

# AFRICA iNFACT



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**CONGO'S FORESTS  
ARE UNDER SIEGE**

BEHIND THE FENCE  
**FORTRESS  
CONSERVATION**

BLUE ECONOMICS  
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# AFRICA iNFACT

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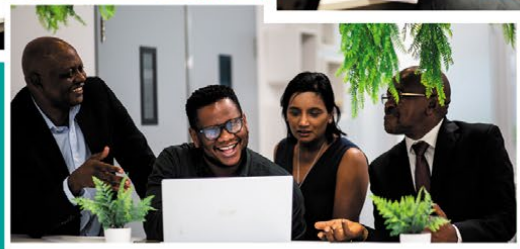
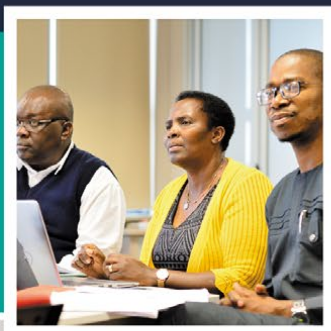
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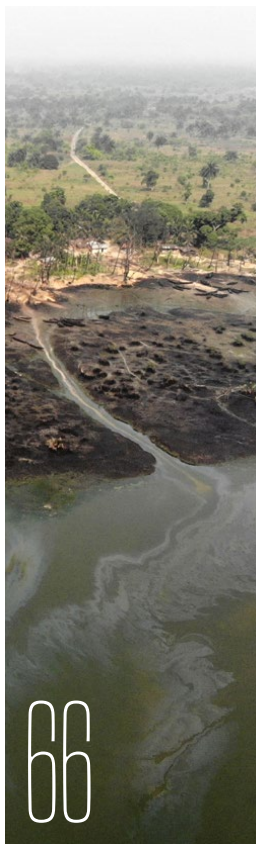
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# CONTRIBUTORS



## MONIQUE BENNETT

holds a master's degree in international relations from the University of the Witwatersrand. She is currently pursuing her doctorate in political science at Stellenbosch University funded by the Peace Research Institute of Oslo. She enjoys a mixed-methods approach to research across topics such as governance, environmental issues, human security and peacebuilding within the African context.



## TERENCE CORRIGAN

is a policy fellow at the Institute of Race Relations (IRR). He has held various positions at the IRR, South African Institute of International Affairs, SBP (formerly known as the Small Business Project) and the Gauteng legislature, and he has taught English in Taiwan. His interests include African governance, land, and agrarian policy.



## ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

is an award-winning freelance journalist and winner of the SADC Media 2010 Awards in the print category. He has travelled extensively across Africa and lived in South Africa for 18 years, where he worked in the media industry for 10 years. He is currently based in East Africa.



## INI EKOTT

is the assistant managing editor (News) at *Premium Times*, an online newspaper based in Abuja, Nigeria. Prior to this, he reported for *Next*, an investigative newspaper in Lagos. He has written for *IPS Africa* and other publications and is a former Wole Soyinka Investigative Journalist of the Year.



## BLAMÉ EKOUE

is the Togo correspondent for the BBC and for Paris-based media house ANA. He has also reported for Associated Press and Radio France International. He holds a BA in communications from the Leader Institute in Lomé. Formerly deputy editor of the *West Africa Revue*, he has been a contributor to the Lomé-based *Business and Finance* magazine since 2015.



## DR NEIL FORD

has been a freelance consultant and journalist on African affairs for more than two decades. He covers a wide range of topics from international relations and organised crime, to cross-border trade and renewable energy. Consultancy clients include international organisations, law firms and financial services' companies, and he has acted as an expert witness in Africa-related legal cases. He has a PhD on East Africa's international boundaries.



## ASHWELL GLASSON

is the registrar at the Southern African Wildlife College, responsible for oversight of a range of academic services and programmes. He has 26 years of experience in the conservation, education, ecotourism, and environmental sectors, fulfilling training, project management, advisory, strategy formulation and policy development roles.



## RONAK GOPALDAS

is a director at Signal Risk, an exclusively African risk advisory firm. He was previously the head of country risk at Rand Merchant Bank (RMB), where he managed a team who provided the firm with in-depth analysis of economic, political, security and operational dynamics across sub-Saharan Africa. He holds a BCom degree in philosophy, politics and economics (PPE) and a BCom (Hons) from the University of Cape Town (UCT). He also has an MSc in finance (economic policy) from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London.



# CONTRIBUTORS



## DR ROSS HARVEY

is a natural resource economist and policy analyst with a PhD in economics from the University of Cape Town, where his thesis research focused on the political economy of oil and institutional development in Angola and Nigeria. Ross was appointed Director of Research and Programmes at Good Governance Africa in May 2020.



## NAOMI HAAPT

has a cum-laude master's degree in anthropology which focused on field rangers. She has made notable contributions to conservation by authoring significant reports and proposals addressing the well-being of rangers on both a local and international scale and has provided invaluable insights into the working conditions and attitudes among rangers in South Africa.



## ADEJUMO KABIR

works at HumAngle as the Editor of Southern Operations. He is interested in community development reporting, human rights, social justice, and press freedom. He was a finalist in the student category of the African Fact-checking Award in 2018, a 2019 recipient of the Diamond Awards for Media Excellence, and a 2020 recipient of the Thomson Foundation Young Journalist Award. He was also nominated in the journalism category of The Future Awards Africa in 2020.



## SIKHULULEKILE MASHINGAIDZE

entered the governance field in Zimbabwe while she was a part-time enumerator for the Mass Public Opinion Institute's diversity of research projects during her undergraduate years. She has worked with the Habakkuk Trust, Centre for Conflict Resolution (CCR-Kenya), Mercy Corps Zimbabwe and Action Aid International Zimbabwe, respectively.



## STUART MBANYELE

is an independent policy analyst. He holds a master of arts degree in security and strategic studies from the University of Pretoria. Previously, he was a researcher in the governance delivery and impact programme at Good Governance Africa. Before joining Good Governance Africa, he was a junior research fellow with the Centre for Law and Society at the University of Cape Town. He also worked as a research consultant at the Institute of Security Studies.



## SARAH NYENGERAI

is an academic and freelance writer based in Zimbabwe with a strong passion for social, cultural, economic and political issues that affect women. She believes literary works form the foundation for the dialogue required to sustain momentums of change and aims to bring attention to such matters. A member of NAFSA (Association for International Educators) and Forum for African Women Educationists (FAWE), Sarah is actively involved in the advancement of education for women.



## VICTOR NDULA

is an editorial cartoonist from Nairobi, Kenya. A member of cartoon and comics collaborative Cartoon Movement, he has exhibited at cartoon festivals worldwide, and in 2012, received the United Nations/Ranan Lurie Political Cartoon award. He draws regularly for Nairobi's *The Star* newspaper.



## RAPHAEL OBONYO

is a public policy analyst. He has served as a consultant with the United Nations. The alumnus of Duke University is widely published in Africa and beyond. He's a Ford Foundation and TEDx fellow and has won various awards.

# CONTRIBUTORS



## NNAEMEKA OHAMADIKE

is a data analyst and researcher at Good Governance Africa. He completed his Master's in Data Science at Wits, supported by a scholarship from the South African government's Department of Science and Innovation. Much of his research focuses on human development, governance, disinformation, and bias, using data science and AI techniques. He has published in scholarly journals, worked as a data consultant at DataEQ, and taught at Wits and the Federal University, Lafia in Nigeria.



## MICHAEL SCHMIDT

is a Johannesburg-based investigative journalist who has worked in 49 countries on six continents. His main focus areas as an Africa correspondent for leading mainstream journals are emerging and high-end technologies, political developments, conflict resolution and transitional justice, and on the continent's maritime and littoral spaces.



## JOE WALSH

is a freelance journalist based in Johannesburg. He writes about the environment, energy and the green economy as well as politics and society for British publications, including *Environmental Finance*, the *New Statesman* and *The New European*.

## SUBSCRIPTION ENQUIRIES

Call: +27 (0)11 268 0479  
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For editorial queries contact the editor, Susan Russell, at susan@gga.org

For advertising and other commercial opportunities contact amanda@gga.org

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Susan Russell

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## DATA JOURNALIST

Mischka Moosa

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Amanda Chetty

## CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

Monique Bennett, Terence Corrigan, Issa Sikiti da Silva, Ini Ekott, Blamé Ekoue, Dr Neil Ford, Ashwell Glasson, Ronak Gopaladas, Dr Ross Harvey, Naomi Haupt, Adejumo Kabir, Sikhululekile Mashingaidze, Stuart Mbanyele, Sarah Nyengerai, Victor Ndula, Raphael Obonyo, Nnaemeka Ohamadike, Michael Schmidt, Joe Walsh



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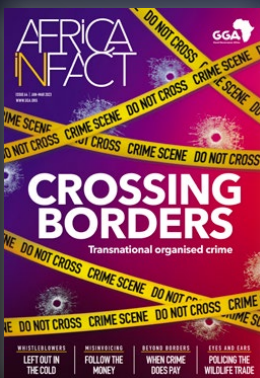
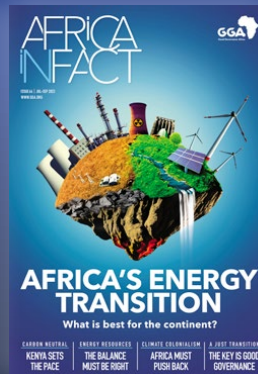
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# A PRACTICAL NECESSITY

Welcome to the first issue of *Africa in Fact* for 2025. The year has begun amid mounting global instability: widening inequality, escalating climate threats, and relentless conflicts. For Africa, these challenges underscore the urgent need to remain committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Good Governance Africa believes that inclusive conservation has a pivotal role to play in meeting SDG targets. Rooted in the recognition that local communities must be active participants in the stewardship of natural resources, inclusive conservation offers an opportunity to harmonise ecological protection and human well-being. Ecological sustainability remains the foundation for human prosperity, and humanity has already overstepped six of our nine planetary boundaries.

This issue of *Africa in Fact* argues that inclusive conservation becomes even more important when considered alongside continental-wide efforts to develop a sustainable blue economy, a concept that emphasises the responsible use of aquatic resources for economic growth while ensuring environmental health.

At its core, inclusive conservation acknowledges the interdependence between people and ecosystems. Africa's land and seascapes are home to a rich diversity of species, many of which are under threat from climate change, habitat loss, and overexploitation. They also provide livelihoods for

millions of people, from subsistence farmers and fishers to eco-tourism operators.

In contrast, the fortress conservation model, which dominated much of Africa's early conservation efforts, often excluded local communities from protected areas and denied them access to the resources they had historically relied upon. Making a case against green militarisation and fortress conservation, GGA's own director of research, Dr Ross Harvey, argues that "those living near parks or wildlife (in unprotected areas) need to have a direct interest in the preservation of wild landscapes. We need to make appropriate incentives available towards this end, and not only monetary ones."

"South Africa's recently gazetted Draft National Biodiversity Economy Strategy is an example of both what to do and what not to do," Harvey writes. "Preserving our natural heritage and expanding wild landscapes will require a fundamental reorientation of how we think about humanity's relationship with nature."

Conservationists Ashwell Glasson and Naomi Haupt also make a case for inclusive conservation. "Local communities should be regarded as co-managers of conservation efforts rather than mere beneficiaries, as they play a crucial role in bridging the knowledge exchange between scientists and indigenous groups, fostering solutions that integrate both traditional and modern approaches," they write.

Fortress conservation followed the creation



of national parks and wildlife reserves in Africa during the colonial and post-colonial periods. These protected areas were often established with little regard for the rights and traditions of indigenous and local populations. While these parks have helped safeguard iconic species like elephants and rhinos, they have also sown deep-seated resentment. In some cases, fortress conservation has had unintended consequences as disenfranchised communities turn to illegal activities such as poaching out of necessity or defiance.

Researcher Neil Ford's article offers Tanzania as an example. He writes, "The track record of inclusive conservation varies enormously.... and visitors are often sold a vision of an African wilderness devoid of people that is at odds with historical reality."

Ford writes that any resettlement must be undertaken compassionately. "This has clearly not been the case in northern Tanzania," he says, where the government aims to relocate 82,000 Maasai from the Ngorongoro Conservation Area and surrounding areas by 2027 for "conservation and tourism purposes".

Elsewhere in this issue, several contributors from across West Africa illustrate how policy vacuums and governments seeking new revenue have seen fishing and agricultural communities lose livelihoods due to exclusion, environmental degradation, and illegal activity.

Issa Sikiti da Silva's article highlights the potential devastation to the Conkouati-Douli National Park, a 795,500-hectare (7,955 km<sup>2</sup>) area of south-western Congo-Brazzaville on the border with Gabon, which is set to become a drilling site, as a Chinese company prepares to move in heavy equipment and launch intensive oil exploration. The Sassou Nguesso administration granted the company a permit barely six weeks after accepting \$50 million from the EU and the Bezos Fund to protect its forests.

Adejumo Kabir, meanwhile, reveals how oil spills

in Nigeria have devastated the country's once-thriving fishing industry. "Before the discovery of oil in the 1960s, the country had a thriving fishing industry, providing livelihoods for millions of people," he writes. "Ongoing oil spills kill fish and endanger the lives of residents in coastal communities. Spills often occur due to pipeline sabotage, and inadequate clean-up efforts have turned what was once a vibrant ecosystem into a toxic wasteland."

From Togo, Blamé Ekoue writes that West Africa's blue economy is also being undermined by illegal fishing on an industrial scale. "Foreign fleets, predominantly Chinese and South Korean, dominate West African waters, reaping profits while local economies suffer," he says. "Chinese vessels are the most prolific offenders, catching an estimated 2.35 million tonnes annually in the region – half of China's distant-water fleet catch, valued at \$5 billion." In Ghana, artisanal fishers have seen a 40% decline in income per canoe over the past 15 years.

Regular contributor Ronak Gopaldas examines how Africa's blue economy has emerged as a strategic frontier for economic development and a vital arena for geopolitical manoeuvring. "This has created a pressing need for African countries to adopt sophisticated diplomatic approaches across economic, environmental, and geopolitical domains to ensure that the continent can benefit from the complex web of global interests in its blue economy," he writes.

Our writers make it clear that conservation efforts that exclude or marginalise communities are unlikely to succeed in the long term. On the other hand, approaches that prioritise inclusion, equity, and collaboration can create a virtuous cycle of ecological and economic benefits. This is especially important for a continent where climate change and global economic pressures demand innovative solutions that leave no one behind.

**Susan Russell – Editor**

# THE CASE AGAINST GREEN MILITARISATION

By Dr Ross Harvey

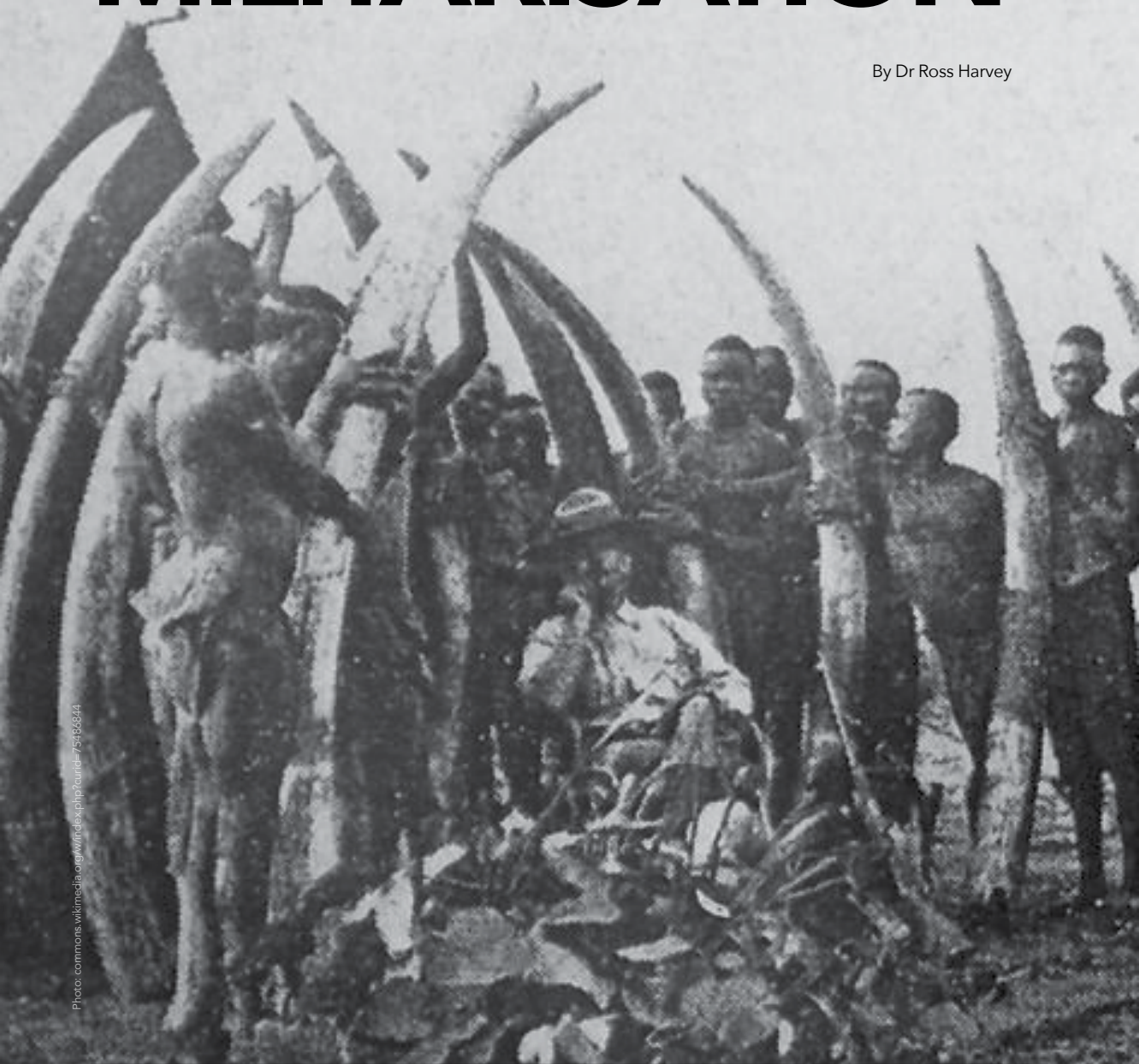


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In a fascinating book, *Biblical Critical Theory*, Christopher Watkin demonstrates how the Christian Bible's salient moments cut through much of the reductionism evident along the political spectrum today. An early insight is how humanity has lost its way when it comes to our treatment of the natural world. The "marketisation of everything" has led to a cold divide that divorces us from the wonder and intrinsic beauty of nature. Whether you're on the left and calling for "environmental justice" or on the right, calling for nature to be "valued" in neoclassical economic terms, you might want to consider that there is another way to view things.

In this polarised world, the debate about what an optimal approach to conservation looks like is highly divisive. The left calls for the demolition of neoclassical economics and its propensity to turn nature into a commodity. The right calls for

the privatisation of wildlife as the only means of protecting endangered species. We need to think about how we got here and how we can plausibly navigate our way out of this impasse.

Across African contexts, it is helpful to understand the current conservation moment as a function of colonial legacy and post-independence decay (to varying extents depending on the specific path dependencies that have unfolded). In broad brushstrokes, colonial conquest was strongly associated with the rampant trophy hunting of iconic species. This much is clear from Nikolaj Bichel and Adam Hart's 2023 book *Trophy Hunting*. The appetite for and scale of destruction is hard to fathom. But the logic of trophy hunting squares fully with the mindset of conquest. Motivated by a desire to show off a trophy (normally horns or tusks, but often entire stuffed bodies), hunters kill in foreign



**ABOVE:** A trophy hunter with tusks from Lado Enclave, Uganda, 1905.



**ABOVE:** British Governor Sir Hesketh Bell with hunting trophies in Uganda, 1908.

**RIGHT:** Male elephant killed at Lake Nyassa in September 1861. Each tusk weighed about 14 kg.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** Paul J. Rainey's 1912 African hunt.



lands and expropriate the trophy back home to line the narcissistic display wall.

Whether the deeper motivation is informed by a perversion of the biblical instruction to “subdue” the earth is harder to ascertain. Either way, the desire to dominate rather than exercise stewardship through our “dominion” has resulted in extensive destruction. Eventually, hunters themselves recognised that administrative efforts would have to be made to conserve species lest they all be extirpated (and thus unavailable to hunt in the future). The establishment of national parks – legislatively protected areas – was not so much an exercise in conservation, then, as it was of creating a more sustainable means of future exploitation.

These efforts to create protected areas gave rise to what has become defined as “fortress conservation” – the imposition of fences to keep wildlife in and indigenous communities out. One intolerable outcome is that many community members living near national park boundaries have never been inside a park or experienced the tranquillity of pristine wildlife areas. It is not surprising that the sentiment among many is that

governments care more for animals than they do for people.

It is not hard to see how this model, which displaced residents and dislocated them from their sources of livelihood, has generated fragmentation of both the social order and institutional arrangements that previously governed resource use. Contrary to the standard “tragedy of the commons” story, where individual resource acquisition incentives are incompatible with sustainable collective resource use requirements, local resource governance institutions were relatively stable and sustainable prior to colonial conquest. Ironically, colonial trophy hunting outside protected areas – which continues today under the banner of “sustainable use” – is highly susceptible to a tragedy of the commons. Each hunting concession lease owner has an incentive to over-exploit the determined quota; no owner expects that other



concession owners will adhere to the quota; this creates an incentive to exploit more today in the expectation that the resource pool will dwindle tomorrow anyway.

Because pre-colonial institutions were distorted through the imposition of national parks, residents living near wildlife became susceptible to poaching incentives. Transnational organised crime syndicates could exploit a vast pool of disenfranchised community members. Poaching was bound to grow when demand for products such as ivory and rhino horn started to escalate, driven by growing consumption in the East following the end of World War II. Eggs are difficult to unscramble, and wildlife protection became dependent on those same institutions (protected areas) created as part of the colonial endeavour. As poaching intensified, protected area management had to increasingly resort to military tactics to defend parks against

poaching incursions. In South Africa, this gave rise – post-2009 – to a “war on rhino poaching”.

Critics have rightly pointed out that securitising parks through this kind of “green militarisation” is likely to prove unsustainable. For one thing, the primary threat is often within the fence, not outside it. Corruption inside Kruger Park, for instance, has been rampant and requires a sophisticated response. Moreover, for every poacher shot or apprehended, there are hundreds of others waiting in the wings. Poverty is also not the only driver of poaching – many poachers are coerced (by gangs) into either poaching or infiltrating park structures. It is, therefore, critical to disrupt organised crime networks at the same time as defending park boundaries. There is growing recognition of this need, and some vital blows have been struck against powerful syndicates across the continent.

In the long run, conservation is not going to be

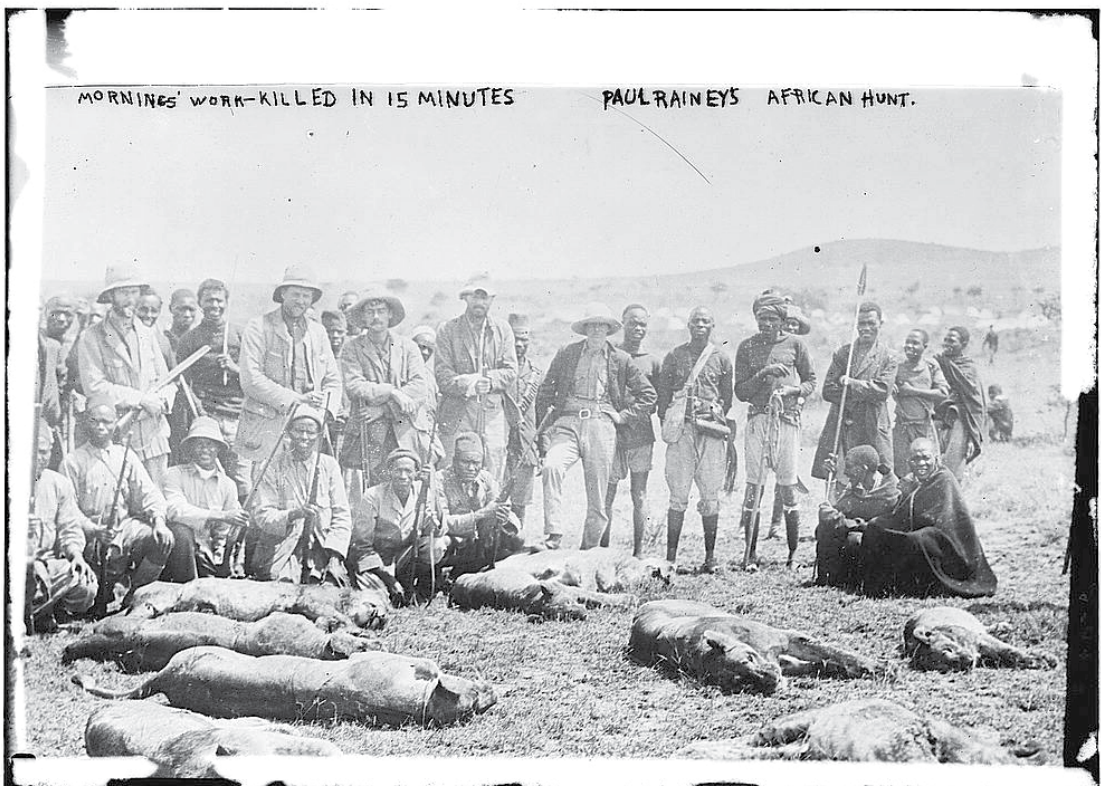


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successful unless it becomes more inclusive. In other words, those living near parks or near wildlife (in unprotected areas) need to have a direct interest in the preservation of wild landscapes. We need to make appropriate incentives available towards this end, and not only monetary ones. Preserving enough biodiversity to mitigate the worst effects of climate change will require massively expanding wild landscapes across the globe. Such efforts require the careful establishment of connecting migratory corridors between different protected areas, free from human encroachment. These corridors require conservation-compatible agriculture along buffer zones. Produce from these zones needs to literally feed tourism value chains, alongside direct ventures that benefit from “non-consumptive” tourism activities that avoid the intensification of commoditising our natural heritage.

South Africa’s recently gazetted Draft National Biodiversity Economy Strategy is an example of both what to do and what not to do. Some have lauded it as progressive, but they are deeply committed to the view that monetisation is inevitable, and even paying the entry fee to a national park, so

their argument goes, renders one complicit in “monetising” wildlife. The plan envisages a massive expansion of contiguous protected areas (laudable) alongside pushing for increased big-five trophy hunting and reopening international trade in ivory and rhino horn (sub-optimal).

Those in favour of private wildlife commoditisation argue that it is the only way forward, and giving local communities a stake in the “wildlife economy” is the only means to fund conservation and break down fortresses. Typically, what is meant by “wildlife economy” is rampant commodification and exploitation through intensive breeding, trophy hunting, trading in animal body parts, and exploiting wildlife for game meat production.

This view is deeply rooted in the very paradigm that gave rise to fortress conservation in the first instance. It is, therefore, difficult to see how it could credibly take us out of the current conundrum. Community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) schemes in countries beyond South Africa sought to generate conservation funds for local communities through consumptive activities like



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trophy hunting. They have largely failed due to poor governance. I am convinced, however, that a deeper reason explaining their failure is the underlying idea that commodification solves all problems. It ends up paying pitiful wages, for instance, to trackers involved in trophy hunting, while the majority of hunting fees accrue to wealthy landowners who are often politically connected. In other instances, gangsters masquerade as “community trusts” and acquire hunting licences from the government at the expense of authentic local communities.

Finally, the idea that big-five trophy hunting and trade in products of endangered species can fund conservation is wrongheaded. It assumes that legal trade will simply crowd out illicit markets rather than merely providing a cover for them. Given that organised crime groups are already well-established in corrupt contexts, it is difficult to see how creating legal markets for highly scarce products will reduce poaching. This is especially the case if moves to legalise trade shift the demand curve outwards. The answer normally is that such trade will generate cash for local communities who have a stake in

**FAR LEFT:** James H. Sutherland stands with ivory shot with a Westley Richards .577 Nitro Express double rifle, Ubangi-Shari, Kenya, 1925.  
**ABOVE:** Hunting trophies in Somaliland, 1899.

breeding, say, rhino, and incentivise preservation rather than poaching. However, poaching wild rhino remains far less expensive than breeding, especially if such breeding is done to avoid merely farming rhino intensively.

Preserving our natural heritage and expanding wild landscapes will require a fundamental reorientation of how we think about humanity’s relationship with nature. We cannot simply call for an end to green militarisation and fortress conservation without providing an alternative model. Similarly, we cannot resort to the fatalistic view that even viewing wildlife is a commodifying act, and therefore we should embrace the market. The latter reflects a naïve expectation that the “marketisation of everything” will solve complex problems. It won’t, as history has amply demonstrated. 



# Navigating Africa's blue economy

By Ronak Gopaldas

Africa's blue economy has emerged as a strategic frontier for economic development and a vital arena for geopolitical manoeuvring. With coastal waters spanning around 13 million km<sup>2</sup>, including vast exclusive economic zones (EEZs), Africa possesses extensive resources that are highly attractive to global powers.

More than 90% of Africa's trade flows through these waters, which include some of the world's most strategically significant maritime chokepoints. This makes the continent's blue economy a focal point for international investment, resource competition, and security interests. Consequently, Africa's blue economy is increasingly becoming a testing ground for innovative diplomacy as African nations work to leverage foreign interests while safeguarding their autonomy over these critical assets.

The renewed international focus on Africa's blue economy stems from three main

drivers: maritime security, energy resource extraction, and sustainable development opportunities. This has created a pressing need for African countries to adopt sophisticated diplomatic approaches across economic, environmental, and geopolitical domains to ensure that the continent can benefit from the complex web of global interests in its blue economy.

Africa's strategic maritime zones have attracted substantial foreign investment, particularly in port development, energy projects, and infrastructure modernisation. Gulf nations like the UAE and Saudi Arabia have increasingly invested in East African ports like Berbera in Somaliland and Doraleh in Djibouti. These investments create new trade opportunities and also raise questions about control over vital infrastructure. Gulf nations pursue these investments to secure supply routes and gain access to Africa's abundant resources. This influx of foreign investment underscores the importance







**ABOVE:** A ship loaded with containers at the Doraleh container terminal in Djibouti, in July 2018. East Africa's smallest country launched the first phase of Africa's biggest free-trade zone, seeking to capitalise on its strategic position on one of the world's busiest trade routes located at the intersection of major international shipping lines connecting Asia, Africa and Europe, the gateway to the Suez canal.



of robust economic diplomacy to help African nations secure beneficial terms and avoid economic dependence.

Mauritius offers a compelling example of how Africa manages this balance of foreign interests. Strategically located in the Indian Ocean, Mauritius has adeptly navigated tensions between China and India – two major powers vying for influence in the region. By maintaining positive relations with both nations while avoiding overreliance on either, Mauritius exemplifies a careful diplomatic balancing act that allows it to retain control over its blue economy while capitalising on economic opportunities from both countries.

Similarly, Ghana and Senegal have introduced local content policies in their energy sectors, requiring foreign corporations to invest in local infrastructure and workforce development. This ensures that revenue from blue economy resources supports broader economic growth. As Abhishek Mishra from the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies notes, achieving this balance will require coherent, structured frameworks like the AU’s Agenda 2063 and the Lomé Charter, which emphasise resource utilisation without sacrificing ecosystem health.

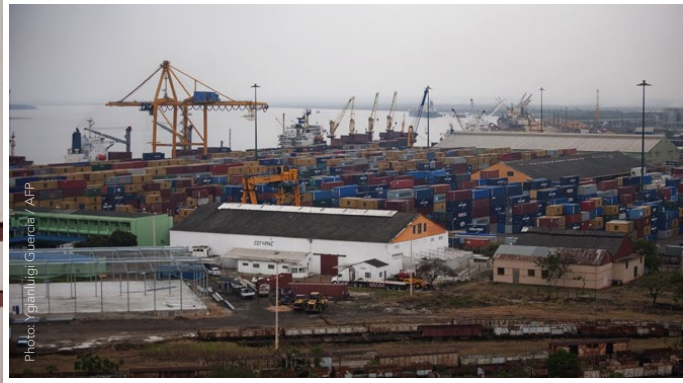
David Willima, a maritime analyst from the Institute of Security Studies, adds that financing for Africa’s blue economy remains a major gap. “Despite the ocean being our biggest climate ally by acting as a carbon sink, SDG 14 remains the least-funded development goal, with only 3% of global climate finance dedicated to ocean-based initiatives. To unlock the full economic and climate potential of the blue economy, increased investment is essential.”

Africa’s blue economy holds vast potential for sustainable development in fisheries, aquaculture, and marine biotechnology. However, overfishing, climate change, and marine pollution threats have made environmental diplomacy essential for preserving these resources and promoting



sustainable growth. West Africa, for instance, loses an estimated \$2.3 billion annually due to illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing, much of it conducted by foreign fleets. This challenge pushes African countries to seek international cooperation to protect their marine resources, secure regulatory funding, and build resilience to climate impacts.

Countries like the Seychelles and Mozambique have led efforts to advocate for stronger global commitments to marine conservation and climate resilience. Seychelles pioneered the “blue bond”



**ABOVE:** The commercial port of Beira, Mozambique.  
**LEFT:** Doraleh multi-purpose port in Djibouti, in July 2018.

concept – a financial tool directing investments towards sustainable fisheries while addressing its national debt. This innovative approach is a model for other African countries looking to finance conservation efforts within the blue economy. Africa’s regional climate coalition, the African Group of Negotiators on Climate Change, has also provided a unified voice in global climate forums, advocating for funding and policies to benefit maritime communities and preserve biodiversity. This aligns with Africa’s blue economy goals by ensuring sustainable management of ocean resources, directly benefiting local populations while addressing global environmental priorities.

According to Amit Jain, Director of the NTU-SBF Centre for African Studies, Africa’s coastal nations could significantly benefit by developing more cohesive blue economy strategies. “With the exception of South Africa, Seychelles, and Mauritius, few African states have articulated clear blue economy strategies, which is a missed opportunity,” he explains. “Africa’s extensive coastline and dependence on marine resources make the blue

economy crucial for food security, livelihoods, and climate resilience. Harnessed sustainably, the blue economy could act as a force multiplier for development and a buffer against climate change.”

Africa’s maritime domain is also a stage for intense geopolitical competition, especially concerning security, migration, and the strategic positioning of military assets. The Gulf of Guinea, notorious for piracy, remains one of the most dangerous areas for commercial shipping, incurring significant security costs and threatening blue economy growth. African nations, through initiatives like the African Union’s African Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIMS) and the Djibouti Code of Conduct, have bolstered regional cooperation to address these security threats and assert control over their waters.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, global supply chain disruptions have underscored the strategic significance of Africa’s energy routes and chokepoints. The Red Sea, for example, has seen increased instability, amplifying Africa’s role in energy geopolitics. Djibouti’s success in managing its geopolitical positioning is a testament to the complex but potentially beneficial nature of these engagements.

Located at the mouth of the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, Djibouti hosts multiple foreign naval bases from countries including the United States, China, and France. This arrangement





allows Djibouti to benefit economically from foreign bases while maintaining sovereignty, demonstrating the advantages of adept geopolitical diplomacy.

The migration crisis across the Mediterranean further underscores the geopolitical stakes in Africa's blue economy. Coastal nations in North Africa have engaged in diplomacy with European counterparts to address migration challenges, negotiating agreements on border management and anti-trafficking efforts. These dialogues highlight the complex interplay between security needs, economic conditions, and the livelihoods that Africa's blue economy supports.

Abhishek Mishra emphasises that to maximise benefits, Africa must integrate its fragmented diplomatic efforts into a more cohesive approach. He suggests that African policymakers focus on inclusive, sustainable governance frameworks that prioritise social equity and ecological conservation alongside economic outcomes. "Policymakers need to make Africa's blue economy people-centric," he advises, adding that a balanced approach rooted in local community needs is crucial for long-term success.

To realise meaningful gains from its blue economy, Africa must coordinate across these diplomatic arenas to create a pathway that maximises commercial potential, enhances security, and preserves environmental sustainability. Leveraging economic agreements with global



**ABOVE:** The Seychelles coastguard vessel *Topaz* arrives in Port Victoria with six Seychellois fishermen, who were taken hostage by Somali pirates in 2010.

**RIGHT:** One of the arrested Somali pirates is handcuffed by police upon arrival in Port Victoria.

investors to modernise infrastructure and enforce conservation measures will allow African nations to develop a diplomatic stance that resonates with both regional and international priorities.

Failing to strike this balance has significant risks. Without proactive economic diplomacy, Africa could become dependent on foreign powers that control critical infrastructure, eroding sovereignty and diminishing local economic benefits. Without resilient environmental policies, Africa's marine ecosystems face potential degradation from over-exploitation, threatening both sustainability and local livelihoods. And without a strong geopolitical stance, African states risk becoming pawns in global



**TOP LEFT:** Crew members get ready to leave Port Victoria, Seychelles, a few days after the French navy was obliged to release 11 suspected pirates for lack of evidence following the failed attack of the ship.

**ABOVE:** The Seychelles has engaged military drives to patrol its sprawling territory from the air and on the seas in a bid to keep marauding Somali pirates at bay.

Photo: Roberto Schmidt / AFP



power struggles, undermining their autonomy, and exposing them to regional instability.

On the economic front, African nations can secure their economic sovereignty and promote growth by setting clear, binding terms for foreign investment that prioritise local benefits. Environmental diplomacy, meanwhile, must align with these economic objectives, supporting resource management practices that foster conservation and resilience. Collaborative climate initiatives, such as those led by Seychelles and Mozambique, should be expanded to include regional marine conservation

goals, ensuring that Africa's ecological resources are protected even as they drive growth.

Geopolitically, Africa's blue economy diplomacy must focus on self-determination as much as partnership. By strengthening regional unity, particularly through bodies like the AU, and engaging global powers as equal partners, African nations can assert their role in shaping the rules and norms that govern their maritime spaces. This balanced approach not only secures Africa's blue economy for today but is also essential to safeguarding its sustainable and equitable development for future generations.

In summary, Africa's blue economy presents a unique opportunity for the continent to lead in terms of sustainability, cooperation, and human-centred growth. The challenge will be one of careful balance – aligning foreign interests with local priorities, growth with preservation, and economic goals with the well-being of its people and ecosystems. By combining economic pragmatism with ethical environmental stewardship and a firm commitment to sovereignty, Africa can position its blue economy as a model of sustainable development that meets present needs while protecting resources for future generations. [GGP](#)





**ABOVE:** Hann Bay, in Dakar, Senegal, stretches 14 km and used to be known as one of the most beautiful bays in West Africa. For the past 20 years Hann Bay has been at the centre of Dakar's industrialisation and today it is one of the city's most polluted areas, with canals spilling raw sewage and chemicals onto the beach and into the sea.

Photo: John Wessels / AFP





# Africa's marine assets need better management

By Raphael Obonyo

**T**he World Bank's 2022 report on the blue economy in Africa points out the vital importance of this sector to the continent's economic transformation, but decries insufficient governance and management failures, which are compounded by low institutional capacity. In particular, policies governing ocean and coastal resources are often fragmented, characterised by legal and regulatory gaps and overlapping institutional mandates.

While the oceans have long been a source of economic livelihood, this vast resource is threatened by population growth, urbanisation, overexploitation, pollution, acidification, marine plastic litter, underwater noise, declining biodiversity, climate change, and the expansion of global trade.

Africa has 38 coastal and island states and a more than 47,000 km coastline, which presents an enormous opportunity for the continent to develop the sectors associated with the blue economy. Sustainable management





of the coastal marine environment and responsible growth of current and future blue economy sectors can potentially lift millions of people out of poverty.

As a continent surrounded by some of the world's most important marine biodiversity, strategic maritime trade routes, abundant aquatic resources, and blue carbon assets, it is critical that governments, regional bodies, and institutions guide blue economy development through impactful policies that meet global and continental targets.

The African Union (AU) estimates that the blue economy generates about \$300 billion in economic activities for the continent, supporting nearly 50 million jobs. By 2030, Africa's blue economy is

projected to grow to \$405 billion, including \$100 billion generated by coastal tourism, and will generate 57 million jobs. These and other crucial benefits – most notably food security, livelihoods, and biodiversity – depend entirely on sound management and effective policies. Although the sector provides food security and nutrition for over 200 million Africans and contributes about 2% to GDP, it remains largely untapped.

But first, African countries must establish coherent policies, strategies, and institutional mechanisms. Donors like the World Bank can support blue economy policy and institutional development, using, for example, sector entry





**LEFT TO RIGHT:** The pollution in Hann Bay has also effected the traditional fishing community. The bay used to be abundant with marine life but now fishermen have to travel further to find fish.

points that are achieving results, such as marine conservation and climate adaptation projects, to engage with governments.

In its Africa Blue Economy Strategy, published in October 2019, the AU said it “recognises the inherent challenges faced by member states in realising the full benefits from the various sectors of the blue economy.”

These challenges included illegal fishing in Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), piracy, and illegal drug trafficking, which “pose a real threat not only to the safety of vessels and their crew but also to the economies of affected countries, particularly in the Gulf of Guinea and South West

Indian Ocean”. Pollution – dumping toxic wastes as well as the indiscriminate discarding of single-use plastics – also undermined efforts to grow Africa’s blue economy, the AU said, noting that “it is now common knowledge that climate change and climate variability are already impacting Africa’s aquatic systems and food production overall”.

In her introduction to the strategy document, the AU’s commissioner for Rural Development and Agriculture, Ambassador Yosefa Sacko, noted that significant institutional and governance issues underpinned these challenges, “constraining the ability of AU member states to effectively formulate and implement policies relating to the growth of the





**ABOVE:** A build-up of plastic and other materials penetrating deep into the sand burns unattended on Hann Bay beach.

Photo: John Wessels/AFR

relatively new blue economy concept”.

In addition to its 2019 strategy, the AU has several pan-African instruments that support blue economy growth: the Policy Framework and Reform Strategy for Fisheries and Aquaculture in Africa (PFRS), the 2050 African Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIMS); the 2016 Lomé Charter and Agenda 2063. Despite the challenges, progress is being made to develop an inclusive and sustainable blue economy that significantly contributes to continental transformation and growth.

In the Seychelles, for example, the fishing industry contributes an estimated 20% to its economy and employs 17% of its population, making it the second most important pillar of the economy. In 2018, the Seychelles issued the first sovereign blue bond in history to finance marine resources, ensure resource sustainability, and advance the ocean economy. The bond demonstrates the potential for countries to harness capital markets to finance the sustainable and inclusive use and protection of marine resources.

Consequently, Seychelles has run educational awareness outreach programmes that educate people on the need to protect oceans and has introduced legislation to protect some marine areas from the impact of humanity. At the same time, the blue bonds have funded small startups operating in the blue economy and the environment sector, enabling them to launch businesses and create more awareness around the need to protect the environment.

In Tanzania, the government is trying to improve governance and promote good fisheries management, in particular by implementing reforms and introducing legislative measures to address the challenges facing its coasts, inland waters, and fisheries. In addressing the challenges facing small-scale fisheries, the country has improved infrastructure and technology for the sector, as well as mechanisms for capital and market access.

In September this year (2024), speaking at the eighth meeting of ministers responsible for oceans, inland waters, and fisheries of the African,



**ABOVE:** Some families have banned their children from swimming and using the Hann Bay beach. Many people fall ill with skin diseases, gastroenteritis and respiratory issues.

Photo: John Wessels / AFP

Caribbean, and Pacific Group of States, Tanzania’s Minister for Livestock and Fisheries, Abdallah Ulega, said that his country understood the importance of the blue economy and was making efforts to accelerate action to transform the sector.

“Tanzania remains fully committed to the sustainable management of its oceans and inland waters,” he said. “Through initiatives such as the Fisheries Sector Master Plan, the Blue Economy Policy, and our ongoing efforts to combat illegal and unsustainable fishing, we are working to ensure that our marine ecosystems remain healthy and productive for future generations.”

Last year, Kenya adopted its own comprehensive national blue economy strategy. Speaking at the validation forum, then Cabinet Secretary of the Ministry of Mining, Blue Economy and Maritime Affairs, Salim Mvurya, said the new strategy was “comprehensive, all-inclusive, and incorporated best standards and practices in blue growth development.”

“The strategy,” he said, “is tailored to the needs

and aspirations of this country, and the strategies for harnessing the opportunities in the diverse blue economy components are well articulated. It is our sincere hope that Kenya’s national strategy will lay a solid foundation for an innovative, prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable blue economy.”

At the same time, the Economic Commission for Africa is helping countries to tackle management and policy failures that hinder their progress in realising the full potential of the blue economy.

“The blue economy offers a unique opportunity for Africa to accelerate structural transformation and economic diversification,” the Economic Commission for Africa’s acting Executive Secretary, António Pedro, said at the 2023 Africa Climate Summit held in Nairobi.

Focused and decisive governance action is required for the sustainable development of blue economies in Africa. By improving management and adopting effective policies, countries will be better positioned to take full advantage of blue economy opportunities. [GGY](#)



# A PRECARIOUS CO-EXISTENCE

By Sikhululekile Mashingaidze

**D**o the cons outweigh the pros for people living with wildlife under Zimbabwe's well-meaning Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE)? In October, *Africa in Fact* interviewed a handful of residents of the Tsholotsho Ward 1 community, in Matabeleland North, to find out.

CAMPFIRE was introduced in the 1980s as a community-centric approach that would enhance local livelihoods through mutually beneficial, collective wildlife management mechanisms. It was perceived as a departure from the exclusionary colonial approach of preservation that focused on protecting these natural resources from any use at all to enabling communities' partial ownership and control that was expected to guard against poaching, overuse, and extinction (Duffy, 2000).

The expectation, as early scholarship reveals (see Child, 1996; Hughes, 2001; and Logan and Mosley, 2002), was that this would culminate in revenue sharing for local communities in these arid, marginal, wildlife-rich areas such as Binga – and of interest to this analysis – Tsholotsho, both districts in Matabeleland North.

CAMPFIRE is managed through Zimbabwe's Rural District Councils (RDCs), which are tasked with granting and managing trophy-hunting concessions. These local authorities are mandated to facilitate revenue sharing for communities' infrastructural development.

Tsholotsho is characterised by an abundance of wildlife resources, notably elephants. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) indicates that Tsholotsho is an agroecological region characterised by low and





**ABOVE:** Hendrita Mwalada demonstrates how she integrates rags laced with a mixture of recycled engine-oil and pepper – meant to deter elephants – into the fencing around her farmland on the fringes of Tsavo-west National Park, Kenya, in October 2024.

Photo: Tony Karumba / AEP



erratic rainfall, where two of its principal rivers, Manzanyma and Gwayi, are seasonal. Some 70% of the district is covered by Kalahari sands that are, for the greater part, not conducive for agriculture. Locals bear the brunt of human-wildlife conflict, especially from marauding elephants and lions.

In 2021, Cultivating New Frontiers in Agriculture (CNFA) highlighted that the Tsholotsho district is home to 50,000 elephants. There are also buffalo and other smaller wild animal species. It is logical to expect that in 2024, after more than three decades of hosting CAMPFIRE, wildlife such as elephants and lions should be more efficiently managed to safeguard communities' livelihoods and, importantly, to secure human life. It is also logical to anticipate that, given such wildlife endowment, the district should, by now, be infrastructurally advanced, with good accessible roads, education, and health facilities, among others.

However, the mixed reactions from Tsholotsho Ward 1 locals, particularly women and children, paint a different picture. Some Tsholotsho Ward One community members stated that the little benefit that has accrued has come at the cost of their

livelihoods, security, freedom of movement, and daily peace of mind. They argue that CAMPFIRE has not fully translated into its much-hyped founding ideals (Mashingaidze, 2012). They also said that government and trophy hunting companies and their partners, many of them foreign, continued to overlook their concerns. Yet they were the ones who had to wrestle with wildlife in their daily lives.

Speaking to *Africa in Fact*, some sections of Tsholotsho's Ward One acknowledged that revenue-sharing arrangements had yielded some benefits to their community. Mr Pholani\*, aged 63, said: "CAMPFIRE has benefited our life as a community because our rainfall is not always good, so we do not have many ways of making money from our community. CAMPFIRE, therefore, offers us a source of money for our community projects. White people come to enjoy looking at our animals and sometimes hunt at Makona, Ndabambi, and Lodzi. I have heard from some of my neighbours in the CAMPFIRE committee that our elephants are sometimes hunted for \$23,000 and some for \$40,000. This money gives us a share of our community CAMPFIRE account, which we use for development."





Yet, as researcher Mkono (2019) observes, benefit sharing in trophy hunting has always been in question, with some of the revenue going to overseas agents. This is at the expense of local communities that, nearly four decades on, continue to live in poverty. The benefits are not congruent with the huge revenues and, importantly, not with the risks and losses they experience in their daily efforts to coexist with wildlife. Residents described their daily lives as precarious, as they felt trapped between the vicious cycle of elephants and the drought. In various ways, their stories echoed how they were perennially subjected to what they defined as two categories of hunger: hunger caused by elephants and hunger caused by drought.

Mrs Magutshwa\*, 61, from Tsholotsho's Muzimunya Village in Ward One, said from the time she was a young girl, life under CAMPFIRE had been one of constant fear of attack, as well as of loss and destruction from the elephants. Talking to *Africa in Fact* in October last year, she lamented that marauding elephants had reduced her 2023 farming season hard work to nothing.

"It seems the wild animals can no longer stay



**ABOVE:** French CNRS researcher Chloe Guerbois (L) talks to Victor Bitu (R), the owner of a field destroyed by elephants on the border of Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe.

Photo: Martin Bureau / AFP

in the game parks as they used to," she said. "Some say there are no fences to keep them in the parks. We regularly spot them in our community and do not feel safe. In January of this year, I woke up to find my fields looking like I had just hired people to harvest everything. My maize and groundnuts had been uprooted, my melons eaten ... that little that I had hoped to pick from my fields after the unreliable rains had been razed by the elephants. I am worried because even my few, already drought-stricken cattle and goats face the threat of being attacked by lions. It's a very difficult life for me, especially because I am a widow."



Photo: V. V. / AFP





Magutshwa's sentiments highlight the limits of decades of the CAMPFIRE inclusive conservation model amidst changing climate patterns. These patterns have led to biodiversity loss, which has affected the elephants' food and water sources and pushed them further into human habitats in their search for both. Magutshwa explained that animals trekking into the communities, especially smaller species such as Impala, have led to an increase in poaching. This puts communities in constant conflict with rangers, who sometimes deploy collective punishment against all community members.

Other women from Ward One particularly felt endangered whenever news emerged that elephants or lions had been spotted in any part of their ward, even in far-off villages. They explained that this inhibited free movement within their yards and community, which affected their ability to attend to their daily life commitments beyond their homesteads, such as working in their fields.

Engagements with schoolchildren also brought up mixed reactions. Sichelesile, a Form three female student, said CAMPFIRE was good for their education, citing a period when one of the classrooms at her school had its roof blown

off by the wind, and they were informed it had been repaired using CAMPFIRE funds. Mrs Ntini\*, a Village Development Committee member, also highlighted the benefits of education.

"We have also used the money to solve our water problems," she told *Africa in Fact*. "Boreholes have not only been drilled but, a few days ago, one of them was connected to a solar system, and we are now getting water much more easily from a tap. Right now, we are looking forward to building Zimatugwa Secondary School using CAMPFIRE funds so that our children can go beyond grade seven. Zimatugwa Secondary has already been pegged, and once we get more funds in our account, building work will begin."

However, one scholar, Alfred\*, while acknowledging the benefits of CAMPFIRE, was



Photo: Zimvange Anthony / AFP



Photo: Tony Karumba / AFP



Photo: Tony Karumba / AFP

**ABOVE:** Villagers in Kenya and Zimbabwe scare away elephants using African honey bees and other non-lethal but odorous concoctions made from locally available products, including chilli, garlic, eggs, and various smelly plants.

concerned that when elephants were spotted within their community, students were unable to go to school until the game rangers, whom he said often took a long time, had responded by coming to shoot to kill or intimidate the animals away.

“When elephants or lions have been spotted in our community, our parents will simply not allow us, and especially the younger pupils, to go to school until a report has been made and the rangers have taken action to push the animals out of our community,” he said. “This, however, is sometimes a very long process, and it may take up to two weeks before the rangers can come and take action to scare the elephants away. The council offices where we make our reports are also very far from most of our villages.”

Alfred’s concluding sentiment was that

while CAMPFIRE had contributed to educational infrastructure development, the presence of elephants and other wild animals undermined these positive outcomes, as they missed school some days.

Overall, the Ward One community members who spoke to *Africa in Fact* emphasised that CAMPFIRE required urgent review in light of a number of changes in the past four decades. These included the country’s decades of economic decline, human and wildlife population growth versus the land’s carrying capacity, and, importantly, the adverse impacts of climate change.

Community members believe that they have been abandoned to their own devices, living restless and risky lives that sometimes require them to sleep in their fields or at dams amidst fires to deter elephants and secure what little they can of their food and water. They want government and trophy-hunting companies to return to CAMPFIRE’s founding ideals by valuing the views and lives of local communities. [GGT](#)

\* Names have been changed to protect the privacy of respondents.





Photo: Tony Karumba / AFP



# Inclusive conservation and a way forward

By Ashwell Glasson and Naomi Haupt

**A**lthough Africa is abundant in natural resources and biodiversity, it faces pressing socio-economic issues. Inclusive conservation provides a sustainable solution by integrating local communities' needs, knowledge, and participation into environmental management. Unlike traditional conservation models prioritising biodiversity over local needs, inclusive conservation recognises local people as vital stakeholders, ensuring equitable benefits for nature and communities.

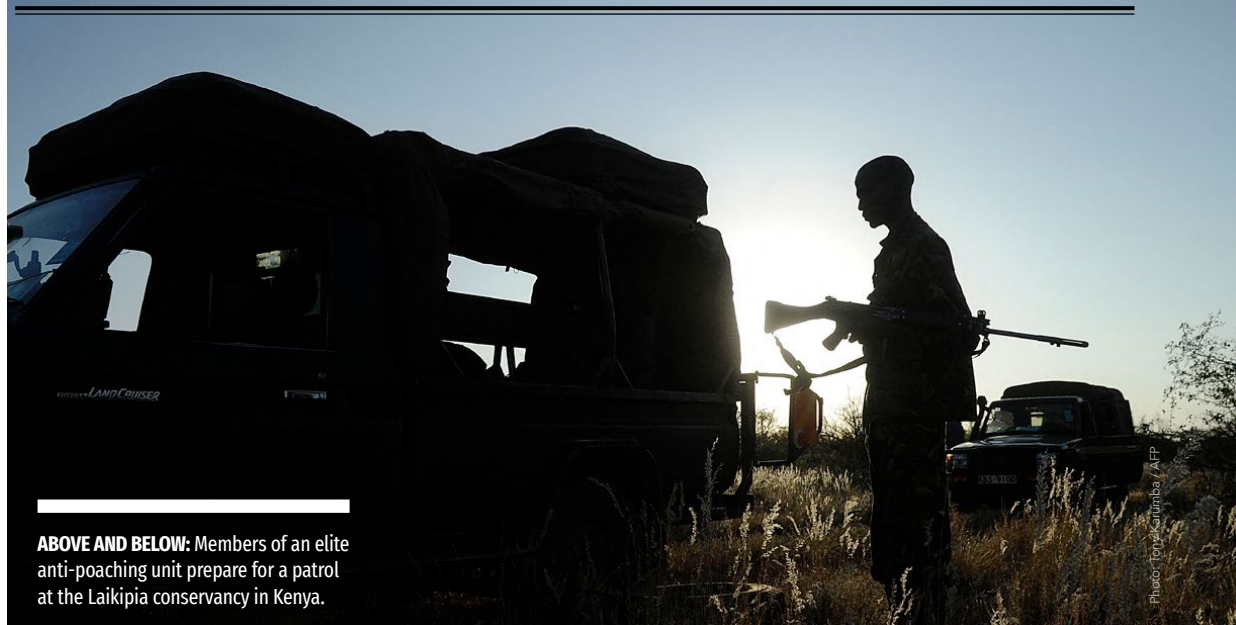
Historically, formal conservation areas were often established during the colonial era, leading

to significant impacts on humans, including forced removals and the criminalisation of local hunting and livelihood activities. Indigenous communities were frequently cut off from their traditional resources, resulting in the militarisation of conservation and the marginalisation of those who hunt or forage in protected areas. The legacy of these colonial practices continues to affect regions like South Africa's Kruger National Park, Niassa Game Reserve in Mozambique, and Kenya's Maasai Mara.

Militarised conservation, while controversial, has had some success in protecting certain areas from poaching and wildlife trafficking, particularly in response to organised crime driven by demand for products like rhino horn, elephant ivory, and shark fins. The Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime reports that the illicit trade in animal products ranked fourth in 2023, with plant trafficking closely following.

**ABOVE:** Armed officers of Lewa Wildlife Conservancy's (LWC) anti-poaching unit look out from a ridge at dawn in Meru, Kenya, in July 2021, as they wind up their nightly security patrol against poaching and illegal incursions into the conservancy.





**ABOVE AND BELOW:** Members of an elite anti-poaching unit prepare for a patrol at the Laikipia conservancy in Kenya.

How does this link to indigenous people and local communities? This dynamic poses significant challenges for local communities, who may be coerced into poaching or aiding traffickers, leading to strained relations. Such pressures can create a zero-sum game where neither communities nor conservation efforts benefit, ultimately driving exclusionary practices by park management. Organised crime syndicates generally function as local crime operations, with ties to broader transnational organised crime that help facilitate the movement of illicit wildlife products to the destination markets. This makes responses challenging for local law enforcement, including park rangers, whose mandate to fulfil law enforcement functions generally ends at the fence line of the park. This undermines the principle of inclusive conservation, making building sustainable partnerships between local populations and conservation initiatives difficult.

Militarised conservation has been successful, primarily in east and southern Africa, though areas like Somalia and northern Mozambique face challenges due to insurgent activity, as do areas where violent non-state actors have entered parks to avoid law enforcement or counter-terrorism operations and, in some cases, to establish bases for



further operations. Parks such as Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Park West-Arly-Pendjari Transfrontier complex that transverses Niger, Burkino Faso, and Benin, have experienced incursions and attacks by violent non-state actors, complicating management and safety for staff and local communities. In that sense, some protected areas have become battlegrounds between violent non-state actors and state forces, with some becoming contested terrain and, in many cases, very challenging to manage.

The conservation framework in South Africa differs significantly, rooted in a history of exclusionary policies prioritising white land ownership and marginalising local populations. Despite being designated as people-free zones,



**ABOVE:** Lewa Wildlife Conservancy (LWC) ranger Rajimen Lesakut (R) escorts primary school children from nearby MCK Lewa Downs School as they walk across the wildlife conservancy to get to their homes situated on the LWC's peripheries in Meru, Kenya, in July 2021.

areas like the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA) are home to more than 2.5 million residents who depend on these landscapes for their livelihoods. This highlights the opportunity for inclusive conservation, human security, food security and the possibility of a truly balanced approach to conservation.

The reality of indigenous and local communities engaging in migratory practices further emphasises the need for parks to adopt inclusive conservation perspectives. Africa's vast network of at least 27 transboundary parks (both terrestrial and marine areas) covering approximately 847 million hectares across the continent faces pressures from various industries, including mining and agriculture, and other specialist land-users such as energy producers and extractive industries, which threaten conservation efforts.

While community engagement has long been emphasised, participatory strategies have limitations, especially in South Africa, where there is a growing recognition of the rights of communities historically tied to these lands. A shift towards inclusive conservation involves integrating these

communities into decision-making processes, ensuring they benefit from conservation initiatives and have a stake in management. Organisations like African Parks, the Peace Parks Foundation and the Wildlife Conservation Society are advancing this model, creating opportunities for a wildlife economy through ecotourism. Successful examples in Gorongosa (Mozambique) and Kruger National Parks demonstrate the economic potential of ecotourism, benefiting both conservation efforts and local communities.

This inclusive approach is crucial for Africa, where deep socio-cultural ties to the environment exist amid socio-economic, geopolitical, and global challenges. According to the United Nations Environment Programme, inclusive conservation fosters local participation, addressing community needs while ensuring biodiversity sustainability. It empowers communities to manage resources and create sustainable livelihoods, promoting peacebuilding and cooperation in conflict-affected areas while safeguarding ecosystems and fostering trust.

Inclusive conservation has proven to be a powerful tool for socio-economic development in a





**ABOVE AND RIGHT:** Dehorned rhinos roam in a private reserve in Limpopo as rangers take part in a joint anti-poaching training programme with US military veterans in Musina, South Africa, in November 2016.

Photo: Mujahid Saraden / AFP

stable region, with the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT) in Kenya being one of the most successful. Established in 2004, NRT unites more than 45 indigenous communities to manage conservancies, focusing on wildlife protection and economic growth through sustainable tourism and livestock farming. Local communities have control over land and resources, empowering them in conservation decisions. This model has led to significant benefits, including job creation as rangers and guides, increased tourism revenue, and enhanced security through community-led anti-poaching initiatives. The funds generated through the eco-tourism industry support schools, healthcare, and infrastructure development.

Namibia's Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) programme is another example of inclusive conservation. Since the 1990s, Namibia has pioneered community-led conservation initiatives that empower indigenous communities to manage their natural resources. Establishing communal conservancies has allowed local people to benefit from eco-tourism, trophy hunting, and the sustainable use of wildlife resources.

In the Nyae Nyae Conservancy, for example, the indigenous San community has been able to



Photo: Mujahid Saraden / AFP

preserve their cultural heritage while generating income through wildlife tourism. The conservancy model has helped reduce poverty, improve social services, and enhance food security in one of the country's most impoverished regions. The conservancy is remote and scarcely populated, yet it generates \$250,000 to \$300,000 annually.

In South Africa, the Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs) demonstrate the potential of inclusive conservation by spanning multiple countries and fostering cooperation among nations and local communities. The Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park, which borders South Africa, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, exemplifies this. Through inclusive conservation, local communities



Photo: Mujahid Safodien / AFP

manage natural resources, benefit from eco-tourism, and collaborate across borders, contributing to regional socio-economic development and serving as a model for Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries.

Africa, however, faces numerous threats to biodiversity protection, including political instability and conflict that disrupt conservation efforts, as seen, for example, in the DRC, where armed groups exploit natural resources. Corruption and weak governance exacerbate illegal poaching and resource exploitation, depriving local communities of conservation benefits. Land tenure issues complicate matters, excluding indigenous groups like Kenya's Maasai from decision-making and economic opportunities.

Climate change and environmental degradation, particularly in the Sahel, increase competition for dwindling resources, while population growth and urbanisation lead to habitat loss. Marginalised groups, such as women and indigenous peoples,

often face exclusion from conservation initiatives, exemplified by the displacement of the Batwa in Uganda. Global demand for Africa's natural resources fuels illegal wildlife trade, further undermining conservation efforts. Economic pressures from poverty push communities towards unsustainable practices, as seen in Madagascar, where deforestation threatens biodiversity despite ongoing conservation initiatives. These interconnected challenges highlight the complexity of achieving inclusive conservation in Africa.

In conflict-affected areas, inclusive conservation is critical in promoting peace and stability. A key example is the DRC's Virunga National Park, which, despite ongoing armed conflict, employs more than 760 local rangers, also former militants and ex-combatants. This model protects endangered species like mountain gorillas and contributes to regional stability. Virunga generates approximately \$48.9 million annually, illustrating the economic benefits of conservation. By providing livelihoods and promoting environmental stewardship, the park has strengthened community ties. Virunga has implemented hydroelectric projects that deliver clean energy, reducing dependence on illegal charcoal production, a major cause of deforestation and conflict.

These inclusive conservation efforts significantly improve local lives while safeguarding vital biodiversity, demonstrating a powerful link between environmental protection and socio-economic development. Dr Emmanuel de Merode, the Director of Virunga National Park, explains the importance of conservation in conflict regions: "Conservation in a conflict zone is not just about protecting wildlife. It's about building a future where people and nature can coexist. By offering jobs, education, and security, we can break the cycle of violence and create lasting peace."

In South Sudan, the establishment of Boma and Bandingilo National Parks as community-



led conservation areas has created opportunities for former combatants to transition to peaceful livelihoods, helping to promote stability and development. Conservation organisations, such as the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), have partnered with local communities to protect wildlife and develop eco-tourism by providing training and employment opportunities, which have helped to reduce tensions and promote reconciliation.

By involving local communities in conservation efforts, inclusive models create a wide range of employment opportunities, from park rangers to eco-tourism operators. In Kenya, Namibia, and the DRC, people have found stable, well-paying jobs through inclusive initiatives. These jobs not only provide income but also foster a sense of ownership and pride in protecting natural resources.

In the blue economy, coastal communities benefit from sustainable fishing practices and marine conservation initiatives that protect their livelihoods. In Mozambique, inclusive conservation projects in marine protected areas have improved fish stocks, ensuring long-term food security for local fishermen.

Local communities should be regarded as co-managers of conservation efforts rather than mere beneficiaries, as they play a crucial role in bridging the knowledge exchange between scientists and indigenous groups, fostering solutions that integrate both traditional and modern approaches. Empowering communities through training



Photo: Tony Karumba / AFP

programmes that enhance local conservation management capacities equips them with the tools for effective engagement while sharing their expertise and traditional practices to ensure preservation.

Africa's socio-economic development is closely tied to the continent's complex ethnic dynamics. Ethnic identity, a key driver of political allegiances and resource access, often supersedes state interests, influencing policy implementation, and conservation efforts. In conflict regions, engaging local ethnic communities in conservation initiatives can reduce tensions and promote social cohesion, while in stable areas, marginalising these groups risks undermining successful conservation. By incorporating ethnic diversity into conservation strategies, Africa can foster local ownership, promote sustainable resource management, and support broader national development.



**LEFT AND RIGHT:** Female rangers visit a manyatta (traditional Maasai homestead) that suffered attacks from hyenas during the night, in February 2023.

Photo: Tony Karumba / AFP



Photo: Tony Karumba / AFP

Nevertheless, significant external challenges exist, including global climate change, dependence on international aid, foreign investment in extractive industries, and international wildlife trafficking. Although Africa contributes minimally to global emissions, it suffers disproportionately from climate impacts like droughts and floods, which degrade ecosystems and push communities towards unsustainable practices.

While international aid is crucial for conservation efforts, over-reliance on donor funding can diminish local ownership and sustainability, as seen in, for

example, Central Africa, where donor agendas may prioritise biodiversity over community development. Foreign investments in mining and oil exploration, such as in Gabon, further degrade the environment and spark debates on balancing development with conservation. International wildlife trafficking, driven by global demand, fosters corruption and violence and undermines local initiatives.

Long-term success in inclusive conservation requires investment in infrastructure, education, and capacity building, supported by organisations such as the World Bank and UNDP, increased private sector contributions, and government buy-in. Inclusive conservation can tackle Africa's socio-economic challenges by empowering local communities, fostering sustainable development, and promoting peace. In stable regions, it drives job creation and resilience to climate change; in conflict areas, it offers pathways to peace through shared incentives for resource protection.

As Virunga National Park's de Merode puts it: "Conservation is not just about saving wildlife; it's about building a better future for people. Inclusive conservation is the key to unlocking Africa's potential." [GGV](#)





Photo: Mohamed Abdiwahab / AFP



# WHO IS THE REAL PIRATE?

By Michael Schmidt

“They cut my nets, and the government does not do anything,” an outraged Somali fisherman named Yusuf told senior East Africa analyst Omar Mahmoud of the International Crisis Group. “If I take up a weapon to defend myself, they call me a pirate – but who is the real pirate?”

Mahmoud recalls this emotional encounter in a June 2024 article in which he warns of the resurgence of piracy off the Horn of Africa, where its original surge, from 2009 to 2012, was initially provoked by desperate local fishermen turning to armed robbery of the foreign



**ABOVE:** A Somali fisherman carries a sailfish on his head to the Hamarweyne fish market near the port in Mogadishu, in January 2018.

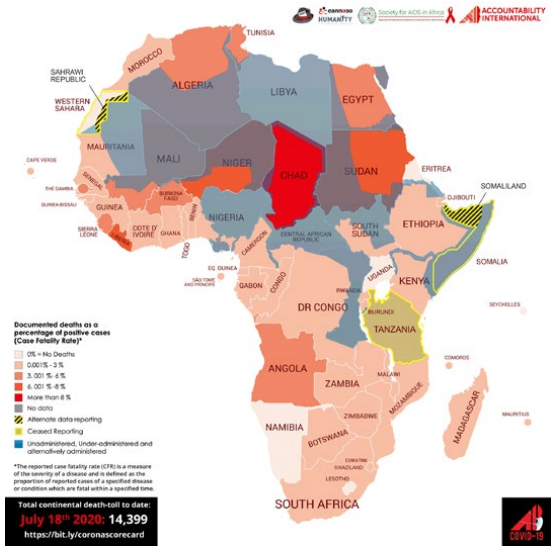


vessels, hailing from nations such as Iran, India, and Taiwan, who were illegally fishing within Somali coastal waters and so depriving them of a livelihood.

The scale of the damage to the coastal economy and fish stocks is huge: illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing strips an estimated \$300 million of marine resources from the waters of the barely functional state of Somalia, its allied Puntland region, and the breakaway state of Somaliland every year (the continental total is \$11.2 billion).

That narrative of fishermen’s resistance rapidly evolved; however, what could be termed subsistence piracy evolved into syndicate crime. Jessica Smith and Amadou Sy of the Africa Growth Initiative noted in 2013 that a kingpin would raise \$50,000 from investors to purchase a “mothership” to venture far offshore. The kingpin would then carry skiffs crewed by well-armed pirates to seize foreign shipping – no longer only fishing competitors – and charge ransoms averaging \$5 million to release ships and crews.

In response to that initial surge, the European Union (EU), NATO, and US naval anti-piracy patrols reduced piracy off the Horn to zero by 2020. However, maintaining that presence was expensive, so the International Maritime Organisation allowed civilian cargo ships to carry armed security



squads. Yet continued insecurity for coastal fishing communities has seen piracy off the Horn soar again since 2023, while it has also become entrenched in the Gulf of Guinea.

The piracy saga sits at the nexus of three aspects that are crucial to the sustainability of Africa’s blue economy: maritime security, resources management, and community livelihoods.

Rights and duties on paper are exceptionally hard to enforce in vast oceans, and few African navies or coast guards have the capacity to rule the waves adequately; Somaliland has only one little coast guard motor boat and a few rubber dinghies.

But IUU fishing has surpassed piracy. According to a 2023 report from the Financial Transparency Commission (FTC), a non-profit network that monitors the global shadow economy, West Africa’s ocean is “a global epicentre for IUU fishing”, targeted by the top 10 IUU companies led by China’s Nasdaq-listed Pingtan Marine Enterprise Ltd and Spain’s Albacora SA (Pingtan refused to comment to the FTC, and Albacora denied the FTC’s assertion).

Nigerian Rear Admiral Adeniyi Adejimi Osinowo, a consultant on the Africa Integrated Maritime Strategy 2050, has estimated the cost of piracy and robbery at sea in the Gulf at \$2 billion a year, while the losses attributed to IUU fishing there was





Photo: Guy Peterson / AFP

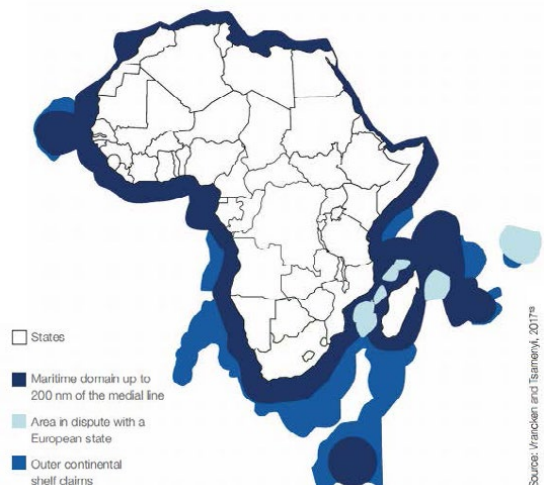
estimated at US\$1.3 billion a year. Both figures are the world's highest.

But first, we need to appreciate the sheer immensity of what the African Union (AU) calls the African Maritime Domain. In a 2021 assessment by Vishal Surbun, the Pretoria-headquartered Institute for Security Studies (ISS) noted that the AU included inland lakes and waterways in this domain, yet that “in a world that looks increasingly to the oceans as a reservoir of resources, there is an underlying insecurity about growing human activity there. This insecurity arises from increased transnational organised crime; illegal, unreported and unregulated [IUU] fishing; environmental crimes and marine environmental degradation; disappearing biodiversity; and the effects of climate change.”

Rich in natural resources, Africa tends to be viewed by most observers in purely terrestrial terms, but its blue economy already generates \$300 billion annually and sustains 50 million jobs, according to the American think tank Brookings Institution, and those figures are only set to soar.

Forty African countries, including Somaliland as a *de facto* state and Western Sahara as a *de jure* state, have a combined exclusive economic zone (EEZ) totalling 13 million km<sup>2</sup> – an astounding 42.8% of the continent's land area.

Under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, maritime nations' rights and obligations





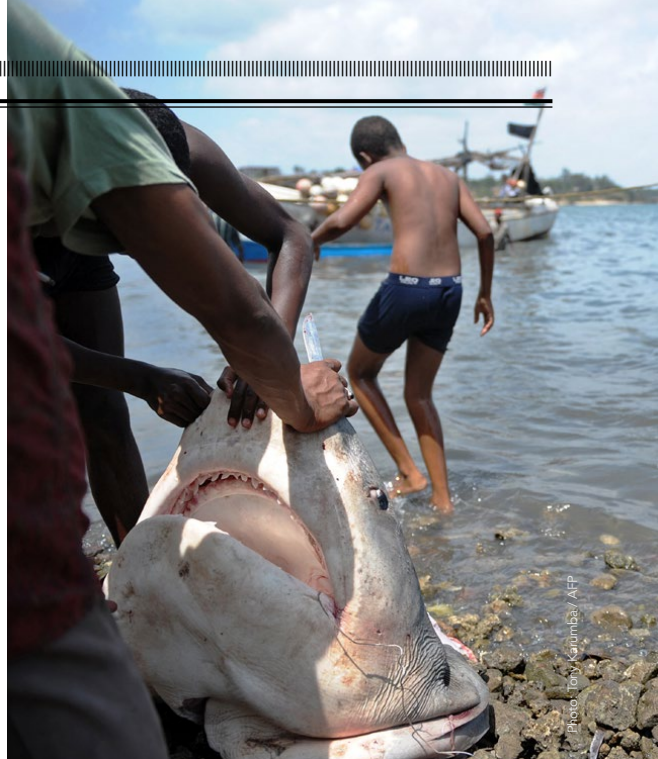
are divided into several zones. Extending 12 nautical miles (22 km) out from shore are the territorial waters in which a state or territory has absolute sovereignty over the airspace, sea column, seabed, and subsoil – with the caveat that it has to allow for the “innocent passage” of foreign vessels. This is *de jure* national territory, and the coast guard, fisheries, customs, immigration, and naval vessels have full rights to police this zone.

From 12 nautical miles to 200 nautical miles (370 km) out is the state’s or territory’s EEZ, where its sovereignty is restricted to the sea column, seabed, and subsoil, all of which it may explore, manage, and exploit as it sees fit, again allowing for the passage of innocent vessels and the laying of communications cables, and for enforcement against those with criminal intent. Seas beyond the 200 nautical mile limit are the “high seas”, or international waters, where the nation has no jurisdiction.

And yet, if a country’s continental shelf extends beyond the 200 nautical mile limit, it may apply to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf to extend their seabed and subsoil exploration and exploitation rights beyond their EEZ, to the edge of the shelf or to a maximum of 350 nautical miles (650 km) from shore. Such extensions do not allow a nation to fish in the water column, however.

As noted by Edwin Egede of the Cardiff School of Law and Politics, by 2022, 16 of Africa’s 40 maritime nations had made progress in submitting such claims, while another nine had started the process but were lagging behind. *Africa in Fact* calculates the total area claimed by 29 states – excluding Morocco and Comoros – at 5,051,902 km<sup>2</sup>.

An obstacle to unlocking the potential riches of Africa’s extended continental shelf is that many maritime neighbours lack delimitation agreements on their EEZs, which, as South African legal academic Siqhamo Yamkela Ntola has argued, affects any shelf claims.



In a 2017 report, Ntola detailed eight relevant delimitation disputes: Morocco/Mauritania; Benin/Togo/Nigeria; DRC/Angola; Namibia/South Africa; Madagascar/Mozambique; Madagascar/Mozambique/Tanzania/Comoros; Kenya/Somalia/Tanzania; and Puntland/Yemen. I will add the disputes between Morocco and Western Sahara, the latter’s maritime rights recognised in law by a 2017 European Union Court decision.

The situation is complicated by France’s colonial possession of Reunion plus four other islands in the Mozambique Channel; Mauritius secured Britain’s agreement in October 2024 to return the Chagos Archipelago, and most other countries have



Photo: Jiri Lopez / AFP

indicated to the UN that they would resolve their delimitations amicably, while others, such as Kenya/Somalia are before the International Court of Justice.

South Africa's claim is probably the most dramatic, as, thanks to its possession of the Prince Edward Islands in the southern Indian Ocean, 2,160 km from Cape Town, it is the tenth-largest claim in the world. If the UN endorses its submission, it will make the country's maritime holdings double the size of its land area and, as former Environmental Affairs minister Edna Molewa projected, create one million jobs and add \$10 billion to the country's GDP by 2033. Namibia's claim at 1,066,426 km<sup>2</sup> is likewise 1.2 times its land area, thanks to the extensive undersea Walvis Ridge.

Dr Ussif Rashid Sumaila, director of Canada's Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, has addressed African fisheries authorities before. He has told them what he states in his 2022 book *Infinity Fish*: that traditionally, fisheries' and marine economists' computations of fish (and by implication crustacean, seabird, and marine mammal) population sustainability focuses narrowly on the

age and biomass of the single species each fishery exploits, thus ignoring that species' role in the biodiversity of the entire local ecosystem.

Sumaila argues for an "intergenerational cost-benefit analysis" of fish stocks, looking at the benefits of restoring stocks to pre-collapse levels so that people a century from now will still have more than sufficient, "maintaining higher resource abundance at equilibrium". This requires a long-term view of policy, regulation, monitoring, policing, and management. In particular, "capacity-enhancing" fishing quotas that drive overfishing must be strongly curtailed.

Fish stocks are a common pool resource in that fish belong to no one until they are caught. A system of authorities issuing individual fishing quotas (IFQs) as part of the total allowable catch is used to manage about 10% of the world's fish stock. IFQs are tradeable in the same manner as carbon credits. But, as conflicts in West Africa have shown, aboriginal fishing rights and IFQs often clash. Sumaila stresses that littoral communities' "social sustainability" is vital here.





Photo: Mohamed Abdouh / AFP

“Global marine fisheries are underperforming economically because of overfishing, pollution and habitat degradation,” he writes. “Added to these threats is the looming challenge of climate change.” Rebuilding depleted and collapsed fish stocks would cost global fisheries about \$203 billion over 50 years, Sumaila estimates, but claims that “it would take just 12 years after rebuilding begins for the benefits to surpass the cost”.

A key component of sustaining fish stocks is the creation of marine conservation areas, particularly in the spawning grounds of commercially-fished species. But most African maritime nations have been slow to create such protected zones, which are primarily clustered off South Africa and its southern islands (with a target of protecting 10% of its EEZ), and the swathe of Indian Ocean between Mozambique, Madagascar, the Comoros, and Seychelles – with smaller enclaves off Tanzania, Kenya, Congo, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt.

There are different ways to manage these areas: full sanctuaries in which no human impact is



Photo: Tony Kumbas / AFP

allowed; wilderness areas that tourists may visit, leaving a light footprint; and regulated take zones where catches are strictly limited by size, age, and species. But more is required, especially the management of “large marine ecosystems” such as the fish-rich Canaries, Guinea, Benguela, Agullas, Somali, and Red Sea currents, which together generate 10 million tonnes of legitimate catch annually, and of long-distance migratory species such as whales.

All these involve managing fish stocks and





Photo: Guy Peterson / AFP

other marine resources and eliminating effluent and pollution. This includes policing illegal waste dumping at sea and adopting greener technologies in the shipping and port sectors. In particular, green hydrogen fuel is being used to help decarbonise the global supply chain, with a focus on shipping corridors and harbours.

In March 2023, for example, in a first for Africa, a consortium of shipping, ports, and mining entities announced the establishment of a zero-emissions shipping corridor to move iron ore between Freeport Saldhana in South Africa and Europe; the free port itself was setting its sights on producing green fuels and using them in vessel construction.

The African Green Hydrogen Alliance, founded in 2022 by Egypt, Kenya, Mauritania, Morocco, Namibia, and South Africa, aims to make the continent the leading exporter of fuel and to give Africa a significant voice in global climate and energy dialogues (Angola, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Nigeria have since signed on). African ports require international technical and funding assistance to go

green, however, such as the UN's project to support "sustainable smart ports".

In 2009, the AU Assembly, concerned about maritime security, including piracy, illegal fishing and the dumping of toxic waste, called on the AU Commission to develop "a comprehensive and coherent strategy to combat these scourges".

The result was the adoption of Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIMS) 2050, consisting of "overarching, concerted and coherent long-term multi-layered plans of action that will achieve the objective of the AU to enhance the maritime viability for a prosperous Africa."

One of the strategic objectives of the AIMS is the establishment of a Combined Exclusive Maritime Zone of Africa (CEMZA). But while the UN expects this and the African Continental Free Trade Area to increase maritime freight demand by 62%, the ISS's Surbun cautioned that the CEMZA concept is vague on balance between national and collective rights and responsibilities, saying a huge amount of technical work on demarcation lies ahead. [GGP](#)





# The human heart of Africa's blue economy

By Monique Bennett

**T**he concept of a “blue economy” was first articulated at the Rio de Janeiro United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012, the same platform that introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While inherently centred on economic priorities, the blue economy and the SDGs fundamentally advocate for equitable resource distribution, human well-being, and the mitigation of environmental risks and degradation.

Despite this, there remains an overemphasis on the financial gains of these development projects, which often leads to a lack of oversight

and consideration of their long-term impact on the environment and communities. The synergy between inclusivity, conservation, and development in Africa's blue economy is challenging, but several examples indicate that emphasising the former can increase the chance of successful intervention.

Although the blue economy has been mainstreamed into many African states' environmental regimes, its economic potential has not nearly been achieved. Many shortcomings in capacity development, community involvement, and technology adoption remain. Knowledge and technological capacity in the marine sectors



**ABOVE:** Agnes Omalayo returns fish originally caught in the Cameroon mangroves and then dried, to her kitchen in the village of Toube, in September 2024.

are limited, and this is further undermined by limited investment, meaning economic activities remain mostly at the subsistence level. Around a quarter of marine catches along the continent's coastline are made by non-African states, which, if fished by African states themselves, would earn them an additional \$3.3 billion, eight times higher than the \$0.4 billion they currently make from fishing agreements. According to the World Bank, aquaculture is vital for the continent's need for food security and is expanding faster there than anywhere in the world.

Beyond the aquaculture sector, Africa's

coastline is well endowed with offshore oil and gas reserves, although most of what is extracted is exported elsewhere for refinement. Consequently, the economic benefits of these resources do not reach local communities sufficiently, and their environmental impacts are rarely top of mind. Similarly, maritime transportation plays a crucial role in the continent's trade economy. However, the sector remains underutilised for intra-trade cooperation, and it, too, has several negative consequences for conservation and the health of coastal marine life.

Tourism, another vital marine sector, seeks to



**LEFT AND RIGHT:** Oyster farmers from the Diamagune Association of Joal-Fadiouth, Senegal, and employees of the Alanza oyster farm in Cape Esterias, Gabon, gather and clean shellfish.



showcase the continent's diverse and exotic marine ecosystems. Island nations like the Seychelles, Cabo Verde, and Mauritius rely heavily on this sector for their economies, and it provides crucial support for local livelihoods and socio-economic development. However, the sector remains underdeveloped along western and eastern African coastlines due to piracy threats and limited infrastructure investment. Still, it could empower local communities through job creation and knowledge sharing of animal and plant conservation.

The African Union recognises the potential of these "blue" sectors for the continent's economic future. However, if this future is to benefit all African citizens, the current framework must avoid fixating on revenue outcomes. The current top-down management and implementation of many African

projects related to the blue economy often exclude the involvement of coastal communities. Also, large infrastructure projects aimed at expanding or building ports, for example, have almost always led to community displacement, livelihood losses, and coastal degradation.

One example is Cameroon's Kribi deep-sea port, China's largest port investment globally. The port, which aims to relieve pressure on the country's current main port, Douala, and provide a trading gateway for land-locked countries in the region, will enter a second construction phase this year. The port's construction has led to widespread displacement of coastal villagers, some of whom were relocated but have been resettled far from the economic opportunities of fishing and farming they had before.



of a community-driven approach to unemployment, resource management, and ecosystem degradation. By empowering local women to engage in oyster harvesting and processing, the project has not only improved their livelihoods but also fostered a sense of ownership over marine resources.

This initiative has allowed for integrating traditional knowledge with modern practices, enhancing ecological sustainability and economic resilience. The success of this project underscores the critical role of community inclusion, as it ensures that the needs and knowledge of local stakeholders are central to decision-making processes, ultimately leading to more sustainable marine resource management.

Experts have suggested that a blend of both bottom-up and top-down management in blue economy projects could help actively involve communities alongside other important local stakeholders within the blue value chain. This approach does not replace government functions or roles but can rather allow those greatly impacted by these projects to have their say early in the policy development process.

A collaborative approach requires more time and resources to maintain. Still, it allows communities to build trust and a sense of ownership within the project alongside high-level partners. This process would aim to eliminate misunderstandings and provide a platform to develop mutual interests for both the project's short- and long-term outcomes.

Thus, at the heart of Africa's blue economy potential are its citizens and ecosystem. For the continent to fully realise this new blue frontier, careful consideration must be given to how these projects intersect with different ecological systems that, in turn, impact the livelihoods of African communities. Recognising the intrinsic connections between ecosystems, economies, and communities across the continent is essential for developing a resilient and socially equitable blue economy. [GG9](#)

In addition, scientists are seriously concerned about ongoing deforestation in the Congo Basin for infrastructure associated with the port. These forests are crucial carbon sinks with immense biodiversity, and they play a vital role in rainfall patterns across the continent, which are needed for freshwater and agriculture. These projects thus have the potential to contribute to friction and dissatisfaction between coastal populations and their governments, which risks contributing further to current security issues in the region.

Projects that have successfully included communities often already have a “people-centred” approach, and their frameworks tend to emphasise co-management and participation. A notable case is the TRY Oyster Women's Association in The Gambia. This initiative exemplifies the effectiveness



# South Africa's

The “blue economy” concept, introduced at the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development, broadly refers to the sustainable use of ocean, sea, and coastal resources for economic activity. This model integrates environmental, social, financial, and institutional objectives, making marine resources central to job creation, food security, economic growth, and environmental protection. The African Union’s (AU) Integrated Maritime Strategy extends Africa’s blue economy to include inland waterways, positioning it as an essential element of socio-economic transformation.

Africa’s blue economy currently contributes more than \$300 billion and 49 million jobs across 38 coastal and island states, emphasising its potential as a transformative driver of growth. The

first aspiration of Agenda 2063, The Africa We Want, is “a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development”, which recognises the potential of the blue economy as a catalyst of socio-economic transformation. Similarly, the AU declared 2015-2025 the Decade of African Seas and Oceans to fulfil the 2050 Africa Integrated Maritime Strategy.

The global ocean economy, estimated at \$2.3 trillion in annual goods and services, is projected to grow to \$3 trillion by 2030, potentially creating 40 million jobs. However, rising sea levels, climate change, resource overexploitation, and geopolitical tensions pose serious risks. Africa’s blue economy



# blue dream

By Stuart Mbanyele

faces additional hurdles, including piracy, weak governance, illegal fishing, and conduits for human trafficking and shipment of narcotics, as highlighted by the 2023 United Nations Global Report on Drugs in 2023. Moreover, weak governance leads to corruption, manifestly through state-sanctioned and private-sector complicit malfeasance on a grand scale, as demonstrated by the “tuna bond corruption scandal” in Mozambique and the “Fishrot corruption scandal” in Namibia.

South Africa’s geography – a coastline spanning nearly 4,000 km – positions it uniquely within the blue economy. The National Development Plan 2030 envisions leveraging this oceanic access to drive economic growth and job creation, projecting a potential contribution of R177 billion to GDP and creating up to one million jobs by 2030. In support

of these goals, South Africa launched Operation Phakisa in 2014 to unlock value from marine resources, focusing on four areas: marine transport and manufacturing, offshore oil and gas exploration, aquaculture, and marine protection and governance.

Despite early enthusiasm, Operation Phakisa has yet to achieve its anticipated outcomes, hindered by the lack of strong political leadership, stakeholder conflicts, and logistical challenges. Against this backdrop, the following section evaluates Operation Phakisa’s progress in each priority area.

## MARINE TRANSPORT AND MANUFACTURING

South Africa’s eight major ports, including globally significant container and dry bulk ports, are hindered by operational inefficiencies, as highlighted by the World Bank’s 2023 Container

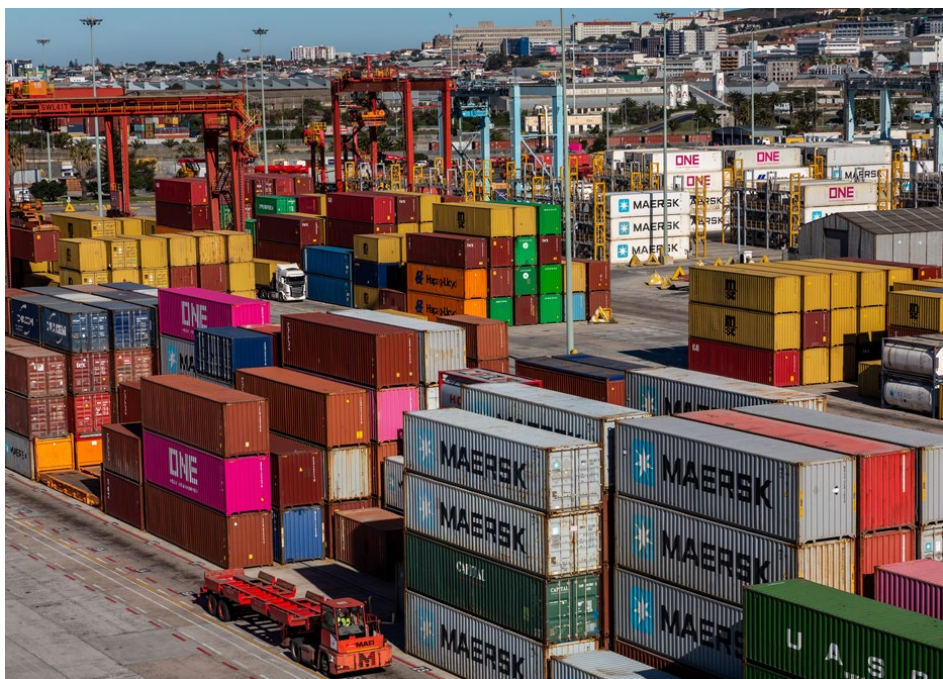


**ABOVE:** The Hafnia Leo oil tanker berthed in the port of Cape Town, operated by Transnet SOC Ltd, South Africa, in February 2023.



**RIGHT:** Containers stacked on a dock at the port of Cape Town.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** The seawall and entrance to the Transnet operated port of Cape Town, South Africa.



Port Performance Index. Key ports – Cape Town, Durban, and Port Elizabeth – rank among the worst globally due to outdated infrastructure, equipment failures, and mismanagement. This inefficiency has significant economic repercussions. Tellingly, in the form of the events of 2023, where the Durban port saw a crisis and gridlock, with extreme congestion. The gridlock is estimated to have cost the country approximately R1.2 billion a year. The South African Association of Freight Forwarders said that delays at the ports have had direct costs to the South African economy of R100 million daily and impeded the movement of around R7 billion worth of goods.

Moreover, South Africa missed capitalising on increased traffic when the 2023 Middle East conflict disrupted Suez Canal shipping. Although rerouted vessels created a demand for bunkering services, infrastructure deficiencies, bureaucratic stalemates, and port congestion prevented South Africa from seizing this strategic advantage. Addressing these issues requires prioritising infrastructure investment, capacity building, and public-private partnerships to enhance port efficiency, alleviate bottlenecks, and capitalise on emerging opportunities.

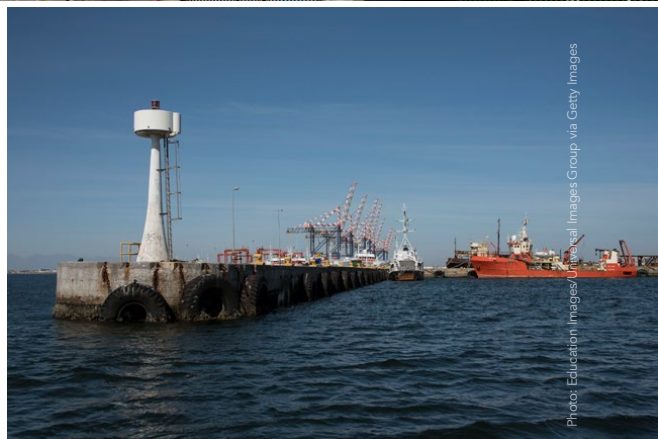


Photo: Education Images/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

## OIL AND GAS EXPLORATION

A key focus for the South African government in developing its ocean economy is exploring offshore gas and petroleum resources. South Africa's offshore basin is rich in untapped resources. According to official government projections, South Africa's offshore reserves include an estimated nine billion barrels of oil and significant natural gas deposits, which could significantly impact energy independence and economic growth. Operation Phakisa had set ambitious targets for offshore exploration, aiming for 30 new wells and a potential production of 370,000 barrels per day.



**ABOVE AND BELOW:** Protestors at various events call for bans on oil exploration in Antarctica, plans by Dutch oil company Shell to conduct underwater seismic surveys along South Africa's East coast and the ongoing use of fossil fuels.



However, environmental concerns and high costs have slowed progress. There has been mounting opposition to offshore exploration due to the associated environmental dangers of fossil fuel exploration and harmful practices such as seismic blasting. The process has been met with protests and legal challenges by communities and environmental and human rights NGOs in areas including the West Coast and the Garden Route in the Eastern and Western Cape Provinces. High costs are another issue; Total Energies' withdrawal from the Brulpadda and Luiperd discoveries, after spending north of R12 billion, citing insufficient commercial viability, underscores the risks. Instead, the company has prioritised exploration in other areas closer to Namibia.

Significant offshore gas deposits and reserves have been discovered in different countries in the neighbourhood, including Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, and Tanzania. In contrast to South Africa, these countries are experiencing massive international investment by offering policy certainty and lower costs. The recent signing of the Draft Upstream Petroleum Resources Development Bill will allow the South African government to claim a





stake and attract interest in oil and gas exploration and production projects.

The government must ensure a stable regulatory framework to attract investors. Establishing a streamlined “one-stop shop” for licensing, supporting spill response capacity, and enforcing the International Oil Pollution Compensation Fund could create a more favourable environment. Expanding research into renewable marine energy options could also enhance sustainability and reduce reliance on fossil fuels.

### AQUACULTURE DEVELOPMENT

Globally, the market value of fish production is estimated to be worth R4.1 trillion annually. According to the World Economic Forum, demand for blue foods – food from aquatic sources – is expected to double by 2050. Coincidentally, South Africa boasts a rich and diverse marine ecosystem with thousands of marine plant and animal species. The domestic fishing industry contributes at least R7.9 billion to annual GDP and provides employment opportunities for about 58,000 South Africans. The South African government has set a target to significantly expand the country’s aquaculture industry and establish its crucial role in fish product supply, job creation and contribution to national income and rural livelihoods. The plan aims to achieve specific targets, including



**ABOVE:** Due to government restrictions in South Africa, local fishermen claim they are not able to fish above quotas and are unable to feed their families.

increasing the sector’s revenue, generating 6,560 new direct jobs, producing an additional 27,020 tonnes, and promoting increased participation to support transformation in the industry.

However, this still needs to be achieved; limited access to funding, markets, and infrastructure and a shortage of technical skills have hindered sector growth. In coastal areas such as the Western Cape, poverty and youth unemployment are linked to crime and gangsterism, threatening maritime security by leading to disruptions to fishing, tourism, and agriculture sectors. The Western Cape province contends with the illegal poaching of high volumes of abalone and other species, bringing hundreds of millions of rands to the black market. Illegal fishing and overfishing are other threats, with some fish stocks fished at biologically unsustainable



**ABOVE:** Erick Koekemoer (R), a Marine Law Enforcement officer working for the city of Cape Town, South Africa, checks fishing licences during a patrol in False Bay, near Simon's Town, in September 2018.

levels. Criminal networks traverse sovereign maritime borders and the high seas, negatively impacting the sector.

South Africa can also learn from the case studies of countries with thriving aquaculture industries, such as Norway. Simplifying the allocation of fishing rights and ensuring effective enforcement of the Marine Living Resources Act could enhance the sector's viability.

#### GOVERNANCE AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

It has been a decade since Operation Phakisa was conceptualised; moreover, South Africa has five years until 2030, the deadline for the National Development Plan. South Africa must strengthen governance and foster strategic international partnerships to unlock the blue economy's full potential. Key recommendations include:

- Establishing a dedicated maritime ministry: Drawing inspiration from Nigeria's maritime ministry, a focused South African ministry could streamline oversight, enhance inter-departmental coordination, and drive competitiveness in the global marine economy.
- Strengthening partnerships: Collaboration with African Union initiatives, such as the 2050 Africa Integrated Maritime Strategy, and through the

Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), could support regional maritime security and trade. Multilateral engagement, including with the Indian Ocean Rim Association, could further bolster South Africa's maritime interests.

- Implementing evidence-based policy: Drawing lessons from successful blue economy models in countries like India, Portugal, Egypt, and Seychelles could inform sustainable practices and drive economic growth.
- Emphasising sustainable practices: Conservation practices, protected areas, and regulated fishing quotas will ensure ecological balance, while responsible marine resource use supports long-term sector health.

With its strategic location and abundant marine resources, South Africa has a unique opportunity to advance food security, create jobs, attract foreign investment, and foster sustainable economic growth. Operation Phakisa's initial vision remains within reach, but success will require decisive action to address current operational, governance, and infrastructural challenges. In Sesotho, Phakisa means "hurry up," underscoring the urgency with which South Africa must act to transform its blue economy aspirations into a sustainable reality. [GGP](#)





**THIS PAGE:** Nixon Kupera Ole Metoi, 25, sits inside his "Manyatta", his home in the community made of cow dug, after he was ordained Maasai age-group leader of the Ittuati morans in the village of Mbirukani in Kajiado in June 2015.

Photo: Simon Maina / AFP

# TANZANIA'S CONSERVATION FAR FROM INCLUSIVE

By Dr Neil Ford

**H**ome to many of the large animals left in Africa, few countries have attracted as much conservation interest as Tanzania. Land has often been protected at the expense of human populations, who used to live in conservation areas, but the government says that local communities are now consulted much more widely than in the past. Yet the track record of Tanzania's inclusive conservation efforts varies enormously.

There is no doubt that conservation efforts are particularly needed in Tanzania. The country is home to a wide range of globally important habitats, from the savannah of popular tourist imagination in the Serengeti to coral reef ecosystems offshore. The Tanzania National Parks Authority manages 22 parks that cover 99,306 sq km of the country's 945,087 sq km territory. Moreover, 28% of the country's total land area comprises a variety of protected wildlife areas, with another 16% in forest reserves, according to a US Congressional Research Service report from July last year.

Yet a combination of poaching, population growth, agriculture and deforestation has had a huge impact on delicate ecosystems. While the

World Bank calculates that 51% of the country was forested to some extent in 2021, Global Forest Watch reports that the country lost 12% of its tree cover between 2001 and 2023.

For example, the elephant population crashed from 316,000 in 1976 to 43,000 in 2014, although it had recovered to 60,000 by 2021 due to tougher action on poachers. The country still has the third-biggest elephant population in Africa, but declines elsewhere have been even more dramatic. The total number of elephants in Africa fell from about 10 million in 1930 to 415,000 today, according to the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

Apart from the obvious benefits of biodiversity, preserving the natural world drives one of Tanzania's main sources of income. A total of 1.8 million tourists visited the country in 2023, the most ever, and a 24.3% increase on the previous year, generating a GDP of \$3.4 billion in the process. Yet visitors are often sold a vision of an African wilderness devoid of people that is at odds with historical reality.

Most wildlife tourists visit the northern park circuit, which includes the Serengeti, Ngorongoro





Photo: Sabnem Coskun Anadolli Agency via Getty Images

**ABOVE:** A red colobus monkey in its natural habitat at the Jozani-Chwaka Bay National Park in Zanzibar, Tanzania in June 2023.

**BELOW:** Young Maasai men wearing a ceremonial headdress made of ostrich feathers take part in the Eunoto ceremony in a remote area near Kilgoris, Kenya in August 2023.

Crater, and Lake Manyara. Various ethnic groups live or have lived here until relatively recently, and interactions with the Maasai are often sold as part of tourist packages.

However, the Tanzanian authorities have steadily sought to remove such communities. Given the effect of global poaching networks and increasing firewood collection, such a strategy is, to some extent, understandable. However, the devastating human cost of such strategies is now being challenged worldwide. Inclusive conservation began as simply ensuring that local communities benefited from conservation efforts, with people in and around Tanzanian parks gaining employment as guides, drivers, cooks and in lodges, for example. Some safari tour operators also supported school, healthcare and other development projects in return for community buy-in to safari operations.

Local people were also able to set up tourist accommodation outside protected areas. However, the latter has not happened as often as might be expected, with foreign firms or companies based elsewhere in the host country usually having more money to provide tourist accommodation.

All too often, such strategies were seen as simply buying off local communities. As a result, the best inclusive conservation schemes have now become more nuanced, with local people involved



Photo: SLUIS Tavares AFP

in decision making as well as through employment and sustainable forest management rights.

One positive Tanzanian example comes from the other main centre of Tanzanian tourism, on the island of Unguja, which is part of Zanzibar. The Zanzibar red colobus monkey is only found on Unguja and principally in the island's main onshore conservation area, Jozani-Chwaka Bay National Park. However, efforts to protect them were hindered by the local perception of the monkeys as pests. Many were killed for feeding on banana and cassava crops.

But attitudes changed when communities bordering Jozani were given a real stake in the park's success in terms of employment and local people becoming shareholders in the conservation

project. Jozani-Chwaka Bay Conservation Project, as it was then called, was created jointly by the Zanzibar Department of Commercial Crops, Fruits and Forestry (DCCFF) and CARE Tanzania in 1995. Local communities received half of all revenue generated from 2008 onwards, with some paid as compensation for damaged crops and the rest invested in local schools, roads, water supplies and power connections. Disagreements over compensation levels continue, but the project is broadly considered a success, with the red colobus population increasing from fewer than 2,000 in the 1990s to more than 5,000 now and attracting 60,000 visitors a year.

CARE International, which works with local NGOs at Jozani, hopes to expand the size of the park and is considering selling carbon credits to raise more income. There are various mechanisms for achieving this, including the UN's REDD+ (Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries) framework that encourages developing countries to conserve forests as carbon sinks in return for financing. However, in high profile media investigations, including by the UK's *Guardian* newspaper, some REDD+ projects have been criticised for the lack of community benefit and exaggerated claims over forest sizes. The biggest example is the Kariba project in Zimbabwe, where carbon offset developer South Pole pulled out in October 2023 because of concerns that the money was not going to local people and the forest wasn't as big as claimed.

As the WWF argued in a February 2024 report, "Meaningfully engaging with local communities means working with communities...from planning and design to implementation and monitoring. While conservation practitioners often understand the value of this holistic approach, it can be challenging to find the necessary funding for these kinds of projects."

The WWF said it was committed to inclusive



conservation, arguing that "the most successful conservation projects are those that partner with local communities who derive benefits from the ecosystems they steward", although it conceded this was a difficult process.

Tanzania struggles with the same debate as the rest of the world: Should we focus on ringfencing specific areas where habitats, flora, and fauna are protected, and people excluded, or seek to promote the sustainable integration of human populations within a healthy natural world? The former often means displacing people and can leave relatively vulnerable species of plants and animals isolated from each other in fenced-off areas.

However, seeking to retain or create untouched wilderness can also conserve threatened species in the long-term, perhaps for a time when we are better placed to integrate human activity within the natural world when human populations begin





to fall. Such concerns are particularly acute in Tanzania, where the human population increased from just 10.9 million at independence in 1963 to an estimated 69.1 million in 2024, with the UN predicting a population of 304 million in 2100.

Any resettlement must be undertaken compassionately, and this has clearly not been the case in northern Tanzania, where the Maasai have long been subject to marginalisation and discrimination. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported in July last year that the Tanzanian government aims to relocate 82,000 Maasai from the Ngorongoro Conservation Area and surrounding areas by 2027 for “conservation and tourism purposes”.

The government claims that it has consulted local people over the process to take their needs into account, but HRW said that people had been forcibly evicted from their homes, and farming and grazing were banned over large areas. Since June 2022,

resettlement enforcement has included “beatings, shootings, sexual violence and arbitrary arrests to forcibly evict residents from their land”, according to HRW.

Maasai groups have also lost access to religious and cultural sites. At the same time, government conservation efforts are “disrupting their traditional way of life and severing their connection to the land”. Juliana Nnoko, HRW senior researcher, Women’s Rights Division, said in August last year. These moves are even more difficult to accept when they are designed to make way for trophy hunting, a long-running sore spot between Tanzania and neighbouring Kenya, which banned the practice in 1977.

HRW found one resettlement village, Msomera, in the Tanga region, which is 600 km from the new inhabitants’ original homes. The resettled Maasai have access to piped water, electricity and a school,



**LEFT:** In June, 2022, Tanzania began relocating Maasai pastoralists from the famed Ngorongoro conservation area to Handeni, a district 600 km (370 miles) south, in a move that rights campaigners have described as unlawful evictions.

Displaced pregnant women have had to choose between living close to family members or health services because only men tend to be consulted, she added.

The reports surrounding the relocation of Maasai in northern Tanzania are obviously shocking and require full investigation. Yet more widely, it is clear that the inclusive conservation being pursued is far from inclusive. The process requires the full involvement of local communities of all ethnic groups and genders, including in leadership roles. Apart from anything else, local people have a lot of useful knowledge, including on long-term environmental changes.

In addition, the jobs on offer tend to be given to fairly narrow sections of the population, in terms of gender but sometimes also ethnicity. Local populations vary enormously in terms of culture, lifestyle and attitudes. Tanzania has a particularly wide range of ethnic identities and cultures, with the hunter-gatherer Hadza and pastoralist Maasai having very different perspectives on land use from the many farming communities that live around the northern Tanzanian parks. At the same time, there should be no expectation that any ethnic group will stick to traditional activities without the option of change.

The only way to ensure that local people are included in conservation efforts is to consult widely and include a wide range of different interests in decision-making bodies. Tourists also need to be educated away from perceptions of pristine natural environments empty of all humans. Only then can there be a long-term future for flourishing habitats and wildlife alongside human development in what is one of the most biodiverse places on earth. [GGN](#)

but HRW argues that the voluntary resettlement programme is far from voluntary, while the new houses are unfit for Maasai traditional multi-generational households. The original inhabitants of Msomera have also lost some of their land in the process.

In June 2024, the European Union cancelled €18.4 million in conservation funding for Tanzania because of the treatment of Maasai in the Ngorongoro and Loliondo areas. It called on the Tanzanian government to stop funding conservation projects that violate human rights. Two months earlier, the World Bank also suspended the final \$50 million tranche of its \$150 million funding for the expansion of Ruaha National Park in southern Tanzania because of human rights abuses.

Even where there is some consultation over relocation, “women are given a subordinate role in what little decision-making occurs,” said Nnoko.



An aerial photograph showing a large, dark, irregularly shaped area of oil contamination on the ground. The oil spill is surrounded by lush green vegetation, including palm trees and other tropical plants. The spill appears to be a mix of dark, viscous oil and lighter, more watery areas, suggesting it has spread over time. The background shows a dense forest of palm trees and other tropical flora, with a hazy sky above.

# Oil is killing Nigeria's fishing industry

By Adejumo Kabir





**ABOVE:** Crude oil pollutes the waters of an estuary in this aerial photograph taken over B-Dere, Ogoni, Nigeria, in February 2020. Nigerians from the delta have asked British judges to allow them to sue Royal Dutch Shell Plc in London over the environmental damage caused by oil spills.

Before the discovery of oil in the 1960s, Nigeria had a thriving fishing industry, providing livelihoods for millions of people. Local fishermen using canoes, nets, and lines flourished in villages along the Niger Delta and other coastal communities across the country, harvesting various species, including shrimp, fish, and crustaceans.

They exported these catches to neighbouring continents, Europe, and the Americas, contributing significantly to the national economy. However, the discovery of oil led to the neglect of the fishing industry as oil exploration attracted massive investment and the diversion of funds from other sectors.

Though nine of the 36 Nigerian states – Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, and Rivers States – share the Atlantic Ocean

Photo: George Osodi/Bloomberg/Getty Images





coastline, the country now depends on fish imports to meet demand. According to WorldFish, a leading international research organisation working to improve food security, nutrition, and livelihoods through aquatic food systems, Nigeria, which has an estimated population of 224 million people, produces around 1.2 million metric tonnes of fish annually and spends one billion dollars a year on fish imports.

As the federal government has repeatedly admitted, Nigeria imports about 2.4 million metric tonnes of frozen fish annually, which drains the country's foreign exchange reserves.

One of the major reasons for this development is ongoing oil spills that kill fish and endanger the lives of residents in coastal communities. Spills often occur due to pipeline sabotage, and inadequate clean-up efforts have turned what was once a vibrant ecosystem into a toxic wasteland.

For instance, residents of Ayetoro, a coastal community in Ondo State, Nigeria, told *Africa in Fact* that livelihoods continue to suffer as a result of oil spillage, and accused oil companies of making their communities uninhabitable.

"Most of us in Ayetoro and over 200 communities on the Atlantic Ocean coastline in



Ondo earn a living from fishing, which was our forefathers' occupation," said Aralu Emmanuel, one of the community's youth leaders and himself a fisherman. "However, we can no longer engage in the business due to the pollution caused by oil spillage. Fish die in the river, and people have in the past lost their lives as a result." Emmanuel added that most of the residents of his community were jobless and idle due to damaged coastal ecosystems, contributing to poverty and unemployment.

In other Niger Delta states like Bayelsa,





fishermen suffer more than 200 oil spills every year, according to different news reports. Also, a recent Bayelsa State Oil and Environmental Commission report says oil companies have spilled at least 110,000 barrels of oil in Bayelsa over the past 50 years and 90% of this toxic pollution came from facilities operated by five international oil majors: Shell, Eni, Chevron, Total and ExxonMobil.

“Life has been terrible, and we have experienced a lot of hazards caused by water pollution,” said Stephen Orji, who heads a group of fishermen protesting the devastating effects of oil spillage in Bayelsa. “As I speak now, if you go to the river with your nets, you will only return with dead aquatic animals. They are all contaminated by oil spillage. Yet, there’s no compensation for the damage done to us. Representatives of the government often promise to hold various companies accountable for their negligence, but nothing significant has been done to rescue Nigeria’s fishing industry from dying.”

In a recent development, in October last year, two communities, Bille and Ogale, both in Rivers State in the Niger Delta, secured an important legal victory in a suit against Shell’s Nigerian subsidiary, Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), in the United Kingdom Court of Appeal. The

**ABOVE:** Abandoned fishing boats sit on the shoreline while fishermen cast their nets in the crude-oil polluted waters of Goi, Nigeria.

communities began legal action against Shell in 2015 after decades of environmental devastation caused by oil spills. More than 13,000 residents are demanding compensation for repeated oil spills allegedly from the company, which has rendered their land infertile and wiped out fish populations – their primary sources of income.

Experts argue that oil spills lead to a reduction in household food security by making seafood unsafe to eat. “It has acute and long-term effects on human health,” said Quadri Adesola, a senior researcher with Develop Africa Now, a non-governmental organisation promoting fisheries and aquaculture in Nigerian coastal communities. “Aside from poisoning the aquatic animals in the water, it also makes the water unusable for coastal communities. With all of these challenges, Nigeria’s fish industry cannot meet our consumption demands, let alone provide exports. The authorities need to give adequate attention to the fishing industry so the industry is again a profitable one.”





**ABOVE:** Decades of oil spills have left the Ogoniland region in southern Nigeria an environmental disaster zone but hopes are high of a rebirth of farming, fishing and clean water.

Photo: Yasuyoshi Chiba / AFP

Oil spillage around West Africa's coastlines is also an abuse of human rights. According to the July 2010 resolution of the United Nations General Assembly, government and international organisations are charged to provide financial resources, help capacity-building and technology transfer to help countries, particularly developing countries, to provide safe, clean, accessible and affordable drinking water and sanitation for all. The assembly added that the right to water entitles everyone to have access to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible, and affordable water for personal and domestic use.

But 14 years later, this is not the case in Nigeria's coastal areas. In fact, many communities hosting oil exploration projects in Nigeria have been found to lack access to clean water, which further complicates the woes of the people as they are forced to ingest hydrocarbons while trying to quench their thirst.

Aside from oil company activities frustrating the livelihood of these coastal communities, residents are also faced with the challenges of rising sea levels and

intense storms caused by climate change, which have been a feature of life for more than a decade but have gotten worse since 2019. The result is widespread flooding that destroys homes and properties.

According to Mercy Aiyemojuba, a fish farmer, more than 3,000 people have been displaced by sea incursions in Ayetoro, Ubale-Nla, Ilowo, Idi-Ogba, Erunna, Ipaare, Molutehin, and other communities along the Atlantic coast in the Ilaje area of Ondo state.

Aiyemojuba told *Africa in Fact* that she had lost her fishing boat and other equipment in a sea surge in early 2023 that had damaged her business. She then created ponds to culture fish but these had also suffered from sea surges. "The heavier the surge, the higher the loss incurred," she said.

Experts say the government needs to support coastal communities with significant intervention and protect residents of affected communities. "Coastal communities can only survive if the government takes the necessary action, or else climate will worsen the plight of these fishermen and cause further devastation to Nigeria's fishing



**LEFT:** Women receive a catch from fishermen on the River Bodo, which was damaged by devastating oil spills about 10 years ago in Bodo village, in Ogoniland, part of the Niger Delta region.



industry,” said Kingsley Enoch, a fishery and aquaculture researcher at the Olusegun Agagu University of Science and Technology, Okitipupa, Ondo State (OAUSTECH).

But amid the suffering of fishermen in the Ilaje communities of Ondo State, a multi-billion naira shore protection project, which was first awarded in 2004 and awarded again in 2009 by the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), has been abandoned by successive governments.

The current administration, however, has assured fishermen that the fishing industry will receive the support it needs to boost food security, job creation, and economic growth under the

leadership of Minister of Marine and Blue Economy Adegboyega Oyetola.

In August last year, the minister embarked on a working and study visit to Morocco, one of Africa’s leading fishing countries, whose fishing industry plays a significant role in the country’s economy, to gain insights aimed at enhancing Nigeria’s own fisheries and aquaculture sector as well as improving port efficiency. Oyetola has emphasised the government’s commitment to exploring global best practices and fostering partnerships that will drive growth, innovation, and sustainable development for Nigeria.

Oyetola said the knowledge gained from his visit to Morocco would be instrumental in shaping Nigeria’s national policy on marine and the blue economy. He added that if properly harnessed, the nation’s fishing industry could take over from the oil sector.

In October last year, the World Bank expressed interest in collaborating with Nigeria to enhance the development of its marine and blue economy sectors, particularly in sustainable fisheries. If all of these proposals come to fruition, Nigeria can revive its dying fishing industry and ensure food security, economic growth, and sustainable development. [GGP](#)



# ABALONE SMUGGLING: WHITE GOLD, OR FOR FOOLS?

By Terence Corrigan

“Beneath its surface, the sea holds many treasures.” It’s difficult to better these opening words of the documentary *White Gold*. Communities that have drawn their livelihoods from the sea have long recognised this; but with the progression of time and changing circumstances, not only can the value of those treasures change radically for those who previously depended on them, but they can become an outright blight.

*White Gold* is a study of South Africa’s abalone resources, its title appropriately referencing the large sea snail – *Haliotis midae*, or “perlemoen” in South African parlance – which is endemic along the country’s coastline, particularly in the Western and Eastern Cape provinces.

Abalone has been part of the diet of the inhabitants of the southern African coast for millennia, and artisanal harvesting has for generations supported the small fishing communities that dot the country’s southern coast.

A corresponding attachment to abalone exists elsewhere in the world, particularly in east Asia, where abalone is regarded as a delicacy – Bao Yu (鲍鱼) in Chinese, which carries connotations of assurance and abundance. Often consumed at celebratory events, abalone is an item whose

inclusion in a menu signals the status of the host and honour to the guests.

Potentially, the endemic abalone along South Africa’s coast and the demand for it in restaurants in Hong Kong is the stuff of a mutually beneficial trade exchange. Sadly, the reality is rather less salutary.

The commercial exploitation of abalone in South Africa is typically traced back to the 1940s. Harvesting was performed by divers contracted to one of five companies, which maintained their own processing plants.

The South African Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment’s (DFFE) 2023 report ‘Status of the South African Marine Fishery Resources’ shows how this developed over the years. Production was robust throughout the 1950s, growing rapidly in the early 1960s, and peaking at nearly 3,000 tonnes in 1965. By this point, concerns were growing about the impact of harvesting on abalone populations and restrictions were introduced in the latter years of the decade – the so-called “total allowable catch” (TAC).

This placed a hard legal cap on the abalone that could be harvested, and dramatically lowered what was being landed. Between the 1970s and 1990s, the TAC hovered below 1,000 metric tonnes, falling gradually to 500 tonnes in 1999. In the two decades



Photo: Joshua Zuckerman/Getty Images





Photo: flickr.com/kittikat

subsequently, the TAC fell precipitously, and after 2006, none reached 200 tonnes. By 2021, it was at a meagre 50.5 tonnes.

These falling quotas existed alongside a booming illicit market. The 50.5-tonne TAC was dwarfed by illegal harvesting, linked to a network of gangs, smuggling routes, and international syndicates, and tied into a devastating addiction epidemic. The abalone faced precisely the danger of extinction that the TAC had sought to prevent. What had gone wrong?

The TAC system always coexisted with some poaching. Communities along the coast saw the ocean as the natural source of their livelihoods. In contrast, others (sometimes recreational divers unconnected to fishing communities) saw the opportunity for quick money by gathering and selling abalone on the quiet. This was all limited in scope and posed no appreciable danger to abalone stocks.

South Africa's political transition in the 1990s opened South Africa to all manner of new business opportunities, including criminal ones. The transition represented a seismic shift in the management of the economy, which made its own waves in the blue economy. The post-



Photo: Auscape/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

1994 government sought redistribution to those previously excluded from the economic mainstream. In the abalone field, the goal was to shift opportunities from the five big concerns to small-scale and subsistence fishermen.

A permit system to govern this was established, though it was poorly and tactlessly administered; the state simply lacked the means to make it function well, even though this involved stepped up efforts against poaching and the launch of new environmental courts – which was perceived by many small-scale violators as harassment. At the same time, the increase in permits issued, coupled with

the falling TACs, meant that what could legally be made by individual fishermen could not underwrite livelihoods. Many grew deeply resentful that they were being squeezed out of profiting from a resource that was part of nature's bounty, and to which they felt entitled. In this environment, poaching made sense for frustrated coastal communities.

At the other end of the world, rapidly growing Asian economies enjoyed an unprecedented rise in prosperity and the taste to savour it. This was the case regarding abalone, with all its cultural and culinary significance. Indeed, with the rand falling relative to the dollar, South African abalone offered tantalising profits if it could be connected with those markets.

Into this stepped both domestic and foreign gangs. South Africa has long had a domestic gang culture of its own. Among poorly policed communities, they were able to assert their coercive authority and, at times, provide a species of security and order. To poverty-stricken communities, they could offer rare (though meagre) opportunities for a livelihood. Abalone had not been a major focus of South Africa's gangs, but they were quick to see its potential as a moneyspinner.

Chinese gangs had already established a small presence in South Africa, and the country's rapid global reintegration saw their activities surge. They were uniquely placed to understand the value of South African abalone in China and had the connections to launder it into Asian markets.

Together, these two groups provided an ersatz commercial infrastructure. Local gangs would control the harvesting and accumulation of the abalone. They would hire or pay the divers and arrange for transport. The foreign gangs would then

handle the drying and preparation of the abalone and its despatch to markets abroad.

For both, abalone was part of a larger portfolio of interests. The relationship developed into the equally profitable but rather more lucrative narcotics trade. South African gangs found that their Chinese counterparts could provide them with methamphetamine and its precursors, with abalone used as payment. Cheap and highly addictive, the South African variant of the drug, "tik", cut a swathe of destruction through many of

these communities, associated with rising crime and general societal pathologies.

Kimon de Greef, whose journalistic work has done much to bring the consequences of the illicit abalone trade to public attention, conducted an in-depth study in the Western Cape's poverty-stricken Hangberg community, which was published in 2013. It presented a nuanced picture. "Illegal abalone fishery," it comments, "has had both positive and negative social impacts in Hangberg. On the one

hand, money from abalone poaching contributes to local economic development and the livelihoods of at least 1,000 residents. On the other hand, lucrative profits encourage extravagant spending, and a culture of conspicuous consumption appears to have taken hold in the community. Abalone poaching thus funds lifestyles in addition to livelihoods, with substantial cash sums spent on clothes, fast cars, and recreational drug use." The impact of tik addiction has taken an extremely damaging toll on communities like Hangberg.

Speaking to *Africa in Fact*, De Greef notes that Hangberg was not a historical abalone harvesting ground. The practice moved in as demand for

**'A permit system to govern this was established, though it was poorly and tactlessly administered.'**



abalone grew, propelled by syndicates and growing competition in other areas. The trade is mobile and insatiable and exacts costs on the future prospects of the communities it impacts.

Just what volumes of abalone are harvested and trafficked? The best estimates appear to have been compiled by the NGO TRAFFIC. Very little abalone is consumed in South Africa, so harvesting – legal and illegal – can be determined from customs data from abalone importing territories. In brief, the total imported, less the TAC and other legally cultivated abalone, would give an indication of the amount poached. In a 2018 report, ‘Empty Shells’, TRAFFIC estimated that 55,863 tonnes of abalone were imported between 2000 and 2016 (the study’s timeframe), of which some 18,905 tonnes were legally produced.

Thus, 39,958 tonnes would have been poached – or well in excess of 2,000 tonnes per year (against a TAC that never reached 500 tonnes). This means that close to three-quarters of the abalone traded was illegally harvested. In monetary terms, the report estimated the illegally trafficked abalone to have been worth a cumulative \$891 million, or more than R10 billion. TRAFFIC has, in fact, suggested that the poached abalone industry may be worth more than all other South African fishing industries, apart from hake and squid.

Once out of the country, abalone is largely uncontrolled. In 2007, abalone was listed by South Africa under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which would have required exports to be accompanied by documentation granting official permission to do so. It was delisted in 2010 after “administrative” challenges – many officials simply didn’t understand how it was meant to work. There is, therefore, no global protection standard to regulate the trade.

The upshot is that South African abalone is described by the DFFE as “heavily depleted” and



Photo: Michael Macor/The San Francisco Chronicle via Getty Images

faces a real risk of extinction. Abalone hauls seem to be in decline, although the abalone population has proven more resilient than initial models had predicted. Combined with the severe harm the illicit economy inflicts, White Gold is an asset in a desperate economy.

As De Greef remarks: “It seems to me that over the past decade, the social costs of the abalone trade have multiplied, while the environmental costs have flattened out.”

The promise of the blue economy is that the resources and regenerative potential of the ocean can be harnessed to provide sustainably for human livelihoods. Abalone harvesting in South Africa is failing at this. Not only are its benefits paired with debilitating costs, but the resource itself is being obliterated.

To deal with this, it is essential to recognise the social context – poverty and exclusion, a crime-ridden environment, a suspicion of authority, and a sense of entitlement to the ocean’s resources. At its broadest, dealing with this demands the twin imperatives of dealing with the criminality that has taken hold of the trade and providing alternative livelihoods to the communities for whom poaching provides an income.

Combating the criminal aspects has failed

dismally for several reasons: weaknesses in South Africa's state, a lack of international coordination, and the level of penetration of the criminal economy.

In technical terms, observers propose enhanced enforcement, including specialist policing units, properly trained and equipped, along with dedicated courts to process offenders quickly and efficiently. Dr Ross Harvey, an expert in transnational environmental crime at Good Governance Africa, argues for an absolute ban on the trade.

The difficulty is that without extensive public buy-in, domestically and abroad, none of this has any hope of success. As long as alternatives are scarce, coastal communities will make whatever accommodations they must, and for socio-economic and cultural reasons, they do not see poaching as a "real" crime.


One possible avenue to explore is abalone aquaculture. At present, there are about a dozen abalone farming operations in South Africa, with a total production of 2,255 tonnes in 2022, according to the DFFE. However, the industry has been growing rapidly, and production is now double that of the previous decade.

Werner Piek of Abagold, an abalone farming operation near Hermanus, told *Africa in Fact* that South Africa is currently "a small player in the global market" – small by the standards of the more mature farming industries in Japan and South Korea, but a demonstration of potential. This production also comfortably exceeds the TAC.

But, as Piek explained, aquaculture is an expensive and difficult pursuit. As a rule of thumb, a tonne of abalone comes off the back of R1 million in investment. "An abalone farm is very costly," he said. "There's the site selection, the electricity, and the need for clean water. Then there's the permit process, a very complex regulatory framework. It's a 24/7 operation."

Obviously, abalone farming has a contribution to make. It provides desperately needed employment, although whether this could compensate for poaching would depend on the scale at which such facilities could be established. Aquaculture might be able to take up some of the commercial demand for abalone, and there have been experiments in reseedling the depleted populations. But there is no sign that it has a discernible impact on the poaching economy.

De Greef suggests that possibilities might lie in abalone ranching: partnerships between investors and communities to replace wild populations for their later exploitation. "It's an interesting idea," he comments, though complicated in view of the difficulties of community politics."

For now, the harsh reality is that there is a hard limit to what economic value can be extracted from South Africa's extant abalone resources, and the prospects for those that exist are rapidly being exhausted. As in any Gold Rush, sooner or later, the resource runs out. 

This piece draws on work originally published by the Institute for Security Studies' ENACT programme.





# A NEW BLUE ECONOMY MINISTER, **BUT** **NO PLAN**

Nigeria's marine conservation efforts are lagging, even with a new blue economy ministry, as ecosystem threats grow.

By Ini Ekott

Photo: Kuni Takahashi/Getty Images

Standing on the shores of Ibeno in Nigeria's southern Akwa Ibom state, Ola Oyi gazes at the horizon, his anxious face reflecting years of battling the seas. The ocean has provided for his family for over two decades, but lately, the catch has been relatively meagre. "We used to pull in fish a lot before. Now, we go out and come back with a lot less," he said.

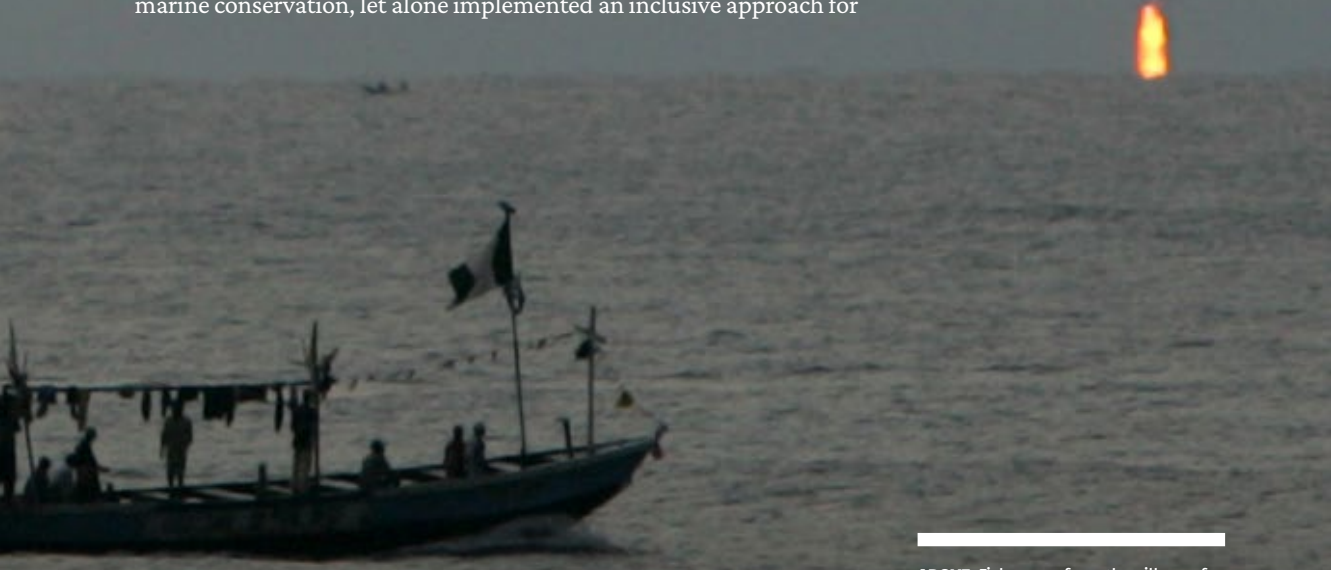
The 51-year-old blames the declining fish catch on oil pollution, unchecked overfishing – particularly by illegal foreign vessels – and pirate attacks that force fishers to avoid certain areas.

Oyi is one of millions of fishermen living on Nigeria's coast, hoping to see a turn of the tide in their catch and government intervention to protect the ocean and safeguard their livelihoods at a time of crushing economic crisis that has pushed some 19 million people into poverty in the last year, according to World Bank. So far, they've heard nothing. "There is no support whatsoever from the government," he said.

When President Bola Tinubu's administration created the Ministry of Marine and Blue Economy last year, hopes were high. Environmentalists saw the move as a way to better balance Nigeria's conservation needs with economic development.

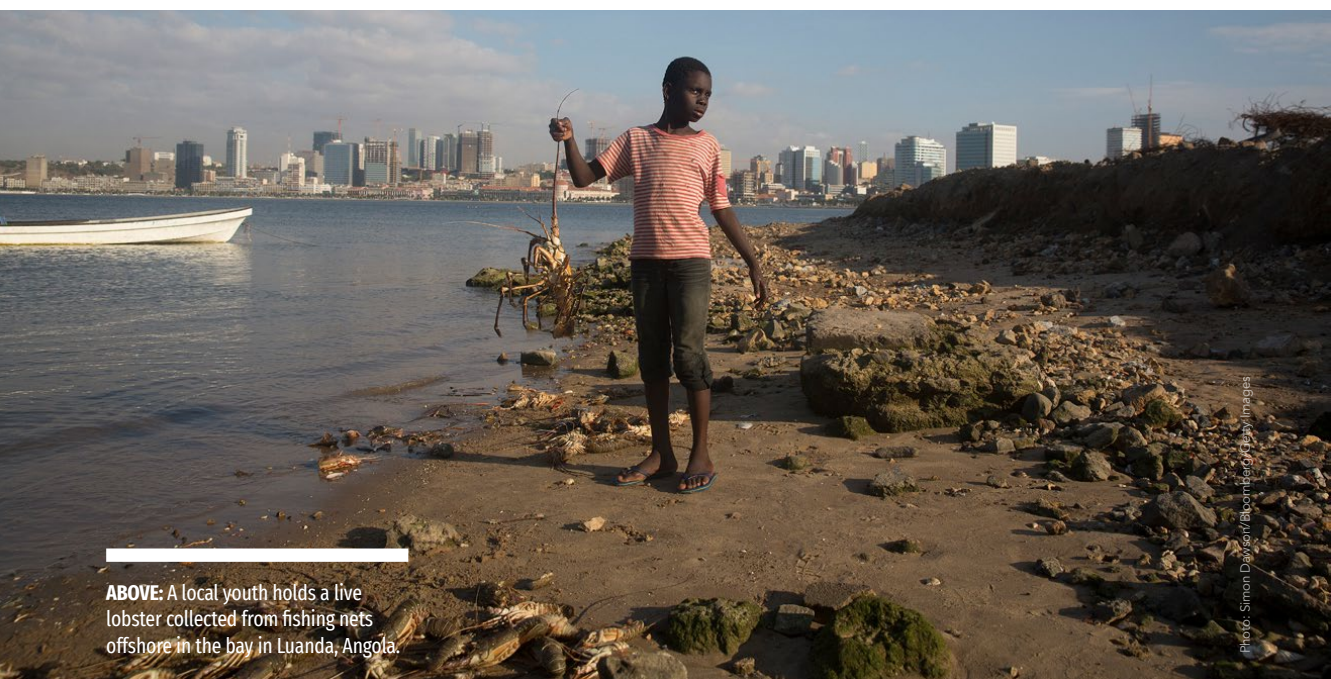
The new ministry was planned to align with the African Union's Blue Economy Strategy and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 14, which encourages conserving the ocean and ensuring sustainable use of marine resources.

More than a year later, the ministry has made little to no progress in marine conservation, let alone implemented an inclusive approach for



**ABOVE:** Fishermen from the village of Itak Abasi in Niger Delta.





**ABOVE:** A local youth holds a live lobster collected from fishing nets offshore in the bay in Luanda, Angola.

Photo: Simon Dawson/Bloomberg/Getty Images

thousands of communities dependent on aquatic resources for their livelihoods. The ministry lacks a comprehensive strategy plan, a clear budget, and concrete initiatives for coastal conservation.

“The effect of the new (marine and blue economy) ministry has not been felt down the ladder to where the coastal dwellers are,” Professor Ikenna Onyema, a marine scientist at the University of Lagos, told *Africa in Fact*.

“The environmental management plans are not implemented. Hence, there are no fish in the rivers, and the creeks are polluted. The mangroves that are the nursery grounds for migratory fish are dying because they are suffocating. They have been impacted by (crude) oil.”

Marine conservation is key to Nigeria’s blue economy, which aims for sustainable ocean use and better coastal livelihoods. Nigeria’s 850 km coastline, which stretches from Lagos in the southwest to Calabar further south, boasts rich marine resources. The country has one of the world’s largest mangrove ecosystems, covering more than 10,000 square km. The mangroves act as carbon sinks, marine habitats, and protection against coastal erosion.

The UN says the sustainable management of these ecosystems could boost fisheries, ecotourism, and climate resilience, especially in countries like Nigeria, where millions depend on freshwater and ocean fish and other coastal resources for food and income. However, these ecologies have faced severe degradation from oil and plastic pollution, overfishing, mangrove destruction, and ocean acidification. Pollution caused by illegal oil refineries run by criminal gangs also plagues the region.

The loss of mangroves has driven coastal communities to the edge of environmental and economic crises. According to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Nigeria has lost 35% of its mangroves over the past 20 years. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) also warned that unsustainable practices put Nigeria’s coastal biodiversity at severe risk. Yet, despite the mounting evidence, little attention is given to marine conservation efforts.

“Local communities around the riverine areas, around the lagoons and creeks and estuaries, are still using obsolete techniques for fishing; they are still harvesting coastal and riverine plants and animals in an unsustainable way,” said Onyema.



**ABOVE AND BELOW:** Fishermen work on the beach in the fishing village of Itak Abasi in the Niger Delta, Nigeria.



Experts say Nigeria can transform its coasts by adopting responsible fishing, creating marine protected areas, and restoring mangroves. Involving coastal communities in these efforts would ensure sustainable resource management, reduce poverty, and boost climate resilience.

The goal is to reduce pressure on natural resources by diversifying livelihoods and promoting marine conservation, according to Victor Ebong, professor of agricultural economics at the University

of Uyo, in the coastal state of Akwa Ibom. “There has been overexploitation of ocean resources due to poor regulation by appropriate authorities,” he said.

With growing global interest, the blue economy is emerging as the new green economy, and more countries in Africa, including Nigeria, Seychelles, Kenya, Mauritius, and Madagascar, are setting up dedicated blue economy ministries or state secretariats, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Previously, Nigeria’s marine economy was managed by a committee set up in 2022 and headed by the country’s vice president, but it had no clear national framework. The Tinubu administration, which came into office in May 2023, created a dedicated ministry to accelerate progress.

On its website, the ministry lists its mandates, including marine conservation, and speaks of its determination to engage with coastal communities. In reality, government efforts have focused more on the economically lucrative aspects of the blue economy, such as shipping, port development, and offshore energy.



In the past year, there were no programmes towards marine conservation, officials said. The ministry has still not produced a national policy framework more than a year after its creation.

Environmental activists have expressed alarm over the lack of progress. “When it comes to the marine and blue economy, not much has been done, either in shore protection or the dividends that it is supposed to bring,” said Henry Erikowa, who leads Coastal and Marine Areas Development Initiative, a non-profit based in the oil-rich Niger Delta region.

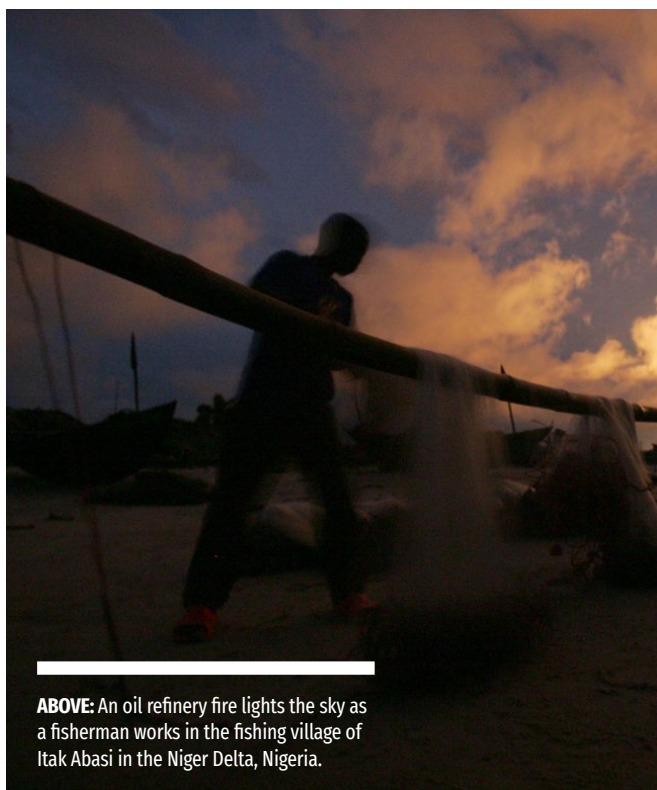
The government, however, has said it would start with “sensitisation” of communities on marine conservation, and a programme is billed to begin in the coming months. “We thank the president for creating this ministry. We are making progress, and we believe the first step is to enlighten communities about conservation,” Omoragbon Wellington, who heads the fisheries and aquaculture unit at the Federal Ministry of Marine and Blue Economy, told *Africa in Fact*.

Government insiders have said progress is slow because the department is not yet fully organised. Since its launch, there has been no formal budget for marine conservation and no clear plan. More than a year later, office buildings are still being assigned, and duties are still being allocated.

In the 2024 federal budget, the closest allocation to marine conservation was 14.9 million naira (\$8,976), designated for “preliminary assessment for conservation plans of wetlands”. There was no indication the fund was released.

A top official, speaking anonymously, told *Africa in Fact*, “We don’t even have a budget as we speak. It was just last month that we managed to move some of our staff from the old office.”

At an event to review a draft strategy in mid-October last year, Blue Economy Minister Adegboyega Oyetola said the ministry’s establishment “reflects our firm commitment to harnessing Nigeria’s vast marine resources.”



**ABOVE:** An oil refinery fire lights the sky as a fisherman works in the fishing village of Itak Abasi in the Niger Delta, Nigeria.

“Our goals include increasing blue food production, creating jobs, and building climate-resilient coastal communities,” he said. The minister confirmed the recent transfer of the fisheries and aquaculture department and said the move “further strengthens our focus on these areas”.

Oyetola said the strategy document was being developed with support from the African Union – Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources and would be ready by December last year. However, there is some doubt that this will translate to the kinds of transformative actions that are quickly needed.

“The mangrove ecosystem has been depleting fast, affected by oil exploration and illegal bunkering. There must be stakeholder engagements; you cannot sit down in Abuja and talk about the blue economy,” Erikowa said.

Some experts argue that the growing focus on the blue economy could ironically harm the marine ecosystems and communities it sets out to protect. Nnimmo Bassey, a Nigerian conservationist, warned that while the ocean economy might benefit coastal



Photo: Kuni Takahashi/Getty Images



Photo: Kuni Takahashi/Getty Images

**ABOVE:** Fishermen at sea near Itak Abasi in Niger Delta, Nigeria, as flares from an oil refinery are seen in the background.

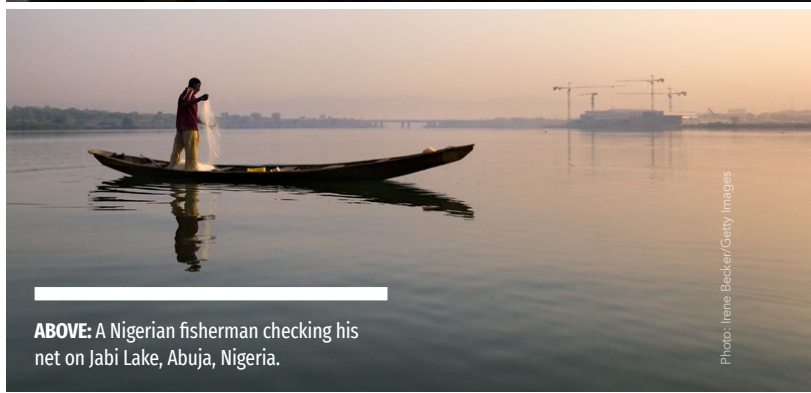


Photo: Irene Becker/Getty Images

**ABOVE:** A Nigerian fisherman checking his net on Jabi Lake, Abuja, Nigeria.

areas, it risks sidelining local communities and affecting their livelihoods and rights.

“Having a ministry on the blue economy is a wrong move,” said Bassey, director of the Health of Mother Earth Foundation, an environmental think-tank. “It opens the marine sector to great risks.”

Nigeria has a history of ignoring local communities in resource-rich areas during environmental and livelihood discussions. After decades of oil exploration, companies like Shell, ExxonMobil, and Eni are selling onshore assets to local firms and moving offshore – without consulting affected communities. Last year, the government announced it would approve asset sales if companies cleaned up and compensated communities, but approvals given in October lacked these conditions.

Bassey said the government’s sustainable conservation must prioritise coastal communities to ensure they benefit from the blue economy. Incentives could include paying locals for ecosystem services and social protection mechanisms to

promote conservation and strengthen regulations, he said. The incentives could be tied to specific actions, such as observing closed fishing seasons or indirectly supporting conservation by reducing community vulnerability and building resilience through diversified livelihoods.

Marine protected areas should also be expanded to include estuaries, rivers, creeks, and other critical marine spaces for long-term conservation, Bassey said.

Onyema agrees that any projects must be centred around local communities. “Involving communities is crucial because they understand the terrain and their livelihoods, whether it is farming or fishing, which they’ve practised for generations. Without their involvement, you risk disrupting and impairing their livelihoods,” he said.

In the absence of government intervention, groups like Erokaya’s Coastal and Marine Areas Development Initiative say they are acting by planting new mangroves and conducting community outreach programmes that provide periodic enlightenment and health services to locals. [GGP](#)





# WEST AFRICA'S SCOURGE OF FOREIGN FLEETS

By Blamé Ekoue

**ABOVE:** Bo Yuan, a large Chinese fishing boat waiting for a licence to fish off the coast of Zanzibar, Tanzania. Chinese fishing companies have been accused of pillaging fish from waters around Africa, killing the local fishing market.

Photo: Andrew Atchison/Getty Images



Foreign fleets, predominantly Chinese and South Korean, dominate West African waters, reaping profits while local economies suffer. Industrial vessels engage in destructive practices such as *saiko*, a form of transshipment whereby large trawlers offload catches onto smaller boats for resale. A 2024 Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) report said that *saiko* accounted for more than 100,000 tonnes of illegally caught fish in Ghana in a single year.

Chinese vessels are the most prolific offenders, catching an estimated 2.35 million tonnes annually in the region – half of China’s distant-water fleet catch, valued at \$5 billion. This overexploitation devastates artisanal fishing communities. In Ghana, artisanal fishers have seen a 40% decline in income per canoe over the past 15 years. Local fishermen, like Ghanaian community leader Nii

Gortsui, are calling for designated fishing zones to protect their livelihoods.

“The authorities must demarcate zones on the high seas to protect local fishermen,” Gortsui told *Africa in Fact*.

West Africa has become the global epicentre of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. An estimated 20% of the world’s illegally caught fish come from these waters, costing the region more than \$2 billion annually. While the fishing sector is vital for the livelihoods of millions in coastal countries, poor management and unchecked exploitation by foreign vessels are pushing the region’s fisheries to the brink.

IUU fishing poses a serious threat to food security, economic stability, and marine biodiversity in West Africa. Factors such as weak enforcement capacity, overfishing, pollution, and climate change





**ABOVE:** A member of Ivory Coast's navy patrols near two Chinese fishing trawlers docked at the port of Abidjan after being accused of fishing illegally off the coast of the West African country in November 2014.

exacerbate the crisis. Maxime Diomande, head of Côte d'Ivoire's National Fisheries Monitoring Centre, has underscored the urgent need for action against IUU, saying it was "a major scourge and a challenge for the sustainable management of fish stocks". Côte d'Ivoire alone loses \$1.5 million annually to illegal fishing, reflecting the broader regional crisis.

The competition between artisanal fishers and industrial trawlers is not only economic; it can also get physical. Catch shortages often force artisanal fishermen to venture further out to sea, exposing themselves to greater risks, and violent encounters with industrial vessels are increasingly common. Togolese fisherman Alipui Mauko recounts his experience of encounters with armed Chinese trawler crews: "They destroy our nets and fight us. Some even shoot when they see our canoes," Mauko told *Africa in Fact*. In 2020, three Mauritanian fishermen died after a Chinese vessel struck their canoe. Such incidents highlight the human cost of IUU fishing, as local fishers risk their lives in already precarious conditions.

IUU fishing affects not just fishermen but entire communities. Declining fish stocks undermine food security and reduce incomes, exacerbating poverty



Photos: Issouf Sanogo / AFP

and inequality. Women play a significant role in fish processing and marketing and are particularly hard hit. A 2023 Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) report found that 78% of fishers and processors in West Africa struggle to feed their families due to diminishing catches.

Environmental damage is another consequence. Industrial vessels often use harmful methods such as fish aggregating devices (FADs), which attract juvenile and protected species, further depleting fish stocks. Overfishing disrupts ecosystems and contributes to the disappearance of species critical to marine biodiversity.

However, efforts to combat IUU fishing have gained momentum. Regional programmes, such as the West Africa Regional Fisheries Programme, supported by the World Bank and International Development Association (IDA), aim to strengthen monitoring and enforcement. The European Union's PESCAO project, which concluded in 2023, focused



on enhancing regional governance and fisheries monitoring. It trained 766 agents and conducted 17 joint patrols, yielding promising results.

The Togolese government has also enacted stricter fishing laws, including fines and imprisonment for violators. However, enforcement remains a challenge. High operational costs, corruption, and limited resources hinder surveillance efforts. Boubacar Ba, head of the Monitoring, Control, and Surveillance Department of the Sub-Regional Fisheries Commission (SRFC), has noted that a single patrol boat costs billions of CFA francs and is beyond the reach of many countries.

Experts agree that sustainable solutions require a participatory approach that involves local fishers. Togolese fisherman Awoudja Nyawudzi believes equipping artisanal fishers with technology to report illegal activities could enhance enforcement. “The cooperation of national navies with fishermen could help. Authorities must provide tools to signal trawlers fishing illegally,” he told *Africa in Fact*.

Non-governmental organisations are stepping in to help fill gaps. Groups like Sea Shepherd have partnered with coastal states to combat illegal fishing, leading to the arrest of 55 vessels in recent years. Collaborations like these highlight the potential for grassroots and international efforts to complement state initiatives.

Legal reforms are also crucial for tackling IUU

fishing. The 1982 Montego Bay Convention (also known as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea [UNCLOS], which established exclusive economic zones (EEZs), provides a foundation for regulating marine resources. Countries like Senegal have updated their fisheries laws to include harsher penalties for illegal activities. Senegal’s revised code introduces higher fines, vessel confiscation, and the withdrawal of captains’ licences.

Despite these measures, IUU fishing persists, driven by weak enforcement and the mobility of offenders. High-risk vessels often exploit regulatory gaps, using flags of convenience to evade detection. The EU has urged West African states to harmonise legal frameworks and improve transparency to counter these tactics.

Therefore, the fight against IUU fishing in West Africa is far from over. A sustainable solution requires coordinated action at local, regional, and international levels. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms, equipping local fishers, and harmonising legal frameworks are critical steps.

As stakeholders rally to protect West Africa’s fisheries, the challenge lies not only in preserving marine resources but also in safeguarding the livelihoods and food security of millions. The sea, a shared resource, must become a space of equity and sustainability rather than exploitation.



## REGIONAL COOPERATION IS KEY

By Mamah Djiman Hairath

**W**est African nations are strengthening partnerships to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. These efforts aim to address challenges within the blue economy, including sustainable resource management, improved governance, and the development of the fishing sector.

Since 2020, bilateral and multilateral agreements have gained momentum. In December 2022, Benin and Togo launched their first joint patrols, financed by the European Union (EU) through the PESCAO programme. By the end of 2023, Ghana had joined the initiative, which now includes sea patrols and information sharing through the Ghana Regional Monitoring, Control, and Surveillance Centre.

Established in May 2021 by the Fisheries Committee for the West-Central Gulf of Guinea (FCWC), this centre provides automatic identification systems to track vessels and shares data on authorised fishing activities.

Comments by Séraphin Dédi, Secretary General of the FCWC, highlight the significance of these efforts: “The establishment of the centre brings us closer to a coordinated strategy to undertake joint actions, including patrols aimed at improving security in our maritime domain.”

The collaboration has also drawn support from international organisations, including the European Fisheries Control Agency, the Regional Maritime Security Centre for West Africa, and Trygg Mat Tracking, which provides analytics for regional patrols.

IUU fishing costs West Africa an estimated \$1.95 billion annually across the fish value chain and \$593 million in household income. Beyond economic losses, illegal fishing exacerbates food insecurity

and depletes fish stocks, undermining livelihoods in coastal communities. According to Duncan Copeland, Executive Director of Trygg Mat Tracking: “For decades, foreign trawlers, mainly Chinese, have targeted the region, leading to a sharp decline in fish stocks. Sea patrols are key to effective enforcement, but only when well-coordinated and informed.”

In September 2023, Senegal and Gambia signed a bilateral agreement to jointly combat IUU fishing and promote their local fishing industries. Under the agreement, each country grants 250 licences to artisanal fishing operators from the other. Musa Drammeh, Gambia’s Minister of Fisheries, emphasised its potential to improve fish stock assessments and enhance the surveillance of marine waters.

Yet, as highlighted in a May 2023 Amnesty International report, insufficient naval patrols allow industrial vessels to encroach on areas reserved for artisanal fishermen. This has further strained coastal communities dependent on dwindling marine resources.

To address overfishing, Ghana, Benin, and Togo also implemented a joint fishing closure period in 2023, halting industrial trawling for two months and artisanal fishing for one month. Paul Odartei Bannerman, Deputy Executive Director of Ghana’s Fisheries Commission, said these measures needed to be coordinated regionally to work. “The effect on fish stocks would be insignificant if only Ghana observed a closed season.”

The closures are part of a broader pact to rebuild fish stocks and curb destructive practices. But as fish wholesaler De Souza Amele told *Africa in Fact*: “At least the trawlers destroying our resources will no longer venture into these territorial waters during the agreed closure period.”

Morocco’s partnerships with several African nations – including Benin – have provided a model for fisheries development. Through the High-Level Conference of the Blue Belt Initiative held in



**ABOVE:** Fishermen from the Democratic Republic of Congo look on after being arrested by the Uganda People's Defence Marine Force (UPDMF) for fishing illegally on Lake Edward, in August 2018.

Photos: Isaac Kasamani / AFP



January 2023, Morocco shared expertise in maritime training, scientific research, and aquaculture. Regular joint commission sessions now facilitate the exchange of experiences and formalise partnerships.

Gaston Cossi Dossouhoui, Benin's Minister of Agriculture, praised Morocco's contributions: "This approach helps countries in the sub-region acquire experience in maritime fisheries cooperation, focusing on sustainable solutions."

Efforts to promote a sustainable blue economy extend beyond enforcement. Workshops and forums, such as the March 2023 Fez conference, have emphasised the importance of collaboration. Experts at the event stressed responsible resource management and the fight against overexploitation.

Marcelle Aka, spokesperson for the Media Observatory for Sustainable Fisheries, noted: "The importance of collaboration between states to address challenges in the blue economy is undeniable." Meanwhile, Ernest Tindo, an international consultant in the blue economy, added: "Stakeholder involvement is essential to ensure the success of these initiatives."

The collective actions of West African states demonstrate the power of unity in combating IUU fishing and fostering sustainable development. With strengthened regional agreements, improved surveillance, and shared knowledge, these efforts are vital to protecting marine resources and securing the future of the blue economy. [GGI](#)





# THE RIGHTS AND WRONGS OF BIODIVERSITY FUNDING

By Joe Walsh



A large green turtle is swimming in the upper left portion of the frame, its long tail trailing behind it. Below the turtle, a vast and diverse coral reef system stretches across the bottom half of the image. The water is a deep, clear blue, and the sunlight filters down, creating a shimmering effect on the coral and the water's surface. The overall scene is a serene underwater landscape.

When it comes to environmental financing worldwide, biodiversity, natural capital, and inclusive conservation have received far less attention than carbon emissions and climate change.

United Nations Environment Programme research shows the biodiversity funding gap has reached \$942 billion. Ahead of the 2024 United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity COP16, which was held in Colombia at the end of October, BloombergNEF estimated that \$208 billion was the current annual amount of biodiversity financing, an increase from \$166 billion in 2021 but still way short of the \$1.15 trillion needed, according to Bloomberg's Biodiversity Finance Factbook.

"We need to value nature in a certain way and develop finance to do that," says Malango Mughogho, managing director of ZeniZeni Sustainable Finance, a sustainability think tank aiming to transform investments to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

Despite having, in recent years, started to garner the attention of global financiers, the world is still falling further behind on the number of resources needed for biodiversity protection and restoration.

**ABOVE:** A green turtle swimming amongst corals in the Maldives Islands.

Photos: Getty Images





**COP16**  
CALI - COLOMBIA  
Paz con la Naturaleza

CONFERENCIA DE LAS  
NACIONES UNIDAS SOBRE  
**BIODIVERSIDAD**

COP16 / CP-MOP 11 / NP-MOP 5  
CALI - COLOMBIA 2024



**ABOVE:** Susana Muhamad, Colombia's environment minister and COP16 president (L), speaks during the United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP16) in Cali, Valle del Cauca department, Colombia, in October 2024.

Photo: Jair F. Coll/Bloomberg/Getty Images

In 2020, the G20 launched the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD) to create a platform for improving biodiversity, natural capital, and inclusive conservation funding. It followed in the footsteps of the Taskforce on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD), which was formed in 2015 by the Financial Stability Board (FSB) at the G20's request.

The TCFD was created with the goal of convincing companies that have large investors to publicly disclose the estimated carbon emissions from their activities as well as the downstream emissions from their products or services. In addition, it sought to encourage disclosure of companies' exposure to climate-related risk, be that physical risks such as a company operating in an area affected by increasingly severe flooding

or transitional risk – for instance, a carbon-heavy energy producer that might be affected by future carbon taxes or other policies towards encouraging greener energy sources.

The driving idea was that climate change presents a financial risk to the global economy, and investors need to have the information to assess that risk to treat it like other financial risks and allocate investments accordingly. It produced recommendations for the information that should be disclosed and disbanded last year, with the G7 agreeing to make the reporting mandatory.

In the case of biodiversity, the same level of financial risk to investors isn't as apparent. Yet similarly to the TCFD, the TNFD sets out to better inform investors of natural risks to capital. Its remit is to "provide decision-makers in business and

capital markets with better quality information through corporate reporting on nature.” This then “allows businesses to incorporate nature-related risks and opportunities into their strategic planning, risk management, and asset allocation decisions.” Yet, there are no plans for TNFD reporting to become mandatory.

“Africa’s economy is deeply intertwined with its natural capital,” argues Dorothy Maseke, head of the African National Capital Alliance (ANCA) secretariat and lead, nature finance and TNFD, FSD Africa, adding that 62% of the continent’s GDP relies on natural resources. This compares to 55% of the global GDP being moderately or highly dependent on nature.

The ANCA is an initiative created to drive coordinated advocacy and action on natural capital across the continent.

“Initiatives like the TNFD are important in driving greater financial responsibility, as they

require financial institutions and real-economy companies to disclose the impacts of their operations on nature. This transparency will enhance responsible investment and business practices that protect and conserve Africa’s natural capital,” claims Maseke.

The TNFD argues that “taking action to conserve and restore nature is now a critical global priority”. But in the African context, the term “conserving nature” has its own problematic and often damaging legacy.

In South Africa, many of its national parks, particularly the Kruger National Park, trace their roots back to British and Afrikaner colonialists removing people from their lands to create conservation areas where big animals would be protected. Unsurprisingly, this has led to resentment of the whole process of parks and conservation efforts.

More recently and further north, in Kenya, large pastoral lands have been expropriated solely for



Photo: Getty Images





Photo: Getty Images

wildlife conservation and tourism, to the detriment of local communities. These are just two instances of what has been a recurring feature of conservation efforts in Africa by those from elsewhere.

It is part of the reason ZeniZeni Sustainable Finance's Mughogho does not approve of the term conservation and feels that, as it has been practised, the focus has been on flora and fauna without due consideration of human communities.

At times, the conversation around conservation in Africa has been framed as a choice between preserving animals and human development. But the ANCA rejects that conflict.

"The transition from fossil fuels does not mean limiting Africa's potential for growth," argues Maseke. "It is about investing in nature-based solutions and clean energy that can provide long-term economic benefits without the destructive impacts of fossil fuel extraction.

"Development that disregards environmental

sustainability can lead to short-term gains but causes long-term damage, and this is already evident on the continent given the pace of deforestation, land degradation, and biodiversity loss," she adds.

Mughogho agrees, adding, "On the whole, there is no trade-off [to be made] between preserving nature and development. We look at financing as something that should have a positive impact. SDGs can't ignore nature."

It is understandable that another set of principles, guidelines, and standards with the goal of conserving nature set out by financiers in the global north, but with a global remit, could cause some concern in Africa. This is why ANCA was established: to be "Africa's voice" on nature. To guarantee that this voice is heard on the global stage, particularly in respect of the TNFD, and "ensure that the African context is integrated into these standards".

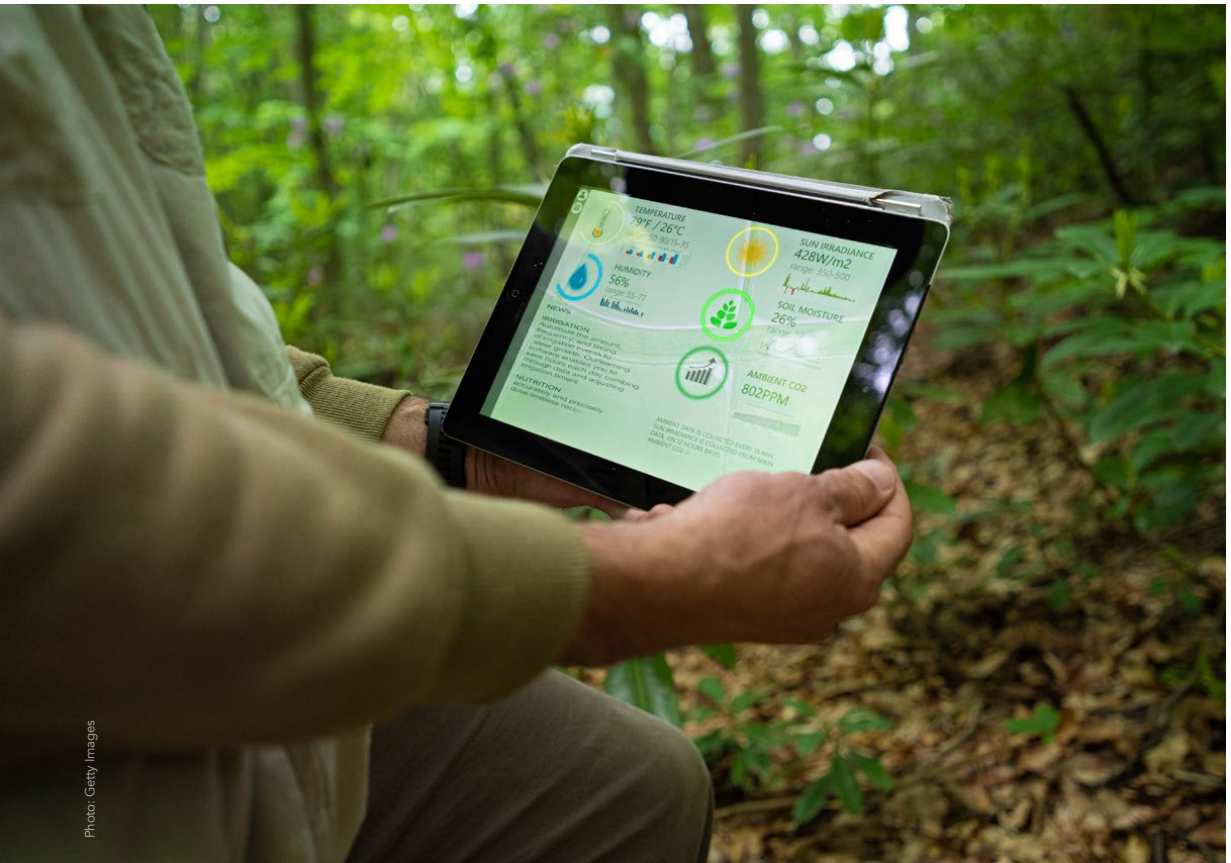


Photo: Getty Images

“Natural capital, when done right – preserving nature and biodiversity – also provides greater opportunities in sustainable agriculture, eco-tourism, and innovative financing models (e.g. biodiversity credits) that expand the scope for investment,” states Maseke.

Biodiversity credits, like their more popular cousin carbon credits, are one potential contributor to averting and reversing biodiversity loss. However, whereas carbon credits have seen \$36 billion invested into projects, with carbon pricing revenues exceeding \$100 billion for the first time last year, less than \$1 million worth of credits have been purchased.

Regarding green financing, carbon and all greenhouse gas emissions are currently attracting funding for two main reasons. Firstly, many governments allow companies to use carbon credits to offset carbon pricing liabilities, which are compulsory in many jurisdictions, either as carbon taxes or Emissions Trading Systems (ETS).

This is a big incentive for companies to invest in carbon credits and set them off against their carbon emissions, similar to a charitable donation tax write-off. Secondly, on the voluntary side of carbon markets, companies that pollute use carbon credits to bring down their emissions figure, not because they are compelled to, but for good publicity or to avoid bad publicity.

Biodiversity credits simply don’t offer these direct benefits to businesses and financial institutions. Investing in a biodiversity credit may offer beneficial publicity but won’t affect a bottom-line figure. That remains the main problem holding back biodiversity investment; it’s trickier to define, count, and quantify the benefits for both an end user and an investor.

In addition, both carbon and biodiversity credits have been criticised for not delivering the benefits they claim to and are often used for egregious greenwashing.





Photo: Cem Osdal/Anadolu via Getty Images

For instance, carbon credits are created to offset emissions by not cutting down a forest that was never under threat of being cut down. Recently, a United Arab Emirates-based company called Blue Carbon, with links to Dubai's royal family and with no forest management experience, acquired huge swathes of forest land across several African countries (Liberia, Zambia, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe) to launch carbon offset projects, which critics say could be sold to the UAE and other oil-reliant countries with large carbon footprints. At the same time, they continue large-scale fossil fuel production and use.

Africa must be wary of greenwashing like this, though Mughogho insists that “we’re not behind as a continent” on biodiversity protection, just that “Africa is falling behind on monitoring.”

“Robust regulation is essential to ensure biodiversity credits achieve their intended purpose

## ‘Africa is falling behind on monitoring.’

by setting clear standards and transparency. This is crucial as Africa’s economy is deeply intertwined with its natural capital,” adds Maseke.

Malango insists “there is no silver bullet”, be it TNFD, biodiversity credits, or any other means; rather, “multi-stakeholders will be required to address it [biodiversity protection and restoration].”

Those stakeholders will need to ensure Africa’s voice is more than just heard when it comes to protecting the continent’s biodiversity. [GGP](#)

# CARTOON

by Victor Ndula









# Selling Congo to the highest bidder

By Issa Sikiti da Silva

**T**he Conkouati-Douli National Park, a 795.500-hectare (7,955 km<sup>2</sup>) wonderland located in south-western Congo-Brazzaville on the border with Gabon, is on the verge of becoming a drilling site. A Chinese company is preparing to move in heavy equipment and manpower to launch intensive oil exploration following the granting of a permit by the Sassou Nguesso administration in February last year.

The move came barely six weeks after the government had accepted \$50 million from the European Union (EU) and the Bezos Fund to protect its forests.

Now, 26% of the park's surface area (1575,8 km<sup>2</sup>) is staring down the barrel of a gun of the joint venture between Congo Holding United, an 85% company owned by China Oil Natural

**ABOVE:** A Conkouati-Douli National Park ranger feeds chimpanzees among the aerial roots of mangrove trees in the Noumbi River, Republic of the Congo.

Photo: Auscape/Universal Images Group via Getty Images



Gas Overseas Holding Ltd, in which the government has a 15% stake through the state-controlled *Société Nationale des pétroles du Congo* (SNPC).

Earth Insight, which alongside Greenpeace and 13 local NGOs last year called on donors to suspend funding for park conservation until the oil and gas permit was revoked, said the Conkouati oil exploration permit covers 26% of the Conkouati-Douli National Park and more than 1,000 km<sup>2</sup> of intact rainforest.

Created in 1999, the park is the country's most biodiverse protected area, recognised as a Ramsar Site and registered on the indicative list of UNESCO World Heritage. The facility, which has a marine section of 412,195 hectares, protects more than 5,000 km of coastal, marine, and forest ecosystems where the Congo's tropical rainforest meets the Atlantic Ocean.

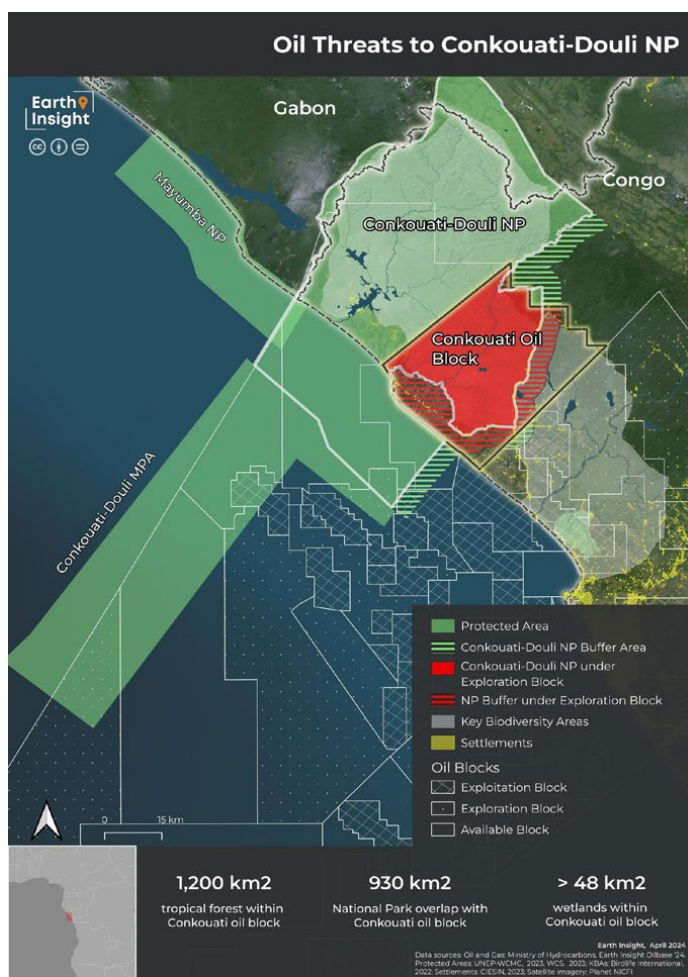
Nevertheless, it remains unclear what will happen to its residents, a long list of which comprises, among others, gorillas, chimpanzees, hippos, elephants, buffaloes, Nile crocodiles, sea turtles, manatees, dolphins and whales, river hogs, and a multitude of migratory birds. Nearly 7,000 indigenous people live in 31 villages on the park's edge, mostly fishermen from the coast who have been established there since the 13th century.

The campaigners are worried that prospecting oil and gas will threaten the survival of the park, which is home to key endangered wildlife species, including the western lowland gorilla, the leatherback turtle, and the forest elephant.

Despondency and anger have been mounting in Pointe-Noire, Congo's second-largest city, located nearly 130 km from the park. Many residents accuse local and international environmental organisations

of doing little to stop the government-China joint venture from "selling Africa to the highest bidder". "They were just making noises, nothing much", Mesmin Matondo told *Africa in Fact* by telephone. "I think they should have taken concrete actions, like sitting down with the government and the Chinese company, to request assurances that the park's occupants (people, flora, and fauna) will not be harmed.

"By engaging in a dialogue with them, they could have reminded the government that its action constitutes a violation of a 1999 presidential decree establishing the park, which states that exploitation permits can only be granted within areas designated as 'eco-development zones', but that extractive activities might not be allowed within the 5 km buffer zone on the south and east sides of the park."



Claire Mavoungou, an environment student who was only 10 years old when her father took her and the entire family to visit the national park, describes the government's granting of the oil permit as an unspeakable act of betrayal and treason. "My father would be turning in his grave," she said. "I think he knew that the park [was] precious because he used to say something like, 'This park is a treasure that needs to be protected at all costs. I hope in the future the authorities will not fall for the temptation of digging it up to find what is hidden underneath.' I was young and did not know what he was referring to, but now I know. It's treason, period."

Mavoungou questioned the efficacy of environmental organisations' efforts. "I don't think they tried hard enough," she said. "We are disappointed in them; we really thought the DRC scenario would be repeated here."

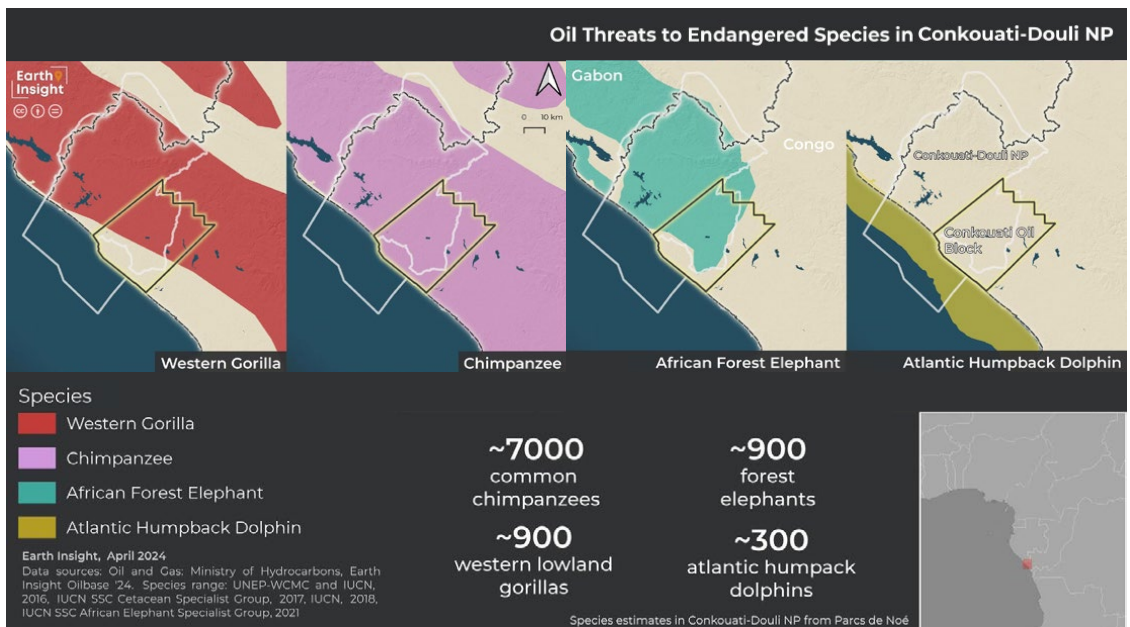
She was referring to the DRC government's decision in mid-October last year to concede defeat by cancelling, at least temporarily, a major auction of rights to drill for oil and gas across the country, including in highly sensitive parts of the Congo

Basin. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ) revelations about the auction process, plagued with apparent preferential treatment and backroom deals, might have influenced the decision.

However, that looks highly unlikely on the other side of the Congo River, where the government, determined to increase the production of fossil fuels at all costs, refuses to budge, ignoring calls by the environmental community to stop the destruction of one of Africa's most amazing natural jewels.

To show that it meant business and to speed up the process, Congo Holding United announced in early October that it would invest \$150 million over the next three years to accelerate the drilling of the Konkouati-Koui and Nanga III wells.

"To increase national production, we must be able to capitalise on proven reserves. We want to develop the free fields so that production can increase and the government can have additional room to manoeuvre and resolve the problems of the Congolese," local media reports quoted Fulbert Dzimbe, director-general of Congo Holding United, as saying.





But speaking from the capital, Brazzaville, a civil servant who wished to remain anonymous wondered what problems President Denis Sassou Nguesso would solve by allowing China to destroy the Conkouati-Douli National Park, problems he had failed to solve during the nearly 40 years he has been in power.

“We started exporting oil a very long time ago, but we still have nothing – no stable electricity and water supply, no adequate health system. Our youth have no jobs, and we still earn peanuts as salary. Corruption persists, and poverty is rising. I’m not sure what Mr Dzimbe says about room for manoeuvre and resolving the problems of the Congolese. It’s called demagoguery.”

Like his countrymen, the civil servant deplored the defeatist attitude of international NGOs, which he accused of throwing in the towel without a fight. “They should have engaged in a dialogue with China to remind them that what it is doing to Africa is unfair,” he said.

The self-proclaimed Global South leader, China, often describes its partnership with the continent as a “win-win” process. Still, its local and international critics and many ordinary Africans disagree, saying its activities amount to neocolonialism. They

complain it has not done enough to improve the lives of millions of Africans still trapped in poverty.

Claude\*, an unemployed university graduate who also spoke to *Africa in Fact*, wondered why China spoke of a win-win partnership while one of its companies was preparing to tear apart a national park, risking the lives of endangered species and indigenous people in the process.

Another concerned citizen, Brice\*, who echoed the sentiments of other Congolese interviewed, said: “These Chinese people are unpredictable. They can go to the Conkouati for oil and gas but end up cutting trees to make timber or digging up to look for diamonds and gold. I really predict an enormous environmental disaster in and around the park. It’s not right; someone needs to stop China from destroying our lands and plundering our natural resources.”

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), a London-based NGO, said in a recent report that while Chinese investment and trade was having a huge impact on African forests by providing steady jobs and incomes for local communities and contributing towards decent forest management, in other instances forests had suffered and people’s lives changed for the worse.



ABOVE: Western lowland gorillas in the Ivindo National Park, in April 2019.

Photo: Amaury Hauchard / AFP

Photo: Florent Vergnes / AFP



**ABOVE:** A group of forest elephants search for salt near Bayanga Equatorial Forest, part of the Dzanga Sangha Reserve, the last refuge of forest elephants and Central African gorillas, in south-western Central African Republic.

However, Mariella Di Ciommo, Associate Director for Europe and Africa at the Netherlands-based European Centre for Policy Development Management (ECDPM), told *Africa in Fact* that from a Chinese perspective, the primary interlocutor of China's government was the Congo-Brazzaville government. "China tends not to take a position on internal matters, including conflicts between environmental/indigenous matters and economic exploitation or certain areas.

"I gather this has been changing in the last few years, though, as China has become more sensitive to protests and a bad reputation linked to similar cases in such contexts. This is because this has caused pushback on Chinese practices and led to the renegotiation or even cancellation of some projects.

"As a result, it has started to follow more international norms and standards rather than rely on national legislation, although in an inconsistent manner. One factor is the extent of the pushback they receive (and possibly also the economic stakes at play)."

Poorva Karkare, Policy Officer at the ECDPM, insisted that China-Africa engagements were as much shaped by African stakeholders and their demands as by the Chinese. "As long as the Chinese

get a licence on land the government itself has auctioned, then appealing to Chinese morality can only go so far. It is the government's responsibility in Brazzaville to refrain from putting the land on auction in the first place to protect biodiversity. It is important to understand the agency [involved in] the African side in this story.

"Secondly, the Congolese government is not giving this to the Chinese for free; they are generating state revenues from the deal. The question is whether what they are getting is enough when accounting for the social and environmental costs. This is a larger question that many countries are dealing with. In many cases, the problem is that not all costs are visible or equally priced.

"What goes missing in this framing of China acting (whether recklessly or not) is that for the Congolese government, revenues are needed to run the country. These revenues can come from sales of licences, among other things. The protection of biodiversity, even though very desirable, costs money and has too little revenue generation capacity.

"In such a scenario, the loss of biodiversity or the rights of indigenous peoples may be seen as dispensable, or simply the price to pay for economic gains that come from the sale of licences." [GGV](#)



# Inclusive decisions drive **EQUITABLE RESOURCES**

By Nnaemeka Ohamadike

**T**he “wave of democracy” that swept sub-Saharan Africa after the Cold War faced widespread scepticism, with many viewing it as mere “window dressing” to satisfy Western aid donors. Yet three decades later, as Professor Rod Alence of Wits University notes, African democracies outperform autocratic ones in delivering good governance.

Democracy transcends voting – it is a continuous process of public participation, accountability, and transparency. It requires robust institutions and an engaged civil society to thrive. Authentic deliberation and open debate are vital in transparently shaping decision-making processes. Academics Stephan Lewandowsky and John Cook note that one reason we trust democracy as a system of governance is its ability to deliver “better” decisions and outcomes than autocracy. This is driven by the idea that the “wisdom of crowds” outperforms any one individual.

Natural resource governance is one of the key areas where democracy could offer citizens a voice in policymaking. Many African countries are rich in natural resources like oil, minerals, and timber, yet these resources often fuel corruption, conflict, and environmental degradation – what many scholars call the ‘resource curse.’ In more democratic settings, where citizens, civil society organisations, the media, and opposition parties can hold leaders

to account, there is a greater chance that natural resources will be better managed, and citizens can get more from their government.

In Botswana, for example, diamond wealth has been better managed and more equitably distributed through accountable institutions. However, in less democratic countries, resource wealth is often captured by elites and multinational corporations, with ordinary citizens excluded from decision-making processes. This may fuel corruption, stifle development, and create social unrest.

The promise of democracy is that it allows people to influence decisions that directly impact their lives and communities. When citizens can participate in the democratic process (through elections, protests, community engagement, or civic forums), they can better demand that resource extraction serves the public good. This question – whether democracy increases Africans’ voice in natural resource governance – is underexplored and is what this article seeks to answer.

To do this, I analysed the latest Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) “liberal democracy” data for 2022 and Afrobarometer Round 9 survey data covering 39 African countries and conducted from 2021 to 2023. Afrobarometer is a non-partisan research network that provides reliable, nationally representative survey data on Africans’ experiences

Photo: Mentrul Bhuiyan / AFP



**ABOVE:** A member of the Botswana cabinet holds a 1,174-carat diamond in Gaborone, in July 2021.



and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life.

In my analysis, I focused on Afrobarometer question 73b, which asked a sample of 54,436 Africans whether they agree or disagree with the following statement: Ordinary citizens currently have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities.

The respondents chose from the following options: “Strongly disagree,” “Disagree,” “Neither agree nor disagree,” “Agree,” “Strongly agree,” “Refused,” and “Don’t know.” For the analysis, I combined “Strongly agree” and “Agree” into a single “Agree” category and similarly grouped “Strongly disagree” with “Disagree” into “Disagree.” I excluded the remaining 13% of responses.

My first aim was to understand how much respondents feel ordinary citizens have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities.

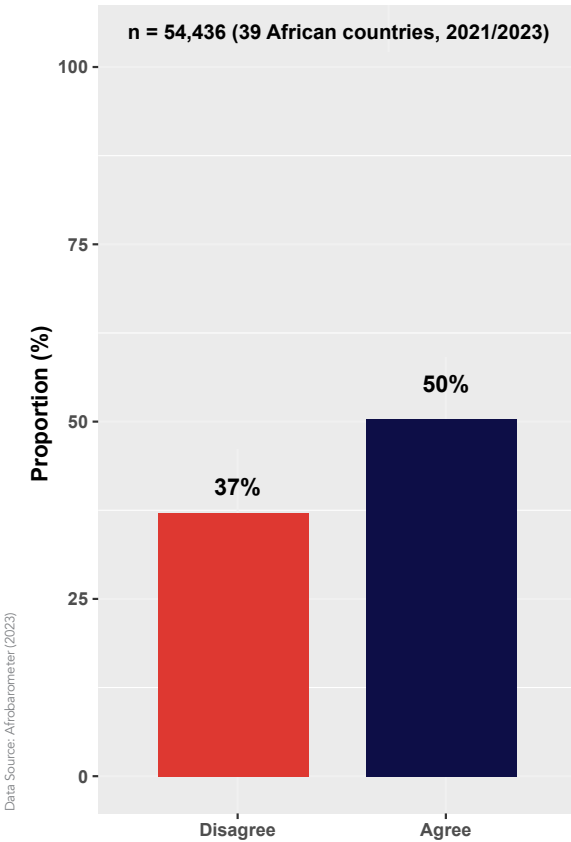
Figure 1 shows that a little over half (approximately 50%) of respondents said ordinary citizens have a voice in natural resource governance and extraction near them, while 37% feel ordinary citizens are excluded. The latter highlights the exclusionary nature of some African countries, especially autocratic ones, where the voices of ordinary people, especially in rural areas, are often ignored in key policy issues in favour of elites and multinational corporations.

In Figure 2, I wanted to understand how these responses varied based on the latest V-Dem ranking of the countries on liberal democracy. I grouped the 54,436 Afrobarometer respondents from 39 African countries into four quartiles according to their country’s latest liberal democracy scores and took the average of responses in each quartile.

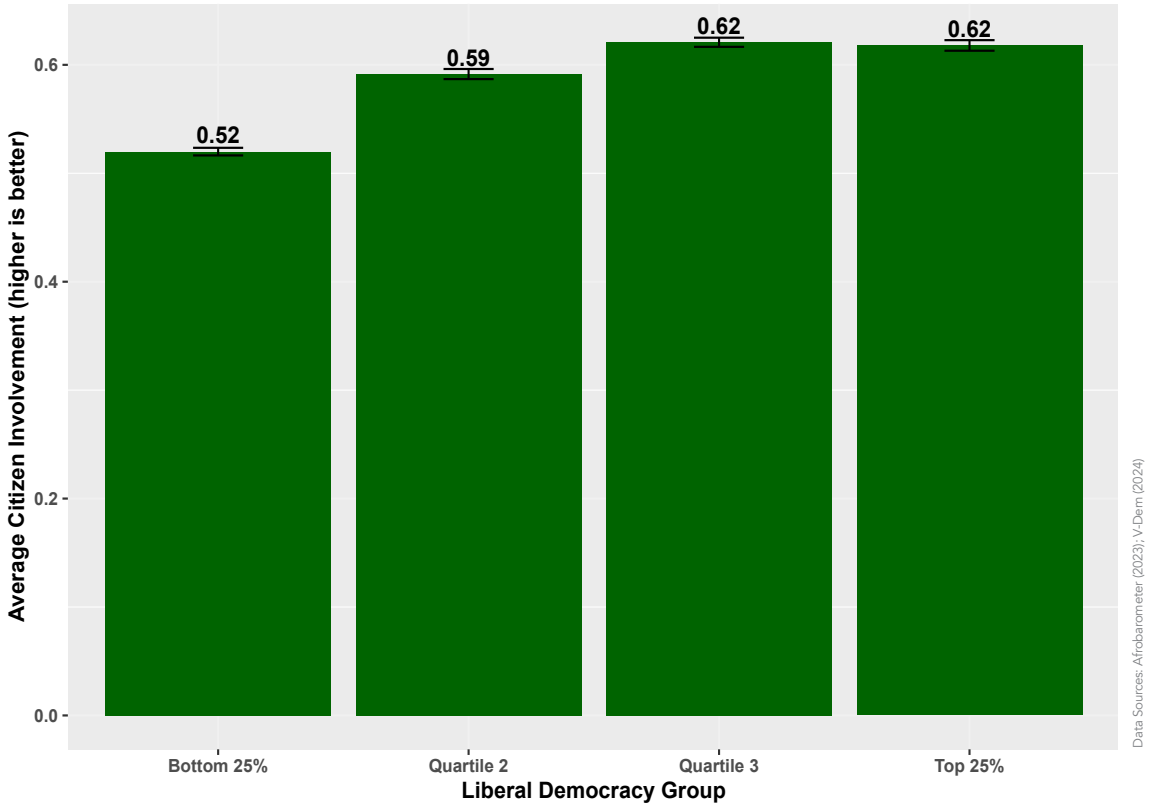
The error bars represent the standard error – this quantifies how much the mean citizen involvement in each liberal democracy group might vary if different samples were drawn from the same population. The small error bars suggest more precise estimates and greater confidence in the mean values.

From the figure, we can see how moving from the lowest-performing to top-performing groups on liberal democracy corresponds with increased reported involvement of ordinary citizens in natural resource governance. This distinction is more pronounced when comparing the upper half of countries on liberal democracy with the lowest-performing group (bottom 25%). Specifically, the average reported involvement of ordinary citizens in natural resource governance among the top 50% of countries in liberal democracy is 19% higher than that observed in the bottom 25%.

In essence, on average, ordinary citizens’



**FIGURE 1:** Sentiments on Citizen Involvement in Natural Resource Extraction.



**FIGURE 2:** Average Citizen Involvement Sentiment by Liberal Democracy Quartiles.

participation in natural resource decisions is higher in more democratic African countries than in less democratic ones. This finding remained consistent after controlling for two potentially confounding factors using regression analysis – GDP per capita (which measures economic size) and the population size of those countries in 2022.

The results suggest that democracy enables ordinary Africans to engage with natural resource decision-making that affects them and their communities. Thus, when institutions are transparent and accountable and when the rule of law prevails (key ideals of democracy), it creates avenues for community input through public consultations, local councils, or civil society organisations. This pattern emerges despite the many defects of real-world democracies in Africa.

The finding also suggests that strengthening democratic institutions could lead to more inclusive decision-making processes about natural resources. In other words, African countries can ensure that natural resource policies and practices are people-driven by embracing democratic ideals.

This is more so for African countries with weaker democratic structures, where the data shows that ordinary citizens are less likely to have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities. In such countries, it becomes vital to create an enabling environment for citizen participation, building trust between the government and its people, and thus reducing the likelihood of resource-based conflicts, among others.

In Figure 3, I unpacked the variations in



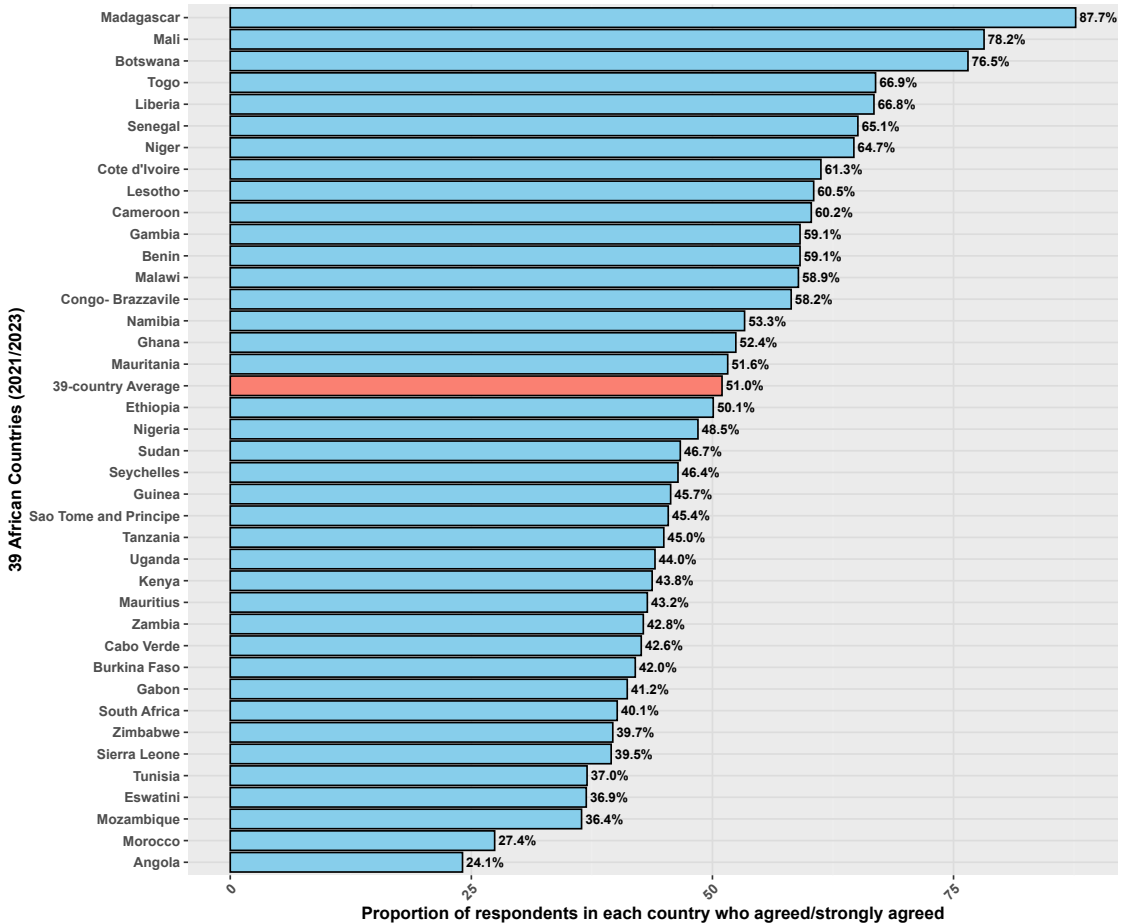


FIGURE 3: Sentiments on Citizen Involvement by Country

responses on citizen involvement across the 39 African countries surveyed by Afrobarometer.

Figure 3 shows wide variation at the country level in responses on whether ordinary citizens have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities. Out of the 39 African countries, only 17 (less than half) surpassed the 39-country average of 51% for citizen involvement in natural resource governance, while 22 countries fell below average. This indicates a lower proportion of respondents in these 22 countries who say that ordinary citizens have a voice in natural resource extraction decisions compared to the average.

Precisely, in less democratic countries, such as Angola and Eswatini, respondents were less likely to say that ordinary citizens have a voice in natural resource decisions compared to more democratic countries like Senegal and Botswana, where citizens are more likely to have a voice.

To better illustrate the results, imagine natural resources as a garden, with soil richness differing from plot to plot. In Angola, the soil is fertile with oil and diamonds, resources that could transform the lives of millions if properly managed. However, in this analogy, the garden is fenced off, with Angola’s government acting as a gatekeeper. The citizens, standing outside the fence, can see the

resources being extracted, but they have no say in how the land is worked or how the wealth is distributed. Angola's oil, for example, generates billions, but much of that wealth is captured by elites, while the communities living near oil fields face environmental destruction and poverty. In this closed system, where democracy is limited, the citizens have little influence on decisions about the land they commonly own and rely on.

Eswatini, though not as resource-rich as Angola, is home to timber, sugar, and minerals. Yet, the kingdom operates in much the same way – citizens have little control over how these resources are managed. The monarchy holds the keys to the garden, dictating how its resources are utilised while citizens watch decisions being made from afar, with no opportunity to participate or voice their concerns about the sustainability of the land or the fairness of the harvest. In both Angola and Eswatini, the closed nature of governance means that the garden, though abundant, primarily serves the interests of a select few while ordinary people remain on the outside.

Contrast this with Botswana's diamond-rich soil, where the garden is managed more collectively. Here, the gate is open, and the garden is more welcoming. Botswana's democratic system allows citizens and other stakeholders (e.g., civil society and local leaders) to have a say in how the diamonds are extracted and how the wealth is reinvested into the community – e.g., through healthcare, education, and infrastructure, ensuring that harvest is shared more equitably.

Similarly, in Senegal, where the garden contains

fisheries and mineral deposits, the government works more collaboratively with citizens and local communities. The country's democracy allows fishermen, community leaders, and civil society groups to have a voice in decisions about how these resources are managed. This inclusivity protects the environment from over-extraction and ensures that the wealth generated from these resources is reinvested in ways that benefit the broader population.

In open, democratic systems, decisions are more

**'In open, democratic systems, decisions are more inclusive and collective, which may lead to more sustainable and equitable outcomes.'**

inclusive and collective, which may lead to more sustainable and equitable outcomes. In resource-rich ones, democracy means the resource wealth can be equitably shared since the soil is rich, and governance structures encourage participation. Citizens have a voice, which ensures that resource wealth benefits many rather than a few. In less democratic countries, the garden is fenced off, with wealth concentrated

in the hands of a few and the voices of ordinary citizens stifled.

Taken together, the data highlights how democracy enables inclusive natural resource governance and conservation. While just over half of Africans say that ordinary citizens have a voice in natural resource governance, this varies based on how democratic African countries are. Citizen involvement is higher in more democratic African countries than in less democratic ones. Despite the many shortcomings of democratic governance, African democracies still outperform their less democratic counterparts in fostering inclusive natural resource governance. [GGT](#)

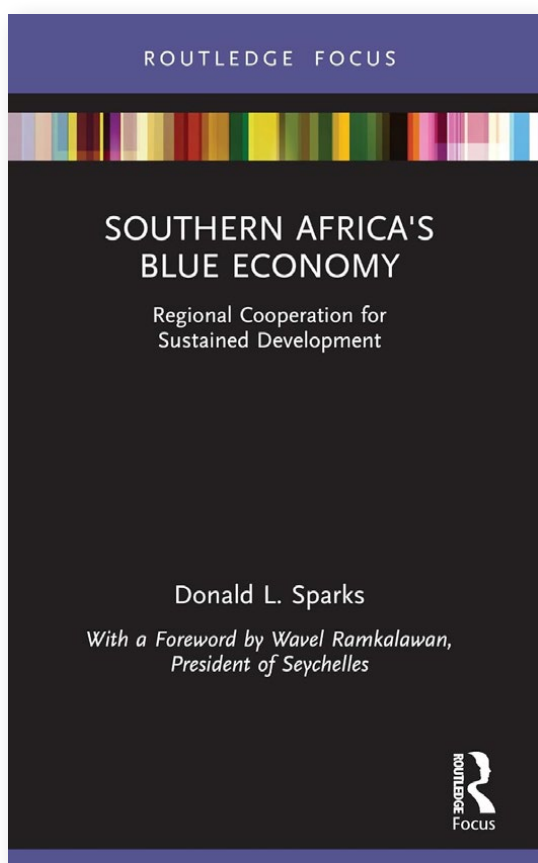


# SOUTHERN AFRICA'S BLUE ECONOMY:

## Regional Cooperation for Sustained Development

by Donald L Sparks

Published by Routledge Focus



In *Southern Africa's Blue Economy*, Donald L. Sparks provides a concise study of the constraints and opportunities that the blue economy offers for southern Africa and the role that the South African Development Community (SADC) could play in promoting the sustainable use of its oceans and coastal resources.

A key problem is that the world's coastal and marine areas have been treated as limitless resources and dumping grounds. This has led to degraded coastal habitats, marine pollution, climate change, and overfishing. Additional challenges include rising ocean temperatures and acidification, which threaten fish stocks and the livelihoods that depend on them.

Likewise, more than half of all key marine biodiversity areas are unprotected; ocean dead zones (areas that lack enough oxygen to support marine life) are rising at an alarming rate, from 400 in 2008 to 700 in 2019; and less than 2% of national research budgets are allocated for marine science. Similarly, of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), goal number 14 (life below water) is the least funded, as less than 1% of official development assistance goes towards SDG 14.

Regarding opportunities, 10 coastal states in southern Africa have an average of 7.5 million km<sup>2</sup> of exclusive economic zones (EEZs). Each coastal state can claim an EEZ beyond and adjacent to its territorial sea that extends seaward up to 200 miles from its baseline. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), adopted in 1982, recognises EEZs, and under provisions governed by the convention, member states have jurisdictional rights.

Major economic activities in the 200-mile EEZ include coastal and marine fisheries (artisanal and commercial), aquaculture, offshore oil and gas exploration, offshore and deep-sea mineral extraction, marine protection and services, shipbuilding and repair, and energy.

Sparks acknowledges that while SADC nations have access to international policies and strategies like UNCLOS and 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy (2050 AIMS), only a small number of countries have exploited resources in their EEZ or communal heritage areas

or have taken the necessary steps to domesticate legislative frameworks into their national policies.

Additionally, despite having access to planning tools like marine spatial planning (MSP) and ecosystem-based management (EBM), few countries use the tools to inform their policymaking and advance their blue initiatives.

That said, island countries such as Mauritius and Seychelles have significantly extended their maritime boundaries based on the provisions of UNCLOS, while others, such as South Africa (Operation Phakisa), have ambitious blue economy programmes.

To tackle the challenges, Sparks provides

country-specific solutions based on each nation's blue resources, maritime expertise, and assets. For example, his analysis of South Africa shows that the country is not only the region's leader in renewable energy but has the most efficient and developed ports in SADC.

Given that the region has 20 ports, South Africa plays a key role in coordinating and consolidating port expansion. Sparks advises that such development should include potential public-private partnerships and that SADC should

work closely with associations such as the Port Management Association of Eastern and Southern Africa, an international organisation that promotes institutional reform of marine transport in the region. Moreover, as the first African country to adopt MSP legislation in 2017, South Africa could share its expertise.

Another nation that has made exemplary strides is the Seychelles, a world leader in blue bond financing for development and marine protection. It is also the first African country to adopt

the SmartFish Project, sponsored by the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) and the European Union. The project focuses on reinforcing the country's ability to enforce the IOTC resolution to prevent illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing in regional trade.

Mauritius's strength lies in green tourism and recreational marine fisheries, having grown in sustainable tourism in the past 10 years. Nonetheless, the degradation of coral reefs due to dynamite fishing and global warming is one of the most significant issues affecting the island. As a result, Mauritius is a joint beneficiary, with the

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**'Mauritius's strength lies in green tourism and recreational marine fisheries, having grown in sustainable tourism in the past 10 years.'**

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Seychelles, of a UNDP \$10 million grant to restore their reef ecosystems. The six-year project is crucial for the country's expanding tourism sectors, which employ approximately half of the population, provide more than 30% of their GDP, and ensure food security for fishermen. If successful, the project could be a model for other states.

Mozambique's expertise is in artisanal fisheries. It has 1,500 miles of coastline, and half of its population in the coastal zone are artisanal fishermen who catch 85% of the country's fish. Despite being a significant source of employment, the income generated through artisanal fishing remains relatively low. To curb the negative effects of overfishing and destructive fishing techniques affecting the ecosystem, the government has embarked on an innovative project, Fish Forever, that could serve as a model for the other SADC coastal communities.

Sparks reiterates that country-specific agendas cannot be achieved without cooperation through regional economic communities (RECs) and initiatives that coordinate and harmonise maritime policies and strategies. He writes that the most significant of the initiatives is the 2050 AIMS, which focuses on developing a sustainable blue economy – a marine version of the green economy. This initiative will address biodiversity loss and improve the well-being of citizens by reducing marine environmental threats, such as illegal fishing, transnational maritime crime, piracy, waste dumping, weak legal frameworks, inadequate navigation, and hydrographic surveys.

Another important initiative from the AU featured in the book is Agenda 2063, which sets the strategic goal of economic transformation, including specific goals for the blue ocean economy as goal

numbers six (marine resources and energy) and seven (port operations and marine transportation).

In addition to continental-wide efforts, Sparks identifies regional initiatives currently underway from SADC, namely, the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

Evidently, he shows that much of the groundwork has been done in terms of initiatives, both regionally and internationally. For instance, AU initiatives date as far back as 2014, namely, the 2014 Policy Framework and Reform Strategy for Fisheries and Aquaculture in Africa – to help governments develop appropriate fisheries and aquaculture policies, and the 2016 African Charter on Maritime

Security and Safety and Development in Africa (the Lome Charter) – aimed at preventing national and transnational crime such as piracy and all forms of illegal trafficking.

Likewise, in 2017, the World Bank identified 10 pathways that countries could take for future action. The

pathways (outlined in the book) include developing coastal and marine spatial plans to guide better decision-making and adopting new investment techniques such as blue bonds and debt-for-adaptation swaps.

It therefore follows that global and regional initiatives will guide policy setting, both at SADC and country levels. However, to succeed, each nation must chart an appropriate course in line with its developmental ambitions while executing plans in a regionally coordinated manner.

Given the high stakes, Sparks insists on the need for expanding southern Africa's blue economy policies and goals, stating that just as sustainable development green initiatives show promise, so too could blue economy projects and activities. 

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### **'Another important initiative from the AU featured in the book is Agenda 2063.'**

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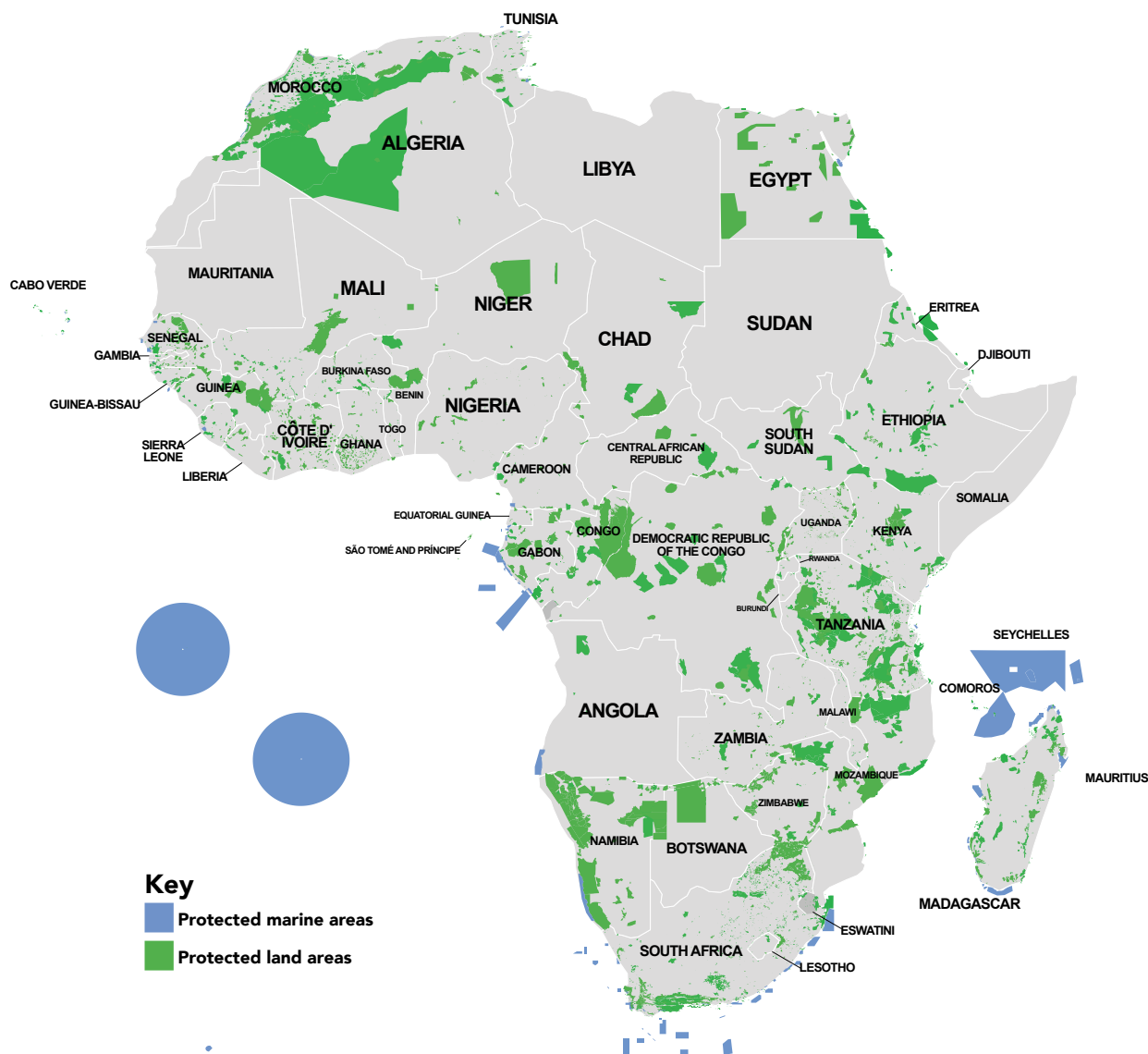
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# AFRICA BY THE NUMBERS



## Blue economy and inclusive conservation

### 2024 OCEAN HEALTH INDEX SCORES (OUT OF 100)

Algeria	65.6	Djibouti	74.2	Libya	49.8	Seychelles	80.1
Angola	57.9	Egypt	65.9	Madagascar	60.6	Sierra Leone	72.7
Benin	66.4	Equatorial Guinea	63	Malawi	NA	Somalia	69.5
Botswana	NA	Eritrea	55	Mali	NA	South Africa	61.3
Burkina Faso	NA	Eswatini	NA	Mauritania	70.4	South Sudan	NA
Burundi	NA	Ethiopia	NA	Mauritius	60.9	Sudan	51
Cabo Verde	59.5	Gabon	68.8	Morocco	61.6	Togo	63.5
Cameroon	64.3	Gambia	67.5	Mozambique	64.4	Tunisia	56.4
Central African Republic	NA	Ghana	64.8	Namibia	62.4	Uganda	NA
Chad	NA	Guinea	66.2	Niger	NA	Tanzania	71.5
Comoros	75.9	Guinea-Bissau	66.8	Nigeria	64.7	Zambia	NA
Congo Republic	47.8	Kenya	69.1	Rwanda	NA	Zimbabwe	NA
Côte d'Ivoire	54.9	Lesotho	NA	São Tomé and Príncipe	71.8		
DR Congo	54.8	Liberia	73.6	Senegal	65.8		

\* The 2024 Ocean Health Index (OHI) is a framework for assessing ocean health based on the sustainable provisioning of benefits and services people expect from healthy oceans, such as food, cultural and social value, and jobs, with 0 being the lowest rank, and 100 to highest rank.

\*\*Data used in map from Protected Planet is not exhaustive.