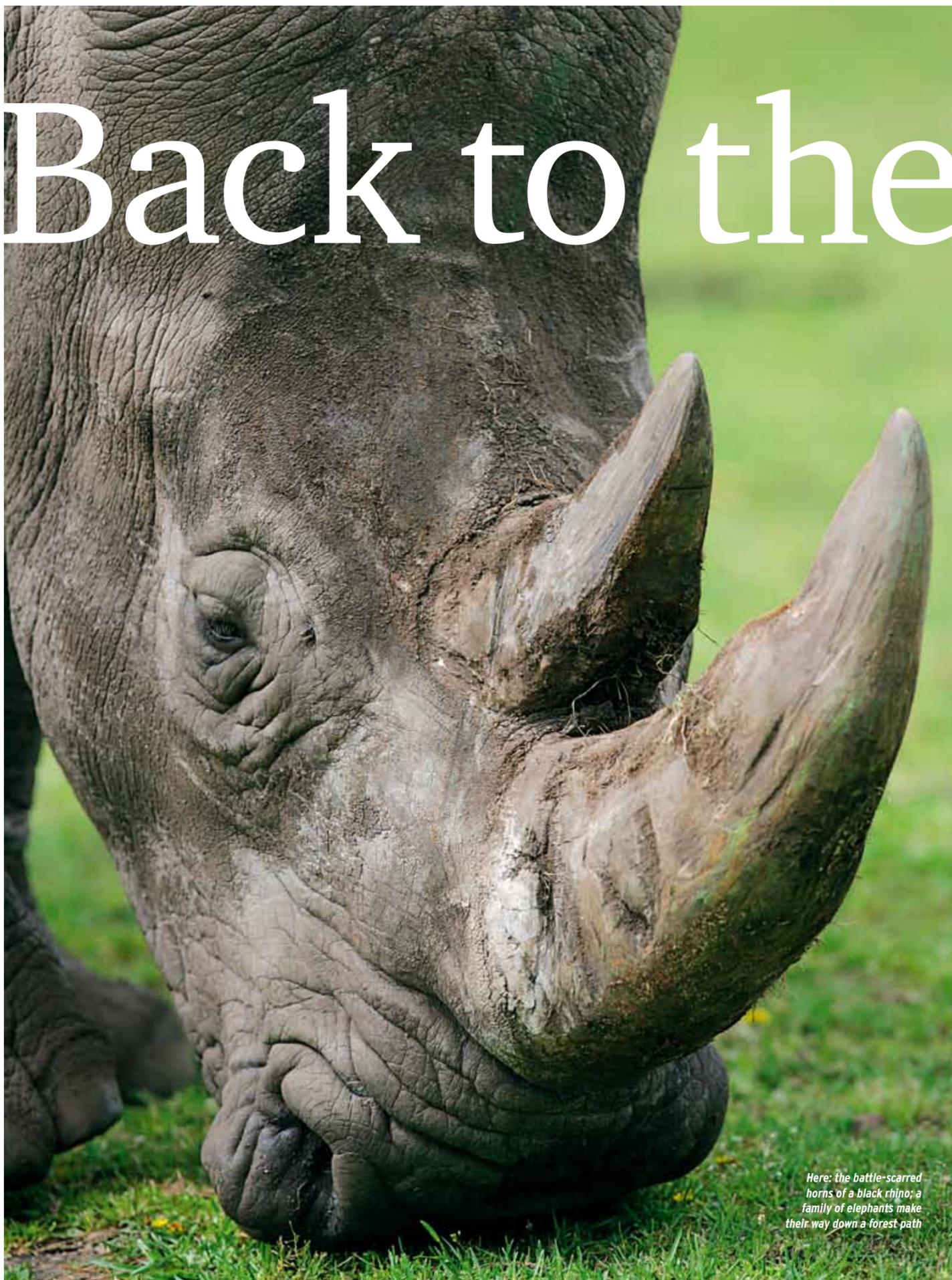


# Back to the

# FUTURE



Here: the battle-scarred horns of a black rhino; a family of elephants make their way down a forest path

© HOLGER EHLERS, ARIADNE VAN ZANDBERGEN/MALAWI



Twenty years ago the Majete region of Malawi was a barren wilderness, its native animal populations decimated by poaching. Now, as **Sue Watt** found, the area is once again home to elephants, lions and rhinos, thanks to the latest pioneering conservation effort by African Parks

“**D**ecide which tree you’re going to climb – quickly.” Dorian whispered his instructions with a palpable sense of urgency, and with good reason. Climbing trees is apparently the only way to escape a charging rhino.

About 20m ahead, Shamwari snorted deeply and angrily: her alarm call, warning us to keep our distance. We’d spent five hours since dawn following the tracks of black rhinos, trawling across sandy river beds and grassy slopes, and we’d finally found one obscured by dense thicket, shading itself from the morning sun.

According to Dorian Tilbury and his tracking team, Shamwari is a relatively placid rhino, but with her 18-month-old calf beside her, this was no time to move closer for a clearer view. Another aggressive snort

convinced us we would do better to retreat than to rush up a tree: my fleeting glimpse of her among the tangled mess of branches and bushes would have to suffice. Despite its brevity, my encounter with this increasingly rare animal, being poached to the edge of extinction, felt a true privilege.

That rhinos are here at all in Majete Wildlife Reserve is thanks to the efforts of African Parks, a not-for-profit South African conservation organisation that has been restoring wildlife to this beautiful corner of southern Malawi for the past 10 years. In one of Africa’s poorest countries, decades of poaching and poor policing have taken their toll, leaving Majete an empty, plundered wasteland. By 1992 not a single elephant remained. Now, around 260 roam around the 700 sq km landscape, many having been relocated from other Malawian or South →

African parks. In all, some 2,500 animals have been brought here, costing some US\$3 million, and today Majete is once again a thriving Big Five reserve, home to 6,000 animals, including lions, leopards, elephant, buffalo, and those elusive rhinos.

Majete is African Parks' flagship project, one of seven Parks the organisation is restoring in six countries, spreading 4.1 million hectares across the continent. The company was established in 2000. Its founders were conservationists and leading businessmen seeking a new way of restoring Africa's poorest wildlife regions. They included South African National Parks' former Chief Executive Mavuso Msimang, its Director of Conservation Dr Anthony Hall-Martin, and Commercial Director Peter Fearnhead. They were soon joined by a charismatic Dutch billionaire and philanthropist, the late Paul Fentener van Vlissingen, who shared their passion for conservation and provided much initial funding.

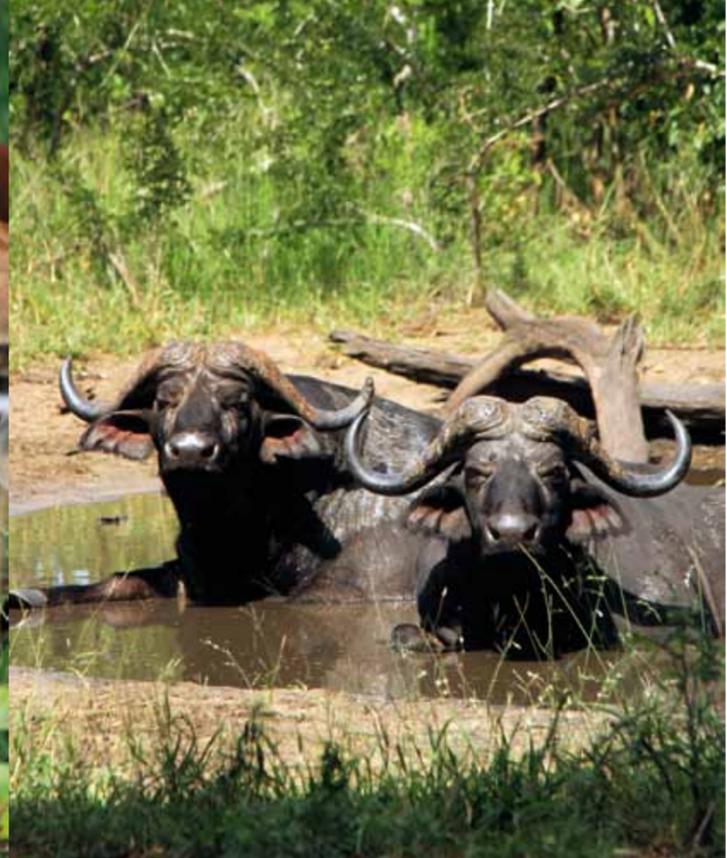
Today, African Parks receives donations from individuals, governments and NGOs ranging from the European Union and the World Bank to philanthropic organisations such as the Walton Family Foundation. Majete was its first project, acquired in 2003. By 2020 the organisation aims to be protecting 15 vulnerable parks in need of restoration, making it the largest conservation organisation on the continent.

**BUSINESS PLANS**

Where African Parks differs from other organisations is in its ethos of adopting a business approach to conservation, working in partnerships with local governments and crucially taking over full management control of its parks. As Dorian, the Field Operations Manager for Majete told me: "We aim to take depleted protected areas, rehabilitate them, restock them and get them moving again, to make them ecologically, socially and financially sustainable. We get a 25-year tenure, then hand them back to their government and say, "There you go, be merry." Despite its successes, it's a controversial approach with some critics believing parks should remain under local management.

African Parks' bold ambitions would be impossible to achieve without the cooperation of local communities that surround and sometimes share the regions with the animals the organisation is striving to protect. Most of these people live in abject poverty and need to be persuaded that their wildlife neighbours are more valuable to them alive than dead.

In Majete, Anthony Chikwemba, African Parks' Community Extension Officer explained the importance of involving the 85 villages



**Most people live in poverty and have to be persuaded the wildlife is worth more to them alive**

around the reserve. "We want communities to take a leading role in conserving the natural resources inside and outside the reserve. If we sideline them, there are going to be problems.

"Majete has more than 130,000 people surrounding it. That's a big group for a small reserve. It's quite a challenge."

Through protecting the wildlife, those communities receive tangible benefits, including new classrooms and teachers' accommodation, clinics and bore holes. Around 200 staff are employed at the reserve itself, and training and micro-finance are provided for new income-generating opportunities such as bee-keeping, chicken rearing, making pottery and furniture, and hosting visitors on village visits. In education, African Parks has awarded over 600 scholarships to orphans attending secondary schools. Children are learning about conservation through wildlife clubs and visits to the reserve, spreading the message to both older and younger generations.

As the wildlife returns, so do the visitors. In Majete, a new community campsite, a tented lodge called Thawale, a heritage centre and an education centre all help to bring in employment and income. Robin Pope Safaris,



*Clockwise from left: a young impala pauses in its grazing to check the photographer; two "daggaboy", buffaloes wallowing in dagga, or mud; children from villages near Majete learning about conservation; the suspension bridge leading to Mkulumadzi lodge in Majete; a lodge bedroom*

a leading safari operator in Zambia and Malawi, showed their faith in African Parks by opening a beautiful luxury lodge called Mkulumadzi in 2011, at a cost of 1.3 million Euros. Prior to African Parks' involvement only a handful of visitors bothered to come to Majete each year. By 2012 their numbers had reached nearly 6,000, a figure forecast to double in 2013.

Not all African Parks' efforts have been as successful, however, and the organisation has had some steep learning curves. Each of the regions in which they operate brings its own challenges, sometimes involving corruption, political chaos or organised criminal activity on a massive scale.

In 2007, African Parks prematurely terminated its contracts in two Ethiopian National Parks – the remote Omo Valley and Nech Sar – when complex problems involving the relocation of around 50,000 indigenous people. Human rights violations by the government and bitter inter-tribal conflicts made successful negotiations on sustainable land use impossible.

In both Zakouma National Park, Chad and Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo, African Parks is striving to reverse the trend of rampant commercial ivory poaching that has decimated

**LIFE SUPPORT**



**How African Parks brought Rwanda's Akagera NP back from the brink**

Akagera National Park suffered dreadfully when refugees returned following Rwanda's devastating genocide of 1994. Thousands of people settled in the Park, poaching, breeding cattle and destroying its ecosystem. In 1997, the government, in a damage-limitation exercise, reduced Akagera by 50 per cent, allowing its new residents to remain in one half while protecting the remaining 1,120 sq km. But resources and expertise were limited, and in 2010 African Parks partnered with the Rwanda Development Board to help manage and conserve this beautiful region.

"African Parks has made a huge difference," said Denise Umugwaneza, who's been guiding in the Park since 2006. "We've had more training, more equipment, better cars, new roads... and the brand new electric fence has made a significant difference in human/wildlife conflict, poaching and other illegal activity."

Up to 200 locals are now employed at Akagera and African Parks provides school visits and environmental education classes to thousands of children to spread the conservation message.

Twenty years after the genocide, like Rwanda itself, Akagera is coming back to life. Today, it's home to some 8,000 animals, including elegant giraffe, buffalo, warthogs, antelopes such as waterbuck, topi, and the Bambi-like oribi, monkeys, and a grumpy old elephant called Mutware, who is renowned for his antisocial behaviour. Visitors have already increased by 50 per cent and African Parks plans to attract more by reintroducing lions and rhinos, making it a Big 5 destination. Of its 480 bird species, the rare shoebill will be the most sought-after sighting.

What is most striking is Akagera's diversity and scenic beauty. Among rolling hills and gorges, deep valleys and open plains, lakes and papyrus swamp cover a third of the Park, making it the largest protected wetlands in central Africa.

Once at risk of being lost forever to an encroaching population, its future now looks secure.

## REPORT: AFRICAN PARKS

*Clockwise from below: Mr Moyo from African Parks, guide Dorian Tilbury and the writer, Sue Watt, track rhino; mischievous young gorilla, Pan, eyes up the visitors; a hippo surfaces in one of the park's lakes*



pachyderm populations. They do this against a backdrop of terror and violence, even murder. In DRC, the rebel militia group called the Lord's Resistance Army is particularly active, kidnapping women and children and attacking rangers. In Chad, six scouts were brutally murdered by poachers last year during morning prayers.

Law enforcement is key to the success of African Parks' projects. In neighbouring Congo, poaching and corruption are the main causes of the dramatic decline in the number of forest elephants at Odzala-Kokoua National Park. The problem may seem insurmountable, but a major law enforcement coup for African Parks' team recently resulted in the conviction of a leading arms dealer and poaching ringleader and his associated corrupt officials, bringing hope for the future.

Research and conservation are central to African Parks' activities in Odzala. It's home to a whopping 16 primate species, including 20,000 critically endangered Western Lowland gorillas whose survival is threatened by disease, habitat loss, the bush-meat trade and political unrest. Primates aren't the only residents in this 13,600 sq km Park – some 430 bird species, 100 species of mammals including vulnerable forest elephants, and thousands of plant varieties live here, too.

One of the world's largest carbon sinks,

with a unique biodiversity, much of Congo's vast rainforest remains undiscovered and African Parks is busy researching using camera traps, counts, and monitoring of key species. It works closely with leading primatologist Dr Magda Bermeja, who has habituated two gorilla groups for tourist visits. Whilst it's early days for African Parks' involvement with Odzala (they took on the Park in 2010), a luxury ecotourism company, Wilderness, has already opened two upmarket camps for gorilla tracking and rainforest safaris.

### VITAL FUNDS FROM TOURISM

Indeed, tourism plays a huge part in African Parks' strategy. It's the main source of revenue for financial sustainability once wildlife has been restored, and each project has accommodation facilities for visitors. In Zambia, African Parks is protecting the precious natural resources of both the Bangweulu Wetlands, where rare shoebills nest in its swamps, and the remote Liuwa Plain which attracts the second largest wildebeest migration in Africa. Liuwa is the next Majete: after 10 years of relentless conservation efforts, wildlife is increasing and plans are afoot to build a luxury lodge, the first in the region. Bangweulu's tourist offerings range from a community campsite to a tented camp with en-suite facilities.

Back in Malawi, African Parks has been

asked by the government to take on the management of Nkhotakota NP, home to the beautiful Tongole lodge, and Liwonde NP where Robin Pope Safaris is building a luxury tented camp, the country's first.

Meanwhile, in Majete, vulnerable species are thriving. Since my visit, Shamwari has had another calf and Shire, a relocated lion, has two cubs. For the first time in decades, the patter of tiny lion paws can be heard – perfectly normal in many of Africa's wild areas but here those cubs are very special. **WT**

*Sue Watt travelled to Majete National Park, Malawi, and Akagera National Park, Rwanda with Cox & Kings.*

*Tel: 0845 527 8150; [www.coxandkings.co.uk](http://www.coxandkings.co.uk)  
For further information on African Parks visit [www.african-parks.org](http://www.african-parks.org)*

