nature's call

An audacious philanthropic project in Mozambique has created one of the world's greatest ecological recovery stories and redefined what conservation can mean for locals. Today, Gorongosa is one of the most biodiverse parks in Africa, but needs tourism to help secure the foundations laid by its quite remarkable turnaround. →

BY **MORGAN TRIMBLE**

On an afternoon drive, our open Land Cruiser bounced between sightings. We stopped to admire a lion. His scarred face and blunt teeth implied years of struggle for dominance in Mozambique's Gorongosa National Park. This old cat would have witnessed much of the incredible revival unfolding here at the southern terminus of the Great Rift Valley. Gorongosa has recovered from a wasteland to a paradise described by legendary biologist E O Wilson as the most ecologically diverse park in the world. Seeing it with my own eyes was a dream.

We traversed fever tree forests, golden in the afternoon light. Elephants sauntered through atmospheric ana tree woodlands. Open floodplains bustled with waterbuck – I would say countless, but, in fact, they have been counted; there are 55,000. We wound through palm forests and past remnant oases, the leftovers of seasonal flooding. Antelope drank and vultures loitered. Fish eagles terrorised a pond in a primordial scene that had me half expecting a tyrannosaurus to charge through the dense palms.

As we approached Lake Urema, crocodiles skidded into the water. Marabou storks and wading birds probed the shallows. We snacked on groundnuts, sipped gin and tonics and watched the sun set. Navigating back to camp, the guide's bouncing spotlight revealed a hippo, civet and genet in the shadows.

In a typical safari camp these sightings would be fodder for dinnertime conversation, but under the thatched roof of the restaurant at Chitengo – Gorongosa's headquarters and tourism hub – there are bigger matters to discuss. Scattered among tables of tourists and an enticing buffet, envoys from international development organisations exchanged notes. Students, scientists and park staff conversed enthusiastically in a multitude of accents. Sitting among them was Greg Carr, the American entrepreneur-turned-philanthropist who, in 2004, pledged tens of millions of dollars and partnered with Mozambique's government to rescue the park from collapse.

Twenty metres from the restaurant, a relic concrete wall pockmarked by bullet holes testifies to the park's brutal history. From 1977 to 1992 Mozambique's civil war claimed a million human lives. It also decimated wildlife, and Gorongosa was a hotbed of violence. Ivory from slaughtered elephants financed weapons, and fighters mowed down animals for target practice and food. Wildlife numbers plummeted by upwards of 90 per cent. While a few lions held out, other top carnivores disappeared entirely.

Today, wildlife thrives thanks to the Gorongosa Restoration Project. The 55,000 waterbuck characterise an explosive recovery among medium-sized herbivores. Elephant, hippo, zebra and a few other species are increasing more slowly. Biomass, aerial surveys reveal, has increased to pre-war levels – on par with East Africa's famously rich Serengeti.

The students dining with Carr are a mix of visiting post-grads and Mozambiquan students enrolled in Gorongosa's Master's in Conservation Biology. Top scientists who conduct research in the park teach this new programme – Mozambique's only conservation biology master's degree. It's also the only Master's in the world conducted entirely within a national park. Graduates will ensure Mozambique has the capacity to study and conserve its rich ecosystems in the future.

While many of Africa's protected areas face chronic underfunding and degradation, an atmosphere of positivity and progress pervades Gorongosa. There's a sense of moving forward despite the challenges. And there are challenges. In 2010, the park expanded to include the massif to its west – Mount Gorongosa. But RENAMO rebels opposing the ruling FRELIMO party occupy the summit. Although Gorongosa helped broker a peace accord in 2019, tourists and researchers still can't visit the rare montane forests, rich in endemic species.

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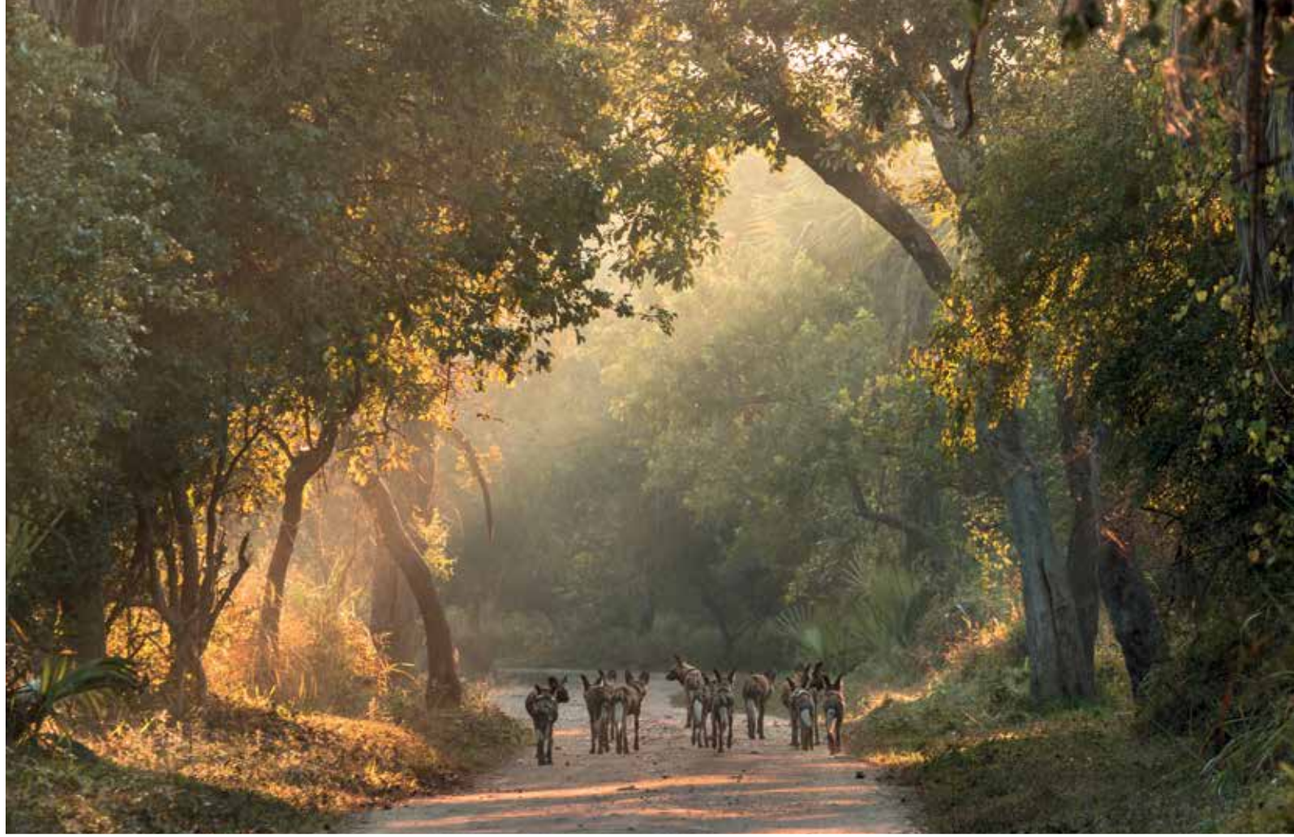
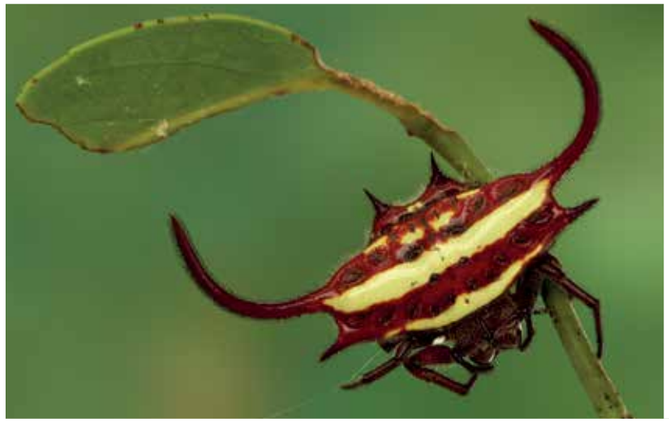
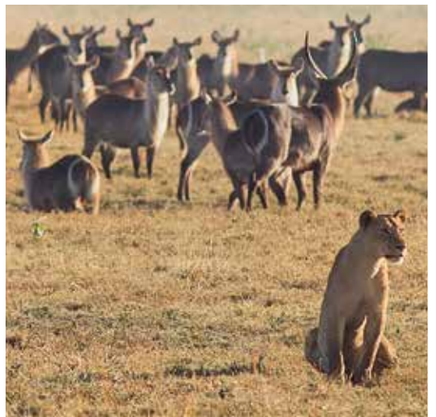
Nascent tourism in the park is the seed of a sustainable future, and a luxury camp called Muzimu will open in 2021 to complement Chitengo's bungalows. But tourism is fickle. Notwithstanding Covid, sporadic political flare-ups, coupled with challenging access, have kept Gorongosa a niche destination.

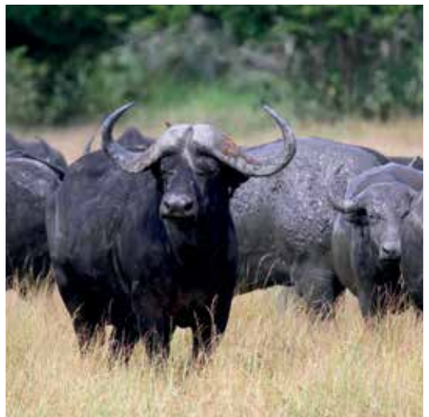
Still, despite the devastation wrought by Cyclone Idai in May, the park celebrated a jump to 6,432 visitors between March and September 2019. Not only did these guests bring US$750,000 in revenue – about 10 per cent of funds required →

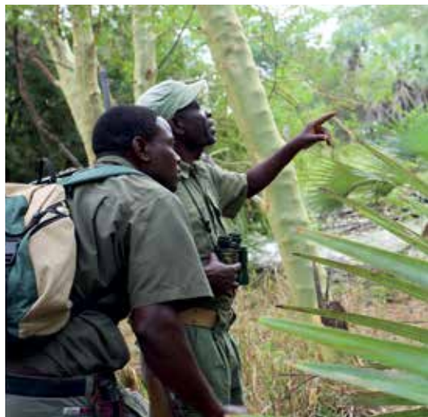


ALL PICTURES: GORONGOSA NATIONAL PARK. ADDITIONAL CREDIT: (4) MICHAEL DOS SANTOS, (5) CLIVE DREYER, (6) BOB POOLE









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1: In 2018 a pack of 14 wild dogs were reintroduced to Gorongosa
2+3: The park may be home to at least 50,000 species of insects and small animals, essential to a healthy ecosystem
4: Waterbuck dominate the Urema floodplain, attracting lions
5: Its large herds include buffalo
6: Activities include walking safaris

gorongosa in numbers

6300 PLANT AND ANIMAL SPECIES | **800** ELEPHANTS | **40** WILD DOGS | **146** LIONS

We know more about the biological composition here than any other park in Africa and any in the world besides the Great Smokey Mountains

to maintain the Gorongosa project – but they supported jobs and a tourism economy for locals.

Some 200,000 people live in the buffer zone surrounding the park, many of whom are reliant on bushmeat and slash-and-burn agriculture.

"It's not right that a lot of conservationists think the local people are the enemy," Carr told me after dinner. "Conservationists and communities should be on the same side. As soon as someone has a proper farm, they're not going to be sneaking in here amongst the crocodiles to set snares. We focus on enabling people instead of making them criminals."

Accordingly, the Gorongosa Restoration Project extends far beyond the confines of the park. They've initiated education, healthcare and agronomy programmes in local communities. They provide scholarships, fix boreholes and train farmers. Nature clubs and girls' clubs in 50 primary schools teach kids about the environment and empower young women to stick with education. In the difficult months after Cyclone Idai, the Gorongosa team delivered aid to 80,000 people.

In the morning we toured Chitengo's Edward O Wilson Biodiversity Laboratory, where researchers suss out the intricacies of ecosystems. The lab's director, Dr Piotr Naskrecki, showed us the Synoptic Biodiversity Collection, packed with reference specimens in climate-controlled conditions impervious to the October inferno outside. It's the only facility of its kind in an African protected area.

Naskrecki, along with E O Wilson, has been a dynamo driving extensive efforts to catalogue Gorongosa's species. He reasons that in order to conserve a place effectively, you need to know what's there. He and other researchers have discovered a host of new-to-science species, including a shrew, two bats, and nine katydids.

"Our list is now up to 6,300 species," said Naskrecki proudly. "We know more about the biological composition here than any other park in Africa and any in the world besides the Great Smokey Mountains [in the United States]." Their list is higher, but only because they got a head start. "They've been counting for 20 years."

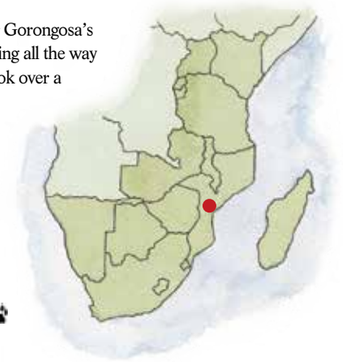
While he attended to students, Naskrecki challenged me to find a Gorongosa pygmy chameleon in a mesh box strewn with branches. I began to suspect the exercise was a prank, but eventually a student took a break from her microscope to spritz the box with water. She pointed out the finger-sized chameleon perfectly camouflaged among the leaf litter.

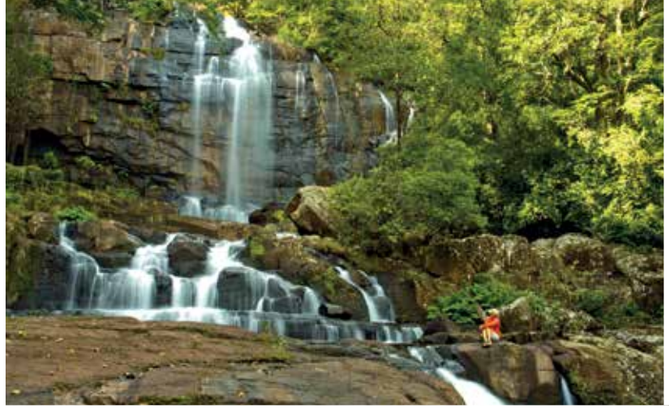
These creatures only live on Mount Gorongosa. With the forests under threat, the lab is experimenting with a breeding project to insure against extinction while hoping it won't be necessary. Coffee farmers on the mountain have been tasked with watching out for a mate for this cryptic captive.

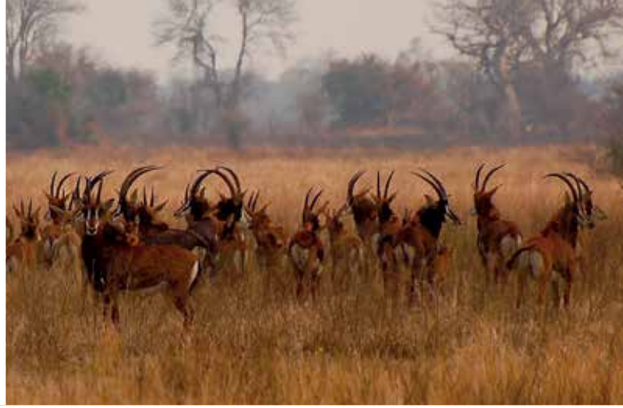
The coffee itself is an experiment to stimulate reforestation. Many people fled to the slopes of Mount Gorongosa during the war. They relied on unsustainable slash-and-burn agriculture, depleting rainforest habitat and threatening the source of the park's rivers. The Restoration Project team reckoned coffee could help the locals and the forests. They provided seeds and training to 500 families to plant coffee and indigenous trees to shade their crops. A new factory processes the coffee, which is sold to tourists and marketed around the world with the slogan: "What if your coffee put girls in school, protected elephants and revived a rainforest?"

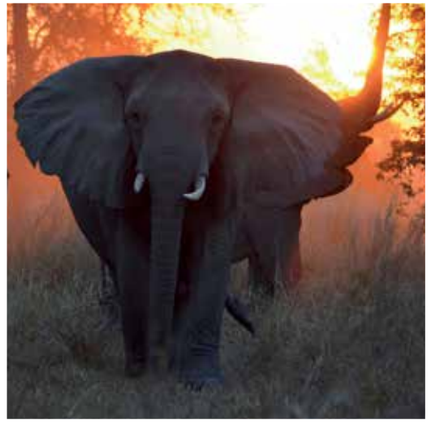
Late in 2020 a similar scheme was announced for cashew nuts, with plans to plant 200,000 cashew trees and build a processing plant in the next year.

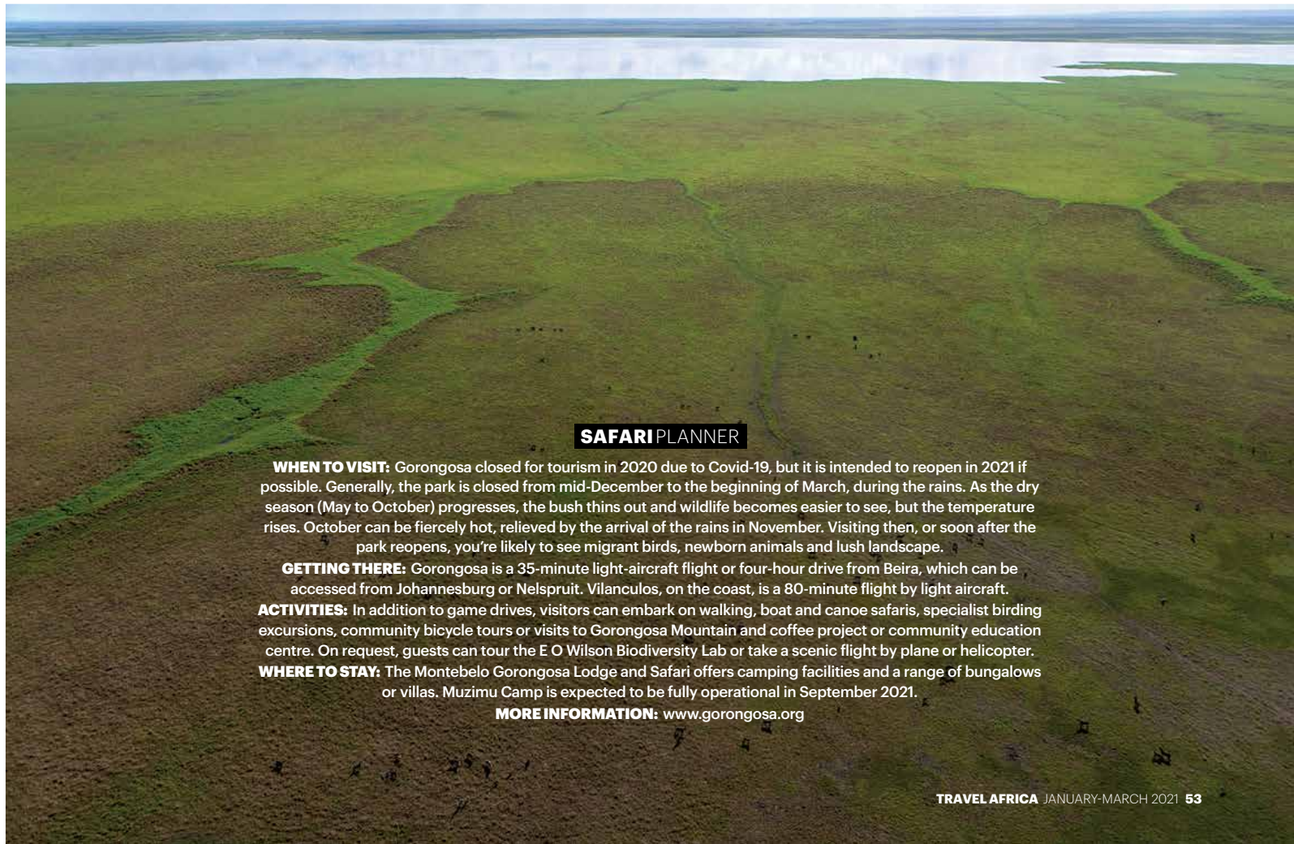
This type of expansive thinking is fuel for Gorongosa's future vision – a protected landscape stretching all the way to the Indian Ocean. In 2018, Gorongosa took over a former hunting concession to the northeast, swathed with awe-inspiring woodlands, which it intends to upgrade to a national park. Community conservation areas and sustainable forestry concessions could create wildlife corridors to link the parks. Considering Gorongosa's incredible success so far, surely this dream will materialise, adding even more diversity to the world's most ecologically diverse park.











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1: Murombodzi waterfall, near the Gorongosa Coffee project
2: Gorongosa has a thriving sable population
3: A pelican feasting; there are 339 bird species here
4: Elephants play an important role in maintaining the ecosystem
5: Sunset over Lake Urema
6: The Urema floodplains are dominated by large numbers of waterbuck and other species

ALL PICTURES: GORONGOSA NATIONAL PARK. ADDITIONAL CREDIT: (1, 3–5) BOB POOLE, (2) MICHAEL PAREDES, (4) JEAN PAUL VERMEULEN, (6) PIOTR NASKRECKI

gorongosa in numbers

2000 GIRLS INVOLVED IN GIRLS' CLUBS AND NATURE CLUBS | 376 COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS SUPPORTED | 37 BURSARIES FOR GIRLS TO ATTEND HIGH SCHOOL | 10,000 FARMERS REACHED BY ITS AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICES

SAFARI PLANNER

WHEN TO VISIT: Gorongosa closed for tourism in 2020 due to Covid-19, but it is intended to reopen in 2021 if possible. Generally, the park is closed from mid-December to the beginning of March, during the rains. As the dry season (May to October) progresses, the bush thins out and wildlife becomes easier to see, but the temperature rises. October can be fiercely hot, relieved by the arrival of the rains in November. Visiting then, or soon after the park reopens, you're likely to see migrant birds, newborn animals and lush landscape.

GETTING THERE: Gorongosa is a 35-minute light-aircraft flight or four-hour drive from Beira, which can be accessed from Johannesburg or Nelspruit. Vilanculos, on the coast, is a 80-minute flight by light aircraft.

ACTIVITIES: In addition to game drives, visitors can embark on walking, boat and canoe safaris, specialist birding excursions, community bicycle tours or visits to Gorongosa Mountain and coffee project or community education centre. On request, guests can tour the E O Wilson Biodiversity Lab or take a scenic flight by plane or helicopter.

WHERE TO STAY: The Montebelo Gorongosa Lodge and Safari offers camping facilities and a range of bungalows or villas. Muzimu Camp is expected to be fully operational in September 2021.

MORE INFORMATION: www.gorongosa.org