

The National Park that survived a war

In Mozambique, Elton Pila, visits Gorongosa National Park to witness how an area that had been ravished by armed groups is now an example to the world



Environmental Club students from the Vila de Gorongosa primary school spent World Biodiversity Day (May 22), visiting Gorongosa National Park and touring the E.O. Wilson Laboratory

At the end of the undergrowth, a pond can be seen. It has the blue-grey colour of the sky at the end of the day and the sun with orange rubbing against red, as if it were a sea of larvae from a recent eruption; a colour that resists even after the sun sets on the horizon line.

There is at least one hippopotamus inside the lagoon. We don't see it, but the fresh footprints announce the late afternoon bath it took before the night incursion for food.

A small crocodile, which almost blends in with a log, takes advantage of the last rays of the sun. These are the images of a safari in the late afternoon, in Gorongosa National Park.

The morning had arrived cold. The sun that seems to rise from the belly of the forest dissipated the mantle of clouds over the vegetation. Impalas and waterbucks had flown away from the car's engine noise.

A lion roared. We followed the direction of the sound, lost in the excitement of finding it and the fear that it will find us. And we found him, sprawled on the grass, as if he were posing for a postcard photograph.

All these are the new signs of life that make Gorongosa a kaleidoscope landscape, with surprises at every turn. It had been lost in the years of wars and military instability but now it is recovering.

A park blighted by warfare

In August 2019, the park was the stage for the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, followed by the Definitive Peace and National Reconciliation Agreement in Maputo. The two agreements put an end to about five years of military instability in central Mozambique.

It was not by chance that the National Park was this first ground for the new times that are blowing. In the years of military instability, as it had been in the ten years of the war against Portuguese colonialism and again in the 16 years of the civil war, Gorongosa was more than a collateral victim. Weapons fired at men were also fired at animals.

The guns though finally fell silent and now Gorongosa is once again waking up. There are 400,000 hectares in an area designated a park in 1960. Now, more

than 60 years later, it is one of the greatest examples of restoration and conservation in Africa, which has much to teach the world and has made the surrounding communities partners in the cause.

As the conservation community prepares for the UN Biodiversity Conference (COP 15) in China later this year, ahead of which it has been agreed that it is necessary to “accelerate the restoration of one billion hectares of degraded lands by 2030”, “strengthen drought resilience” and “improve the involvement of women in land management”, Gorongosa has a lot to teach.

The story dates back to 2004, when the Carr Foundation, based in the United States of America and whose patron is Greg Carr, a philanthropist who made his fortune in technology and decided to invest in environmental causes, and the Government of Mozambique agreed to join forces to rebuild the Park’s infrastructure, restore its wild fauna and flora and stimulate economic development.

Between 2004 and 2007, the Carr Foundation invested more than ten million dollars in this effort. Then, in 2008, the Government of Mozambique and the Carr Foundation (which changed its name to the “Gorongosa Restoration Project”) announced the signing of an agreement to restore and co-manage the Park over the next 20 years.

There are more than 6,000 species of animals and plants recorded in Gorongosa’s landscape. A biodiversity that tells of the renewed strength of the park, but also of the relationship with other Parks.

Animals such as buffalo, cheetah, eland, elephant, wildebeest, wild dog and leopard arrived at the Gorongosa Wildlife Sanctuary from distant parks such as Kruger, Isimangaliso Wetland, Modgagi Conservation, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalangan South Africa as well as from closer parks such as the Limpopo National Park, Marromeu Reserve or Coutada 9 in the province of Manica.

A sanctuary for pangolins

Elias Mubobo arrives with a pangolin clinging to his shoulder. It has a name, it is Januário, in honor of the person who took it from the hands of poachers in Manica. The pangolin weighs 2.55 kilos and has to reach about 7 kilos to be returned to its natural habitat, which could happen as soon as November.

Animals from different provinces arrive at the Center. Since it was founded in 2018, it has already returned close to 80 pangolins to their natural habitat.

Mubobo, a veterinarian at the Pangolins Rehabilitation Center, was born in Dondo and grew up listening to the mysticism that surrounds this mammal, which is a sacred animal in the Mozambique context.

“When people saw pangolin, it was believed that they would live much longer, there would be an abundance of food or an abundance of rain, that they would be lucky”, he tells me.

This may also be one of the reasons for the rampant hunting that put him in extinction pathways. Until he arrived in the park, Mubobo had never seen live pangolins.

Involving the community

“I’m Alberto, I like lions. I’m Mónica, I like pangolin. I’m Albino, I like wild dogs. I’m Teresa, I like ants.” More names follow. More species of animals too. Many of the animals they talk about would have been seen for the first time on the safari they did that morning through Gorongosa.

The diversity that we find in the answers shows the revelation of its biodiversity through the eyes of these children from the Escola Primária Completa de Púnguè who are there under the Youth Club project, which was created in 2012 as a way of introducing children to the importance of nature, of biodiversity and conservation.

“It is when you are small that you twist a cucumber. We educate the child today so that in the future it is not necessary to educate adults,” tells Amemarlita Matos, the trainer with a master’s degree in Conservation Biology who now teaches them when they visit Gorongosa National Park.

The project is an example of community involvement as these children are from the buffer zone, neighbouring the Park. The activities start in schools, but they also come to the park for a more physical encounter with the environment.

And they learn of ants to elephants, from small bushes to large baobabs, everything is of great importance for the life of the park, which also helps in their lives. Already it is starting to show results. “Children have been telling us

that they dismantle traps for birds or mice in their communities,” Amemarlita says.

Other young people arrive in the park through workshops or internships that Gorongosa National Park offers. The best stay. Research laboratories here have many faces under 30 years old, as is the case of Norina Vicente Tete, who is 26 years old.

He arrived in the park in 2016 after a degree in Ecotourism and Wildlife Management for an internship, and driven by the passion to understand how organisms and ecosystems are organised and how this knowledge can be used to develop strategies to protect natural areas.

Now he works as a curator at the EOWilson Biodiversity Laboratory, where he manages biological collections, coordinates the entry of biodiversity data and digital images of specimens and identifies species. In July, he begins a master’s degree, funded by the park, in Integrative Biology at the State University of São Francisco.

He is already thinking about what he can do when he returns. “I will be able to help my community develop a better understanding of conserving natural ecosystems and increase the level of growth of protected areas at my root site,” he says.

Conservation benefits

The administrator of the district of Gorongosa, Pedro Francisco Mussengue, is a partner in the work of the administration of the park.

For him, conservation, which guarantees the presence of several species that the world does not have, brings benefits to the community also. “The Park belongs to the community and has positive results,” he says.

Conservation is not a new topic for communities but at the moment there has been an improvement in understanding of its importance. “We are all ready to conserve the environment. And we have hope that we will win,” he explained. Also, because the population already sees benefits, with the rivers for example still having enough water, the population realises that it is worth conserving.

Poaching is still the big Achilles heel. There are poachers who end up enticing local workers. “But now it is the community who knows it must alert the Government and the Park and work in a common way, in agreement,” Mussengue says.

Pedro Muagura is a former professor at the Instituto Agrário de Chimoio, which had Gorongosa National Park as a field for its practical classes. He started working at the park as Reforestation Manager, became Director of Conservation before being appointed Park Administrator.

I ask him what is it like to try to raise awareness of the topic of conservation with local communities? “We have to combine the protection of biodiversity with the empowerment of communities,” he tells me. “If we don’t, our work will have no effect, especially in rural communities, where poverty and illiteracy are accentuated.

“The environment of the schools we have leaves a lot to be desired, they need help to improve education. No country can succeed without education at the desired level. We also need to empower girls. If girls drop out of school, the fight against poaching will be fruitless.”

He continues “Communities need ways to earn income. Means to guarantee success of food, of money, at a sustainable level. That’s why we think about cash crops: coffee, cashew, fruit. If that happens, people will no longer fight just to eat.

“But we have other community engagement strategies. There are community management committees. The 16 communities here in Gorongosa have committees and subcommittees. In these committees, 20 per cent of the tourism money collected in the park is distributed. The money is given to communities who decide how to spend it.

“Today, they produce coffee, there are a thousand coffee producers, a thousand families, multiplied by all family members, there are so many beneficiaries. And we have 800 honey producers. Beekeepers are also conservationists of nature; they help us to avoid uncontrolled fires.

“We offer goats and chickens to the communities, thus weaning them from the idea that they can survive only with antelopes. Then we also give scholarships,

not just for higher education, but for basic as well. There is also the construction of schools, health centres, water and sanitation. And we also take communities on safaris so they realize the impact and importance of these animals.

It made me think of what has been achieved since the wars and instability ended. I ask him if he believed we are in a phase of the resumption of normal life? “The wars contributed negatively,” he tells me. “The number of tourists stopped. But it also impacted the Park’s staff. Skilled technicians, aware of the problems, decided Gorongosa is no place to work. We had a loss of qualified staff.

“We had an impact on deforestation, trees were cut down for wood. Weapons of war were also used also for hunted animals. The animals left the Park; others were killed. The impacts were incalculable. That is why the National Reconciliation Agreement was concluded here. It was a big ceremony. Now a place that served as the epicentre of the war can also be seen to have served and be serving as a space for peace.”