

RESILIENT AFRICA

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2026: Volume III

DRIVING ECONOMIC GROWTH

*Linking Conservation
to Opportunity*



BUILDING A FUTURE WHERE
PEOPLE AND WILDLIFE THRIVE



How does nature deliver value for people?

Linking Ecosystems to Opportunity

Conservation in Africa has been historically argued as a cost: land set aside, economic activity forgone, income given up. But Africa's protected and conserved areas are not only important as wildlife habitats—they are parts of larger working economies.

In 2020 the World Economic Forum put \$44 trillion—over half the world's GDP—as moderately or highly dependent on nature, and almost none of it is present in the plans and budgets that decide how land is used. That nature-dependent economic value takes many forms, and as a whole they make up what is known as the biodiversity economy.

This is incredibly important for Africa, which holds a quarter of the world's biodiversity, but receives a fraction of global green investments. The gap is not for want of value. Nature-based businesses are worth some \$7 trillion a year worldwide, and in Africa alone the biodiversity economy could generate more than \$1.4 trillion annually and 80 million jobs by 2030.

Between 65 and 70 percent of Africans live in rural areas and depend directly on nature for their survival. In Zimbabwe, forests alone account for 35 percent of rural incomes, and the country's 2023 Biodiversity Economy Report identified 22 nature-based sectors with real economic growth potential—enough, on its estimates, to double community incomes and create 250,000 green jobs by 2035.

Too often the true value of nature is lost because its economic value is either taken for granted or dispersed across farms, forests, fisheries, tourism businesses, or individual livelihoods rather than considered in its totality. Biodiversity economies are a way of ensuring nature is properly counted across economic sectors.

ABOVE: A MOUNTAIN GORILLA ON THE BOUNDARY OF VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK, ABOVE TERRACED FARMLAND.

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

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COVER: IN CAMPO-MA'AN, CAMEROON ROSE MHANDO HARVESTS MAIZE.



RWANDA: WILDERNESS SABIYINYO LODGE NEAR VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK, THE COUNTRY'S FIRST COMMUNITY-OWNED LODGE, WHICH AWF HELPED BUILD.



Edwin Tambara is AWF's Director of Global Leadership, based in Washington, DC. A Zimbabwean biologist who joined AWF as a Conservation Leadership & Management Fellow, he has helped to shape AWF's biodiversity economy work since the landmark Biodiversity Economy Report for Zimbabwe in 2023.

Edwin, in plain terms, what is a biodiversity economy?

Biodiversity economies are an approach to economic development that values wildlife and nature both at local subsistence levels and as part of the larger systems that drive GDP and multi-sectoral growth.

At the core, it is the direct use of nature for commercial purposes, and it does not stop at ecotourism. Agriculture can just be agriculture; the moment it is climate-smart—working with the natural systems it depends on rather than against them—it becomes part of a biodiversity economy. Forestry and fisheries work the same way, down to the beekeeper looking after the pollinators that make the honey.

What is most misunderstood about biodiversity economies?

Two things are often misunderstood. The first is how we count subsistence. What a household harvests may never be exchanged for money, but if the household uses it, it is a natural subsidy—money they did not have to spend, because they took it from the forest instead. Quantifying that is how you show these economies build resilience and support food security.

The second is how we measure sustainability. These economies need genuinely good monitoring, or we take too much and compromise the forests, water, and other natural infrastructure they run on. Without checks and balances, we can easily over-exploit nature.

Why does this have to cut across sectors, and what is AWF's role?

AWF has always built biodiversity economies—our conservation enterprise work and our rural livelihoods work were both part of it. But we treated them as isolated things on the ground, without the policy picture. This moves us from project-by-project strategies to a systems approach that scales.

Growth gets planned one sector at a time. A tourism plan is judged on visitor numbers, an agriculture plan on yields, a forestry plan on timber volumes. None accounts for the natural systems all three draw on: the same forest holds the fresh water, the pollinators which food security depends on, and tourism products at once, yet this appears as a cost in every plan and an asset in none. Unless a recognition of the biodiversity economy is built into planning and policy formulation, we are not going to realize its potential.

AWF's role includes three things. Creating awareness: policymakers and the public still ask what biodiversity economies are and we can provide that reference point. Providing evidence: proof of how these economies behave in specific countries and landscapes, which informs policy and planning. And implementation: which is what differentiates us—actively developing these economies, so the potential we claim becomes real.

Where is potential becoming reality?

The Biodiversity Economy Report for Zimbabwe, produced with the Ministry of Environment, found that nature contributes roughly US\$2 billion a year to the national economy—counted across non-timber forest products, ecotourism, ecosystem services, forestry and fisheries. That analysis helped bring \$6 million of Global Environment Facility investment into one of Zimbabwe's landscapes.

In Rwanda we have moved from a master plan linking conservation and growth in the Volcanoes landscape to materializing the opportunities it surfaced. AWF's own \$13.6 million commitment is unlocking \$214 million from the World Bank Group, the European Investment Bank, the Nordic Development Fund and others, against a \$294 million strategy. The opportunities

are largely agricultural: outside tourism, agriculture is the region's second largest sector, so we have worked on horticulture training, on organizing producer groups so they can receive investment, and on linking those groups to markets to buy what they grow.

In Kenya's Kajiado County, geospatial tools built for government and business are helping investors develop sustainable livestock and dairy supply chains on community-owned land around Amboseli National Park. In Tanzania's Kilombero Valley, the seventeen farming cooperatives we helped establish had earned a combined US\$24 million by 2022. Similar work is beginning in Uganda's Kidepo landscape.

What comes next, and what are you most excited about?

This fall we launch a toolkit to help governments identify and value their biodiversity economies. Countries wanted the same support we gave Zimbabwe, so with the World Bank's backing we built it with the African Leadership University and the Conservation Strategy Fund. When we presented it at the Business of Conservation Conference, the strongest response came not from national delegations but from community managers running conservancies, who wanted to

\$2B Estimated annual contribution of nature to Zimbabwe's economy, from the Ministry of Environment's 2023 Biodiversity Economy Report, developed with AWF support

\$55M Estimated annual value the Amboseli ecosystem generates through tourism, livestock, and ecosystem services, from Kenya's 2024 Amboseli Ecosystem Economic Impact Survey

\$294M Projected long-term contribution to Rwanda's economy from the Volcanoes National Park master plan, developed by the Government of Rwanda with AWF support

run the assessment on their own sites. We have been refining it to work at site and landscape levels because of that.

Nobody has to do all of it at once. A country or a community can take on the parts they have capacity for and bring in partners like AWF for the rest, rather than waiting for someone else to do it for them. And because the toolkit is a course as well as a guide, with case studies added over time, it keeps working long after any one project closes.



KENYA: AMBOSELI NATIONAL PARK BENEATH MOUNT KILIMANJARO, WHERE LIVESTOCK, TOURISM, WILDLIFE, AND COMMUNITIES SHARE THE SAME LANDSCAPE.

What is a Biodiversity Economy?

A biodiversity economy describes the sustainable use of nature for commercial purposes or subsistence livelihoods. AWF's approach to biodiversity economies includes:

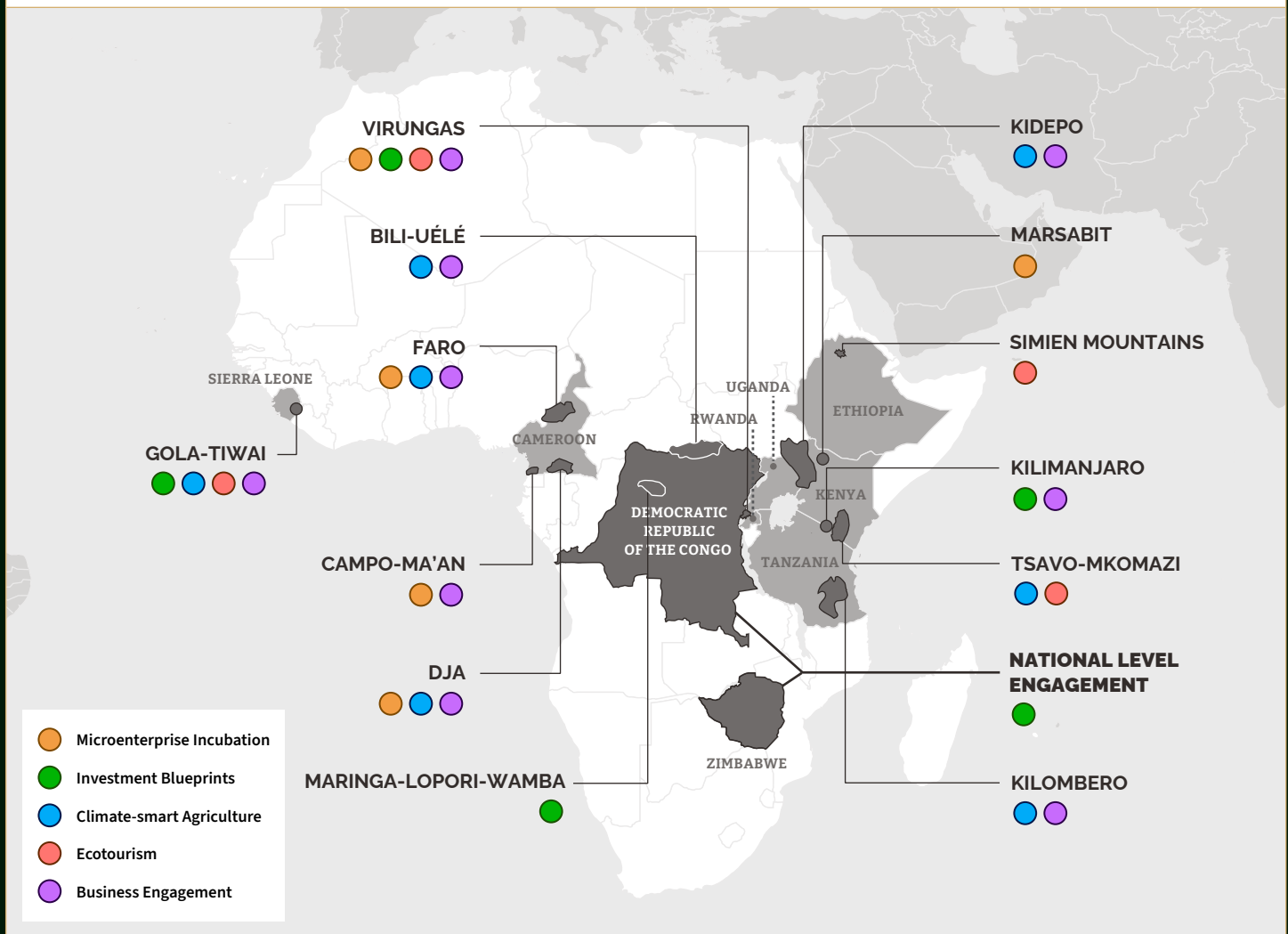
Microenterprise Incubation: Giving entrepreneurs the skills to develop and invest in business ideas that link sustainable resource management to economic opportunity, particularly in remote rural communities that traditional incubation programs rarely reach.

Investment Blueprints: Developing plans for government that shape opportunities for enterprise solutions to deliver conservation and development outcomes, helping local leaders engage business partners and leverage private finance for jobs and growth.

Climate-smart Agriculture: Supporting smallholder farmers to improve yields, access markets, and reduce post-harvest losses in ways that protect and restore forest, wetland, and grassland systems.

Ecotourism: Supporting environmentally responsible tourism initiatives that combine nature conservation, community development, and visitor education while protecting Africa's natural and cultural heritage.

Business Engagement: Partnering with businesses whose acumen helps scale ways of harnessing markets to sustain ecosystems, incentivize the protection and restoration of habitat, and reduce threats to biodiversity.



DRIVING NEW ENTERPRISE OPPORTUNITIES: MICROENTERPRISE INCUBATION



Volcanoes National Park's greatest success is also its biggest challenge: the mountain gorilla population is growing, while the park has lost over 50 percent of its original size to human settlement. For communities along its edge, conservation now means expanding habitat for wildlife while expanding opportunity for people.

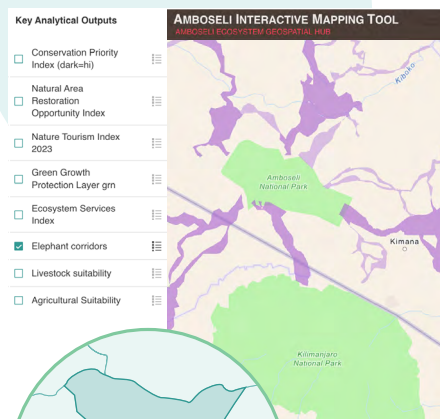
AWF and the Government of Rwanda developed a conservation and development master plan for the landscape: restoring degraded parkland, creating a land-use buffer, and green villages with modern amenities for communities. The masterplan has an investment blueprint to drive sustainable growth in agriculture, tourism, forestry and other nature-based industries. One piece of this is the Business Incubation Program. Run with AWF's partner Inkomoko, it supports local community members living near the park. Participants train in business planning, market analysis, risk and financial management, work with a mentor, then pitch at a Demo Day where the strongest idea wins seed funding. The first cohort

of 132 entrepreneurs, a little over half of them women, has launched agriculture, livestock, and retail ventures. Another 160 farmers, almost three quarters of them women, have trained through the Volcanoes Community Association Horticulture Hub, which sells to high-end hotels, reinvesting a fifth of its profits into the community.

Uwera Esther, one of the program's first participants, pitched a commercial egg-laying farm and was awarded about \$990 in seed funding. She started with 20 layer chickens and reinvested the profits. Esther's Fresh Eggs now produces more than 30 trays a week, employs other young women from her community, and has enabled her to go back to school. "The incubation program didn't just fund my business; it transformed me into a leader," she says. "I used to doubt myself, but today, I employ others and help feed my community. If you have a dream, start small, learn constantly, and never give up."

PHOTO: NYIRAMA HOR MARIE CHANTAL AT A HYGIENE TRAINING IN GAHURA VILLAGE, KINIGI, NEAR VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK, RWANDA

GIS PUTS DATA IN DECISIONMAKERS' HANDS: INVESTMENT BLUEPRINTS



In Kenya's fast-growing Kajiado County, home to Amboseli National Park, the stakes for people and wildlife are high. Geospatial data joins satellite mapping, field records, and modelling to show what today's land-use decisions will mean decades from now.

Last year, Kenya announced it would transfer management of the park from the national government to the county. AWF and Kajiado County are developing the Amboseli Ecosystem Integrated Masterplan, designed to encourage sustainable development while maintaining the ecological integrity of the landscape.

However, the county lacked centralized data. AWF worked with the Amboseli Ecosystem Trust and Kajiado County's

Department of Wildlife and Tourism to pool that data into a geospatial hub, each partner's contribution credited. This hub is how the Masterplan's progress will be tracked: whether corridors stay open, and how value is created for the landowners who carry the cost of living alongside wildlife.

Future plans for the hub include adding mobile data collection on the livestock and dairy value chains, rangeland carbon, biodiversity credits and the other opportunities the masterplan is meant to identify. For a landscape as complex as Amboseli, that is what lets everyone plan from the same picture.

GRAPHIC: A GIS MAP FROM THE AMBOSALI GEOSPATIAL HUB, WHICH POOLS DATA FROM ACROSS THE LANDSCAPE IN KENYA

CULTIVATING HEALTHIER COTTON: CLIMATE SMART AGRICULTURE



In Uganda's Kidepo Valley, years of land degradation and unpredictable weather have strained farms and wildlife habitat alike. Victor Bari watched pest infestations and erratic rainfall steadily erode his cotton yields. In June 2024, a three-year AWF project supported by the Regenerative Fund for Nature, established by Conservation International, the global luxury group Kering, and Inditex, began working with local partners, including the Dynamic Agro-Pastoralist Development Organization (DADO). The program seeks to transform sustainable cotton farming into a driver for rural development while making space for wildlife. Bari planted trees among his cotton, swapped bought chemicals for natural pest control and organic manure, and began rotating his crops. Among the project's 2,280 cotton farmers, half of them women, the number using these methods rose from 24 percent in 2024 to 54 percent in 2025.

"According to the Uganda Wildlife Authority, 70 to 80 percent of the wildlife in the region live outside the Kidepo Valley National Park. To address this, this project equips farmers with skills to mitigate human-wildlife conflict, as elephants and buffaloes frequently wander into their fields. These strategies help reduce crop damage while protecting the wildlife that share the landscape," says Henry Mukiibi, Senior Program Manager, AWF Uganda. However, conservation here doesn't look like a fence or a ranger. It looks like soil. "Through the project, I am learning sustainable practices that have improved my yields and enhanced soil health." Bari says. The soil he is rebuilding is the ground the wildlife cross, and what he puts back into the ground serves them both.

PHOTO: COTTON FARMER VICTOR BARI HARVESTS IN THE KIDEPO VALLEY, UGANDA

OWNING THE HARVEST: BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT



"It not only gives us income, but also dignity," says Ndongo Jean Daniel, standing in the rubber farm his community planted. He is a community leader in Nyamabande, a village of Bagyeli and Bantu families in Cameroon's Campo Ma'an landscape, resettled out of Campo Ma'an National Park; the move took with it the forest livelihoods they had always depended on. Rubber was what they planted instead, knowing it would be six years before a single tree paid them anything.

In 2020, a community rubber farm was established in Nyamabande with funding from the Cameroon Oil Transportation Company (COTCO) through the Foundation for Environment and Development in Cameroon (FEDEC), and additional support from Karen Combs. AWF provided the technical guidance to establish and manage the farm, and helped the community build a direct relationship with HEVECAM, the

Cameroon Rubber Company, which buys the latex. The land and the trees now belong to Nyamabande. The first tapping took place in June 2026, and latex is collected every 24 to 48 hours through the production season, so money comes in continuously rather than once a year. That is the shape of the opportunity: six years of patience to establish the trees, and up to thirty years of production once they are established.

"This rubber farm shows that our community is willing to work," Ndongo says, and he sees jobs in it for Nyamabande's young people. Lydie Nguesse, AWF's Community Development Assistant in Campo Ma'an, puts the wider logic simply: "When communities are given tools and support, they can build sustainable livelihoods that reduce pressure on protected areas."

PHOTO: MARLUS BOMO COLLECTS LATEX AT NYAMABANDE'S COMMUNITY RUBBER FARM IN THE CAMPO MA'AN LANDSCAPE, CAMEROON

Growing Prosperity at the Edge of Volcanoes National Park

For the people living beside Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park, conservation and livelihoods are deeply connected. The park's mountain gorillas have helped make the region a globally recognized tourism destination, but neighboring communities rely on small plots of land that are increasingly vulnerable to climate change. Through support from the Peter Gilgan Foundation, AWF partnered with over 160 smallholder farmers, more than three-quarters of them women, to help ensure that local communities can share more fully in the benefits of a thriving conservation landscape.

Over the past two years, this group received training in climate-smart agriculture and established a community horticulture hub featuring greenhouses, a nursery, and cold-storage facilities. These investments are helping farmers grow high-value vegetables year-round despite increasingly erratic rainfall, while supplying hotels and tourism businesses that serve visitors to the park. In the first production cycles alone, farmers harvested thousands of kilograms of tomatoes, cucumbers, and sweet peppers, generating new income and creating a foundation for long-term economic resilience.

The impact extends beyond agricultural yields. The 160 farmers who took part, three quarters of them women, formed the Aheza Kinigi Farm Cooperative, strengthening their ability to learn together, negotiate as a group, and reach formal markets—eighty percent of the women are now in negotiations with registered buyers, with AWF supporting the cooperative toward the compliance standards those contracts require. Three quarters of participants reported greater confidence in leadership and decision-making.

By helping families build more secure livelihoods from the land they already steward, the project is advancing a vision at the heart of AWF's work: demonstrating that when conservation creates value for people, they are willing to champion it. Around



Volcanoes National Park, that means healthier communities, stronger local economies, and a more sustainable future for one of Africa's most iconic wildlife landscapes.



What excites us most is seeing women turn opportunity into lasting change. Through AWF's program in Rwanda, we are investing in women farmers through climate-smart agriculture and market access — but it is their leadership, hard work and commitment to learning new approaches that turns that investment into more secure livelihoods, for their households and for entire communities. We are proud to partner with AWF in supporting local solutions that help families thrive while contributing to the long-term sustainability of this remarkable landscape.



KIM PLEWES

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2025 ANNUAL REPORT

Read our 2025 Annual Report to learn how the African Wildlife Foundation is building a future where people and wildlife thrive:

[ANNUALREPORT.AWF.ORG](https://annualreport.awf.org)



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