life. *The Ecological Citizen* 6(1): epub-072.

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Just a decade ago, Zinave National Park in central southern Mozambique stood eerily silent – a once-abundant wilderness decimated by decades of relentless human impacts. Today, however, the park abounds with more than 6,500 animals from thirteen reintroduced species (including elephants, giraffe, apex predators such as leopard and hyena, and soon, rhinos), standing out as one of southern Africa’s greatest rewilding success stories. Against all odds, the previously silent Zinave – a core component of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area – will soon become Mozambique’s first ‘big five’ national park, completing a remarkable return to former glory.

Home to a dazzling variety of terrestrial, marine and coastal wilderness areas, southern Africa is one of the most ecologically important regions on the planet. With wild biodiversity increasingly under threat, the creation and expansion of protected areas, including the restoration of fully functioning, wildlife-rich ecosystems, is vital to secure and preserve this remarkable natural heritage.

Zinave’s revitalization comes as a result of years of backbreaking work in securing the 408,000 ha open system and the 30,000 ha sanctuary therein, implementing effective conservation management strategies, putting in place required infrastructure, employing and training a productive staff component and bringing wildlife back to re-establish fully functioning ecosystems.

With limited resources, governments in southern Africa cannot do this work on their own. This is where non-profit organizations are stepping in, helping to facilitate the restoration of conservation areas by securing and rehabilitating natural habitats and bringing animal populations back into areas from which they had been extirpated.

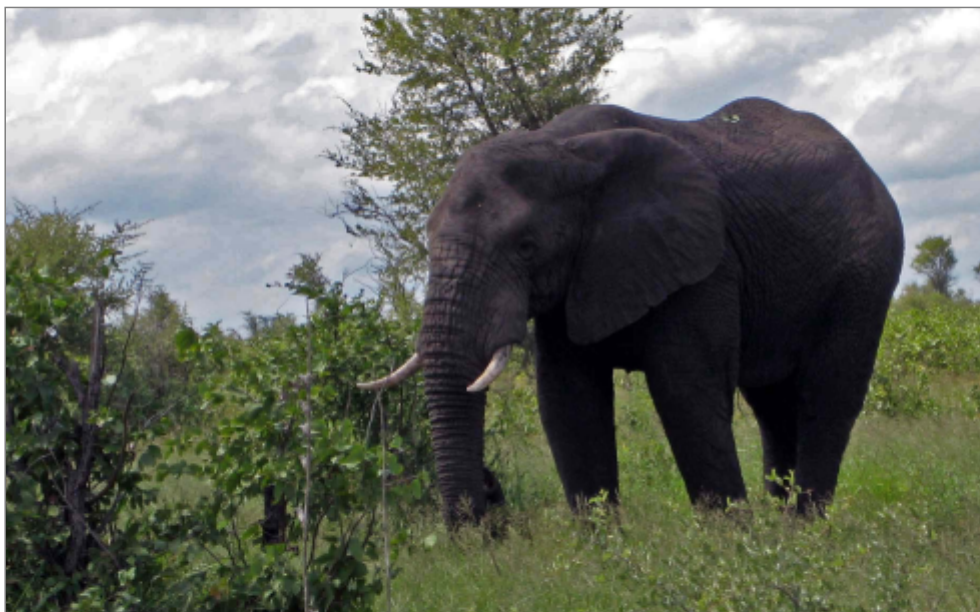
Established in 1997, Peace Parks Foundation – founded by former South African President Nelson Mandela, business leader Anton Rupert and Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands – has been pioneering the charge to restore and reconnect wild African spaces, such as Zinave, by playing a central role in the

establishment and management of transfrontier conservation areas (TFCAs) across the southern part of the continent. As part of these efforts, the Foundation has successfully reintroduced more than 15,000 mammals – from the tiniest antelope to the African elephant (the world’s largest land animal; Figure 1) – into core anchor parks within these large cross-border ecosystems.

Restoration and rewilding already present a unique, highly complex challenge, which is further complicated in the African context. Here, the restoration of wilderness areas requires a multi-faceted, intricate and patient approach that, first and foremost, needs to foster a harmonic co-existence between non-human nature and human populations living in challenging socio-economic circumstances.

In order to make this effective, Peace Parks has successfully brought government leaders together, facilitating agreements to jointly protect and conserve natural wild areas shared between countries. On a local and regional level, rewilding lays the basis for a tourism and wildlife industry that provides much-needed income for the communities living in and around protected areas. On a grander scale, Peace Parks’ role in the establishment of ten TFCAs encompassing more than one million square kilometres of conservation space that houses the world’s largest populations of the great megafauna, is providing a blueprint for combatting climate change in the face of senseless, widespread destruction of the wild areas upon which Earth’s future relies.

Zinave National Park, which Peace Parks co-manages together with Mozambique’s Administration for National Conservation Areas (ANAC), is just one shining light in the Foundation’s history of restoration initiatives. In southern Mozambique, the partnership between ANAC and Peace Parks has been instrumental in the development of Maputo National Park, a spectacular combination of terrestrial and coastal wilderness within the Great Lubombo



**Figure 1.** An African elephant, a member of one of numerous species of animal reintroduced to core anchor parks by Peace Parks Foundation.

TFCA, that has been rewilded with 5,000 animals, which have flourished to around 13,000 animals and allowed for the reintroduction of cheetahs in 2021.

Meanwhile, in southern Zambia, Peace Parks worked closely with the local Sesheke and Sekhute Chiefdoms to establish the Simalaha Community Conservancy, a pioneering conservation area where an initial 22,000 ha sanctuary recently had to be enlarged to 50,000 ha as the more than 2,000 reintroduced animals from eleven species (including giraffe, sable, roan antelope, eland, puku, hartebeest and waterbuck) increased to over 3,500 through natural proliferation. Communities have proudly taken ownership of the sanctuary and are starting to benefit from sustainable revenue streams through tourism and wildlife management.

This is arguably the key to Peace Parks' success in rewilding: in order to restore wilderness areas, local communities need to reap the benefits of conserving natural resources. This is why the Foundation's conservation work goes hand-in-hand with a wide array of community development projects across southern Africa, benefitting tens of thousands of people, along with the creation of sustainable employment opportunities through the development of wildlife tourism products.

Peace Parks' efforts are more relevant than ever before, in this, the United Nations Decade of Ecosystem Restoration. The UN and its member countries have recognized that reversing the degradation of ecosystems is crucial “to end poverty, combat climate change and prevent mass extinction” and that “without reviving ecosystems, we cannot achieve the Sustainable Development Goals or the Paris Climate Agreement” (<https://is.gd/j1UbWT>).

To meet the 1.5°C global climate target it is not enough to turn to renewable energy, halt deforestation and convert land – we also need the help of a range of wild animal species to facilitate the capture of excess carbon dioxide already in the atmosphere. Research (led by the Global Rewilding Alliance, of which Peace Parks is a member) is now showing that restoring wildlife populations to significant, near historic levels, has the potential to ‘supercharge’ climate mitigation. For example, the rebound of wildebeest populations in the Serengeti has rejuvenated grasslands to capture carbon up to the equivalent of the total annual CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of both Kenya and Tanzania, while almost completely eliminating wildfire outbreaks (Global Rewilding Alliance, 2021). This is just one of many case studies worldwide which have shown that ecological restoration, when carefully planned and implemented, can be the single most important factor in mitigating climate change.

Peace Parks is investing in our planet at a scale and tempo that races to get ahead of climate change and biodiversity loss. If the Peace Parks model of restoring and reconnecting wild spaces is replicated across Africa, and indeed on a global scale, then the world has the potential to secure a future for nature, and consequently, humankind.

## References

Global Rewilding Alliance (2021) Animate the carbon cycle: Supercharging ecosystem carbon sinks to meet the 1.5°C target. Available at <https://is.gd/piVVP2> (accessed June 2022).