



# Wildlife Action Group



**ANNUAL REPORT 2019**

*“unprecedented levels of poaching of wildlife severely impact the ecosystems they inhabit. It is more important than ever to ensure that these areas are robust, reliable”*



*rely threatening the future of these species and the  
ever that law enforcement responses in protected  
e, and effective.” (IUCN)*



# Foreword

Almost ten years ago, responding to a tiny advert placed by the trustees of Wildlife Action Group looking for a manager, I flew from Dublin straight into a rundown camp pitched at the top of a mountain forest reserve called Thuma. In spite of my deep passion for animals and conservation, my first years here were to be the most difficult and challenging of my career. In those early days, WAG was made up of 12 rangers. The forest was under severe threat from being completely deforested by charcoal burners. We were unable to patrol many areas due to illegal poachers working in large numbers who were extremely aggressive and attacked and chased the rangers and several times our camps were attacked and burnt or vandalised. Poaching of wildlife was also high and elephants targeted for their ivory. I was warned time and time again to give up and go home. The forest was almost gone. There was no money and little support.

Looking across the forest from Top Rock stretching from beneath my feet to the shores of Lake Malawi, I think I lost my heart to this sad, lonely, neglected forest. My passion for wildlife and wild areas connected with this tired forest and drawing on reserves of Irish grit and determination, I rolled up my sleeves, unpacked my bags and went to work.

Nine years later and the difference is clear. Driving up to camp, on a maintained bush road, through protected trees, you see baboons, kudu, bushbuck, warthogs, exquisite birds, butterflies, all racing around and we see elephants regularly.

WAG's motto „more sweat, less poaching” hangs at our camp entrance and inspires us as a team not to give up, but to increase our efforts and little by little things started to change. After a lot of work, our rangers have increased three-fold and are now trained, equipped, hardworking and professional. They are passionate and dedicated to the forest they serve.

Communities living on the borders of the forest are equally benefitting through shared natural resources, income generating activities such as bee keeping, home gardens, animal husbandry projects and piece work. The solar electric fence project has improved food and personal security which mitigates wildlife conflict and compliments humans and wildlife living side by side. It is now rare to hear of elephants leaving the forest, destroying the lives and livelihoods of those living on the forest boundary. These initiatives improves people's lives, giving them more possibilities and at the same time providing improved nutrition for their families, moving people away from complete dependence on forest products.

Protected areas continue to see major threats from the needs of a growing population. The protection of the environment and at the same time protecting and ensuring people's lives and livelihoods, is critical. Conservation work is dangerous. It requires the very best of training. It is expensive and at times deeply frustrating. Losing animals to poaching is simply too devastating.

As I write, we see the world in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. Travel restrictions, lack of tourism and loss of jobs and incomes are affecting economies and the ripple effect is now hitting conservation efforts hard. This highlights just how fragile the link is between humanity and nature and how more important than ever our work is.



Yet, despite ongoing and increasing challenges, in 2019 we saw giant steps in our work on the ground. Key wins for 2019 were

- Zero elephant losses due to poaching
- Ranger training covered tracking, orientation and refresher basic anti poaching, increasing our skill set on the ground
- Boot on the ground - we increased the number of patrols over the year and coverage of both protected area with 23,461km logged by foot
- Court monitoring saw a 68% success rate in custodial sentences (54% increase on 2018)
- Extension of the solar powered elephant fence along western Thuma boundary by 22kms
- Decrease in human elephant conflict (2018 saw a total 64 recorded elephants leaving the reserve and 2019 saw 29, a 55% decrease)
- Drilled 4 bore holes providing clean water to over 800 people
- Continued to support and increase community projects (83 projects- working directly with over 800 people)
- Refurbishment of three schools including painting and building of new tables and chairs providing seating for approx 580 children who sat on the floor to learn
- Building 2 classroom blocks in two districts
- Conducted the 4th animal count
- Deployed 4 satellite collars on elephants to monitor their movements and increase security
- Discovered and identified 15 orchid species
- Rescued 1 trapped hyena, released 2 duikers
- Installation of new digital radio system with communication tower with live tracking of patrols

These activities showcase how a well-managed protected areas can have a positive impact on the habitat, the wildlife and the communities. We are proud to be part of tangible changes, that reach out and actually have a positive impact on people's lives, mitigating climate change and that support positive impacts on wildlife especially an iconic species such as lands largest mammal - the African Elephant.

None of this could have been achieved without our partners, donors , volunteers and supporters. May we take this opportunity to Thank you all for making this work possible and we look forward to your continued support in 2020.

So we continue our motto

***“More sweat and less Poaching”***

Stay well and keep safe. Lynn and all Wag staff





# Law Enforcement

*Our skilled and dedicated anti poaching unit patrol over 320km<sup>2</sup> of protected habitat and the wild animals that live here, including an important elephant population. Ivory poaching and a very vibrant bush meat trade are having devastating effects on Africa's wildlife and forest crime has very destructive effects on the habitat. Our rangers, all employed from local areas, are fully trained, equipped and determined to deter and stop illegal wildlife and forest crimes and also arrest suspects found carrying out illegal activities. All patrols are conducted on foot, in very challenging terrain and boots and uniforms are in desperate need of replacing. In 2019, WAG put much effort into continued protection of the forests and wildlife through our anti poaching teams. In 2020, we plan to increase the number of rangers and already have over 150 applications to select from.*

## **Training:**

Up-skilling our rangers was high on the agenda this year with all rangers receiving refresher training early in the year and additional specialist tactical tracking training, navigation and map reading. This ongoing training means each ranger continues to acquire new skills and knowledge to be applied in the field on subjects such as law enforcement, weaponry use, capture and arresting, tracking, eco system management, leadership skills etc. Thanks to external trainers from Big 5 Protection and Mellivora Systems.

## **Patrols:**

Impact on the ground saw an increased number of patrols and coverage of areas, logging an impressive 23,461km by foot over the year and 2180 patrols. Through these efforts we have improved the overall protection of the reserves, however, poaching in many forms still poses high threats to the wildlife and habitat. Hunting of wildlife using firearms, snares and dogs and illegal fishing are still the highest threats followed by forest related crimes such as illegal mining inside the forest, encroachment and charcoal burning. Commercial firewood collecting (collecting firewood for sale rather than use) is becoming a major concern especially for community security due to large dangerous wildlife.

Confiscations over the year included :

- 173 snares
- 239 other confiscations (pangas/fishing nets, hoes)
- 2 firearms

## **Arrest and Court Monitoring:**

A total of 31 arrests were made over the year which showed 65% were forest crime related and 35% relating to wildlife crime with zero listed species (i.e. elephant) cases. Through our court monitoring systems, we were delighted to see a 68% successful conviction rate with the maximum sentence of 54 months in prison for a gun poacher.

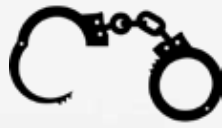
## **Communications:**

Patrol Communications to date has been a challenge with a VHF two way radio system meaning rangers could not communicate with HQ due to many black spots. A new digital two-way radio system was installed increasing capacity to accommodate more radio channels, improved audio quality, greater functionality, higher battery life, stronger security and better channel efficiency, however, due to the terrain we also had to install a communications tower to ensure good coverage. A radio tower was built at the highest point in Thuma at over 1500mtrs, with turboparks tracking, we are capturing live data direct from the field. This system was kindly funded by STE and WCN through Elephant Crisis Fund and has ensured improved communication throughout both parks.

## No. of Patrol per year by Reserve



**23,461km**  
Patrolled in 2019



**31**  
Arrests in 2019



**68%**  
Successful conviction rate



**2**  
Firearms confiscated



**173**  
Snares Removed



**0**  
Elephants lost due to Poaching



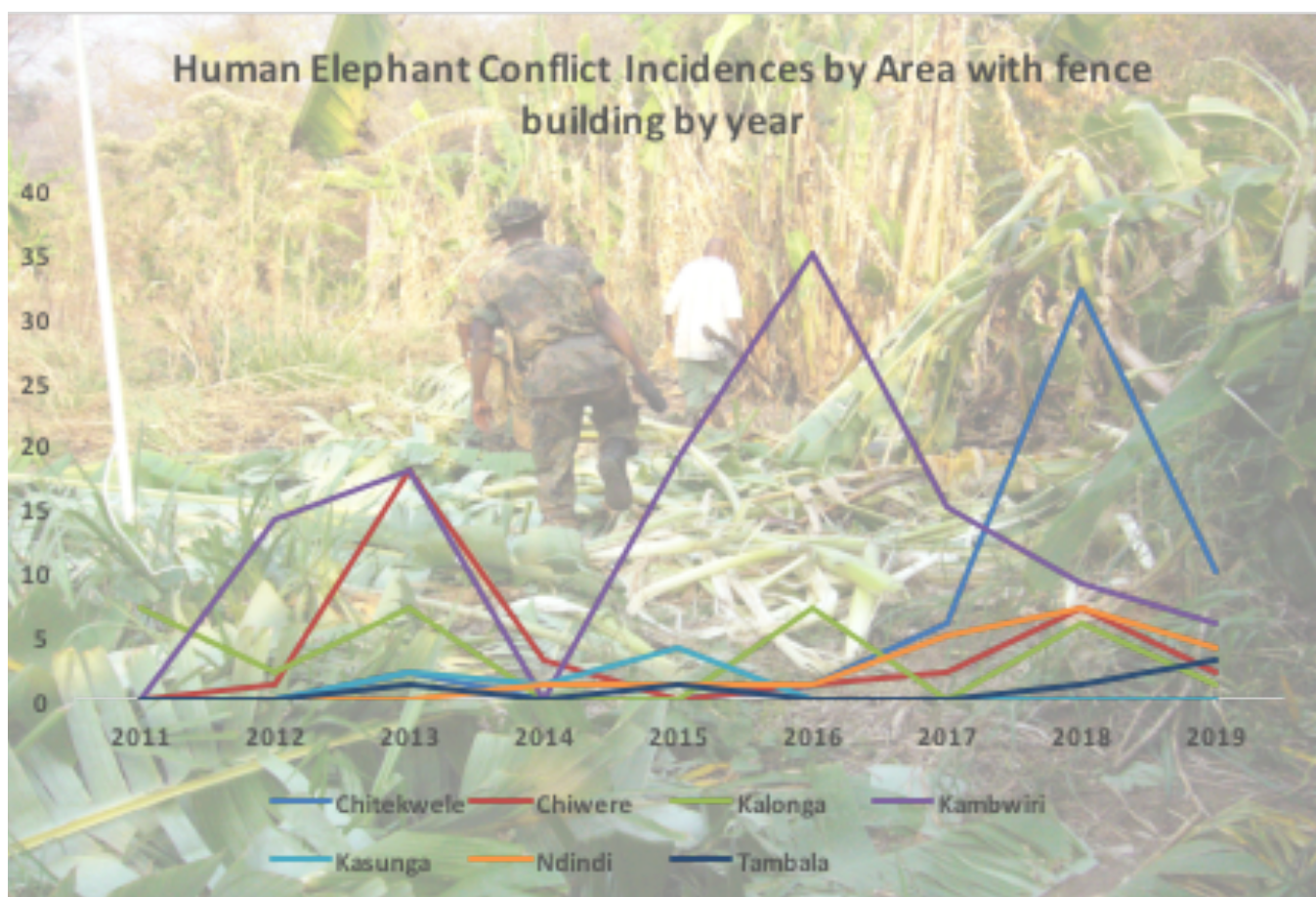






# Human Wildlife Co Existence (HWC)

Population growth alongside a need for farming land and settlements close to protected areas are some of the major concerns and causes of people and wildlife coming into direct conflict with wildlife. People living close to Protected areas can experience both the negative and positive impacts. One of our core activities is to mitigate the negatives associated with HWC, and with elephants in particular (human elephant conflict-HEC). In one of the poorest countries in the world where most people farm small plots of land to feed their families, food security becomes paramount along with personal security and this also affects attitudes towards conservation efforts and those working hard to protect these spaces and wildlife. Over the years we have worked hard to address issues arising from wildlife leaving the protected areas and destroying crops, and at times killing people. Our solar powered electric fence has shown over the years to have 99% success in dramatically reducing this conflict. 2019 saw phase 8 of Thuma Fence project completed kindly funded by Elefence, meaning Thuma Forest Reserve has an elephant fence around all boundaries providing good protection to communities and their crops. This could not have been achieved without our generous donors over the years and communities who played a vital role in its erection and ongoing maintenance. Our next step is to continue building the fence around Dedza Salima Forest offering the same protection to communities living there and ensuring food security. We are looking for funding to start this project. The graph below shows as the fence was extended, we see a reduction in animals leaving the PA (except for TA Ndindi were the fence ends so animals are able to walk around and outside).



Above graph shows HEC by year and by Area. As the fence line grows, we see HEC increasing in new areas, as elephants are able to walk to the end of the fence and outside into public land. 2019 saw the completion of Thuma boundary fence. Up until December end of 2019 T/A Chitekwele was not fenced, and Kusumbe still has no fence.



*Communities need  
opportunities*

# Community Development

*Next to protected areas are challenged to find sustainable livelihood activities that support, rather than hinder, wildlife conservation*





For many years, local communities have depended on local natural resources from inside the protected areas as a source of income at a commercial level.

Over the last few years, we have worked hard to switch this habit and realise benefits to communities which in turn takes pressure off the wildlife and forests.

2019 saw us strengthen community engagement through

- Identifying and scaling up viable new projects in different areas
- Continued support and training for ongoing projects.
- Empowering communities and encouraging them to develop and practice alternative income generating activities which reduce their reliance on forest product.

These initiatives will not only improve their livelihoods but will also tackle and have positive impact on the health and future of both people and the protected area and also mitigate climate change. This continues to be carried out in 4 districts, particularly for people living close to the reserve boundary and this is done in cooperation and consultation with local communities for the benefit of the communities and the forest.

Three of the most important steps to change are

- engagement
- awareness
- education

We continue to create long-term, robust projects in several key areas around both reserves which address the needs of communities and have far-reaching impacts.

2019 saw some giant steps to achieving this. Through support from USFWS we increased bee keeping, irrigation gardens and poultry clubs, bringing new skills, changing old habits and creating new opportunities as well as improving nutrition at a village level.

In Malawi, 1 in 3 people do not have clean water (approx 5.6 million). We were aware of 4 areas where people depended on taking water from inside the forest, putting lives at risk if dangerous

animals are encountered. Increasing access to clean water and improved sanitation facilities, especially at a household level, has had significant impact in reducing infectious diseases, enhancing people's dignity and well-being, and producing socio-economic benefits.

In mid 2019, WAG were thrilled to partner up with Nu Skin's, non-profit Force For Good Foundation (FFG) and Nu Skin's agricultural outreach program, SAFI Extension - SAFI stands for School of Agriculture for Family Independence. Funding was raised from Nu skin European Distributors, lead by a close friend of WAGS, Marcus Westberg. Marcus is an extremely talented photographer who is also passionate and active in working to help raise funds for different projects. Through this funding three bore holes were drilled in villages close to the boundaries which has stopped people entering into the forest to find water and now supplies clean fresh water to over 1000 people.

Additionally, villagers received agricultural training and inputs to have small home gardens growing much needed food. The feeling of joy and pride was unbelievable: one 60 year old woman, Mama Kadula, told us how this was the first time in her entire life that she had tasted clean water and one of the chiefs told us that in the month since the installation of the borehole, most people stopped suffering with diarrhoea. This project has had outstanding lasting impacts on many people lives. We thank everyone, especially to Veronica, Stephen and Ben, Marcus and the MAD Sweeds :).

Another bore hole was drilled with funding kindly received from Hilde Muelle who raised money by asking for donations for her birthday rather than presents. Once again changing many people lives. We thank everyone who were part of this gift of life. We received a further donation related to clean water in the form of water filters very generously donated through Dr Kurt Heim and the Lion's Club Fulda. Huge big thanks.



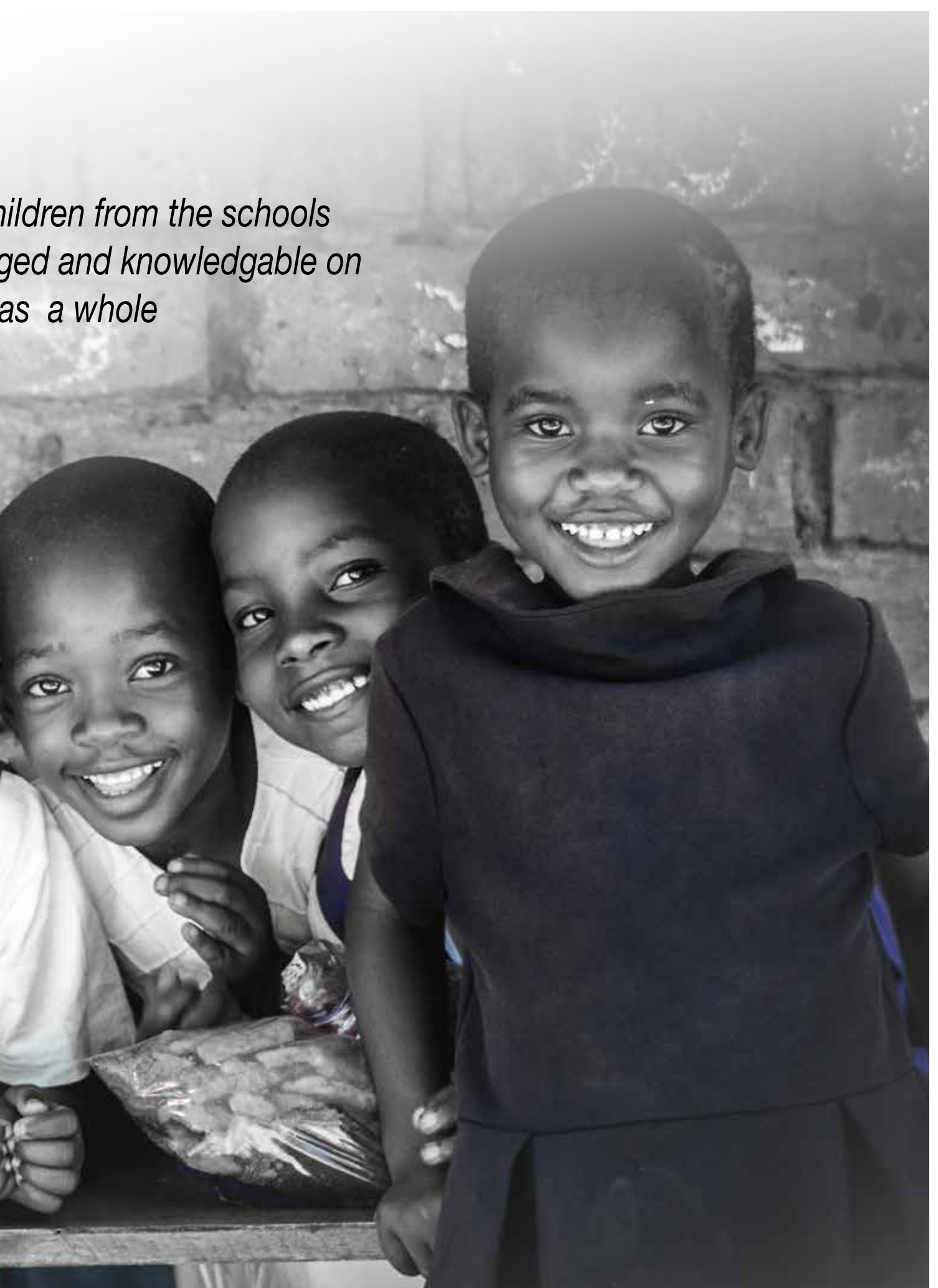
# Education & Outreach

*Our goal is to impart knowledge and change the mindset of children around two forest reserves to become responsible citizens engaged in wildlife conservation and the natural environment.*





*Children from the schools  
engaged and knowledgeable on  
as a whole*



Influencing people's attitudes, emotions, knowledge, and behaviour about wildlife and wild places is so important for the future, protection and development of our protected areas. Wildlife Action Group currently conduct environmental and conservation education which is added on to the school syllabus. This is done once a month across all classes in 14 primary schools. Lessons are conducted through theory and practical work, ensuring we engage children through senses (visual, auditory and kinesthetic) and instil a real delight, imagination and pride in Malawi's environment and wildlife. Working with partner Tuesday Trust, we currently work in the following schools - 3 in Dowa, 8 in Salima and 2020 sees an additional 3 schools in Lilongwe district. Reaching out to over 8000 children who can and will make a difference.

2019 highlights saw

- the building of 1 school block in Dowa
- Roofing of another school block in Kambiri School, Chipoka,
- Roofing of a teachers house in Kaviguti school in Salima

In partnership with the Tuesday Trust-

- 3 schools (Kambiri, Kaviguti and Namajete) saw all class rooms and blackboards painted
- Educational inputs supplied to teachers (chalk, pens, hardback books, flip charts, markers etc)
- Building of tables and chairs in classrooms without, made of durable cement
- Educational posters were also supplied

This is an initiative to inspire a certain pride in the schools for teachers, children and parents alike. This project is continuing in 2020 to finish table and chair building. A new donor is required to expand this project.

Also in July 2019, 34 children who achieved the highest scores in the end of year test were rewarded with a special day excursion. We brought them out to visit and see wildlife up close in a personal setting at a small private reserve close to Salima. Here the children walked through the bush and saw animals such as zebra, kudu, giraffe and bushbuck. The excitement and joy on their faces was amazing. We then brought them to visit Lake Malawi. Although most of these children live within 1 hour of the lake, they had never visited there. Some ran straight into the water, others stopped and just stared at it in awe. Certificates were given to all students to congratulate them on their achievement and to encourage them to be wildlife warriors and be active in wildlife conservation.







# Wildlife Monitoring

In an ongoing effort to protect and monitor the important population of elephants and with funding from Save the Elephant and Wildlife Conservation Network through the Elephant Crisis Fund, we collared 4 elephants in November. Three breeding herds and one bull were selected to be monitored as they are normally resident in areas far from camps and in known poacher hot spots.

Darting and collaring elephants is no easy job especially in Dedza Salima Forest where the topography is challenging. Despite these obstacles, we had an amazing team working on this. Thanks to Bravo Romeo Aviation Services and Dr Amanda Lee Salb along with our WAG team for all their hard work.

Thanks to Save the Elephant (STE), we are using an STE tracking app powered by Vulcan Inc which is a specialised tool designed for those interested in visualising and analysing the movements of individuals.



# Research and Development

Recording and monitoring of flora and fauna has been one of our ongoing activities and is essential for our conservation effort. Rangers record daily wildlife sightings which is then collected and mapped by month/year. This helps us keep track and find out about animal movements, distribution patterns, diversity and new species.

Thuma in particular is still surprising us with new delights. Thanks to Reto's insatiable appetite for the creepy crawlies, he is adding to our rather large photo index of insects, butterflies, moths, spiders, flowers, birds and trees. All photos are recorded and indexed and this is growing and becoming a full time job and extremely exciting. All of this effort is far from completion and shows that we have so much biodiversity living here which is still undocumented.

## 2019 saw:

-15 new orchid species found, bringing the total number of identified orchids up to 58. This is ongoing.

-WAG have been working with the Hyena Specialist Group by collecting and sharing data on the hyenas living here. This has several aspects to it; mapping movements of hyenas using camera traps, photo identification of individuals to establish clan compositions, and as there are no other confirmed large carnivores on the reserves, we are collecting hyena scat to analyse and determine their diet. Using hairs within the scat, we are able to identify the species which have been preyed on and are therefore important in supporting our reserves' ecological communities. Big thanks to volunteer Eleanor Comley who has been working on this and Oliva Sievert who has been so kind with her time and experience.

-The 2019 Animal Count: November 2019 saw the 4th animal count in both reserves. Data collected shows exciting increases in all wildlife populations as well as increased distribution which is linked to reclaimed land and increased protection/security down to the law enforcement effort.

-A Habitat Suitability Assessment conducted in a planned reintroduction site for a number of ungulate species. These surveys comprised of grass, shrubs and tree identification and quantified the availability of suitable habitat for wildlife we would like to reintroduce to Thuma in order to increase its biodiversity.

-Our Fire management plan proved very successful with lowest to date uncontrolled fires over the year and allocated zones went unburnt offering protection to wildlife and trees.

## Records of Animal Counts, 2013,2015, 2017, 2019

	Baboon	Blue monkey	Bushbuck	Bushpig	Buffalo	Common Duiker	Elephant	Grysbok	Hyaena	Hyrax	Kudu	Klipspringer	Python	Warthog	Vervet monkey	Porcupine	Serval	Total animals seen	Percentage difference each year
Total 2013	141	23	33	14	101	18	104	8	0	3	52	7	0	46	21	0	0	571	
Total 2015	97	6	29	7	27	22	133	13	0	5	45	4	1	27	0	0	0	416	-27%
Total 2017	430	2	72	8	44	33	141	18	1	0	95	15	0	72	3	0	0	502	21%
Total 2019	524	23	121	36	95	46	208	10	1	16	128	31	0	127	11	1	1	1379	175%

\*pls note these are actual animals counted and represent a minimum number.



# Saving Wildlife

2019 saw it's fair share of saving and reintroducing wildlife. One hyena was found in a pit trap and then re-scued and released, 3 baby pythons rescued, 3 serval kittens rescued, 12 tortoises, 50+ chameleons. 300 scorpions were released here in Thuma after being rescued by LWT from foreign nationals. Thuma is proving to be an excellent haven for wildlife fallen prey to the illegal wildlife trade. Here we can offer a second chance of freedom with good security.





# British Army Aid our conservation efforts and save rangers life

Our conservation efforts and save rangers life 2019 saw the third deployment of the British military to Malawi, where they trained and assisted African Parks rangers at Liwonde NP. In November 2019 troops from the 2nd Battalion Royal Gurkha Rifles British Army spent just under 2 weeks sharing skills with Wildlife Action Group rangers here at Thuma Forest Reserve. The Gurkhas Rifles are a rifle regiment who's soldiers are recruited from Nepal. Their motto is "Better die than to be a coward". They are considered to be among the finest infantrymen in the world. They got stuck in, providing excellent training for all rangers on leadership, 1st aid and helped set up our admin and communications office. However, on the second last day one of our rangers collapsed and was unresponsive and stopped breathing. Thankfully the British army was there with experienced medics and medical equipment to assist. Wilcliff our rangers condition was not improving and he looked like he would die. He was placed in the Army ambulance and rushed to Lilongwe Central Hospital for urgent treatment. Thankfully he recovered but we will be forever thankful to RGR and British army for saving his life. Wilcliff returned to duty some ten days later.



# In Memory of WAG Rangers and Employees

We were deeply saddened by the loss of 3 staff (current/ ex staff) who sadly passed away in 2019.



Kennedy Asan left WAG after serving 6 years as a ranger. He was an excellent ranger and an extremely open friendly man. He sadly passed away early in the year after a head injury.

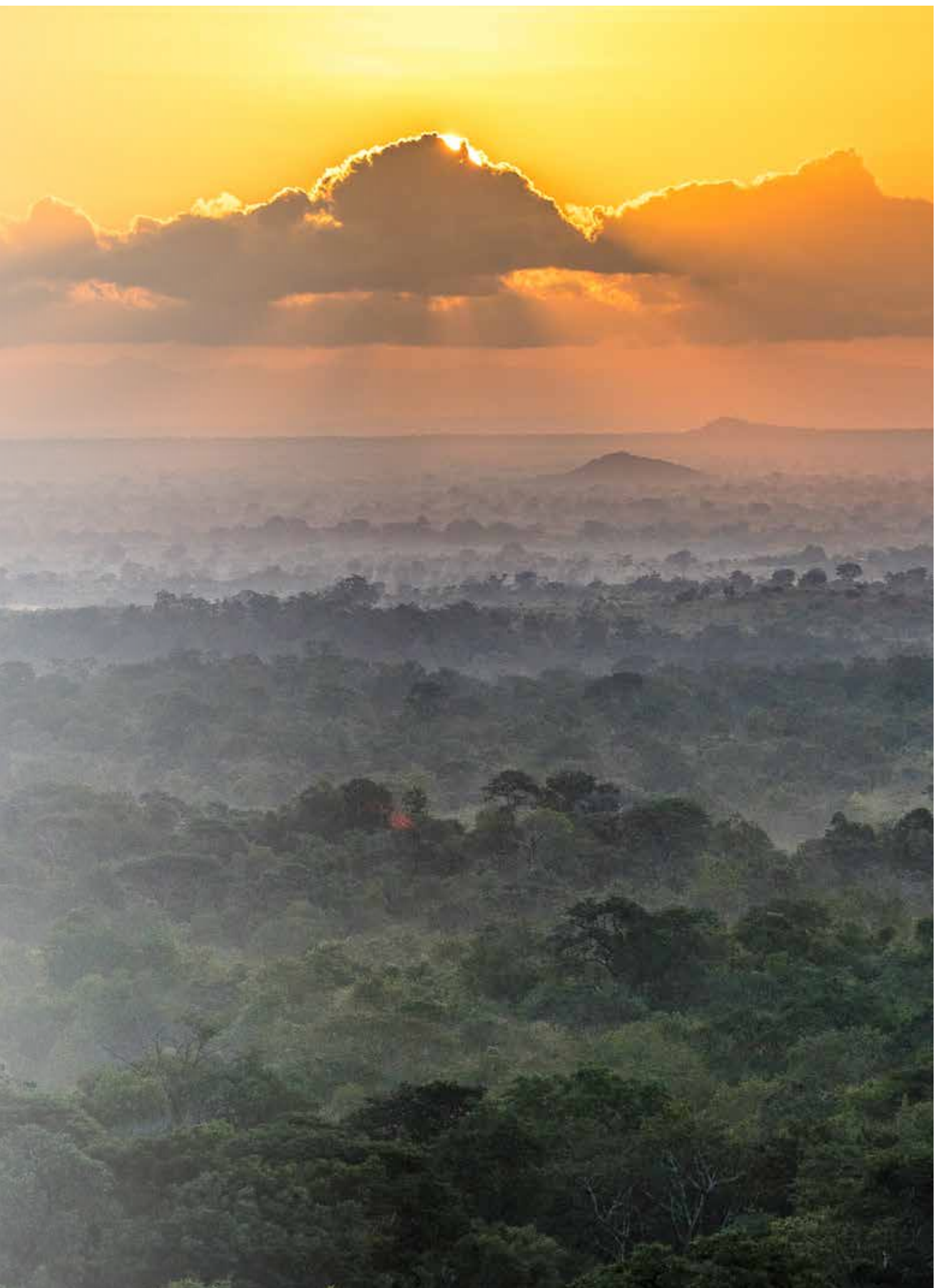


Zelfred Banda passed away after a short illness. He was an excellent fence attendant with a great sense of humour and is sadly missed.



In March 2019 our dear colleague and friend Geoffrey Umali, tragically passed away. Geoffrey was a dedicated, skilled and highly motivated ranger, who worked hard protecting wildlife in Malawi. He was fatally injured in a motor accident while at home and fought hard right up to the end of his life. Geoffrey had a character larger than life, and it is still hard to believe he is no longer with us. He is missed by everyone who knew him from a work and personal perspective.

We dedicate this report in thanks and memory for their hard work and dedication to protecting Malawi's natural resources. Hero's to the end all of them.

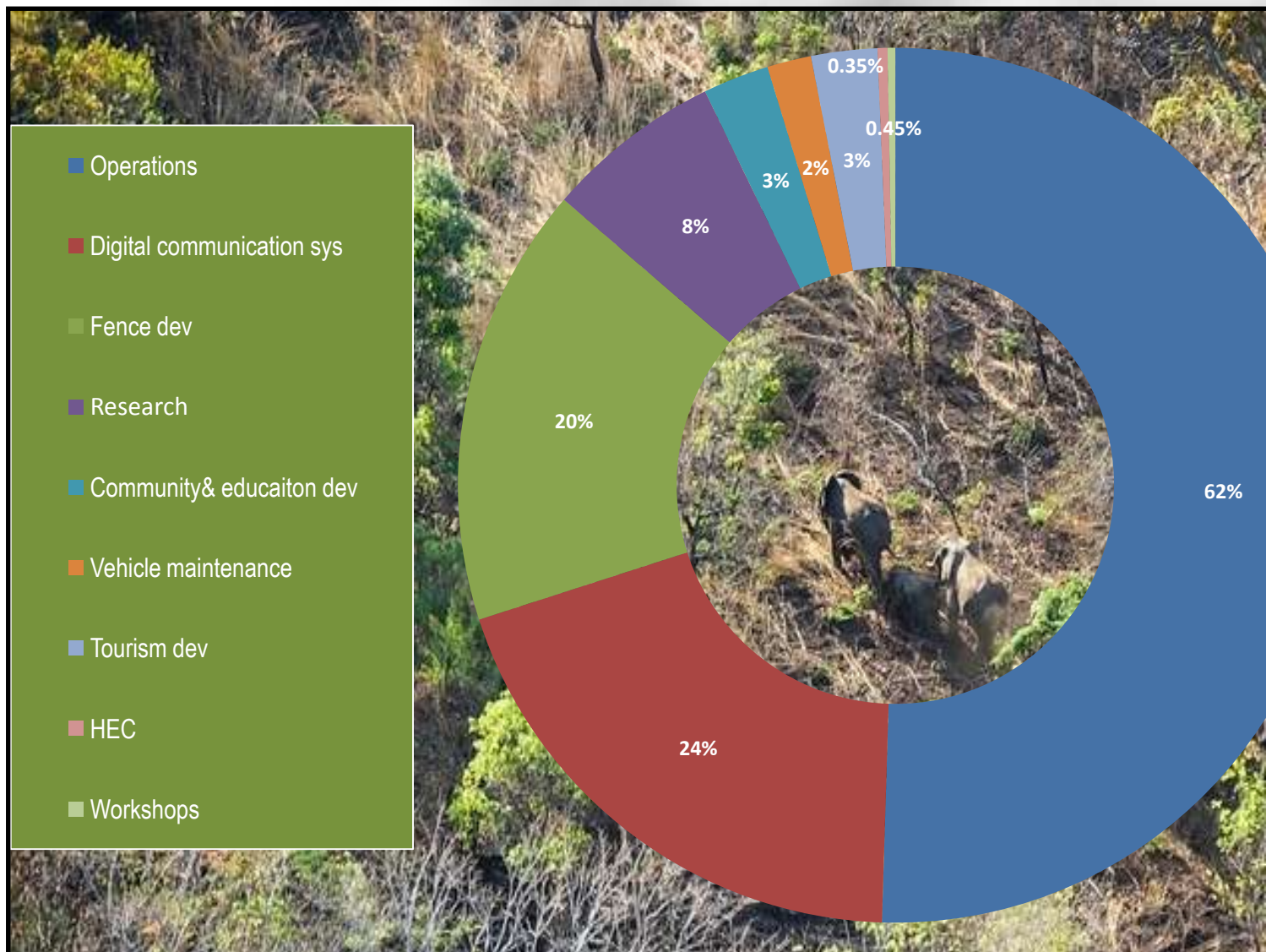


# Finances

Presented here are the income and expenditure of Wildlife Action Group in 2019. We would like to especially thank our long term major contributors for their ongoing support of our operations, and who over the years who have been instrumental in our ongoing achievements. We also wish to thank donors who have enabled us to roll out special projects in 2019 which have had incredible impacts on the development of the reserves.

Our work is only possible with the support of the Department of Forestry and Department of National Parks and Wildlife, local partners, communities and the generous and ongoing support and donations from our donors, individuals and organisations. We are so grateful for your support which is having such positive impacts in these areas.

2019 financial overview		
	B/F	I
Donor Income (Includes ongoing projects of two year period)	171'075	
<b>Expenditure</b>	<b>USD</b>	
Operations	118'826	
New two way radio	46'546	
Fence dev	38'355	
Research	15'445	
Community& educaiton dev	5'207	
Vehicle maintenance	2'900	
Toursim dev	4'316	
Bank charges	202	
HEC	865	
Workshops	669	
<b>Total exp</b>		
<b>Balance C/F (includes ongoing projects)</b>		



Incoming USD	Total USD
247'650	418'725
%	
62	
24	
20	
8	
3	
2	
2	
0.45	
0.35	
	233'331
	185'394



# Donors



Aoife Calven  
Catherine Almeida  
Demiter Avtanski  
Donald Goldberg  
Edgar Mackels  
Ester Iohmane  
Falvio Brothers  
Friedmann-French Foundation  
Heike Henderson  
Jana Fecker  
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Joanna Gentili  
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Jürgen and Friends  
Kathleen McMullen  
Kindy French  
Kurt Heim  
Kristina Rösel  
Maja Neerman  
Marnix Neerman  
Maarten J. van Strien  
Mady Krahl

Mrs. Rösel  
Nancy Abraham  
Pip Dunewell  
Polly Mason & Sam Trollope  
Ronald Ulrich  
Schäffer Family  
Stefan Plappert  
Steven Stone  
Tedla Damte  
Tracy de la Mater  
Thomas & Jana Ruoss



# Partners



# Stakeholders



Special thanks to Rettet die Elefanten Afrikas, Abraham Foundation, Save the Elephant and Wildlife Conservation Network through Elephant Crisis Fund, Steven Stone, Elefence, Big 5 Protection, Mellivora Systems, African Elephant Fund, USFish and Wildlife Svs, Ron Ulrich, Kindy French, Tracy and Donald Goldberg.



# Wildlife Action Group

