

Lessons learned on securing and maintaining peace through nature conservation - January 2026

Case Study from South Africa/Mozambique

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Purpose

- Raise awareness of the relationship between peace and conservation
- Provide practical yet innovative recommendations for countries facing conflict and violence¹
- Provide policymakers with clear and innovative options for “conflict sensitive conservation”
- Provide policymakers with clear and innovative options for “environmental peacebuilding”²

Background

The relationship between peace, nature and conservation.

“Armed conflicts deeply impoverish nations, especially impacting local communities that depend on natural resources as their primary means for socio-economic recovery. In the post-conflict period, protected areas play a vital role in a country's integrated planning and development..... Access to natural resources and environmental benefits is essential for all of humanity, as our survival depends on them. Conflicts over biodiversity can, in turn, lead to broader conflicts. Therefore, policies must recognize that biodiversity is a shared resource for all people.” – President Joaquim Chissano (President of Mozambique, 1986 to 2005).

Nature conservation and peace are intertwined. Nature provides the biological foundations for stable societies and economies – our life support system. It is therefore essential that we learn to live at peace *WITH* nature. This means seeking a harmonious future for humankind and the natural world. One means to achieve this is to strive for peace *THROUGH* nature.

Natural resource use can follow two distinct pathways: one that accounts for long-term impacts on communities and societies, creating the potential for positive feedback loops; and one that ignores these impacts, risking a downward spiral into poverty and conflict.

The first pathway initiates co-managed natural and cultural resources at scale, providing essential and equitable services such as clean water, fresh air, soil fertility, pollination services and a healthy climate. The environmental stability fostered can also provide a foundation for income generation, including tourism and climate finance. When this co-management springs from a joint vision and shared cultural values – such as rhinoceros protection – it can help build a shared future of lasting peace and stability.

Examples of collaborative actions on nature with impacts on peace/stability include:

1. *Habitat protection and maintenance leading to effective and equitable resource management*
2. *Invasive species removal*
3. *Pollution prevention and mitigation*
4. *Law enforcement and border/perimeter security*
5. *Prevention and mitigation of climate shocks and related catastrophic natural disasters*

The second pathway can add to, or accelerate, conflict over access to resources and benefit sharing, manifested through human-wildlife conflict and person-to-person conflict. Evidence from political ecology shows that when environmental change and resource governance reshape who can access and benefit from land and natural resources — especially where exclusion and coercive enforcement take hold — conflict risks rise and can become embedded in local political and economic life, reinforcing wider patterns of poverty, insecurity and instability.³

Examples of limited actions (or no actions) on nature with negative impacts on peace/stability:

1. *Focus on habitats, invasive species and climate at limited spatial and temporal scales (or not at all)*
2. *Focus on crime and social dysfunction in limited spatial and temporal scales (or not at all)*
3. *Focus on nature protection without consideration of essential long term human needs*
4. *Focus on nature protection without consideration of sustainable funding for long term sustainability*

Alongside theory, case studies can illustrate both pathways and thus help guide more frequent selection of the first, collaborative one. This approach (SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals) can also support other Sustainable Development Goals (SDG):

- **Earth Precondition:** Climate Action (13), Life Below Water (14), Life on Land (15)
- **Sustainable Resource use:** Clean Water & Sanitation (6), Responsible Consumption & Production (12)
- **Basic Human Needs:** No poverty (1), Zero Hunger (2), Good Health & Wellbeing (3)
- **Universal Values:** Reduced Inequalities (10)
- **Social & Economic Development:** Decent Work & Economic Growth (8), Sustainable Communities (11)
- **Governance:** Peace Justice and Strong Institutions (16)

Case Study – Introduction

“During Mozambique's civil war (1977–1992), many of the country's economic assets, including its natural resources, were destroyed. Wildlife populations were decimated, the illegal ivory trade flourished, and valuable wildlife products were exploited, leading to the local extinction of species like rhinoceroses, cheetahs, and giraffes.” – President Joaquim Chissano.

Theoretical outcomes provide a valuable framework but they neither prove the outcomes nor explain how they were reached. Case studies can illuminate both areas. This case study focuses on southern Africa from the 1980s to the present day, with a particular focus on Mozambique and South Africa. It involves multiple actors, many of whom were instrumental in advancing the cause of peace through nature. Inevitably, much of what follows is from the perspective of Peace Parks Foundation, the authors of this document. Peace Parks continues to play a key role in transboundary conservation across southern Africa with an ever-growing number of government, private, Indigenous People/Local Community (IPLC) partners. Reflecting the importance of collaboration, this demonstrates the first condition – SDG 17 – Partnership for the Goals. Through this work, Peace Parks' transboundary approach also tackles key drivers of fragility, conflict and violence (FCV) by reducing resource competition, strengthening cross-border co-operation and supporting shared economic opportunities in transboundary landscapes.

The Mozambican conflict arose after independence in 1975 and lasted for sixteen years until 1992 and touched the entire region and beyond. More than one million people died, with profound impacts across society, the economy and natural resources. In the post-conflict period, the government focused on consolidating peace, demining the country, implementing emergency humanitarian measures, and resettling displaced populations. These efforts were essential in laying foundations for multiparty political dialogue and national development. However, significant challenges remained at the nexus of nature and development.

According to a World Bank report (1997), Mozambique was one of the poorest countries globally, with a per capita income of just US\$80 in 1995. The population, totalling 16.2 million (62% of whom lived in rural areas), was growing at a rate of 2.6% per year, and most Mozambicans lived below the poverty line. Social indicators were among the lowest in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁴

In this context, the following interlinked post-conflict challenges emerged:

1. **Displacement:** Over four million people were displaced internally and externally, with over 200,000 crossing the border into South Africa in 1983 alone, at the height of the conflict. Following the war, many people moved in search of livelihoods, and, although the government encouraged returns from abroad, there was limited planning for where returning households could settle.
2. **Settlement:** Under these pressures, many people settled in parks and reserves, often in remote areas, far from government control. Many simply did not know that these sites were protected. To exacerbate the problem, the conservation department was only formed several years later, and conservation NGOs arrived later still. By then, many protected areas were widely settled, depleted of wildlife and exploited for firewood and charcoal production.
3. **Materiel:** Many of these areas had been sites of conflict. For example, Gorongosa National Park was close to the HQ of the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO). Minefields were laid there, at Banhine and Zinave National Parks, as well as what is now Limpopo National Park. Mine clearance was an initial priority for the conservation department. Only once areas were formally certified as cleared could conservation measures begin.

4. **Community:** During this immediate post-conflict period, almost all policy decisions were decided at the ministerial level and, at this point, holding teams were put in place to protect what resources they could. With a degree of protection in place the government initiated community programmes aimed at co-existence with nature positioned alongside food security. For example, in 1994/95 the GEF-World Bank supported the piloting of *Tchuma Tchato* in Mozambique, a community-based natural resource management model similar to Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE (Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources). However, implementation was expensive and challenging, particularly where communities were firmly established inside the Parks and depended upon their resources. Overall, communities played a limited role in early conservation decision-making and were rarely, if ever, consulted on protection measures or benefit-sharing.
5. **Crime:** During the main conflict, large-scale elephant poaching was enabled under cover of the fog of war. In the immediate post-conflict period, due to challenges of food security, animals continued to be poached to provide basic nutrition.
6. **Borders:** A final critical feature of the post-conflict phase was linked to the migration issue. There was a good deal of mistrust between South Africa and Mozambique at this time. The apartheid system was still in place throughout much of the conflict period and the ideological aspects of the Mozambican conflict itself created suspicion on both sides of the border. This was exacerbated by combatants from both sides using one country or another as a cross-border safe-haven. Security measures were put in place along the border during the conflict but concerns persisted that illegal economic migration would swamp South Africa. Many of these static security measures may have impacted wildlife migration, but as in the case of the US-Mexico border, physical barriers rarely prevent human movement when socio-economic push-pull factors are substantial.⁵

Case Study – The GLTFCA story

"His [Dr. Anton Rupert's] dream was to create a peace park that would not only support biodiversity conservation through an ecosystem-based approach but also improve the quality of life for communities living in the region. Critically, this initiative aimed to foster cooperation between Mozambique and South Africa. contributina to reaional peace and stabilitv." – President Joaauiim Chissano.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, before tensions in southern Africa had fully eased, stakeholders from Mozambique and South Africa began discussions on collaborative approaches to conservation, anticipating that peace would soon allow such initiatives to be implemented. In May 1990, Dr Anton Rupert, then President of WWF South Africa*, and Mozambique's President Joaquim Chissano discussed connecting protected areas across the two countries' borders. The idea of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area (GLTFCA), part of a broader network of Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs, now more commonly referred to internationally as Transboundary Conservation Areas, or TBCAs), was seen as a non-contentious conservation tool to build ties between countries, leading to sustainable economic development through tourism.

However, at this time there was no official contact between the two countries and so initial conversations were conducted as private citizens. Soon afterwards, a feasibility study was prepared to assess the political, socio-economic and ecological impacts of such a scheme. In Coutada 16 (now Limpopo National Park) only a handful of kudu and ostrich were recorded across an area of more than one million hectares. Meanwhile, The Global Environment Facility (GEF) of the World Bank was advocating for transboundary conservation

**Known at the time as the Southern African Nature Foundation and rebranded in 1995.*

initiatives across the SADC region. After Nelson Mandela's release from prison and the South African elections in 1994, political conditions became more favourable. In May 1996, Dr Anton Rupert and Mozambique's President Joaquim Chissano met again, with strong support from President Mandela. In August of the same year, a "Transfrontier Park Initiative" meeting was held in Kruger National Park. There it was agreed that South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Swaziland should cooperate to realise the economic benefits of TFCAs. As WWF South Africa could not operate outside that country or across its borders, Peace Parks Foundation was established in 1997 with an explicit mandate to support the establishment of TFCAs in southern Africa.

The first formal meeting between South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe on the GLTFCA took place in December 1998, after the appointment of an international facilitator. This was followed by a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2000 and a formal Treaty in 2002, signed at Xai-Xai in Mozambique by three Heads of State, signalling high-level political commitment to the scheme.

"[The Xai-Xai Treaty] embodied a spirit of collaboration and partnership, aimed at achieving the highest ecological, social, and economic goals." – President Joaquim Chissano.

Improving functional connectivity is a core tenet of transboundary conservation. It provides access to greater resources, thereby supporting larger, more diverse and more sustainable populations of interconnected species. It also enables adaptation to and avoidance of threats. For example, it may allow animals to alter their home-ranges in response to shifting climate. In the case of GLTFCA two activities have been undertaken which enhance connectivity. The first has been to remove border fencing wherever possible and replace it with technological surveillance and increased patrolling, ensuring that security is not compromised.

The second approach involves actively identifying and facilitating ecological corridors between habitat areas. This requires significant community engagement as it can increase the risk of Human Wildlife Conflict (HWC) and poaching threats. Planning, development and implementation of ecological corridors and wildlife dispersal areas have been undertaken between Gonarezhou, Zinave, Banhine and Limpopo National Parks. This ensures ecological connectivity between these core conservation areas.

In landscapes that have experienced extensive conflict and associated habitat and species loss, wildlife reintroductions can play an important restorative role. Reintroductions can increase species diversity and population numbers, strengthen species interactions and help restore ecosystem function and resilience, with positive knock-on effects for ecosystem services, local communities and sustainable revenue possibilities. They can also contribute to the revitalisation of historic wildlife corridors and migration routes disrupted by man-made borders.

Peace Parks has facilitated and funded the translocation of over 7,000 animals to parks in the GLTFCA, with a particular focus on Limpopo and Zinave National Parks. However, it is critical to plan and consult on such translocations carefully. In 2001, President Mandela opened the gates between Kruger and Limpopo, and more than 100 elephants were released into a 30,000-hectare sanctuary. However, many local communities were unprepared for the arrival of their new neighbours. Lessons were learnt and now extensive consultation happens prior to wildlife translocations.

The Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park (GLTP) is now home to more than 850 animal and 2,000 plant species. This 3.5 million-hectare park links the Limpopo National Park in Mozambique, the Kruger in South Africa and the Gonarezhou National Park in Zimbabwe. The wider GLTFCA spans almost 10 million hectares and additionally includes Banhine and Zinave National Parks, alongside community and private areas.

Today, one-quarter of Mozambique is officially designated as protected. The country has also established Collaborative Management Agreements, through which 70% of its protected areas are currently managed. These approaches have supported significant conservation and development outcomes, including the rapid recovery of wildlife populations, tourism growth, and the integration of local communities into management and benefit-sharing processes.

The concept of TFCAs is now formally supported by all Southern African Development Community (SADC) Members States and forms part of the official development strategy of SADC. In many SADC countries it is also being incorporated into the national legislation and conservation agency planning.

In 2022, Peace Parks celebrated 25 years of transboundary conservation interventions. It has been actively involved in the establishment and development of ten of the 18 TFCAs found throughout southern Africa, all of which are in various stages of development.⁶

The overarching goal remains to establish fully functional TBCAs, managed in harmony with their surrounding communities, to create sustainable local, national and regional benefit flows. Over time, Peace Parks has evolved from a facilitator of treaty processes to a technical advisor supporting joint management planning and on-the-ground implementation. More recently, this has included the development of innovative co-management models that bring together governments, IPLCs and private-sector partners within shared governance structures, optimising effectiveness and the equitable dispersal of benefits. In the GLTFCA landscape, Peace Parks has now entered into partnership agreements with the Government of Mozambique to support the management and development of all three national parks, collectively measuring over 2.2 million hectares. This evolution emphasises the critical role of partnership and collaboration in successful transboundary conservation.

Case study – Key Lessons

After 27 years of delivering peace through nature, Peace Parks Foundation have identified four key interventions that enable the development of functional, resilient ecosystems, alongside economically and socially viable communities free from conflict. These areas are central to the successful application of conservation at scale, yet are rarely carried out.

1. Parity of capacity

“At the outset of its participation in the Transfrontier Program, Mozambique had the lowest capacity among its partner countries. However, with support from neighbouring nations, Mozambique has enhanced its leadership in biodiversity conservation.” – President Joaquim Chissano

A critical enabling condition for successful transboundary collaboration is that an approximate parity of capacity is required on both sides of the border. Effective collaboration must begin with equity, by investing in the weakest links. Capacity can be assessed in terms of workforce size, skills and experience, communication tools, technology and supporting infrastructure. Where parity of capacity is achieved, collaboration can begin to occur organically (a flywheel effect), through WhatsApp groups, cross-border meetings, information exchanges and more. This, in turn, can impact the effectiveness of law enforcement, tourism management and scientific research. Future programmes should therefore begin with capacity analysis and then invest into parity gaps.

Parity does not just apply to field staff. Institutional support and political will also impact outcomes. Local institutions should be strengthened early and made aware of opportunities arising from collaboration. Where appropriate, Peace Parks provides partners with training in various fields, including human rights, leadership and tracker dog handling. Additionally, rangers receive support to complete the Certificate for Natural Resource Management at the Southern African Wildlife College and Southern African College for Tourism.

2. Long term commitment and leadership

When working at landscape scale, achieving meaningful impact requires a long-term commitment and endurance. Ecological change happens slowly and is hard to measure over monthly or annual timeframes, often unfolding over cycles of 20+ years. Thus, if the natural recovery of an ecosystem takes time, then overlaying tourist infrastructure may take even longer. And if the change we want to see takes time, then it is inevitable that there will be obstacles along the way. These may include political instability, droughts or other external shocks that cause backward steps.

Long-term commitment therefore involves working with all stakeholders in the landscape and constantly evolving and adaptively managing challenges together, for better or worse. It requires daring to try – even if this results in failure at times - because it is better in the long-term to address problems rather than walk away from them. But the positive side of this commitment is that it breeds trust, mutual understanding, shared ownership and loyalty. Where strong community buy-in exists, direct political opposition is rare.

This approach can be challenging to put in place because a twenty-year commitment requires courage as well as up-front financing. It involves an International Coordinator playing the role of a symphony conductor, inviting investment while driving policy harmonisation in alignment with long term strategies. Critically, they play a convening role, bringing together disparate stakeholders, including government departments, conservation NGOs, researchers and traditional authorities, to foster collaborative conservation. And, crucially, it also requires the highest level of political support – at least in the initial phase – which is not inevitable. In the case of GLTFCA, such support was clearly present, with sustained leadership from Presidents Chissano, Mandela and Mbeki, alongside the vision of Dr Anton Rupert.

3. Community engagement and benefit

“Notably, 20% of the revenue generated from protected areas [in Mozambique] is allocated to local communities, and livelihood programs have been implemented.” – President Joaquim Chissano.

“Fortress conservation” – which entails the protection of nature by community exclusion – is gradually being replaced by community-led conservation. There has been a realisation that unless Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs) have a meaningful stake in the outcome of conservation measures, there will be prolonged conflict over access and control of natural resources.

Peace Parks is now rolling out an innovative, inclusive, co-management model in the transboundary conservation areas in which they work. This model incorporates governments, IPLCs and private enterprise into governance structures which optimise effectiveness and ensure the equitable dispersal of benefits. This is the best currently available model to address equity and achieve sustainability, which puts local communities at the heart of decision-making rather than limiting them to arm’s-length advisory roles.

Partnerships with communities, the private sector, donors, other like-minded NGOs and governments are key to a holistic approach to sustainable development and are essential to conservation impact at scale. The diversity and complexity of engaging stakeholders involved in large landscapes may lead to slower progress, but ensures local ownership, trust, inclusivity and robust leadership structures over time.

One of Africa’s unique commercial selling points is its unspoilt wilderness landscapes and wildlife. And the tourism and travel industry continues to grow exponentially year on year. If well managed, this can deliver sustainable economic development, employment and stability.⁷ These benefits give people a tangible stake in the effective and equitable management of protected areas, reducing the risks of political and social unrest and criminal enterprise.⁸ For this potential to be realised, private-sector investment in TBCA initiatives must be supported through appropriate commercial structures and incentives, allowing private capital to be leveraged to accelerate development.

Peace Parks creates both direct and indirect employment opportunities, mostly in the conservation and hospitality sector, supported by the Southern African Wildlife College and the SA College for Tourism. Tourism is a regional socio-economic driver in the GLTFCA through the development of cross-border tourism products. Several initiatives have been established, including the Pafuri walking trail and the Shangane Festival. Further initiatives include campsites, lodges, tented camps, 4x4 trails, fishing experiences and the Giryondo border post enabling direct access between Kruger and Limpopo National Parks. In Mozambique as of 2024, Peace Parks provides employment for 695 people. The Foundation supports 69% of the park staff and offers training in responsible community resource use and professional herding. Community programmes that benefit approximately 117,325 people are also in place, promoting livelihoods, health and education.

4. Addressing criminal activity

Criminal groups can destabilise the power dynamics of communities by offering illegal carrots and sticks which can corrupt them and their values. In the case of wildlife crime and transnational crime groups, this manifests itself by undermining the ability of the community to engage in consultations, exercise independent decision-making, collaborate with external parties, and maintain political stability and physical security.⁵ Thus, while transboundary conservation can contribute to peace, stability and shared prosperity, criminal activity directly undermines these outcomes.

For this reason, addressing wildlife crime must be built into transboundary conservation from the outset, through shared governance and day-to-day operational co-ordination. In April 2014, Mozambique and South

Africa signed a MoU on biodiversity conservation and management, with a view to addressing the scourge of rhino poaching in GLTFCA. A joint park management committee for Limpopo and Kruger National Parks was established in 2015. This drives a joint wildlife-crime strategy to guide collaboration through regular bilateral wildlife-crime meetings between the two park managers and field rangers. Joint operations have been very successful, often leading to arrests and the recovery of firearms and related poaching equipment.

Also, enforcement must be strengthened across the whole landscape, not just in isolated pockets. Experience from Kruger demonstrates that uneven enforcement can create opportunities for criminal networks to exploit gaps between jurisdictions.⁹ To address this, the GLTFCA, since 2015, has invested tens of millions of dollars on both sides of the border in equipment, training, technology, capacity building, infrastructure, forensics, investigations, rhino management, as well as rhino orphan care and rehabilitation. This reduces the risk that criminal networks simply shift activity to weaker areas and underlines a core principle in transboundary conservation: a security gap in one location becomes a vulnerability across the entire landscape.

This leads to a central policy debate in transboundary conservation projects; how to balance the need for wildlife connectivity with the risk that more permeable borders may facilitate illicit activity. In the GLTFCA, this has been addressed not by reinstating physical barriers, but by replacing static fencing with integrated surveillance systems, specialised personnel and joint patrols, supported by community engagement. When cross-border poaching increased dramatically around 2014/2015 there was a knee-jerk call for fences to be rebuilt. Instead, Peace Parks and its partners hired specialist staff, deployed air assets and embraced advanced technology, including the Wide Area Surveillance Radar System. Within two years, illegal activity originating from Mozambique dropped from 80% of total incursions to 30%.

As a result, the South Africa-Mozambique border in GLTFCA is now one of the most secure in the world, while still allowing for the movement of wildlife essential to ecosystem function. Funded primarily through environmental budgets, these joint security systems now deliver wider public benefits – contributing to stability, safety and state presence in remote border areas, alongside biodiversity protection.

Case Study – Conclusion

“Regional economic communities, which bring nations together, should focus not only on economic integration but also on the integration of natural resources and environmental management. Frameworks for collaboration, such as the Transfrontier Conservation Areas, or TFCAs, adopted by SADC, should be strengthened.” – President Joaquim Chissano.

This experience demonstrates that conservation investments, when strategically designed, can simultaneously strengthen ecological resilience, community confidence and national sovereignty, reinforcing peace rather than competing with it. Peace and nature conservation are not separate policy objectives, but deeply interconnected processes that can either reinforce or undermine one another.

The case study illustrates the complex and interconnected challenges faced by post-conflict landscapes. In Mozambique, the legacy of war included ecological collapse, displacement, poverty, weak institutions, resource competition and cross-border insecurity. A narrow conservation approach focused only on protecting wildlife would have risked reproducing exclusion and conflict. Instead, the GLTFCA demonstrates the potential of an alternative pathway: one where natural resource governance becomes a platform for rebuilding trust, strengthening cooperation and creating shared benefits.

The case study has shown that transboundary conservation can function as a practical form of environmental peacebuilding. The establishment of the GLTFCA transformed a landscape previously characterised by conflict, mistrust and ecological degradation into one based increasingly on cooperation between governments, communities, conservation actors and private partners. By reconnecting ecosystems, rebuilding wildlife populations, strengthening law enforcement collaboration and creating opportunities for sustainable livelihoods, conservation became a mechanism for addressing some of the underlying drivers of fragility, conflict and violence.

The lessons emerging from this experience provide important guidance for policymakers working in conflict-affected and fragile contexts. First, successful conservation at scale requires parity of capacity between partners, ensuring that collaboration is built on equity rather than dependency. Second, meaningful outcomes require long-term commitment, adaptive management and sustained political leadership, recognising that ecological and social transformation unfolds over decades rather than short project cycles. Third, conservation must place Indigenous Peoples and local communities at the centre of decision-making, ensuring that benefits are shared and that communities have a genuine stake in protecting natural resources. Finally, addressing criminal activity and insecurity must be integrated into conservation strategies from the beginning, with landscape-wide approaches that strengthen both ecological and human security.

The GLTFCA experience also challenges assumptions that conservation and development are competing priorities. Instead, it demonstrates that well-designed conservation initiatives can support poverty reduction, employment, tourism, climate resilience and institutional strengthening while protecting biodiversity. The shift from fortress conservation towards inclusive co-management reflects a broader recognition that lasting environmental outcomes depend on social legitimacy and equitable governance.

Ultimately, the lessons from southern Africa suggest that peace can be built not only through political agreements, but through shared stewardship of the natural systems upon which societies depend. Environmental peacebuilding offers a practical framework for countries facing conflict and instability, transforming natural resources from sources of competition into foundations for cooperation. The GLTFCA is a work in progress, but already achieving significant conservation outcomes, and offers a demonstration of how partnerships around nature can help create more peaceful, resilient and sustainable futures.

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