An ambitious coffee-growing project in Mozambique is not only aiming to bridge political divides and provide business opportunities for war-torn communities, but also to restore the rainforest that once flourished on the slopes of Mount Gorongosa.

Text and photography by Heather Richardson
Mount Gorongosa, home to RENAMO rebels as well as the coffee project

There’s thought to be much more wildlife to discover, including species not yet known to science
the permaculture project: the years that followed were fraught with conflict and the team was often unable to visit. But the village women still ventured up the mountain to tend to the plants, it’s rumoured that they’d even sleep there overnight. Remarkably, throughout this period of conflict, they only lost 20 per cent of their crops.

In 2015, the first coffee seedlings were planted at 600 metres above sea level, much lower than the ideal altitude of 1,800 to 2,000 metres – but it was as high as RENAMO would allow them to go.

The coffee pilot project – supported by the Norwegian government and the Global Environment Facility – was completed in 2018, with the first successful harvest. The Gorongosa Project is currently working with around 1,000 farming families. More than 300,000 coffee seedlings were planted during the 2018/19 rainy season, with over 10,000 native trees peppered among them. At the foot of the mountain, the Mapongwe factory is fully operational and the initial batch of coffee – Mozambique’s first rainforest coffee and its first arabica coffee export – will be ready to sell from April 2019, the profits from which will go back into restoring the land and to the farmers.

MOUNTAIN RESTORATION
My visit takes place just over a year since the ceasefire began. We drive through the small town of Vila Gorongosa at the foot of the mountain. Matthew Jordan, a peppy young American and associate director of Gorongosa’s Agricultural Livelihoods Programme, tells me that during the height of the post-war conflict around Vila in 2016, he drove through town and found it deserted: everyone was hiding. Today, people are all going about their business: we pass women in bright wrap-around skirts walking their children along the dusty road and men on motorbikes pulling up by little stalls selling phone data.

Leaving town, we follow a narrow dirt track that weaves up the mountainside through fields of cotton and sorghum. We paddle across a river, using a rope to help us. We stand at the foot of the mountain, with a few white farms down among the trees to the plantation. Neat rows of coffee seedlings are bent double over the young plants. It is dappled by sunlight shining through the partial shade.

There is now a sense of optimism, after what must have seemed like endless set-backs. ‘It’s been a difficult time and many people – RENAMO supporters – still fear to leave the mountain. But some are now venturing down to trade, drawn by the better value without middle-men, and emboldened by the Gorongosa team’s presence and the bridge that has been created between government and opposition affiliates. It’s still a very sensitive environment. ‘The dominant factor here is politics,’ says Jordan. ‘There is a risk that if the ceasefire dissolves, everything being achieved here could be lost.

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BRAIN DAMAGE
Coffee takes four years to start making money. In the meantime, the area has been used for growing other produce such as bananas and pineapples, ‘two big cash crops,’ says Haaroff. Papayas, passion fruit and maize are also grown on the mountain, for both trade and personal use, and Haaroff’s team are recommending potato crops which farmers can sell off the mountain. Many people – RENAMO supporters – still fear to leave the mountain. But some are now venturing down to trade, drawn by the better value without middle-men, and emboldened by the Gorongosa team’s presence and the bridge that has been created between government and opposition affiliates. It’s still a very sensitive environment. ‘The dominant factor here is socio-political,’ notes Jordan. Everything has to be negotiated, from access and land use to conservation and sustainability practices.

There is, of course, a risk that if the ceasefire dissolves, everything that is being achieved here could be lost. ‘Though the situation is currently stable, Mozambicans are not yet at a point where they can relax. For the Gorongosa Project, the aim is to ensure this is a wholly community-based project, so farmers feel a sense of ownership and financial reward, reducing the likelihood of it being cast aside if the non-profit staff has to leave the area, as in previous years.

A local team helmed by Sional Moiane now manages everything on a day-to-day basis with the Gorongosa team offering guidance from a conservation and development point of view. ‘There are lots of people looking for work around here,’ Haaroff says. ‘We’ll employ as many as we can.’ The goal is to work with three times as many farming families, increasing the amount of mountain land to protect and reforest.

Jordan says that the project is keen to incorporate more women into the supply chain, from production to management. It is also developing a cashew farming project as another sustainable business for buffer zone communities, as well as honey farming. There’s a potential for tourism on the mountain, too. Carr mentions that he’d like to have a coffee lodge up here one day.

As we wander through the plantation, birds flitting around us, the hum of bees in the air, Haaroff gestures around. ‘You can see nature breathing a sigh of relief. The communities have been traumatised for 27 years, almost continuously. It’s not just the rainforest that coffee may enable to thrive, but people, too. ’