

# AWF Conservation School

ILIMA SCHOOL  
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO



AFRICAN WILDLIFE FOUNDATION®





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African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) has worked with local communities since 2003 to conserve the biodiversity and natural resources of its Congo landscape, located in the Equateur Province of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

located in the heart of the Congo Basin, the African Wildlife Foundation's (AWF's) Congo landscape is an area rich in fauna and flora—among them the endangered bonobo, forest elephant, golden cat, giant pangolin, and more than 600 known species of trees. As part of the second-largest rainforest in the world, this area was chosen by AWF as a prime location for conservation work because of its wealth of biodiversity.

This 74,500-sq.-km region is, however, also one of the poorest and least developed areas within the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The 800,000 people who live in this remote part of the Equateur Province have little by way of sustainable income-generating opportunities. They therefore rely heavily on the landscape's natural resources to satisfy basic livelihood needs, from food and fuel to medicine, income, and shelter. The area has suffered from bushmeat hunting, and habitat destruction and fragmentation from deforestation and unsustainable agricultural practices.

Since 2003, AWF and a consortium of partners, including the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Bank, have been working with communities here to reduce the rate of forest degradation and biodiversity loss and to increase livelihood opportunities and incomes for residents. Led by a forward-thinking chief, the village of Ilima was one of the first to actively engage with AWF on these conservation efforts. Ilima residents participated in land-use planning, establishing zoning restrictions and limiting deforestation in certain parts of the forest; agreed to stop illegal bushmeat hunting; and embraced new, sustainable agricultural practices.

As a part of its conservation work in the Congo landscape—which has included establishing two reserves and launching a Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) project, among other activities—and as an incentive to the Ilima community for its continued commitment to conservation, AWF is now in the midst of constructing a brand-new, cutting-edge conservation-themed primary school in Ilima.



What to most people may look like a ramshackle building is actually the local school for the Ilima community in northwest DRC. In Africa, rural areas such as this—Ilima is located in a remote part of the forest—rarely attract the best teachers. Further, the isolated location, as well as the harsh tropical climate, makes the building of permanent infrastructure challenging. While there may not be a direct link between these factors and primary school enrollment, research from the University of Kinshasa and Pennsylvania State University has found that primary school enrollment is 15 percent to 30 percent lower in rural areas in DRC as compared to urban areas.

In the not-too-distant future, however, AWF may be doing its small share to help turn that trend around. And it'll be doing it in part by constructing a building.

### Dignified infrastructure

With support from AWF and its architectural partner, MASS Design Group, the community was able to break ground on a new school in Ilima, part of the broader AWF Conservation Schools initiative under which AWF will build 15 new primary schools in rural African communities over the next 10 years. Ilima was chosen as a conservation school site because of its ongoing engagement with AWF on land-use planning and other conservation actions to protect habitat for the endangered bonobo.

Conservation typically involves actions that safeguard the natural environment, rather than those that develop human-made structures. Yet one of the main premises behind the AWF Conservation Schools initiative is the need in these rural communities for well-designed infrastructure.

"It's pretty evident that for conservation to work, there has to be investment in communities," says Michael Murphy, co-founder and CEO of MASS. "Part of that is investing in dignified infrastructure to improve lives. What becomes really interesting about the conservation of wildlife and the environment is the notion of precise infrastructure—where it should be placed, how it should be built, and who it's supposed to serve."

The planned Ilima school is a good example. As the village sits between two land uses—untouched forest and areas that were cleared by people for agriculture—the school will be situated to span these areas and ultimately foster learning opportunities around the need for conservation. All classrooms will feature views of the forest, reinforcing the link to the natural environment.

In deference to the rainforest climate, which typically features heavy rains and high heat, school walls will only go up two thirds of the way to the

ceiling to allow for unrestricted airflow. A large, suspended roof will provide extra shade from sun and shelter during rains. Rain catchments will make it possible for water to be stored and used later in the agricultural fields.

### Knowledge transfer

Unfortunately, the ambitious project is made all the more challenging because of the village's location deep in the Congo Basin. After making an initial visit to the region, MASS calculated that it would take at least one month and multiple modes of transportation to ship construction materials to Ilima. "We want to build efficiently, inexpensively, and functionally," says MASS's Murphy. Thus the new school will be primarily built from locally sourced brick, with a shingled roof made from a local hardwood. The community will be trained and employed throughout the construction process, a hallmark of MASS's typical construction process and in keeping with AWF's capacity building philosophy.

This transfer of construction knowledge to the local community will also be advantageous from a practical standpoint. "Even if AWF is not on the ground at a particular time, the community can perform the building maintenance on their own," says Charly Facheux, AWF's Congo landscape director. This will further transfer ownership of the conservation school to the community.

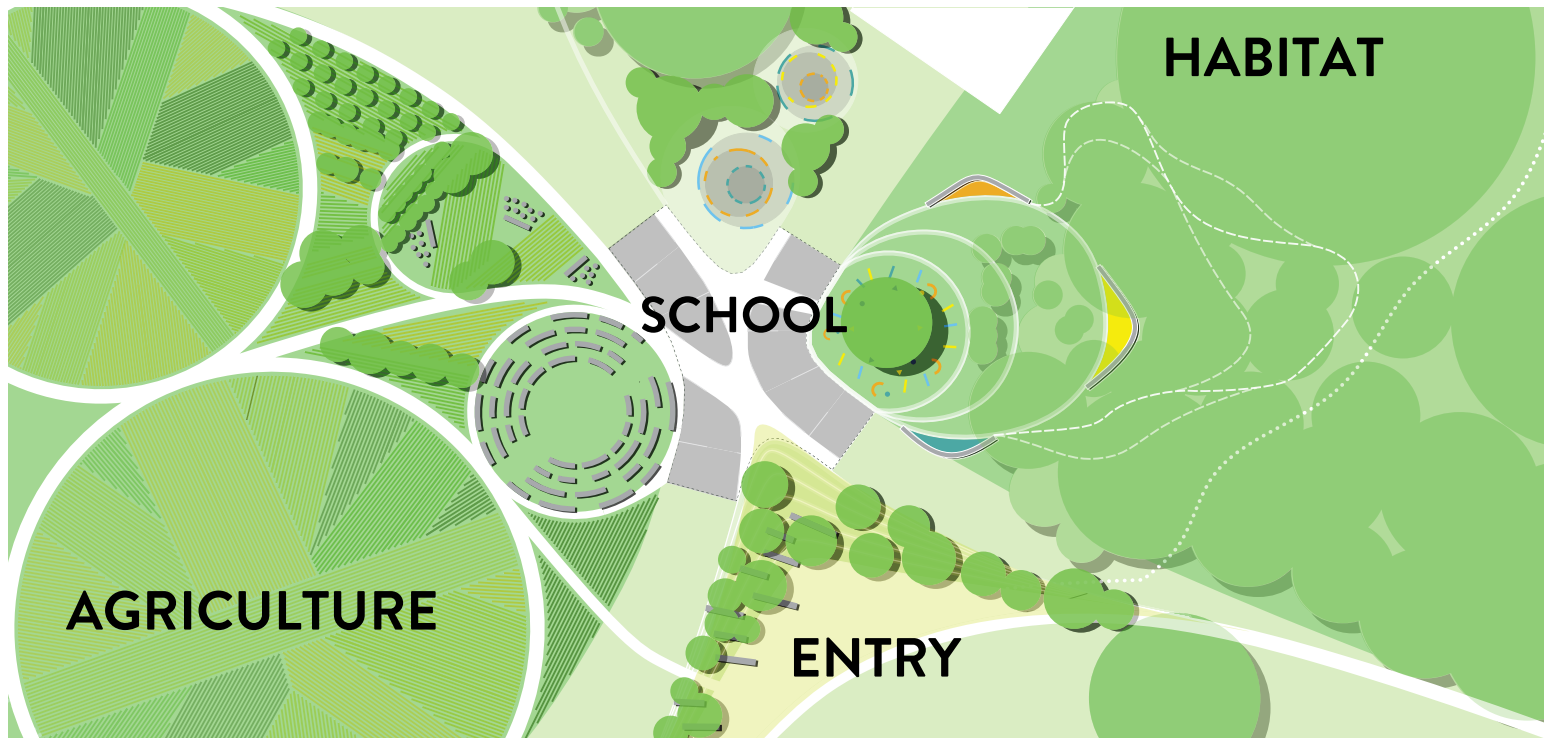
Clearly, building the school at Ilima will amount to more than just brick, mortar, and shingles. And that's exactly the point with AWF Conservation Schools. "Ilima School will be the first piece of infrastructure in a very rural community," says Murphy. "It will be a civic center, a place for assembly—so much more than just an educational enclosure. We have to be cognizant of that and design it so that it's appropriate."

The new AWF Conservation School at Ilima will replace the existing dilapidated school seen here. AWF previously replaced two crumbling schools with new facilities, one in northern Tanzania and one in Zambia, visited by Clinton Foundation Vice Chair Chelsea Clinton last August. At the 2013 Clinton Global Initiative annual meeting in New York, AWF committed to building 15 Conservation Schools over the next decade.

“Ilima School will be the first piece of infrastructure in a very rural community.”

— Michael Murphy, co-founder and CEO, MASS Design Group





The school is sited in a location that bridges both untouched forest and agricultural areas, reinforcing the importance of the land and natural resources.



AWF and its architectural partner, MASS Design Group, carefully planned for a sustainable school that is appropriate to both the area geography and the regional climate.



From the beginning, AWF and MASS Design Group knew that local residents would be actively involved in the building of the school. Here, community members learn the process of—and participate in—shingle construction.



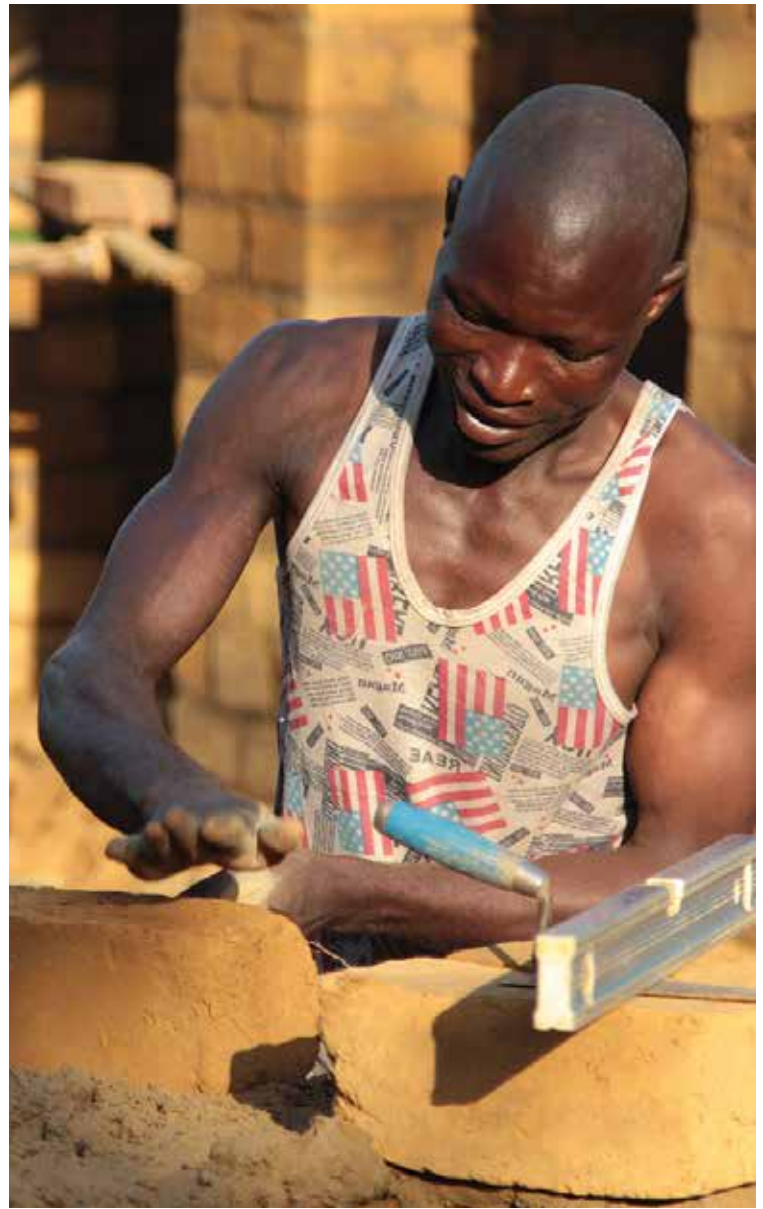
The roof shingles are made from a local hardwood, minimizing the cost of having to ship non-native materials into the remote landscape. Bricks for the school walls are also being sourced locally.



AWF and MASS Design Group developed a design manual for the school. Plans have been shared with community members and construction workers. AWF is paying all laborers a fair daily wage for their work, injecting cash into the local economy.



Workers are gaining new construction knowledge, which has the dual benefit of increasing sustainable livelihood opportunities for them and ensuring their ability to maintain the building structures, rather than outside contractors trekking to this remote area.



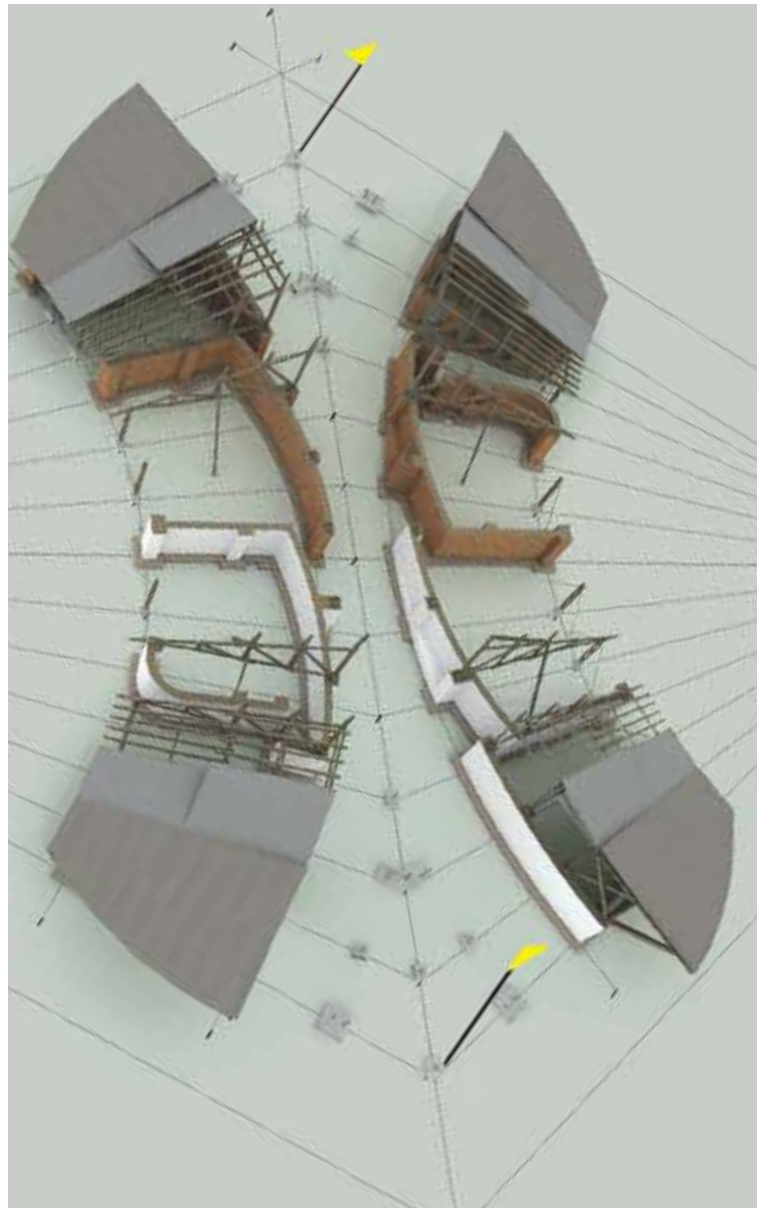
Residents have been instrumental in the construction of bricks. Though male residents have primarily been working on the day-to-day construction, women have also participated in gathering materials for brick construction and more.



Ilima School continues to grow, quite literally, from the ground.



Residents have been involved in every aspect of construction. Pride in their involvement in building Ilima School is evident among participants.



The new Ilima School won't be your typical rectangular building. Two gently curving blocks house the classrooms, separated by an open-ended corridor to allow air, traffic, and light to flow through. This will be a modern, elegant, and appropriate addition to its forest context.





The building will feature brick walls that go up two thirds of the way to the ceiling to allow for unrestricted airflow in this tropical climate.



When completed, Ilima School will boast six classrooms, six teacher houses plus an office for teachers, a reading room/library, latrine block, play area, water access, gardens, nature paths, and an outdoor education space, ensuring tremendous educational opportunities for these children.



All classrooms will look out into the forest, further reinforcing the connection between the school and conservation.



Once completed, Ilima School is anticipated to become not just a learning space for children but a gathering area for the entire community, which until now has lacked a proper assembly hall.



Watch the construction video at: [awf.org/beyondilima](http://awf.org/beyondilima)

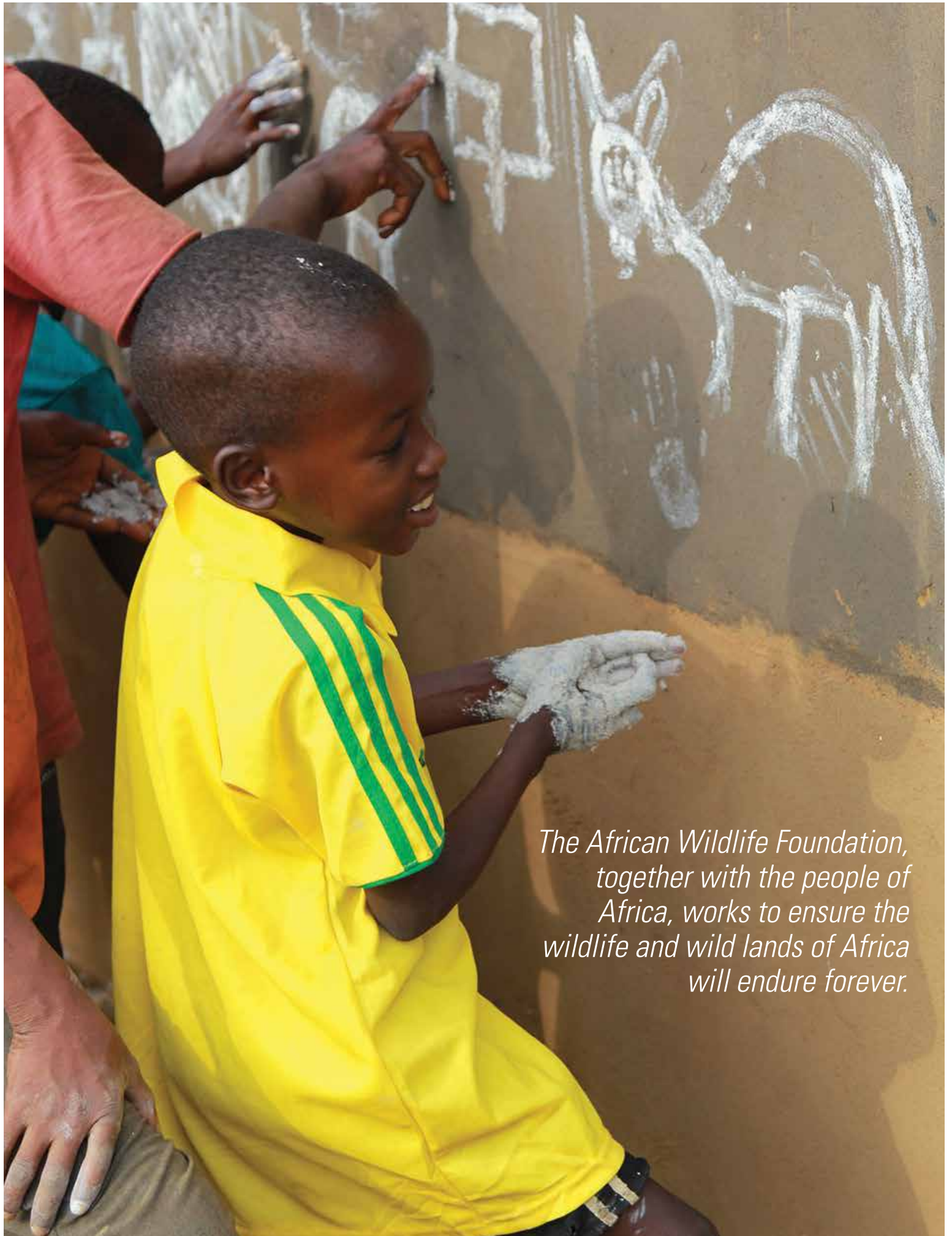
### **About African Wildlife Foundation**

Founded in 1961, the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) is a leading conservation organization focused solely on the African continent. AWF's programs and conservation strategies are based on sound science and designed to protect both the wild lands and wildlife of Africa and ensure a more sustainable future for Africa's people. Since its inception, AWF has protected endangered species and land, promoted conservation enterprises that benefit local African communities, and trained hundreds of African nationals in conservation—all to ensure the survival of Africa's unparalleled wildlife heritage. AWF is a nonprofit organization headquartered in Kenya and registered as a 501(c)(3) in the United States. For more information, visit [awf.org](http://awf.org).

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*The African Wildlife Foundation,  
together with the people of  
Africa, works to ensure the  
wildlife and wild lands of Africa  
will endure forever.*



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