

Coffee Diplomacy

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



Local women tending to the young coffee plants

O

n the edge of Gorongosa National Park in central Mozambique, Mount Gorongosa – a single granite massif of 1,863 metres, rising beyond Gorongosa's lush forests, wetlands and savannah – has long been the hideout of the RENAMO rebels, a militant organisation and political movement that opposes the Mozambique government. During Mozambique's 16-year civil war, Gorongosa was on the front line; the park and its surrounding communities were left in tatters. This was once one of Africa's most popular and glamorous safari destinations, rich in wildlife, visited by Hollywood film stars and wealthy socialites; by the time the war ended in 1992, it was unrecognisable.

In 2004, the Gorongosa Restoration Project was set up by US philanthropist Greg Carr. Four years later, he signed a 20-year partnership with the Mozambican government to restore Gorongosa National Park. This was extended to 25 years in 2016.

Even after the war, Gorongosa continued to suffer through regular flare-ups of conflict. The Gorongosa Project's work was constantly interrupted, with the staff frequently having to evacuate the park. Yet despite such turbulence, the results to date are impressive examples of the effectiveness of public-private partnerships in conservation: there has been a ten-fold increase in large animals; in 2018, 14 wild dogs were successfully reintroduced and a record-breaking number of lion cubs (24) were born; poaching has been reduced to the odd occurrence, from a point when rangers were arresting several people on a daily basis; a Masters in Conservation Biology has been founded, thought to be the only one in the world that takes place entirely within a park; and 50 'Girls' Clubs', with 2,000 enrolled young females, have been set up throughout the park's buffer zones, aiming to empower girls to complete their education. And now tourism might finally be a viable revenue stream for the park as later this year it will open its first luxury eco-camp, Royal Gorongosa, run by South Africa's Royal Portfolio, a brand known for its lavish, art-laden hotels and lodges.

Politically, Gorongosa is the calmest it has been since the start of the civil war. In 2017, a ceasefire was announced – an agreement that, at the time of writing, has lasted. Although there were concerns when the long-standing RENAMO leader, Afonso Dhlakama, died last year, the political climate has so far remained stable.

Mount Gorongosa, home to RENAMO rebels as well as the coffee project



A MULTIFACETED APPROACH

'The big vision is that the protection of nature and helping humans can be the same project,' explains Carr, an energetic Idahoan who spends about half his year in Gorongosa. Around 98 per cent of the Gorongosa Project's 600-strong team are Mozambican and 85 per cent are local to the area. Carr pulls up a map on his laptop: 'I always show people a map of the whole area, not just the national park. I don't think I even have one just of the national park,' he says. In other words, the surrounding communities are just as important as the park itself, if not more so. As such, sustainable development programmes to provide long-term business opportunities are a major focus – and of these, Gorongosa Coffee is perhaps the most ambitious.

The idea for a coffee project came about when the park warden, Pedro Muagura, found wild coffee on the mountain, remnants of what was planted during Portuguese colonial rule. A scientific survey was organised, which concluded that the best crop option for the mountain was coffee under shade.

First and foremost, the coffee and permaculture project was conceived as a way to work with the



communities left with nothing in the aftermath of war – not only to provide them with food security and income, but also to tentatively bridge divides across a deep political gulf.

But there was another major benefit. Rainforest coffee requires partial shade, ideally around 50 per cent. The rainforest of Gorongosa Mountain is at risk, in part from slash-and-burn farming techniques employed across the mountain's slopes. The forest shelters rare animals, from the Mount Gorongosa pygmy chameleon to the green-headed oriole, both endemic to the mountain. And there's thought to be much more wildlife to discover, including species not yet known to science, such as a shrew the Field Museum of Chicago found in 2011. Coffee farming could provide a solid financial incentive to allow the rainforest to regrow and protect what remains.

The project is one that requires a great deal of sensitivity, maintaining the Gorongosa Project's governmental backing while working with opposition supporters. After delicate negotiations, the Gorongosa team were allowed onto the mountain to plant the first nursery in 2013. It was not an ideal time to launch

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 seeds were planted at 600 metres above sea level, much lower than the ideal altitude of 1,000 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 Maponbwe factory is fully operational and the initial batch of coffee – Mozambique's first rainforest coffee and its first arabica coffee for 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 for balance, and walk under the cool cover of leafy trees to the plantation. Neat rows of coffee seedlings are dappled by sunlight shining through the partial shade. A handful of women, their heads wrapped in turbans, are bent double over the young plants.

There is now a sense of optimism, after what must have seemed like endless set-backs. Quentin Haaroff, head of the coffee project, is elated that the visiting experts from Brazil approve of their set-up. Haaroff is a warm, middle-aged man, originally from Zimbabwe, where he was raised on the family farm; coffee was



A waterfall a short hike from the plantation

one of their crops. Like so many other white farmers targeted by Robert Mugabe's land reforms of the 1990s, Haaroff was forced off his farm at the barrel of an AK-47 assault rifle; since then, Bristol has been home and his career has seen him work on coffee plantations in Zambia, Angola, Tanzania and Cameroon. In 2013, Carr invited him to Gorongosa.

One of the challenges is to work out what species will grow together in harmony. Currently the trees shading the coffee include acacia umbrella trees – pioneer species, ideal for rehabilitating an area – and mahogany. Gorongosa's science department, led by Dr Marc Stalmans, who has a background in forestry and a PhD in landscape ecology, will keep stock of the area, continuously assessing what is working and what needs changing.

Encouraging farmers away from slash-and-burn techniques seems to be working. Haaroff says none of the new farming recruits had started fires over the past year and hadn't cut down a single tree. There is enthusiasm and cooperation: 'They really want to start something,' observes Haaroff.



Matthew Jordan explains the background of the Gorongosa project

There is a risk that if the ceasefire dissolves, everything being achieved here could be lost

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

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. The factory, with its state-of-the-art machines, is cautiously located lower down the mountain.

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. ●