

Conservation Success Against the Odds In South Sudan

Last week, Africa's youngest country, South Sudan, created the world's newest protected area, the Bangangai Game Reserve. Chimpanzees, Pangolins, and Bongos secured a forest home, South Sudan's citizens glimpsed a brighter future, and conservationists worldwide were inspired that halting man-made extinctions by 2030 might just be possible.

Biodiversity does not respect national boundaries. Some 78% of terrestrial plant and animal species live in the tropics, where many countries are less economically and politically developed. In Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is home to the greatest number of animal species on the continent--as well as one of its longest running civil wars. Somalia, which routinely beats out DRC for the bottom of global governance indexes, harbors unique and endangered arid-land ungulates that will not be easy to save.

Does the concentration of biodiversity in countries with governance and development challenges doom global conservation targets? This year, virtually all the countries on Earth will meet in Kunming, China under the Convention on Biological Diversity to set global conservation targets for 2030, and most conservationists hope and expect they will agree to set aside 30% of the world's lands and seas for nature by the end of this decade. But the most important part of that 30% will be in tropical countries. If that part cannot be saved, is this vision doomed?

The history of conservation in Africa and globally suggests this is not a crazy ambition. One of the great species-conservation success stories of the past quarter century has been the recovery of mountain gorillas. In 1989, these numbered 620 individuals and falling, sprawled across the unstable international boundary of Rwanda, Uganda and DRC. Through multiple invasions between these countries and civil wars and genocides in all three, gorilla numbers stabilized and then climbed, to 1,063 gorillas in 2019. The reason was creation and intensive management of national parks in all three countries and development of lucrative tourism so that the gorillas became a source of national pride and income to the three countries, with tangible benefits for local communities.

In 2007, working with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), I helped Mike Fay and Paul Elkan rediscover the lost migration of antelopes in South Sudan--over 1.2 million white-eared kob, tiang, and mongalla gazelle--one of only four great ungulate migrations left on Earth. That was only two years after the country's independence from North Sudan which followed a half-century of civil war. Security, permissions and logistics were tough--the new country had only a few miles of paved roads, hundreds of thousands of bush fighters had yet to be decommissioned, and the ethnic divisions festered and would shortly plunge the country back into civil war.

But President Salva Kiir, leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Army, and his rival Vice President Riek Machar, who would later take up arms against him, were united by excitement over the opportunity to conserve South Sudan's wildlife and ecosystems. Each saw the creation

and management of national parks, and the eventual development of tourism, as ways to diversify their country's income and resource base beyond oil, preserve its heritage, and give its people something to be proud of (and, to be honest, something to live off of in case of another war). Both descended from pastoral people who revered wildlife.

Through the civil war that ensued from 2011 to 2018, both WCS and another international conservation organization, Fauna & Flora International (FFI), remained in South Sudan in spite of the extreme risk. They were convinced the fledgling nation's biodiversity was too important to give up on and hopeful that the country would survive its growing pains. In 2018, with a new peace deal signed, FFI partnered with the Government of South Sudan and Rainforest Trust to create a new game reserve to protect a unique rainforest habitat in the country's far southwest. This area harbored globally important populations of Chimpanzees, Forest Elephants, Bongos, and two species of Pangolins.

Now, thanks to hard work, community support, and government vision, the Bangangai Game Reserve becomes a reality, contributing to South Sudan's, and the world's, progress towards 30% protected. If protected area creation is challenging and critical, ongoing management is even harder, and the future remains uncertain. Will South Sudan become a stable enough country that international tourists consider visiting to see its extraordinary wildlife and landscapes? Will the government, and FFI, and local communities be committed enough, and skilled enough, and will there be enough money to protect the park and allow the wildlife and ecological web to flourish?

There are no simple solutions to the twin crises the world faces of climate change and biodiversity collapse. But the lessons from South Sudan are clear--if even the youngest country on the world's poorest continent can do its part, we all can. And success is possible.

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