

RESILIENT AFRICA

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2025: Volume II

EASING CONFLICT

*The Potential of Rights-Based
Conservation Approaches*



BUILDING A FUTURE WHERE
PEOPLE AND WILDLIFE THRIVE

What role can conservation play in increasing peace and security around protected areas?

Africa’s biodiversity strongholds are not just vital habitats for wildlife—they are home to millions of people whose well-being is directly tied to the natural world. But in many places, these landscapes intersect with conflict zones, where insecurity, weak governance, and environmental degradation fuel a cycle of tension and displacement.

A 2018 study by Yale and Princeton found that over 70% of Africa’s protected areas have been affected by armed conflict in recent decades. The consequences: sabotaged infrastructure, illegal poaching and lawlessness, and threats to rangers and communities. Conservation has the potential to be a powerful force in advancing human rights and well-being in and around these protected areas. It can create pathways for local communities and Indigenous peoples to better understand their legal rights, hold each other and authorities accountable, monitor threats, and navigate sources of potential conflict.

AWF is working to advance this rights-based conservation approach—one that respects Indigenous knowledge and empowers communities—by **leveraging conservation as a strategy for security, equity, and resilience.**

Resilient Africa is a newsletter from the African Wildlife Foundation exploring how Africa is defining and meeting conservation challenges on the continent.

COVER IMAGE: FOREST ELEPHANTS (CONGO BASIN)
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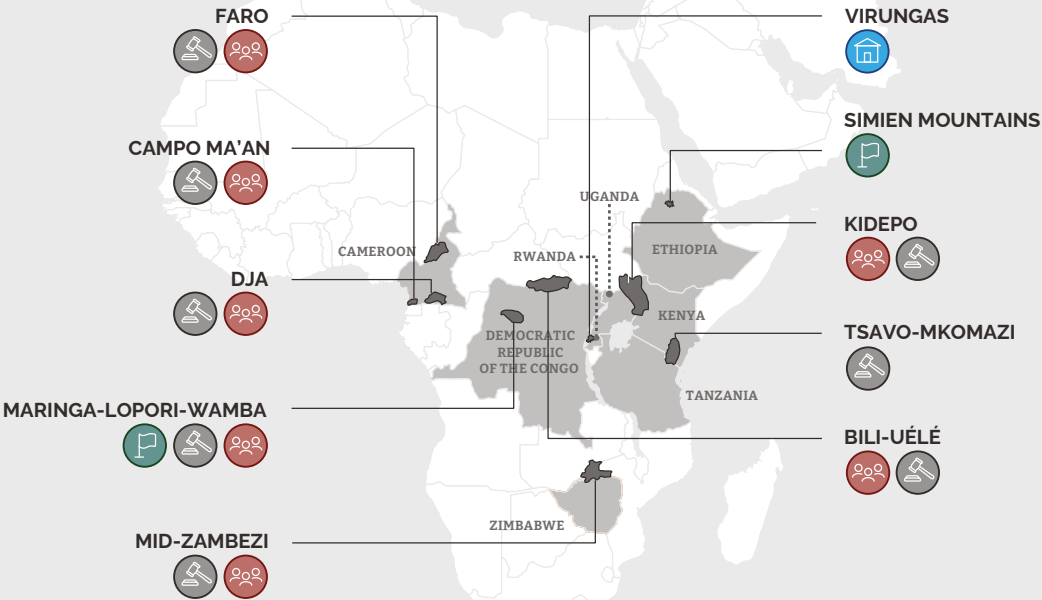
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Dodo Moke leads implementation of AWF’s rights-based strategies, partnering with colleagues across AWF’s field programs. Much of Moke’s day-to-day work has focused around AWF’s landscapes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Cameroon. AWF’s rights-based strategies also include implementing Free, Prior, and Informed Consent with local communities around Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda; conflict sensitivity training in Ethiopia; and rights-based trainings in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

We recently spoke with Moke to gain a better understanding of how rights-based conservation promotes peace and security.

AWF Rights-Based Strategies



Rights-based conservation training



Complaint Management Mechanism (CMM)



Conflict sensitivity training



Free, Prior and Informed Consent established with local communities

How does AWF use conservation as a stabilizing force for people living in and around conflict areas?

We bring communities into decision-making about their resources and help everyone in the landscape understand people’s fundamental rights—that every single person has the right to be treated with dignity. With our approach, communities are at the table as active partners in designing ways to increase peace and security. When people are feeling part of the process, they become more empowered to protect land and wildlife. It helps to build trust.

We show people that they have a role in what is happening in protected areas and in mediating conflicts that arise over land use. At the same time we create pathways to hold wildlife authorities accountable for their actions and explain to communities their obligations for conserving their natural heritage.

PeaceNexus Foundation has been a good partner in helping us develop skills to understand the context of the people we are working with. What are their cares? What are their problems? This helps us meet them where they are with conservation strategies that improve their lives.

This is changing how people think about conservation. There used to be a feeling that ‘conservationists are coming here and taking away our resources, like the forest, and we don’t have access.’ But today we are helping them exercise their legal rights to the forest—but also reminding them of their responsibility to protect it and helping them develop alternative options to activities like illegal hunting in protected areas.

300+

Rangers and scouts sensitized to rights-based conservation and the use of the CMM

400+

Community members trained as rights-based monitors to support their communities

7K+

Indigenous peoples and local community members sensitized to their legal rights

ABOVE LEFT: DODO MOKE MEETS WITH RESIDENTS OF BILI VILLAGE IN THE DRC. THE VILLAGE IS ONE WHERE MOKE ESTABLISHED A COMPLAINT MANAGEMENT MECHANISM SUPPORTED BY THE EU NATURAFRICA PROGRAM.



© BILLY DODSON

What are some of the issues you grapple with in a conservation landscape that is also a conflict zone?

You can learn a lot about this looking at the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s Bili-Uélé landscape, where I’ve been working for more than three years. It has a lot of insecurity concerns. Some are due to pressures between settled communities and herders searching for grazing land, but there is also pressure due to armed groups coming in from neighboring countries.

When you are living with that level of physical threat, simply trying to survive is stressful. Wildlife migrations are disrupted by the groups’ activity, and there is a high demand for bush meat hunting.

And when local communities that depend on the ecosystem are displaced by violence, they lose access to the natural resources that support them. Sometimes they lose their children or other family members to armed groups or violence, or maybe they themselves face abuse. In this situation, people can lose trust in conservation because to them, conservation represents more guns and restrictions.

What are the biggest concerns in these conflict zones for local communities, Indigenous peoples, and conservationists?

For local people, what scares them the most is displacement. You have to remember, people in these places are very isolated, poor, often illiterate. They have very few options. Displacement is devastating. When communities have to flee violence or relocate their villages, they lose their food sources, sense of personal security, access to medicine. For Indigenous peoples, the land and forest are spiritual. When they are forced to leave their traditional land, they lose a way of life.

For wildlife such as elephant, lion, and leopards, illegal hunting increases because there is a huge demand for ivory, skins, and bushmeat. Also human-wildlife conflict may increase as human settlement areas change.

As conservationists, we have to be careful not to go beyond the area where there is security, particularly when armed people are nearby. We are working in very remote areas, and when we need to move to another town to get food or other supplies, anything can happen on the road.



AWF’S DODO MOKE LEADS A TRAINING WITH COMPLAINT MANAGEMENT MECHANISM COMMITTEE MEMBERS IN UGANDA’S KIDEPO LANDSCAPE.

“When we partner with authorities and communities to manage land with land-use plans, create incomes, and respect rights, together we change everything.”

How can conservation help increase security for local communities and Indigenous peoples?

When land is mismanaged or exploitation through poaching and logging intensifies, it fans the flames of conflict. Communities lose access to vital resources, frustrations rise, and divisions deepen as groups compete over what remains. When we partner with authorities and communities to manage land with land-use plans, create incomes, and respect rights, together we change everything.

In the past, communities’ rights were not top of mind for conservation—the focus was on wildlife and habitat. AWF puts people in the center because we recognize how powerful conservation can be as a driver of positive change. People-centered

conservation helps to foster mutual respect between local communities, Indigenous peoples, and authorities by creating a sense of shared responsibility and accountability. Conservation becomes part of the values of those living in the landscape because it makes people safer and gives them power to improve their lives.

I think that where conservation is respecting people’s rights and listening to their stories, it becomes more strategic in saving nature. Rights-based conservation becomes a pathway to healing, to dialogue. It creates peace and stability. We need to have a new paradigm of conservation that starts with community needs and aspirations. I know it’s not easy to change established mindsets, but we are proving that it can be done.

How is AWF changing mindsets?

We bring different stakeholders together for dialogue and lean into partnership with local organizations to build trust within the society. One specific and powerful tool we’ve introduced with communities is the Complaint Management Mechanism (CMM). Basically, it’s a way of holding

local wildlife authorities accountable for respecting the rights of people by allowing local people to report illegal activity without fearing reprisals. It’s co-developed with communities as part of a larger feedback process. We help to ensure buy-in from authorities so people see real change when they participate.

What motivates you to do this work?

I care a lot about how wildlife and wildlands will support Africa’s development agenda. My hope for the future is a world where communities, especially Indigenous and local ones, are at the heart of conservation—thriving alongside the wildlife and landscapes they help to protect. It can be grueling, but I love traveling and staying with Indigenous peoples. It inspires me. When they come from the garden or farm at evening, we eat together, we dance, we talk some good story about conservation, and that is my passion.



SAMUEL MEMPONG

RESPECTING INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

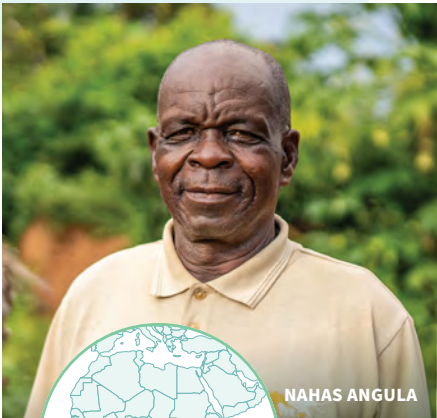
Moke recently spent 35 days in Cameroon’s Dja Landscape, which includes the Dja Faunal Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In addition to elephants, gorillas, and leopards, Dja is also home to local communities and the Baka People, an Indigenous group of rainforest hunter-gatherers who have lost access to their traditional lands and experience extreme marginalization and poverty.

Historically, conservation in Dja was primarily focused on wildlife and habitat protection, but AWF’s rights-based approach puts people at the center, including the Baka. “We are not just protecting wildlife, but we are carrying the needs of the Baka and their hopes for a better life,” Moke says.

When a problem related to conservation work surfaces, through community monitors the Baka have a voice. Eco-guards receive training on respecting people’s rights, and people living in and around the Reserve have rights sensitization trainings so they better understand their legal rights and permissible use of nature within protected land.

Samuel Mepong, a member of the Baka community shared his experience. “Before, we didn’t know how to speak up or who would listen. Now, with this system, I feel more heard and protected.”

INCREASING THE ACCOUNTABILITY OF AUTHORITIES IN NORTHERN DRC



The remote Bili-Uélé landscape in northern DRC includes the largest protected area in the country, the Bili-Uélé Protected Area Complex. Living here is challenging. The landscape abuts some of the world’s most dangerous conflict zones, access to electricity and internet is rare, and the nearest city is an arduous two-day trip away. For many, wildlife authorities are the only visible representatives of the government they ever see.

To increase authorities’ accountability to people in and around the Protected Area Complex, in 2022 AWF began **training eco-guards on communities’ legal rights and the importance of respecting human dignity during altercations.**

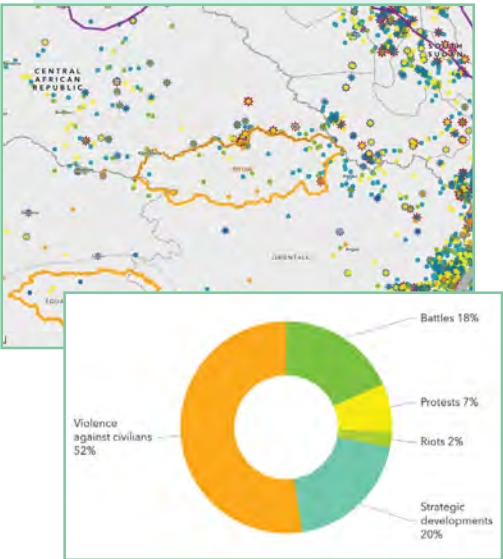
The trainings are part of a project supported by the EU’s NaturAfrica program to create a feedback loop between community members and authorities that allows community members to safely lodge complaints against authorities and report potential illegal activities. Community concerns are captured through a complaint management mechanism managed

by community volunteers. “With the presence of the complaint and conflict management mechanism, there is a change and mutual respect that has taken place between the members of the community and the ICCN [local wildlife authority],” says Aniboti Nakeno-Sylvain, a monitor in Bili-Uélé.

Trained community monitors gather feedback, investigate complaints, and escalate grievances when necessary—all while serving as sustainability ambassadors in their communities. **By showing that community voices matter, the program is reshaping relationships—and strengthening trust in conservation.** Since monitoring began, wildlife authorities have removed three eco-guards from their positions within the Bili-Uélé Protected Area Complex.

Nahas Angula, another volunteer monitor from the community, for one, is very happy “Today, if they [wildlife authorities] did something wrong, seeing us pass, discipline takes hold immediately,” he says.

HEADING OFF CONFLICT FROM THE SKY



While Moke and his AWF field colleagues must travel long and grueling distances to build relationships with isolated rural communities, there is another way conservation contributes to increasing security for people in and around protected areas—satellite data. Using GIS-based mapping and data sets, AWF has created digital dashboards with global GIS leader Esri to deliver alerts about insecurity incidents, deforestation, and fire activity. We also use AI to predict hotspots for human wildlife conflict, poaching, and other illegal activity, based on on-the-ground monitoring data.

The Risk Management Dashboard covers all AWF landscapes, providing **near-real-time mapping of reported security events.** Incidents can be viewed

using various scales and backdrops, from topographic-style maps to high-resolution satellite imagery. This mapping provides clear indications of risks that help to inform AWF operations and advise partners. For example, during recent strife in Ethiopia, the dashboard was **used to plan safe travel** to and from Simien Mountains National Park. Likewise, it **has helped wildlife authorities and communities** in the DRC’s Bili-Uélé landscape **avoid confrontations** with armed groups.

FAITH AND FORESTS: RELIGIOUS LEADERS CONNECT COMMUNITIES AND CONSERVATION



In the Iyondji Community Bonobo Reserve in the Maringa-Lopori-Wamba landscape in north-western DRC, AWF is partnering with local religious leaders to use their moral authority and deep community trust to resolve conflicts and promote conservation.

Established with the help of AWF, the Reserve protects bonobos and their habitat from poaching, deforestation, and unsustainable forest use. In 2023 AWF and local partners began a project to increase trust between eco-guards and the community. It started with encouraging regular dialogue between all local stakeholders to help identify issues. Through those dialogues, conservation partners gain insights about community needs and challenges, which help to tailor solutions and support. Initially, the process saw low community engagement—until religious leaders joined, and participation more than doubled.

102% in community participation

Faith plays a central role in the region, where religious leaders are among the most trusted figures. These leaders also promote responsible use of natural resources and discourage illegal activities like poaching. “From the church leaders now, **a lot of communities are buying in through the influence they have on the faith,**” says Gérard Limbanga Ngili, a religious leader and volunteer monitor from the village of Yofala. “They tell communities to start using resources in a good way but not...in the protected areas,” says Ngili.

This is positive news for bonobos, in particular, which are revered and off-limits to hunting. “[Traditional communities] don’t eat bonobos,” Ngili says. “For them, bonobos are like a totem... And it is very good for them to protect the bonobo.”

BONOBO IN THE MARINGA-LOPORI-WAMBA LANDSCAPE IN THE DRC © BILLY DODSON

FROM TENSION TO TRUST: REDUCING CONFLICT BETWEEN FARMERS AND HERDERS IN CAMEROON



Cameroon’s Faro landscape is part of a large network of protected areas linking Cameroon and Nigeria. Here, like in many places in Africa, seasonal cattle migration—known as transhumance—is a source of conflict. Fulani herders moving through the region in search of pasture clash with local farmers and communities. Livestock damages crops, degrades farmland, and encroaches on the local protected area.

That is changing with the creation of TANGO: the Association for Peaceful Management of Transhumance. Launched with support from the European Union in 2021, the initiative trains respected community members as mediators to negotiate between farmers and herders. Among them is **Oumma Djaoudji**, a Fulani woman and one of four women leaders in the network.

“At first, the villagers were reluctant to join or listen to us,” says Djaoudji. “But we

62% in resource-based conflict

didn’t give up. We kept the dialogue open, and now people trust us.”

TANGO members use culturally sensitive communication, traditional diplomacy, and practical problem-solving to reduce tensions. They’ve **helped establish corridors for cattle movement, negotiated shared grazing areas, and mediated disputes before they escalate.** Since its inception, Faro National Park officials estimate that there has been a **62% drop in resource-based conflict** around the park.

Beyond peace, TANGO has empowered its members—especially women. Djaoudji says the role has improved her status and income. “The allowances I earn have made my life better,” she says. With this success, **AWF is expanding the TANGO model to other conflict-prone landscapes.**

The PeaceNexus Foundation, a private foundation based in Switzerland, was established in 2009 to help organizations improve their effectiveness in peacebuilding. Over the past five years, PeaceNexus has been exploring how conservation actors are impacted by conflict and how that limits their ability to achieve conservation goals. They have also seen the underused potential of conservation to foster dialogue, collaboration, social cohesion, and peacebuilding. The foundation began supporting AWF's work to mainstream conflict-sensitive approaches across our programs and landscapes in 2023.



Heloise Heyer, Conflict Sensitivity Lead and International Partnerships Manager at PeaceNexus Foundation, shares her perspective on partnership with AWF

From the very start, we could see how real and live the challenge was for AWF and the risks and dilemmas they faced—not only in managing conflict in conservation, but also in the tremendous opportunity they had through their community-based approaches and their voice in policy networks like the Africa Protected Areas Directors.

With AWF, we approached the work step-by-step, starting by creating a space where teams across countries and landscapes could come together to reflect. The questions were simple but vital: What's happening at the moment in our work? Where do we see conflict and peace issues coming up? What's working, what's not, and how can PeaceNexus make a difference?

At the Nairobi kickoff workshop, AWF's CEO listened to staff from seven landscapes share nuanced perspectives of how these issues were playing out in their work. Then he responded. He began with, "If nature could speak, it would ask for peace." That moment really stayed with me. He unpacked that idea in connection with AWF's broader

strategy, which led to the development of a practical roadmap for AWF to embrace conflict sensitivity training and social cohesion across the organization. This partnership has already taught us so much. It's not just us supporting AWF—it's mutual learning. **We're inspired by how AWF is tackling these issues** on the ground, institutionally, and in policy circles. I really have big hopes for the future, because we're not just collaborators, we're becoming allies—helping show others across Africa and beyond the huge potential in connecting conservation and peace.



AWF are pioneers.

Violent conflict is now at its highest since World War II. No one can escape these dynamics. What gives me hope is that **AWF takes a proactive—not just reactive—approach**, grounded in prevention. AWF are pioneers. It takes courage and innovation, and we will continue to stand by them on this journey.

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