



| DE BEERS

OKAVANGO ETERNAL

PROTECTING A NATURAL WONDER

PHASE 1 IMPACT REPORT, 2021 - 2026

Prepared for De Beers | September 2026



Letter from the CEO

Dear Friends,

The most enduring conservation efforts are never measured solely by the landscapes they protect. They are measured by the futures they make possible – for people and nature today, and for generations yet to come.

Five years ago, we set out to build that kind of partnership. Even its name, Okavango Eternal, reflected our shared ambition: to help ensure that one of the world’s greatest freshwater ecosystems, and the communities whose lives depend upon it, would continue to thrive long into the future.

As the first chapter of our partnership comes to a close, I am struck by how fully that vision has come to life. Together with the Explorer-led National Geographic Okavango Wilderness Project team, we have demonstrated that the most enduring conservation efforts are those rooted in local leadership and built alongside the communities who call these extraordinary landscapes home.

Across Angola, Namibia and Botswana, that commitment has taken many forms. It lives in the Forest Watchers program, where stewardship is passed from one generation to the next; in our investment in local scientists and Ph.D. students, whose expertise will help shape the Basin’s future; and in entrepreneurs creating new livelihood opportunities through initiatives such as Lisima Handmade and the Nkashi Centers.

It is equally reflected in our commitment to storytelling. “Nkashi: Race for the Okavango” demonstrated the power of stories told by and for local communities – fueling record participation in the annual Nkashi Classic and inspiring Storytelling Clubs, a new generation of storytellers preserving and sharing the region’s rich cultural heritage.

Perhaps no milestone better embodies the spirit of Okavango Eternal than Angola’s landmark decision to designate the country’s first-ever Ramsar Wetland of International Importance: Lisima Lya Mwono, known locally as the “Source of Life.” By protecting the Basin’s headwaters, this historic designation lays the foundation to safeguard not only one of the world’s most significant freshwater ecosystems, but also the communities, livelihoods and opportunities that depend upon its future health.

Together, these accomplishments reflect the true legacy of our partnership: strengthening the conditions that allow both people and nature to thrive through scientific knowledge, cultural heritage, economic opportunity and the local leadership that will carry this work forward long into the future.

On behalf of the National Geographic Society, thank you for your partnership, your trust and your unwavering commitment to this shared vision. We are proud of what we have accomplished together, and we are even more inspired by what these investments will continue to make possible in the years ahead.

Jill Tiefenthaler
Chief Executive Officer
National Geographic Society



■ Introduction and Overview of Okavango Eternal

The Okavango River Basin stands as one of Africa’s final intact large-scale wetland systems, a sprawling lifeline that secures water and biodiversity across Angola, Namibia and Botswana. Originating as rainfall in the remote highlands of Angola, these source waters travel nearly 1,000 kilometers across international borders through Namibia before entering Botswana. It acts as a critical freshwater resource for over 1 million people and iconic African wildlife. However, a major environmental vulnerability exists: while the Okavango Delta in Botswana is officially protected, the critical headwaters that lie in Angola and provide approximately 95% of its sustaining waters are not.

If these upstream water systems are disrupted, it risks not only the health of the Okavango Delta, but also the wildlife, communities and economies that depend entirely on its flow throughout the transboundary expanse of the Basin. The National Geographic Okavango Wilderness Project (NGOWP) began on-the-ground work in 2015, conducting arduous scientific expeditions, mapping biodiversity and establishing vital relationships with local communities and governments.

What the project then needed was a like-minded partner that could help provide the injection of resources to scale. To solve this transboundary challenge, the National Geographic Society and De Beers launched the Okavango Eternal partnership in 2021. De Beers’ funding catalyzed and strengthened the established work of the NGOWP. By combining National Geographic’s world-class science and storytelling with De Beers’ regional footprint and financial backing, and with an expansive network and implementation experience from on-the-ground partner The Wild Bird Trust, the partnership shifted from localized research projects into an interconnected, high-impact, multicountry conservation initiative spanning the Okavango Basin.

True ecological protection and local community empowerment cannot happen overnight. This partnership recognizes that protecting a 5.4-million-hectare Basin requires a sustained, long-term commitment to build trust with local populations, gather longitudinal data and shift government policies.

As the realities on the ground shifted, the alignment between NGOWP’s scientific achievements and De Beers’ sustainability goals grew stronger. The strategy shifted from broad baseline research to creating targeted, community-led infrastructure, such as the newly established Nkashi Knowledge Centers, ensuring that conservation and economic prosperity go hand in hand.

As the partnership transitions into Phase II of Okavango Eternal, we will build on the excellent momentum gathered during Phase I to ensure greater impact and forge deeper connections across the entire Okavango River Basin.

Partnership Approach and Aims

Okavango Eternal is committed to two high-level objectives:

- **Protecting the Natural World** by supporting community-based systems of protection and local governments to protect biodiversity, striving to reach 5.4M hectares around the headwaters of the Okavango River Basin.
- **Supporting Communities** by enabling stronger economic foundations and providing access to as many as 10,000 livelihood opportunities.

These objectives are driven by six enabling pillars:

Okavango Eternal Guiding Approach



These six pillars work hand-in-hand to help achieve the two objectives of Okavango Eternal: protect the natural world and support communities. Celebrating traditional knowledge and advancing cutting-edge scientific research help engage Conservation Stakeholders and make the case for the Okavango River Basin’s long-term protection. Driving impact through storytelling and education helps raise awareness and can ultimately lead to protection by inspiring people to care for and act on behalf of this vital ecosystem. Importantly, Okavango Eternal envisions a future in which conservation, education and storytelling are locally led. Supporting community development and capacity building is essential to meet the moment and the future challenges the Basin will face.

High-Level Impact Metrics

COMMUNITY	21,077 students and 158 educators supported through Okavango Eternal initiatives, such as Backyard Expeditions, scholarship programs, internships, offerings at the Nkashi Knowledge Centers, and the Lisima Knowledge initiative.	18,500 people in Angola saw improved quality of life through infrastructure projects, including building 9 new bridges, 4 traditional meeting centers and one library.	9,500 cumulative attendees of the Nkashi Classic race over the course of the partnership, with 409 polers competing in finals over the past 5 years and participation across 21 villages.	2,118 livelihood opportunities supported across all Okavango Eternal initiatives in Angola, Namibia and Botswana, including 76 full-time staff as well as positions in beekeeping, regenerative agriculture, basket weaving, and entrepreneurial skill-building.
CONSERVATION	5.4M hectares of land in Angola designated as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance.	12 peer-reviewed publications produced to date, including descriptions of 53 new species to science, biodiversity monitoring of Miombo woodlands and fish populations in the Okavango Delta.	19 scientific river expeditions completed across the Basin, generating datasets that underpin the Ramsar designation and ongoing water governance discussions.	18 active hydrological/ meteorological monitoring stations offering the only independent hydrological dataset for the Basin.
STORYTELLING	177,000 individuals reached through 60 media moments featuring the opening of the Knowledge Center.	4.34M viewers for the Nkashi: Race for the Okavango documentary, with a reach to 80% of households in Botswana.	100 youth participated in Storytelling Clubs, receiving training in how to document their own cultural and natural heritage, with 58 students featured in a final exhibition in Gaborone.	



CONSERVATION STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

HOW IT STARTED

When Okavango Eternal launched in 2021, Conservation Stakeholder engagement was envisioned primarily as advocacy and policy work. This initial phase focused on attending forums, supporting legislative reviews and building relationships with decision-makers within Angola's Ministry of Environment.

HOW IT EVOLVED

Over five years, Conservation Stakeholder engagement shifted from external advocacy to community-led governance. At the local level, the team partnered with communities and traditional authorities to co-create programs, while simultaneously building policy capacity across the greater Okavango River Basin through workshops and legislative reviews.

This evolution brought together a multiyear coalition in 2023, involving the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the Angolan National Institute for Biodiversity and Protected Areas (INBAC), traditional authorities, and the provincial government. Together this coalition advanced a proposal that culminated in a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance designation in 2026. The Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECM) dialogue, not part of the initial area conservation protection strategy, has emerged as a significant opportunity to embed community-led conservation within national law.

What began as external advocacy evolved into co-created governance with communities who were not just informed but also leading.





Conservation Advocacy and Support for Policymakers *Angola*

Through deep engagement with conservation policymakers in Angola, the Okavango Eternal partnership is part of a coalition of funders that is embedding community-led conservation in the Lisima landscape within national and international policy frameworks, ensuring that local stewardship is formally recognized and supported.

WHY IT MATTERS

Without formal policy recognition, conservation gains remain vulnerable to shifts in political priorities, economic pressure and land-use change. While the Lisima landscape supplies 95% of the Okavango Delta’s water and supports over 1 million people across the Okavango and Zambezi River Basins, before this program, it had no designation, no formal conservation plan and no standing in national biodiversity frameworks.

PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- Wide-ranging consultations with government officials, local leaders, communities and scientific experts, which began in 2021 and were sustained over time to build consensus on the Ramsar and OECM processes.
- The Marxan Systematic Conservation Plan was finalized in December 2023 using optimized scenarios for the Lisima Lya Mwono protected area configuration.
- A formal technical proposal for the Lisima Lya Mwono Ramsar site was submitted to Angola’s Ministry of Environment for national review in January 2024.
- The first national-level workshop and dialogue to integrate OECMs into Angolan conservation law was convened in December 2024, in collaboration with IUCN, TNC and Angola’s Ministry of Environment.
- In 2025, OECM follow-up activities were conducted, including programmatic dialogues, site visits, development of a site assessment tool and legal support for incorporating OECMs into Angolan conservation law, creating a credible pathway for recognizing community-governed land alongside formally protected sites and laying the groundwork that Phase 2 will build on.
- A Local Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (LBSAP) for the Moxico region was finalized and submitted to provincial and national authorities in 2025, giving the government a biodiversity plan it can act on beyond the Ramsar site itself.
- Conducted knowledge-sharing on applied biodiversity and ecosystem resilience research through keynotes at TEDxJohannesburg Countdown (October 2025) and the 26th WaterNet Symposium in Luksasa (October 2025), as well as speeches at the Africa Biodiversity Summit in Gaborone (November 2025) and National Geographic’s International Explorers Festival in Johannesburg (January 2026).

- The next steps include formal ratification of Lisima Lya Mwono as a protected area by the Angolan Government and a high-level government summit, supported by Okavango Eternal, to sustain momentum from the Ramsar designation into implementation.



The Government of Angola and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands officially designated Angola’s first Wetland of International Importance, Lisima Lya Mwono, in January 2026 – an area covering 53,670 square kilometers (km²). As Angola’s first Ramsar site and one of the five largest in the world, this historic milestone permanently recognizes a landscape encompassing critical headwaters, vast carbon sinks and biodiversity hotspots under a legally backed, globally recognized framework.

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Protecting these headwaters and wetlands, Miombo woodland forests – the natural heritage of Angola – is one of the most critical conservation challenges in Africa today.”

STEVE BOYES
NGOWP PROJECT LEAD



PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

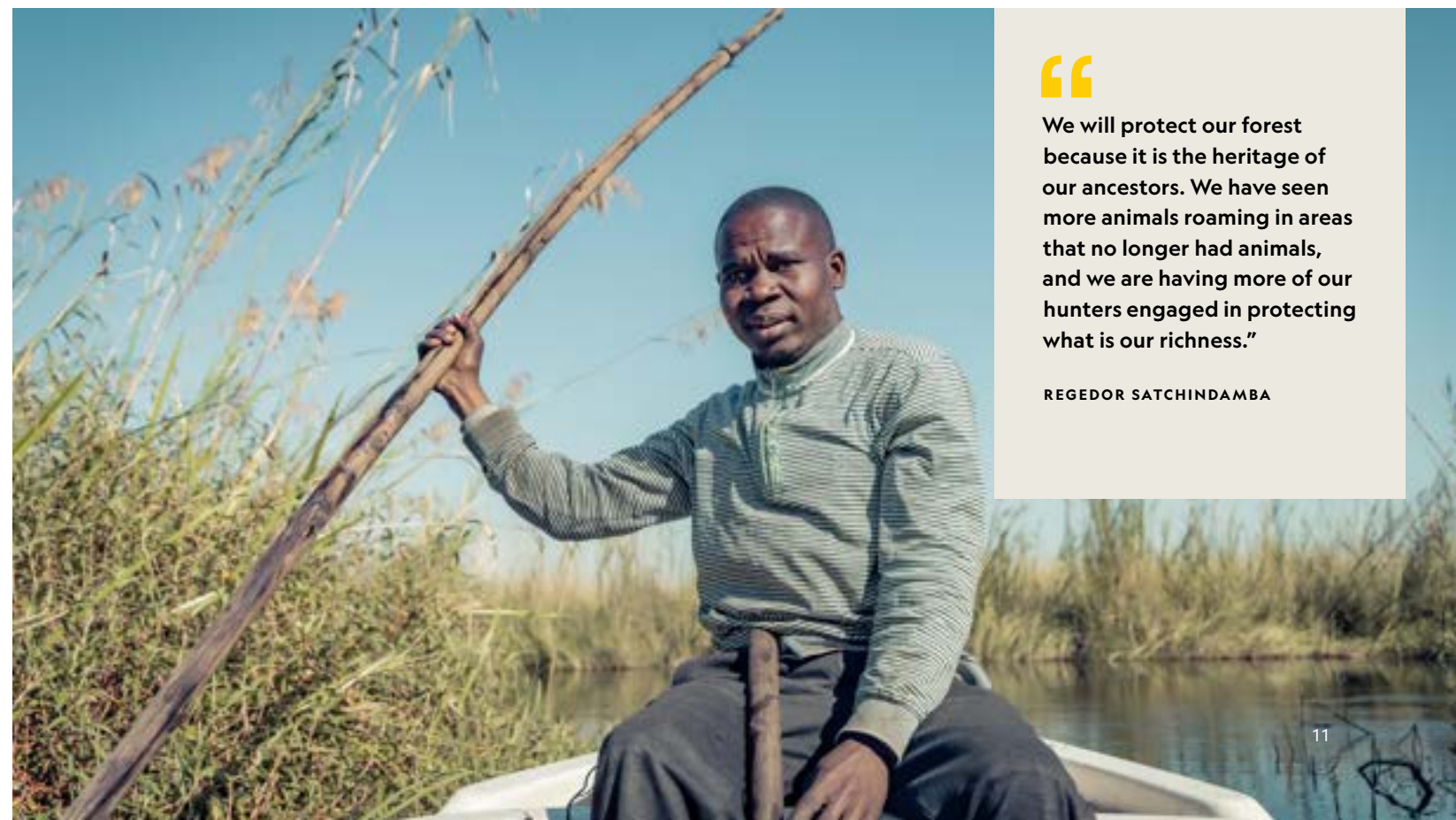
- Recruited, equipped and trained 82 active Watchers across eight regedorias (traditional domains) with uniforms, motorbikes and digital monitoring tools, so that traditional authorities could enforce their own governance for over 20,000 km² of forest. This resulted in confiscations of illegally hunted bushmeat, a documented return of wildlife to previously depleted areas, and a functioning fire-monitoring network across four provinces.
- 20 women and girls served as specialized river and fishing monitors in two villages, leading community knowledge-sharing workshops and fishing contests to engage youth and support monitors who expose unsustainable practices to village elders, as well as establishing youth mentorship pipelines for the future of the Watchers program.
- Fire management workshops united communities, Watchers and government officials across four provinces to map forest fires in real time, establishing a shared approach used directly to build a Lisima-wide fire framework grounded in traditional practice and ecological assessment.
- Camera traps recorded the first high-definition images of the “ghost” elephant population – images shared directly with traditional leaders to strengthen support for expanded Watcher coverage.

Community-Led Forest Monitoring – Tunyiungi va Lisima (‘The Watchers’)

The Watchers program is a community-led forest monitoring and protection system operating across the Lisima landscape in Angola. Selected and empowered by traditional authorities, Watchers collaborate with local authorities to conduct patrols, monitor wildlife, detect illegal hunting, and document fire and land-use change.

WHY IT MATTERS

The Miombo woodlands of the Angolan headwaters underpin the ecological integrity of the entire Okavango Basin. No ranger stations operate in these remote landscapes. Conservation success depends on activating the legitimate, locally governed systems of stewardship that have existed for generations – not replacing them.



“

We will protect our forest because it is the heritage of our ancestors. We have seen more animals roaming in areas that no longer had animals, and we are having more of our hunters engaged in protecting what is our richness.”

REGEDOR SATCHINDAMBA



STORY SPOTLIGHT

Protecting the Inheritance: How Traditional Governance Became Angola’s Frontline of Forest Protection

THE BASELINE

A Landscape Without Borders

The Lisima landscape in eastern Angola spans a massive 12,500 km²: a remote expanse of Miombo woodlands, wetlands and critical source waters larger than some European countries. It serves as the vital headwaters supplying life to the region, yet historically, it has not been formally protected or benefited from any formal environmental monitoring system. As the area has emerged from the post-civil war conflict and remote parts of the landscape become more accessible, pressures from unsanctioned commercial hunting and the illegal wildlife trade have increased. To address those looming threats, a conservation framework would not be sufficient. There was a need for a framework that builds on the millennia of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) held by local communities, whose governance structures have kept these landscapes in near-pristine conditions. To realize such a vision, comprehensive relationship-building and community engagement were crucial, as was supporting local conservation leaders by developing the skills they already hold.

THE IMPACT

Reactivating Ancestral Authority

The transformation of the Lisima landscape began not with outside experts, but with the people who have always belonged to it. By anchoring the Watchers program directly in the ancestral governance of eight regedorias (traditional areas or domains) with 35 Sobas (village chiefs), the project places the future of the forest into the hands of its traditional leaders. These chiefs personally select and mandate members of their villages to step forward as local guardians. By backing this generational authority with modern tools to gather empirical data on wildlife populations, fire extent or land-use change, the initiative has equipped 82 active Watchers with uniforms, motorbikes and digital monitoring systems like Survey123 and ArcGIS, turning local pride into a precise, real-time observational network.

Today, this network manages an area of 20,000 km² within the landscape and has fundamentally transformed local livelihoods. Instead of turning to poaching out of economic necessity, young men are choosing part-time employment and stipends as specialized patrols. Crucially, these opportunities are also being extended to women and girls, with 20 female Watchers having been integrated into the frontline as specialized monitors to track fishing and river status in their villages.

The practical results of this community framework are immediate and measurable. Working in tandem with traditional authorities and in collaboration with municipal police, Watchers have successfully intercepted unsanctioned bushmeat and apprehended an illegal wildlife hunter. By embedding this traditional authority mandate directly into Angola’s official OECM management framework and utilizing traditional fire management workshops to coordinate practices across four provinces, the project ensures that conservation is no longer an external rule imposed on the landscape: it is an act of sovereign inheritance.

Jeremias Tchissola (Watchers Project Coordinator & Community Liaison)

Jeremias “Ríbio” Tchissola started working with the Lisima Foundation in 2017 and is now a coordinator and community liaison for the Watchers program.

He has transformed his skills as a hunter into serving the Watchers program and helping restore the wildlife within his community’s traditional authority. As Jeremias states: “Furthermore, in our area, when our work first began, we did not have animals. We could not see them up close, only in very remote areas. But these days, we are already seeing results, and the animals are starting to return. Animals like roan antelopes, elephants, and lions.”

Now, Jeremias is able to support himself and his family through the Watchers program.



In order to protect our wealth through our culture, I am able to protect the forests, the lagoons and the rivers. This is done using our experience and what our great-grandparents taught us.”





ADVANCING KNOWLEDGE

HOW IT STARTED

Advancing Knowledge was initially envisioned primarily as a mechanism for establishing a data-driven, independent scientific foundation for the Basin’s protection through long-term monitoring, specifically by expanding the Hydrological and Meteorological Monitoring Program (HMMP) network and continuing river transects to build longitudinal baselines. This initial phase focused on building the empirical evidence base needed to align with De Beers’ Building Forever commitments and achieve a net-positive impact on biodiversity. While both original objectives were successfully delivered, the pillar has since expanded well beyond its initial scope.

HOW IT EVOLVED

During Phase 1, the Advancing Knowledge pillar evolved from a nascent baseline prior to 2021 into an adaptive, threat-responsive framework unifying regional scientific achievement. This transformation empowered the science and research team to identify ecological gaps in real time. For instance, when research revealed that the Kavango River section in Namibia was under the greatest pressure, the team established repeat Kavango Transects and launched Kavango Conservation Education. Similarly, in Botswana, the team was able to rapidly integrate new heronry and salvina monitoring programs to respond to data gaps. Their work carrying out the first systemic biodiversity surveys in a generation in the Angolan Highlands produced new species, peer-reviewed papers and a globally significant peatland carbon dataset. These cumulative scientific advancements turned localized fieldwork into a powerhouse of regional scientific and policy impact and the inaugural Okavango Delta Science Symposium in 2025 unified regional scientific cooperation.





PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- Hydrological monitoring expanded from five to 18 active stations by adding Tempué and the Lungwevungu River, delivering near-real-time rainfall and river discharge data across the Basin while prioritizing a highly reliable, resilient network over a larger, more vulnerable footprint.
- 3 Angolan technicians completed training in hardware, software and hydrological station management, enabling the team to maintain and repair the network without relying on international experts to protect the Basin's only independent hydrological dataset and reduce long-term operational costs.
- A fully rebuilt online dashboard improved accessibility and transparency for water management, with usage peaks surging during key hydrological periods, demonstrating the data is being actively used, not just collected, for real-world decision-making.
- Continuous independent hydrological data identified the Angolan Highlands as a water tower supplying 70% of the Kariba Reservoir's late wet-season flow, establishing critical evidence used directly to feed into the Ramsar case and allowing communities to anticipate flood and drought risks.

Hydrological and Meteorological Monitoring Project (HMMP) *Basin-wide*

The HMMP is a Basin-wide network of monitoring stations collecting long-term data on rainfall, river discharge and hydrological variability across Angola, Namibia and Botswana. The system provides near real-time information while building longitudinal datasets that track changes in flow and seasonal dynamics across the Okavango Basin.

WHY IT MATTERS

The Okavango Basin is transboundary and deeply under-monitored. Without consistent, independent hydrological data, it is impossible to detect change, anticipate flood or drought risk, or support coordinated water governance across Angola, Namibia and Botswana. The HMMP is the only independent hydrological dataset for the Basin.

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These images and data provide a benchmark against which to measure future change in terms of ecosystem health and services.”

DR. RAINER VON BRANDIS
NGOWP RESEARCH DIRECTOR





STORY SPOTLIGHT

Securing the Flow: How a Basin-wide Hydrological Blueprint Anchors Community Survival

THE BASELINE

Navigating a Changing Current in the Dark

For the 1 million people who build their lives along the Okavango River Basin across Angola, Namibia and Botswana, the water is not a feature on a map — it is their market, their highway and main source of drinking water. Yet, before 2021, communities had to navigate life on the river in a data vacuum, as only five monitoring stations existed across this vast expanse. This meant that families largely lacked the predictive data needed for early flood warnings or tracking water quality. This information gap was most evident along the 472-kilometer Kavango corridor, a cross-border pressure hotspot forming the boundary between Angola and Namibia. Between 2017 and 2025, human activity, such as fishing, washing and bathing along these banks, expanded by 130%. Lacking empirical evidence to defend their traditional way of life or demand targeted development support from their governments, however, traditional fishers and families faced an increasingly crowded and rapidly changing river with sharply declining fish stocks and collapsing riverbanks.

THE IMPACT

Giving the Keepers of the River the Power of Foresight

To push back against this encroaching degradation, the HMMP and the repeat river transects, including the Kavango and Delta Crossings, were transformed from an academic exercise into a shared shield for community survival. The effort began on the water, where researchers partnered with local communities to conduct 19 standardized river transects across 6,000 kilometers of waterways — a massive undertaking that put money directly into the local economy by creating 52 seasonal income opportunities for Indigenous polers, including 10 women.

To turn this baseline into a permanent early-warning system, the program scaled the Basin’s network to 18 active automated stations by July 2026, training three local Angolan technicians in advanced maintenance to ensure the region’s data security remains entirely in local hands.

By centralizing this incoming data into an open-access online dashboard, the project turned abstract hydrological numbers into a transparent, protective resource for the community. Today, public usage of the dashboard spikes dramatically when the river rises, with a majority of users requesting data for environmental research and conservation, academic or educational use. The digital dashboard is fueled by 18 automated monitoring stations recording daily river height and flow rates across the Basin.

This real-time stream is paired with environmental context from the Kavango River Research program’s biennial surveys. Conducted in 2021, 2023 and 2025 to track a 2017 baseline, these expeditions cover 472 kilometers from Katwitwi to Mohembo. Traveling alongside local guides in traditional mekoro, researchers use advanced tools, such as environmental DNA (eDNA) sampling, drone photography and direct observation, across 49 fixed sites to document a river under accelerating duress. Their findings capture a landscape rapidly reshaped by human survival, noting a visible rise in sand mining, brick production and riparian clearing, alongside a 62% increase in waterborne vessels since 2021 — reaching 2,220 in 2025 — with 94% being mekoro used for daily transport and fishing. Ultimately, these repeat surveys provide the independent evidence needed to manage the river sustainably for the communities who call it home.



The power of repeat transects is that one can track the change over time and act accordingly in near real time. The Kavango is a great example; our research has shown and confirmed that the river is in trouble, and that led directly to the establishment of the Kavango Wilderness Project.”

GÖTZ NEEF
NGOWP RESEARCH LEAD



Basin Transects and Ecological Baselines *Basin-wide*

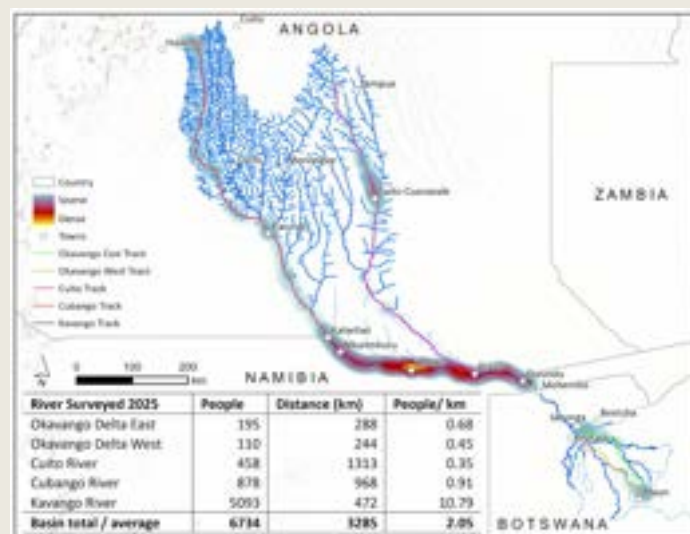
The Delta Crossing is a flagship research baseline expedition that assesses the status of hydrological, ecological, biodiversity and human use across the Okavango Delta using repeat, standardized survey techniques.

WHY IT MATTERS

Repeat, standardized river transects generate rare longitudinal data across some of Africa's least-developed freshwater landscapes. They detect ecological pressure early, document biodiversity trends and demonstrate the condition of headwaters supplying 95% of the Delta's water. Fixed-point drone photography at each site creates a permanent visual record of riparian habitat change over time.

PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- 16 scientific river expeditions completed across the Basin, generating the longitudinal dataset that underpins the Ramsar case and ongoing water governance discussions.
- The 2025 third biennial Kavango Transect monitored hydrology, human activity, eDNA and aquatic macroinvertebrates across 472 kilometers in 16 days, gathering the critical research that established the Kavango as the river under the most pressure from human activity among those surveyed in the Basin surveyed in the Basin and ultimately informing the decision to launch the Kavango Wilderness Project.
- The Annual Delta Crossing will continue in 2026. It will include two parallel routes: eastern transect (Seronga-Maun, 288 km, will be the 16th repetition) and western transect (Mopiri-Maun, 244 km, will be the 7th repetition).
- 52 livelihood part-time roles created through the conduct of transects and exploration.
- 1 full-time and one part-time local research assistant managed ongoing scientific field activities in Angola, anchoring vital expedition knowledge and technical skills in-country between survey cycles to sustainably build long-term local capacity.



The 2025 Basin-wide comparison shows the Kavango is by far the most intensively used stretch of river that WBT/NGOWP surveys anywhere in the Basin: 10.79 people/km against 0.35-0.91 in the Cuito and Cubango, the highest vessel density in the Basin (4.71/km), the highest livestock density (20.29 animals/km), and the highest number of water abstraction points (380) of any surveyed river.



Targeted Biodiversity Research *Angola and Botswana*

Documentation within the scientific record adds further validity when making the case for durable conservation outcomes. Every species newly described to academic science, every paper published and every dataset shared is another argument for protecting a landscape that is harder to dismiss.

WHY IT MATTERS

Scientific discovery is the foundation of the conservation case. Angola's scientific invisibility was itself a policy risk since landscapes that cannot be proven important are harder to protect.

This is why De Beers's work supporting research to map and quantify Angola's peatlands was so critical. Its peatlands store vast amounts of carbon while naturally filtering the water that sustains more than 1 million people downstream. The research helped strengthen the scientific evidence base that ultimately contributed to the historic Ramsar designation of Lisima Lya Mwono. Further, it equips Angola with the scientific knowledge needed to steward and manage peatlands that are part of the Ramsar site. As this work advances, De Beers, alongside other funding partners, will continue to support efforts to sustain and expand this research – strengthening the foundation needed to advance transboundary cooperation across the Basin.

PHASE 1 OUTCOME

- 12 peer-reviewed publications released across the Okavango Eternal period; these papers, along with other in-depth scientific reports, provided a verifiable scientific record making the case for protection of Angola's headwaters where almost none existed prior to 2021.



STORY SPOTLIGHT

Unlocking the Science of a Recovering Landscape

THE BASELINE

A Landscape Closed to Science

For nearly three decades, a devastating civil war drew an invisible curtain across the Angolan Highlands. The Angolan Highlands Water Tower, the source waters of the great Okavango and Zambezi Basins – the lifeblood of southern Africa – remained a vast, scientific blank space on the global map. Decades of conflict kept researchers out, leaving the region’s rivers undocumented and vulnerable. When the war ended, the maps showed land, but not life. Without baseline scientific data, proving the ecological value of these headwaters to policymakers was an impossible task.

THE IMPACT

From Microscopic Code to Global Policy

Deep within the Angolan Highlands, the rivers hold secrets written in code. For Götz Neef and the NGOWP research team, these splendid yet poorly documented waters were not just geographic features, but also a living archives of a landscape recovering from war. As the leader of the eDNA program, Götz set out to capture the invisible footprints of the Basin’s wildlife by analyzing the genetic material shed by organisms into the water column. In a fragile aquatic system quietly suffering from overfishing pressure and facing the silent invasion of non-native species like Nile tilapia and crawfish, this non-invasive, cost-effective technology allowed the team to read the river’s true biodiversity without physically trapping or disrupting a single creature.

While Götz unlocked the genetic secrets of the currents, the wider team pushed into the surrounding wilderness through two multidisciplinary biodiversity expeditions in 2022 and 2024, ground-truthing 230 peatland sites to reveal vast carbon stores dating back more than 10,000 years and establishing camera-trap transects that captured the first high-resolution photographic records of a legendary “ghost” elephant population. Since the start of the Okavango Wilderness Project, these combined efforts yielded 12 peer-reviewed publications and described 53 species new to science, including the Boyes’s Giant Cupid butterfly and two entirely new rough-scaled lizards. These massive undertakings bridged the gap between global science and local expertise, purposefully bringing together Angolan nationals, international specialists, and community knowledge holders to map the wilderness side by side.

By transforming biodiversity datasets and traditional ecological knowledge into unassailable scientific evidence, Götz and his team created an enduring baseline to measure future ecological change. This ultimately delivered the empirical weight needed to inform the landmark Ramsar management framework and permanently secure the protection of Southern Africa’s most vital water towers.



Science Symposiums *Basin-wide*

Scientific symposia bring together researchers, practitioners and decision-makers to share findings and align priorities.

WHY IT MATTERS

Collaborative science strengthens evidence-based decision-making and builds a regional research community. The Basin had no structured platform for researchers, practitioners and decision-makers to exchange findings across borders and disciplines. For the inaugural Okavango Delta Science Symposium, the NGOWP team hosted sessions emphasizing community-based conservation, with representation from other NGOs adding lived experience to the science policy discussion.

PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- The inaugural Okavango Delta Science Symposium in Maun brought together 128 participants from 37 institutions in 2023 for 39 presentations and 14 poster sessions on ecology, human-wildlife coexistence, TEK and geosciences, and established the Basin's first shared research forum to unify the regional scientific community, including 20 local students.
- A Kavango Symposium, held in Windhoek after the 2022 (33 delegates) and 2024 (51 delegates) Kavango Transects, brought together scientists, government and traditional communities from Angola, Namibia and Botswana. Following the 2025 transect, the approach shifted to identifying five communities along the Kavango River to host workshops directly in 2026 – moving the model from a capital-city symposium to community-based knowledge-sharing.
- A webinar, Fire and the Miombo, drew 50 attendees, mostly students and researchers from Angola and Mozambique. Additionally, a series of webinars on biodiversity and conservation in Lisima presented the species posters developed by the program and opened discussions to local and international audiences in Portuguese.



“
The Delta is under threat, and
science can help us protect it.”

HON. WYNTER MMOLOTSI
MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENT
AND TOURISM, BOTSWANA

Laboratory, Heronry Monitoring and Salvinia Control Botswana

Supported by Okavango Eternal, the Nkashi Lab provides the critical scientific infrastructure, equipment and training needed to safeguard the Okavango Basin. The Lab strengthens regional capacity through applied research, internships and long-term environmental monitoring.

WHY IT MATTERS

A locally based research facility reduces dependency on external institutions and builds credible, regionally led science. Conducting dedicated heronry tracking to evaluate avian breeding success and other crucial assessments helps to understand the indicators of wetland health. This scientific foundation directly informs active conservation. This research is also critical for combating invasive species, such as the giant-like *Salvinia molesta* (an exotic floating weed), which, when left unchecked, forms dense mats that choke out native biodiversity, block water flow and threaten local fisheries.

PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- The fully equipped science laboratory at the Nkashi Knowledge Center in Maun — completed in 2024, Botswana’s first eDNA laboratory — eliminated the need to outsource eDNA and pollution-monitoring work abroad, positioning Maun as a research hub for young Botswana scientists through a partnership with the University of Botswana / Okavango Research Institute (UB/ORI). The lab expanded its pollution monitoring capacity in 2025 with new HANNA spectrophotometers and a high-resolution microscope. It now supports internships from BIUST.
- Non-invasive eDNA sampling conducted through the Lab builds comprehensive aquatic biodiversity inventories, detects invasive species such as Nile tilapia and crayfish, and assesses the impact of overfishing, all without physically capturing specimens.
- Following the discovery of significant *Salvinia molesta* infestations in the Okavango Delta, the Maun team, in partnership with ORI, established rearing ponds to breed weevils that feed on and destroy the invasive weed, avoiding chemical controls. The release of these weevils were informed by reports from the Department of Water Affairs, private reserves and local communities to ensure the control effort follows where the infestation actually is.
- Drone imagery from five waterbird breeding sites (one in Kasane and four in the Delta), surveyed in July, September, October and November 2025, established the first baseline dataset for heronry breeding success in the Delta — a starting point for tracking wetland health over time.
- In 2025, the Lab expanded its nutrient and macroinvertebrate analysis capacity, underpinning the Okavango Water Insights (OWI) project led by National Geographic Explorer Goabaone Ramatlapeng, which combines high-frequency sensors, daily water sampling and Indigenous knowledge to monitor water chemistry across the Delta.

“

Environmental DNA is set to transform environmental monitoring by allowing us to detect species through their genetic material in the environment, without the need for physical capture. With its non-invasive, cost-effective approach, eDNA promises to revolutionize how we protect and understand our biodiversity.”

GÖTZ NEEF
PH.D. CANDIDATE, NGOWP RESEARCH LEAD

“

Women and youth are now collecting water samples, learning to interpret results and using the data to protect drinking water, fish and ecosystems. When communities own the science, they become powerful guardians of wetlands.”

GOABAONE JAQUELINE RAMATLAPENG
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC EXPLORER





| Peatlands and Climate Research *Angola*

Research on peatland distribution and fire regimes in the Angolan Highlands Water Tower provides the critical scientific insights needed to understand carbon storage and climate resilience. In collaboration with The Nature Conservancy's Natural Climate Solutions initiative, this work advances global restoration efforts by directly aligning with Target 2 of the UN Global Biodiversity Framework to restore 30% of degraded ecosystems by 2030.

WHY IT MATTERS

Tropical peatlands are major carbon reservoirs. The Angolan Highlands Water Tower is emerging as a globally significant freshwater and carbon landscape — protecting it not only matters for communities downstream, but also for the global climate.

PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- Field operations ground-truthed 230 peatland sites, including recovering a 4.5-meter-deep core from a small river near Tempué, revealing over 30% organic matter content with origins dating back more than 10,000 years, turning an unmapped landscape into one with a quantified, defensible carbon story.
- Modeling estimated total peatland coverage between 8,662 and 11,167 km² within the Angolan Highlands Water Tower (covering 2.28–2.94% of the entire area), providing Angola with its first definitive scientific baseline to actively steward carbon-rich ecosystems now designated within the Ramsar site.
- The Lisima Peatland Fire Observatory conducted its first controlled peatland fire experiment, establishing an empirical foundation to ensure that future fire management decisions in these sensitive carbon sinks are guided by evidence rather than assumptions.
- Submitted the region's first probabilistic peatland distribution map, co-funded by The Nature Conservancy — a pioneering spatial model to guide targeted conservation, land use planning and climate policy — for peer review in a scientific journal.



TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

HOW IT STARTED

When Okavango Eternal launched in 2021, the Traditional Knowledge pillar was rooted in the recognition that Indigenous knowledge systems are foundational to the Basin’s ecological integrity and community resilience. The initial design focused primarily on two targeted initiatives in Botswana – the Nkashi Classic mokoro race and expanding Backyard Expeditions for teachers, led by National Geographic Explorer Koketso “Koki” Mookodi – while traditional knowledge work in Angola was not yet formalized as a named program. This early phase laid the groundwork for building partnerships with elders, knowledge holders and traditional authorities across Angola, Namibia and Botswana to document, preserve and actively apply traditional insights to modern conservation.

HOW IT EVOLVED

By the end of Phase 1, the Traditional Knowledge pillar had expanded substantially, evolving into a model in which cultural heritage directly informs biodiversity protection and fuels economic opportunities in alignment with De Beers’ Building Forever strategy. In Angola, the initiative grew into Ŋgala Okola, a structured, community-governed knowledge documentation library led by National Geographic Explorer Kerllen Costa that spanned 150,000 km² – a scale unanticipated at the project’s launch. In Botswana, systematic documentation dimensions were added through the TEK and Fisheries Mapping work and the Manqee Project led by National Geographic Explorers Gobonamang Kgetho and Tumeletso “Water” Setlabosha, while the Backyard Expeditions program deepened its reach across all five eastern panhandle schools. By learning directly from generational stewards, the pillar explicitly linked traditional knowledge to local governance and livelihoods, informing the Watchers’ patrol design, shaping fisheries governance conversations, and underpinning the Nkashi Trails route assessments to strengthen long-term conservation outcomes.

TEK and Fisheries Mapping Botswana

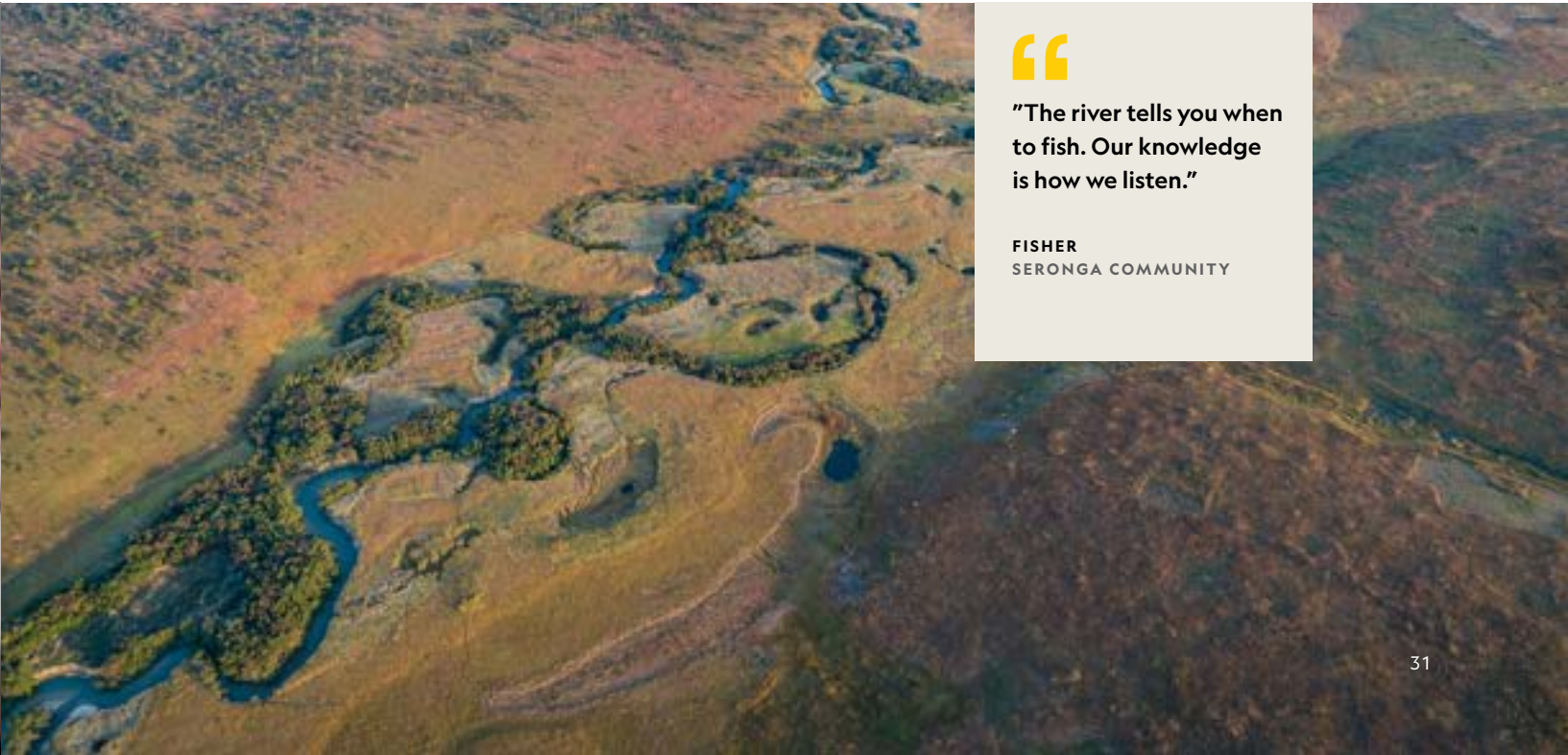
The preservation of the Okavango Delta’s ecological integrity is inextricably linked to the cultural and ancestral knowledge of its people. By documenting the profound intersection of fishing practices, natural resource governance and oral histories, we are ensuring that the communities who have lived in harmony with this landscape for generations remain the primary architects of its future.

WHY IT MATTERS

Fisheries are central to food security, livelihoods and cultural practice in the Delta, yet formal management systems often lack fine-scale local data. Integrating TEK into fisheries planning strengthens sustainability, supports inclusive governance and improves alignment between community practice and conservation policy.

PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- Community-validated data from 100 TEK–Natural Resources interviews and 60 structured fisheries interviews across 250 km² in Seronga and Gunotsoga integrated the insights of 68 fishers, elders and Village Development Committee (VDC) representatives directly into fisheries governance, shifting decision-making from external survey dependencies to lived local observations.
- Presentation of research findings to local communities in Q1 2026 facilitated a consultation process that identified declining fish stocks, captured strong community support for closed seasons tied to traditional breeding cycle knowledge, and generated targeted calls for commercial fishing enforcement – translating raw documentation into a concrete set of community-backed policy recommendations.
- The training and deployment of 18 Community Youth Mappers (of which 10 were women) across TEK and Trails activities built enduring geospatial capacity within the community, ensuring technical expertise outlasts any single project cycle.



“

“The river tells you when to fish. Our knowledge is how we listen.”

FISHER
SERONGA COMMUNITY



Community-Led Mapping of Living Histories and Ancestral Geographies *Botswana and Angola*

Though independently co-funded and implemented as National Geographic Explorer-led initiatives rather than fully funded by De Beers, the Ñgala Okola (Ngoya) project in Angola and the Manqee Nga Muni Enda project in Botswana run in parallel to Okavango Eternal and remain critical to its progress. Driven by local Explorers Kerllen Costa in Angola and Tumeletso “Water” Setlabosha and Gobonamang “GB” Kgetho in Botswana, both activities treat communities as the authors of conservation rather than mere informants.

WHY IT MATTERS

These projects safeguard irreplaceable traditional knowledge, place names and ancestral geographies before they are lost to development pressures. By integrating Indigenous insights with formal science, these initiatives ensure that local governance forms the bedrock of regional planning and sustainable livelihoods.

PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- Documentation efforts in Angola covered 150,000 km², engaging over 200 villages across more than six ethnic groups to map oral traditions, ancestral routes and traditional healing systems. This knowledge directly shaped the design of the partnership’s Watchers, Healers and Knowledge programs, building them around existing community governance structures rather than outside models.
- Participatory mapping across Seronga and eastern panhandle communities in Botswana successfully captured traditional place names, settlement histories and clan relationships. Backed by strict community validation to ensure consent and accuracy, this mapping creates a data-rich ecological resource for conservation planners that is now evolving into Phase 2 “Knowledge Trails.”
- Structured dialogues between traditional authorities and the government led to four sacred sites being identified for potential recognition as Cultural Sites under Angolan Conservation Law.

“

Instead of being idle, we are engaged in something meaningful that connects us to our culture and helps us grow.”

GAETLHOPHE
YOUTH POLER, SERONGA

Nkashi Classic *Botswana*

The annual Nkashi Classic, which comprises mokoro (carved canoe) polers racing in a time-trial format in the Okavango Delta, honors these polers’ traditions, whose canoes and nkashi poles are essential for transportation, food gathering and tourism-based livelihoods. Over time, the mokoro has become a symbol of conservation, with polers guiding research expeditions and supporting scientific discoveries.

WHY IT MATTERS

The mokoro is more than a boat: It is a cultural identity. Conservation that communities celebrate and identify with is more durable than conservation imposed on them. The Nkashi Classic is the mechanism that makes conservation visible, social and locally owned. The annual mokoro race morphed into a platform for conservation education, women’s and youth inclusion, and local economic activity, so that a tradition at risk of fading with the older generation is instead drawing thousands of new participants and spectators each year, ultimately giving the Delta’s polers, especially women, a visible, celebrated route into conservation-linked income.

PHASE 1 OUTCOMES



9,500+
cumulative attendees
(2018-2026)



409
polers competed
(finals, cumulative)



75
vendors across
all events



71
women competed in
2025 and 2026

- The annual mokoro race became a platform for conservation education, women’s and youth inclusion, and local economic activity.
- Over 9,500 cumulative attendees between 2018 and 2026.
- 409 polers competed in finals (cumulative), of which 30 prize winners benefited directly.
- 75 vendors across all events (cumulative), giving local traders a recurring, conservation-linked income opportunity.
- 39 women competed in 2026, continuing a shift from a historically male-dominated event.
- In 2026, 91 polers from 19 villages, aged 21-76, competed across six categories in Seronga.
- The event now also has a significant impact on livelihoods in the area. In 2026, it supported 22 local vendors, six entertainment groups comprising 29 individuals and nine youth casual workers with additional opportunities.
- Conservation messaging is integrated at all events through VR experiences, meet-and-greets with Botswana scientists, Knowledge Bus activities, and storytelling, so that race day doubles as a conservation-education touchpoint for thousands of attendees who may not otherwise engage with the program.
- Partnerships with the Botswana Tourism Organisation, ABSA Bank Botswana, the European Union and multiple private tourism entities, alongside De Beers, have diversified the event’s funding base beyond just Okavango Eternal.
- The 2021 inaugural event, filmed as part of “Nkashi: Race for the Okavango,” reached 4.34 million individuals through Nat Geo Wild, BTV and YouTube – bringing the race, and the tradition it celebrates, to a global audience for the first time.



“

We can now use the river to make some income. Please continue doing this so that our children can also pole mekoros, just like our parents did.”

BOAGO THOMAMO
WOMAN YOUTH POLER, SERONGA



STORY SPOTLIGHT

An Art Worth Celebrating: How the Nkashi Classic Turned Tradition into Delta Stewardship

THE BASELINE

A Heritage at Risk of Being Lost

Embedded in the living history and identity of the Okavango Delta, the mokoro has long served as the primary vessel for navigating these intricate wetlands. For generations, panhandle communities have stood atop these flat-bottomed wooden canoes, threading through the marshways using a hand-carved pole called an nkashi. This ancient art encoded an intimate understanding of shifting river channels, flood dynamics and seasonal wildlife behavior. Yet, by 2021, changing economic pressures and a lack of structured engagement left this heritage at risk. Indigenous communities around the Delta expressed feeling disconnected from the broader heritage the mokoro and nkashi represented. The idea that this cultural art form could once again be celebrated, showcased and invested in as the centerpiece of a community-wide mokoro race seemed out of reach. Younger generations were disconnecting from water-based traditions, women remained significantly underrepresented on the water, and local conservation initiatives were increasingly perceived as externally driven rather than locally rooted. When cultural connections to an ecosystem weaken, the foundational incentives for community stewardship decline alongside them.

THE IMPACT

How River Knowledge Built a Home and a Movement

Tshegofatso’s journey reveals the true dimensions of impact in a remote Delta village and exactly why the Nkashi Classic matters far beyond the spectacle of race day. Within the Okavango Eternal strategy, this platform addresses a critical vulnerability most traditional conservation programs miss entirely: cultural identity. While research, governance and enforcement are vital tools, conservation that a community actively celebrates and identifies with is inherently more durable. By giving traditional heritage direct economic meaning, the Classic ensures that local stewardship is no longer an externally imposed rule — it becomes a socially reinforced choice, deeply tied to community pride, survival and opportunity.

What began as an isolated competition has matured over five years into a self-sustaining regional movement, proving that when a community’s heritage is given direct tangible value, active landscape stewardship naturally follows. Driven by the Nkashi Trust — a nationally governed Botswana institution — the Nkashi Classic expanded its footprint across the villages of the Delta, drawing participants and polers to the race heats and the finals, as well as adding more inclusive categories for women, youth and elders. The project used these high-energy cultural gatherings to create a platform for conservation education, using the interactive classrooms of the Nkashi Knowledge Bus and Science Corner to engage residents through meet-ups with Botswana scientists and virtual reality experiences, and to support local economic development by engaging local vendors and youth casual workers to demonstrate conservation-linked livelihood pathways. This intersection of culture, economic growth and education transitions conservation from a top-down regulatory constraint into a durable, community-led framework, ensuring that the people who best understand the Delta are permanently positioned as its primary custodians.

For Tshegofatso Kesenolotse, a veteran poler from Seronga, the river was always a place of grueling daily survival. The annual Nkashi Classic — supported through the Okavango Eternal partnership and the Nkashi Trust — transformed her traditional skills from an overlooked daily chore into a celebrated exhibition of artistry, economic opportunity and cultural pride. Yet, building this platform required overcoming deep-seated skepticism. It took many conversations to convince the Indigenous people of the Okavango that their routine water navigation was a profound talent and an art form worth showcasing, investing in and leveraging for conservation leadership.

Despite her deep expertise, Tshegofatso lived a life of humble means and did not own a mokoro of her own. Her daughter watched as she borrowed canoes from neighbors to venture onto the water, navigating treacherous currents in a mokoro that was not her own, only to defy the odds on race day, becoming a true pioneer against the historical underrepresentation of women on the water as the 2025 Veteran Women’s Champion. Tshegofatso selflessly prioritized her family, channeling every cent of her prize money into building a brick house for them. Today, that house stands as a monument to her resilience, even without electricity or a surrounding fence. To finish it, Tshegofatso still wades into the river on borrowed boats, harvesting and selling wild reeds to save for the day she can finally command a vessel of her own.



“

I decided to build myself a small house, a place where I could lay my head. ... If it weren’t for the Nkashi Trust, perhaps I would have died without ever sleeping in a brick house. I would have only kept hearing about it from other people. But because the Nkashi Trust helped me, and God helped me find the strength to pole, I was able to make money and build for myself.”

TSHEGOFATSO KESENOLOTSE
WOMAN VETERAN POLER, SERONGA





Every single teacher who has participated has left the experience with a profound appreciation for nature. There's a new energy in them when they go back to school — they're reinvigorated."

KOKETSO "KOKI" MOOKODI
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC EXPLORER,
NGOWP BOTSWANA COUNTRY DIRECTOR



STORY SPOTLIGHT

Infrastructure for Ownership: How Traditional Mapping Secures the Delta's Lifeline

THE BASELINE

Invisible Knowledge and External Maps

For generations, the communities of the Okavango Delta have carried a vast, unwritten map of their ecosystem in their minds — knowing exactly where fish spawn, which islands hold sacred cultural value and which riparian plants cannot be cut. Yet, because this TEK was never formalized, it remained invisible to outside policymakers, land boards and commercial developers. Historically, conservation and territorial boundaries were drawn by external entities using cold satellite imagery, leaving local people as passive subjects of regulations rather than their authors. In the eastern panhandle, this lack of empirical documentation meant that the deeply entrenched wisdom of village elders was routinely excluded from the decision-making process. Without a mechanism to translate Indigenous heritage into a format that modern governments recognize, local communities faced the quiet erosion of both their resources and their traditional way of life, left with no way to formalize what they already knew.

Backyard Expeditions *Botswana*

The Backyard Expeditions program enhances science education in the Okavango Delta by bridging gaps between teachers and students in remote areas in understanding local biodiversity and culture.

WHY IT MATTERS

There's often a disconnect between predominantly urban teachers and the ecological and cultural reality of the rural learners they teach. Backyard Expeditions closes that gap by taking teachers into the landscape surrounding the villages where they work, guided by local elders and knowledge holders.

PHASE 1 OUTCOME

- A series of 16 expeditions across all five eastern panhandle primary schools trained 108 teachers, a majority of whom are women, alongside eight local guides and elders, grounding educators' environmental understanding in firsthand traditional expertise to cascade this place-based knowledge to some 1,800 downstream learners, as teachers carry what they learned back into the classroom.

THE IMPACT

From Single-Day Enumerator to Mapping Expert

The turning point in changing who controls the map is captured entirely through the journey of Jimmy Moyevu. Born and raised in the eastern Okavango, Jimmy spent his early career in public health serving under the Ngami District Health Management Team. In mid-2023, he joined the Nkashi Trust for what was supposed to be a single day of temporary work as a casual enumerator. Recognizing the deep structural connection between human well-being and environmental health, that single day extended into weeks, culminating in his official appointment as the permanent TEK Field Coordinator in January 2024. Under professional mentorship, Jimmy mastered Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping and modern digital data collection tools, becoming the bridge between village elders and modern spatial science.

Today, Jimmy directly drives the system shift from his office into the field, replacing external mapping with community-led data security. He has personally trained eight Indigenous youth mappers to actively lead participatory mapping initiatives across the eastern panhandle, systematically documenting the heritage of community elders. Simultaneously, Jimmy coordinates 24 community polers for the Nkashi Trails project — evenly split between the eastern and western panhandles — turning historical river routes into tangible economic assets.

Route assessments generated by Jimmy’s team have transitioned from abstract lines on a page into the formal basis for a Land Board application. When an elder names an island, they are no longer just sharing a memory; they are contributing to the empirical dataset required to secure a legal campsite permit. When a poler leads a reconnaissance expedition, they are no longer just scouting a river route; they are mastering the professional guiding skills required to host paying international guests. By equipping local people like Jimmy to translate traditional memory into digital code, conservation shifts from a top-down mandate into a tool for community ownership.



For me and the TEK team, true success is measured by the empowerment of the communities we serve. It is incredibly rewarding to see our trained youth mappers actively leading participatory mapping initiatives, managing local resources and documenting Indigenous knowledge from community elders and knowledge holders. Our ultimate goal is to see these local polers directly benefiting from sustainable ecotourism, transforming conservation into tangible livelihood opportunities.”

JIMMY MOYEVU



CAPACITY
BUILDING

HOW IT STARTED

To support the vision of Okavango Eternal and align with De Beers’ “Building Forever” livelihoods and nature commitments, the partnership is dedicated to building local expertise and strengthening conservation leadership across Angola, Namibia and Botswana. Through initiatives in tertiary education and infrastructure development and support for the local workforce and leadership, Okavango Eternal is ensuring long-term, locally led conservation efforts while empowering future generations of scientists, conservationists and policymakers. From the beginning, capacity building was framed around three core pillars: scholarships, the Kissama Internship and localization.

HOW IT EVOLVED

While capacity building remained structured around these three original pillars, the depth and pace of institutional development significantly accelerated. When Okavango Eternal began, there were no formally registered local entities in Angola or Namibia. However, by the end of the partnership’s first phase, all three countries established nationally registered, citizen-led and independently audited conservation organizations.

Additionally, the scholarship program grew from a Botswana-focused initiative into a true Basin-wide investment. It now supports nine scholars in Angola, seven in Botswana, and four in Namibia, covering Ph.D. and MSc research across fisheries, hydrology, land cover, traditional governance, waterbirds and eDNA. The infrastructure dimension also expanded beyond its original scope. The Beetsha Nkashi Knowledge Center, the Tempué Conservation Development Node and the Kuito operational base now stand as permanent physical assets that did not exist when the program started.



Local Leadership and Localization *Regional*

Localization is the cornerstone of Okavango Eternal’s long-term success. Conservation cannot be imported. Locally led institutions are essential for credible, durable protection.

WHY IT MATTERS

Long-term stewardship of the Okavango Basin depends on strong national organizations, skilled local teams and leadership that understands the cultural, political and ecological realities of the landscape. By building strong regional teams, developing local leadership and strengthening institutional structures across Angola, Namibia and Botswana, the program ensures that conservation efforts remain community-led and sustainable for generations to come.

PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- 3 national nonprofit entities have been formally registered: Fundação Lisima (Angola), Kavango Wilderness Project (Namibia), and Nkashi Trust (Botswana, renamed from Botswana Wild Bird Trust in December 2025). These are being led by local directors and staff.
- The organizations collectively had 96 full-time staff by the end of June 2026, an increase of 1% in the prior six months. Okavango Eternal funded 79% of the positions. 84% of staff members are people of color; 27% are women, and four women hold key leadership roles.
- Fundação Lisima and Kavango Wilderness Project achieved clean reports in their first-ever audits in 2025, giving funders independent assurance that locally led governance is functioning and not just formally established.

“

As a local leader, I understand the culture, traditions, language and social dynamics of the communities I serve. This leads to stronger community trust and participation.”

MORULAGANYI “RULLY” MOWANENG
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT MANAGER





Ph.D. Scholarship Program, Internships and Academic Development *Regional*

The Ph.D. scholarship program, internships and academic development initiatives made possible by Okavango Eternal support postgraduate research, applied training and early-career pathways for emerging conservation scientists from Angola, Namibia and Botswana. The program focuses on ecological and social sciences relevant to the Okavango River Basin while also strengthening institutional links with universities, research centers and government departments. Through a combination of full scholarships, partial bursaries and internships, the program is designed to bridge the gap between academic research and applied conservation practice in the region.

WHY IT MATTERS

Long-term conservation success depends on strong local scientific and technical capacity. Angola, Namibia and Botswana all face significant shortages of locally trained conservation scientists with applied field experience or field training pathways. There is a limited pipeline for postgraduate students in the sciences working on Okavango Basin-specific research, which remains dominated by international researchers.

The scholarship program is building a connected cohort of early-career scientists from across the Basin whose expertise and research topics complement one another within a shared scientific and conservation framework. It is the foundation of a regional scientific community with its origins in the Basin — not dependent on international institutions for its continuation — that is building the pipeline of regional conservation leaders who will generate evidence, inform policy and lead locally grounded solutions.

PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- 20 Ph.D./MSc students were supported through Okavango Eternal, including:
 - 9 students in Angola (three Ph.D., five MSc/BSc), including three students from Moxico Province at the N'dunduma Superior Polytechnic Institute — the first tertiary conservation students from the Lisima landscape, meaning the program is now producing scientists from the exact communities it studies, not just training outsiders to study them.
 - 7 students in Botswana (four Ph.D., three MSc), researching land cover change, women's use of Indigenous knowledge, waterbird movements, colonial breeding birds and eDNA.
 - 4 Ph.D. students in Namibia, focusing on fisheries biology, ecotoxicology, AI flood forecasting and Transfrontier Conservation Area freshwater ecology.
- Graça Catuti, a previous Kissama graduate, now manages the latest internship cohort, and Isilda Cavaleca, another graduate, heads the Knowledge and Healers Guardians projects in Lisima — the clearest evidence that the internship pipeline is producing leaders, not just alumni.
- A Conservation Science Bootcamp, supported by the partnership, the National Geographic Society and the University of Botswana, trained an additional 10 university students in hydrology, biodiversity monitoring and eDNA techniques, extending exposure to field-based science beyond the funded scholars alone.
- The Kissama Internship program completed nine full iterations, training 33 Angolan scientists and conservationists (including 18 women) in peatland ecosystems, fire management and environmental monitoring, so that Angola now has a repeatable pipeline for turning graduates into field-ready conservationists. This has already resulted in four graduates moving into full-time conservation employment, including two who now lead the Knowledge and Healers program they once trained under.



STORY SPOTLIGHT

Home Ground: A Young Scientist Reclaims the Miombo

THE BASELINE

Untapped Potential to Build Local Expertise

Angola faces a significant shortage of locally trained conservation scientists with applied field experience. Tertiary education institutions have historically lacked strong conservation science programs, and the civil war disrupted a generation of academic development. The area has long been studied by scientists from outside it, and while the research is real and important, it creates a dependency: When the external team leaves, the data goes with them, relationships weaken and institutional knowledge does not stay in the country.

THE IMPACT

Next Generation of Conservation Leaders

By funding Ph.D., MSc and undergraduate students conducting research for their final-year projects from Angola, Namibia and Botswana, the program is investing in the next generation of local scientists and conservation leaders. These individuals grew up in the landscape, near the rivers and ecosystems they are now studying. They understand the cultural and environmental context of the region, speak the languages of the communities they work alongside, and are committed to building their careers in the countries they call home. Supporting these students not only advances critical research but also strengthens long-term scientific capacity, local ownership of conservation initiatives and evidence-based decision-making. In doing so, the program is helping to create a self-sustaining, locally rooted scientific community capable of safeguarding the future of the Okavango Basin.

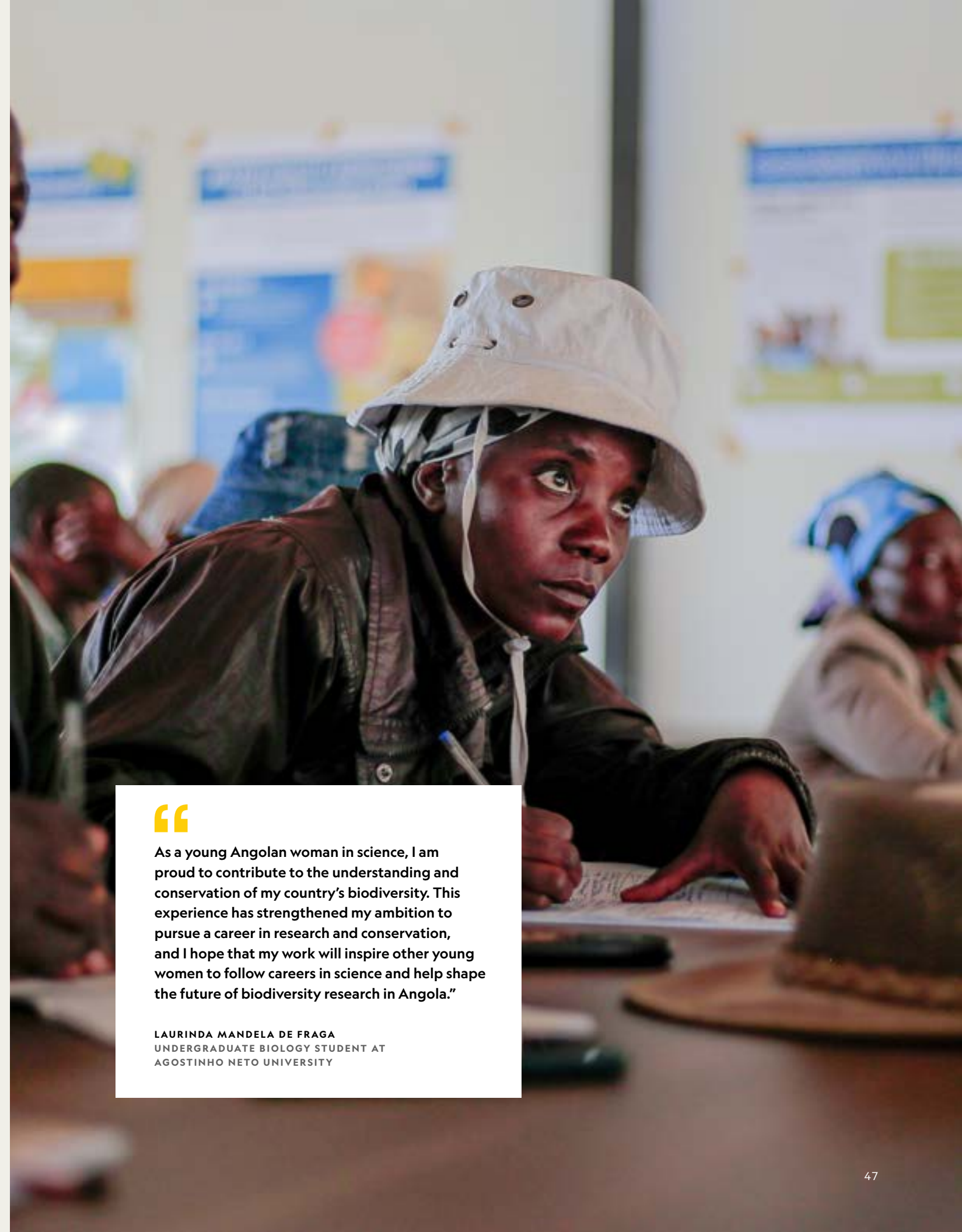
Laurinda Mandela De Fraga, an undergraduate biology student at Agostinho Neto University in Angola, is conducting vital final-year research on how fire impacts spider communities in Angola's poorly studied Miombo woodlands. Spiders are critical bioindicators of environmental change, yet very little scientific data exists about them in Angola.

By funding her work in the remote Lisima landscape, the program has provided Laurinda with hands-on training in field research, biodiversity monitoring and species identification alongside national and international scientists. This support not only allows her to generate crucial data for the sustainable management of fire-prone ecosystems, but it also helps bridge the regional talent gap by empowering a young Angolan woman to pursue a lifelong career in conservation research and inspire others to follow.



As a young Angolan woman in science, I am proud to contribute to the understanding and conservation of my country's biodiversity. This experience has strengthened my ambition to pursue a career in research and conservation, and I hope that my work will inspire other young women to follow careers in science and help shape the future of biodiversity research in Angola."

LAURINDA MANDELA DE FRAGA
UNDERGRADUATE BIOLOGY STUDENT AT
AGOSTINHO NETO UNIVERSITY





PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- The opening of the Beetsha Nkashi Knowledge Center in April 2025 drew over 400 members of the local community, representing more than a quarter of the village's estimated 1,500 residents, as well as 80 VIPs and representatives from both regional and international media. A dedicated press day followed to further showcase Okavango Eternal and the partnership's progress to date, leading to 60 pieces of coverage. Notable attendees over the two days of activities included:
 - The Honorable Ketlhafile Motshegwa, Minister of Local Government and Traditional Affairs.
 - Kgosi Bonang Karundu, Beetsha Chief, as well as chiefs from five surrounding villages.
 - Representatives from Botswana Television (BTV), The Ngami Times, Botswana Unplugged and a freelance journalist who writes for outlets including The New York Times and BBC.
- Infrastructure development supported a total of 99 jobs during its construction phases, including 36 jobs in Phase 1 and 63 jobs in Phase 2, while also creating eight full-time operational positions.
 - A total of about 500 families in the vicinity of the center are benefiting from the additional water, services and stability it provides.



I believe just like 'nkashi,' which propels mokoro through the Okavango Delta waters, this facility will propel this community forward."

MR. KETLHAFILE MOTSHEGWA
MINISTER OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT
AND TRADITIONAL AFFAIRS

Infrastructure Development Botswana

The Beetsha and Maun Nkashi Knowledge Centers are permanent, community-based hubs designed to support cross-generational learning, conservation leadership, digital access, and sustainable livelihood development in the eastern Okavango Delta.

WHY IT MATTERS

Many of the Delta's most remote communities face limited access to educational infrastructure, digital tools, and convening spaces. The Beetsha Knowledge Center provides a permanent anchor for conservation, education, culture and enterprise in the eastern panhandle.

Dr. Ramatlapeng's work linking formal water chemistry with Indigenous knowledge, paired with the project's Backyard Expeditions, which immersed 108 primary school teachers in the TEK of their students' lives, is helping close the gaps for eager young learners and bridge traditional knowledge with classroom teaching. Further, by demonstrating that Indigenous roots are an asset to scientific inquiry, Dr. Ramatlapeng has become the living roadmap she never had growing up. Ultimately, the true success of this initiative isn't captured in raw metrics; it lives in the reality that when opportunity finally arrives in the village, a young girl in Beetsha can look at a world-class African scientist, see her own reflection, and realize she is no longer a spectator in the Delta, but its future author.



STORY SPOTLIGHT

Bridging Science and Heritage: How Goabaone Ramatlapeng Empowers the Delta's Future Authors

THE BASELINE

A Landscape of Invisible Barriers

For decades, the scientific research and storytelling of the Okavango Delta have largely been conducted by external entities, while the communities living within the ecosystem have been relegated to the role of subjects in these narratives rather than their authors. For a young girl growing up in a remote village like Beetsha along the Delta's eastern panhandle, careers in science or conservation historically felt out of reach. Deep geographic isolation, scarce classroom resources and low teacher retention created a reinforcing cycle of exclusion. Because teachers in these panhandle schools frequently come from urban backgrounds, there is often a profound cultural disconnect between the educators and the traditional realities of their learners. Without permanent infrastructure, structured STEM exposure or visible local role models, local youth can be left with no roadmap to a career in science, reinforcing the belief that the future of the Delta is theirs to watch, but not theirs to write.

THE IMPACT

Healing the Water and Anchoring Ambition

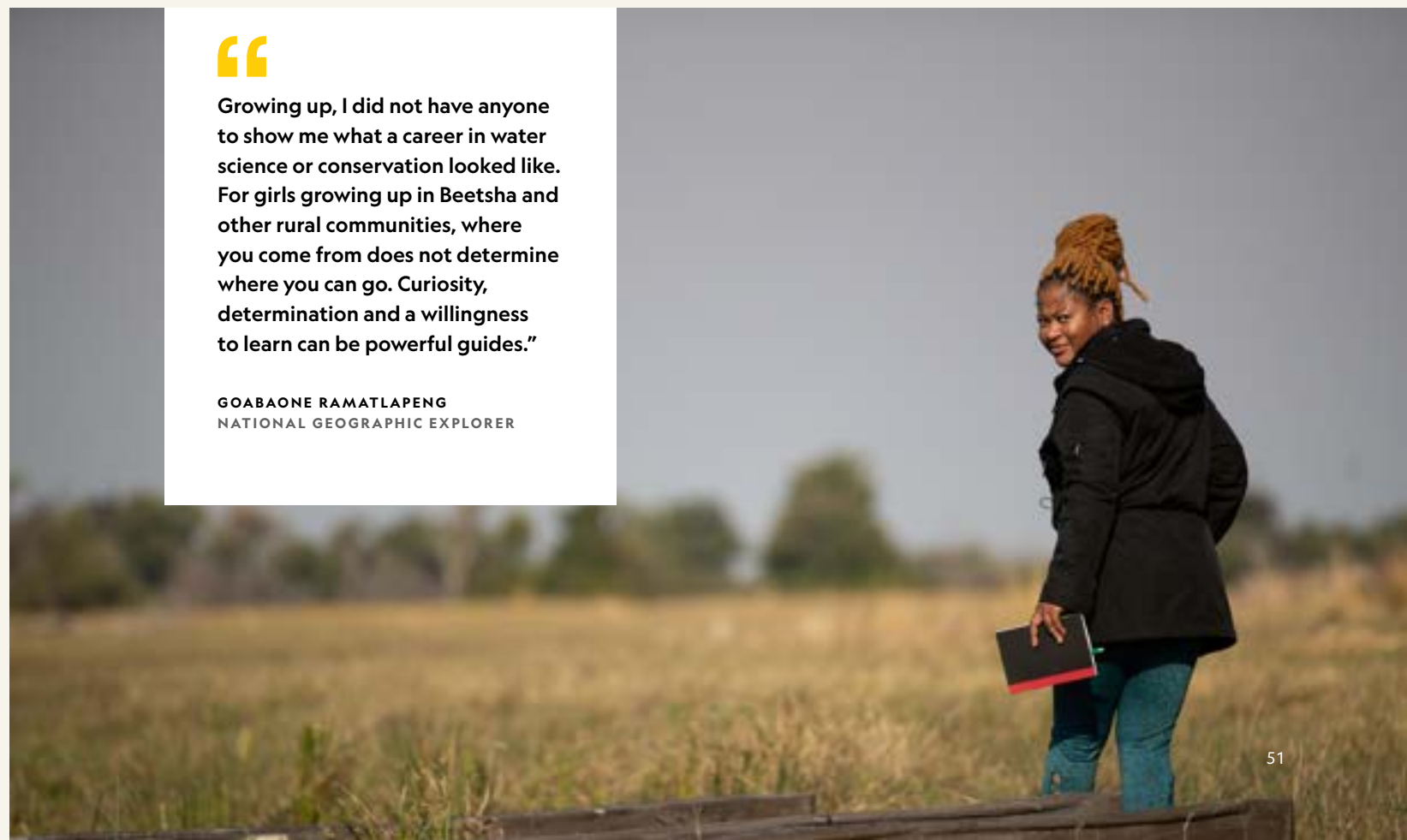
Dr. Goabaone Ramatlapeng's path into water science began far from the Okavango Delta, in the village of Kopong in southern Botswana, where water scarcity was a lived struggle. Witnessing prolonged periods with empty taps and watching families collect visibly unsafe water from a nearby river left her with a driving question: Why did communities have to struggle for clean water, and how could science fix it? Navigating a highly specialized field, she ultimately became Botswana's first female hydrogeochemist with a Ph.D. Today, she brings those hard-won answers straight to the panhandle through her National Geographic Wayfinder project, Okavango Water Insights, at the newly opened Beetsha Nkashi Knowledge Center. Her project is helping link formal water chemistry with Indigenous knowledge, and her presence ensures that the youth of the panhandle now have the local, visible scientist they were historically denied.

Dr. Ramatlapeng's work linking formal water chemistry with Indigenous knowledge, paired with the project's Backyard Expeditions, which immersed 108 primary school teachers in the TEK of their students' lives, is helping close the gaps for eager young learners and bridge traditional knowledge with classroom teaching. Further, by demonstrating that Indigenous roots are an asset to scientific inquiry, Dr. Ramatlapeng has become the living roadmap she never had growing up. Ultimately, the true success of this initiative isn't captured in raw metrics; it lives in the reality that when opportunity finally arrives in the village, a young girl in Beetsha can look at a world-class African scientist, see her own reflection, and realize she is no longer a spectator in the Delta, but its future author.



Growing up, I did not have anyone to show me what a career in water science or conservation looked like. For girls growing up in Beetsha and other rural communities, where you come from does not determine where you can go. Curiosity, determination and a willingness to learn can be powerful guides."

GOABAONE RAMATLAPENG
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC EXPLORER





PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- Tempué CDN, originally planned as a brick-and-mortar, was redesigned as a container build to avoid permissions issues and shorten the construction timeline. The completed site now includes a catering building, a wood-fired bread oven, ablution and laundry areas with workshops, an office building, and tent weather protection, all awaiting final inspection before handover.
- Office facilities, accommodation, ablution blocks, and kitchen and dining areas at the Kuito base were refurbished and became operational in 2025.
- The Tempué airstrip was refurbished and cleared of unexploded ordnance by the HALO Trust, and it is now routinely maintained and operationally active, ensuring rapid response and extraction if needed.
- Several spaces were refurbished in Tempué, including the government water system and two primary schools, so that 6,000 people now have reliable water access and 3,615 learners of all ages benefit from the upgraded schools.
- Tempué clinic was refurbished with ceiling panels and electrical lighting, enabling evening consultations for the first time — a small infrastructure change that materially extends the hours patients can safely be seen.
- A total of nine new bridges were built, collectively strengthening community coordination and safety across the region.
- 4 traditional meeting structures were built near Tempué to bolster local governance and repair communication networks, thereby enhancing information sharing.
- 1 new community-managed municipal library was established, supported by two trained librarians in Alto Cuíto, creating the first formal learning space of its kind in the region and cataloging and providing access to approximately 2,500 books for over 1,000 students.
- This initiative's scope of work created 15 jobs and provided 20 men with construction training.
- In total, infrastructure development outcomes benefit 18,500 people across Angola.

Infrastructure Development *Angola*

Through Okavango Eternal, the Conservation Development Node (CDN) in the village of Tempué and the Operational Base in the village of Kuito will serve as vital spaces for scientific staff and community members.

While these spaces were under construction, the Okavango Eternal partnership listened to and engaged communities to understand other high-priority infrastructure needs. Thanks to the partnership's actions, every resident of the village of Tempué now enjoys access to improved infrastructure, such as a refurbished primary school and clinic.

WHY IT MATTERS

Sustained field presence in remote landscapes requires reliable infrastructure. Operational bases enable continuous monitoring, rapid response, staff retention and local employment, all of which strengthen long-term conservation impact.

In addition to bases for researchers, infrastructure improvement is also needed to support local communities as they face persistent challenges related to basic infrastructure access. Long distances to services, limited communication networks and relative social isolation from country-wide decision-makers increase vulnerability and place pressure on natural resources. By strengthening locally governed knowledge and social networks and incorporating traditional knowledge, this initiative improves quality of life while reinforcing community resilience and long-term conservation outcomes in the Okavango headwaters.





COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ANGOLA

HOW IT STARTED

The initiative began with a focus on establishing the Tempué CDN, launching the Handmade enterprise and introducing beekeeping. This integrated community-building effort in the Lisima landscape aimed to improve well-being in remote headwater regions by weaving health, education and social infrastructure with traditional stewardship. It recognized that long-term conservation depends entirely on the resilience of local communities, like the Luchazi and Chokwe peoples, who have served as resident stewards for centuries.

HOW IT EVOLVED

Over Phase 1, this design matured into a fully integrated program led by Fundação Lisima, expanding into six simultaneous workstreams: health, education, agriculture, artisan enterprise, financial literacy and youth mapping. The most significant evolution was the unexpected creation of the Lisima Healers program, born from the realization that remote healthcare access is fundamentally a conservation issue. By boosting antenatal attendance from 45% to 70% and integrating six traditional midwives into the hospital system, the project deepened the community trust essential for long-term conservation governance.





PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- 32 traditional midwives across 40 villages were trained so that women in remote communities have a birth attendant nearby, instead of undergoing a long, unsafe journey to the nearest clinic. Six are now formally recognized by the health system and coordinate directly with the local hospital, which ultimately lifted antenatal attendance from 45% to 70% and enabled 17 recorded safe births in 2025.
- 20 traditional healers were supported to document and transmit knowledge to younger community members, so that healing knowledge held by a single generation doesn't disappear when they do.
- 6,500 community members received hygiene, sanitation and cholera-prevention education delivered by Community Health and Development Agents (ADECO), so families had the information to change everyday practices, ultimately producing a 40% increase in community-led latrine construction.
- A feminine hygiene initiative, delivered in partnership with a government program, benefited 1,000 women and young girls, directly contributing to a sharp increase in the number of young girls attending school and participating in village activities.
- Overall, this initiative helped deliver 774 medical consultations in remote communities, improving access to basic healthcare.



The most powerful solutions for the future already exist in the present. We simply need to know how to listen to those who have carried them for centuries."

DR. ISILDA CAVALECA
PROGRAM LEAD, FUNDAÇÃO LISIMA

Health and Healers *Angola*

The Lisima Healers program works to bridge traditional and modern healthcare systems while improving access to healthcare in remote communities by training dozens of midwives and healers in over 40 regional villages.

WHY IT MATTERS

Healthy communities protect landscapes better. When people are struggling with preventable illness, conservation becomes a remote abstraction. The integration of traditional and formal healthcare also demonstrates the program's core principle: knowledge held by communities has value, and when it is respected, trust deepens.





| Lisima Knowledge

The Lisima Knowledge program aims to empower local communities by improving access to education while preserving traditional knowledge. Through partnerships with the Moxico Provincial Education Department, the program has helped identify and support local community members to receive certification to work as teachers across the region. The team also holds environmental education workshops with local children, which bring together traditional knowledge and academic science and impart the importance of learning about the landscape and preserving cultural ways of life.

WHY IT MATTERS

Educational access in the remote headwaters directly shapes the program’s long-term conservation workforce. The Lisima Knowledge program ensures communities can produce their own teachers, librarians and future conservation leaders.

PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- 52 government-certified lecturers (including five women) have been supported through official testing and recognition – the first time lecturers in this area were tested and certified by the government – so that 3,369 learners, including 2,369 children in Tempué, are now taught by lecturers with recognized qualifications.
- Of the original 52 teachers trained across two regedorias, 49 remain active and are supported through materials, coordination and learning spaces.
- 3,369 children had improved access to education through refurbished schools and a library.

| Sustainable Livelihoods *Angola*

The Sustainable Livelihoods program in the Lisima landscape supports community-led economic activities that are environmentally responsible and culturally appropriate. The initiative brings together regenerative agriculture, artisan production, honey and nursery development, and financial literacy.

WHY IT MATTERS

Limited livelihood options and economic insecurity increase reliance on natural resource extraction. By supporting diversified, locally governed income opportunities, the program reduces pressure on forests and wildlife while strengthening household resilience.

PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

LISIMA HANDMADE

The Lisima Handmade Initiative provides an opportunity for local women to support their families through traditional basket weaving, creating a long-term source of income that celebrates local cultural heritage and protects the environment by using sustainably harvested materials like grass roots. Outcomes included:

- To weave the first basket, the team had to build trust, which took over one and a half years. Now, baskets are being woven again as a livelihood. From six members in one community, the initiative has grown to 350 members across 11 groups in eight different villages.
- Selection to represent Angola at the prestigious International Folk Art Market (IFAM) in 2026, securing international recognition for the program.
- Began market testing and more expansive sales through a partnership with the national handmade brand MUSA.

REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE

The regenerative agriculture initiative integrates conservation agriculture, agroforestry and regenerative techniques, and reduces slash-and-burn agriculture expansion. Key actions include farmer training, land rehabilitation, tree planting, nursery development, and cooperative and governance systems formation. Over the past five years, the program has:

- Secured and mapped 200 hectares, consisting of a 180-hectare cooperative farmland and a 20-hectare school nursery.
- Trained 137 farmers in conservation agriculture and agroforestry, distributing 449 kilograms of seeds; approximately 60% of the crops grown were sold locally.
- Trained and equipped 123 individuals in sustainable beekeeping as an alternative, fair trade livelihood for families. Honey has always been part of the community, consumed and harvested through traditional knowledge. This initiative brought together this knowledge with more modern practices.

FINANCIAL LITERACY AND SAVINGS

The Financial Literacy and Savings program works to empower the Lisima community members to achieve financial security, economic empowerment and self-reliance by establishing and operating community-based savings and lending groups. It leverages existing informal savings practices, supports small businesses and promotes gender-inclusive economic development. It took time to build community buy-in for this initiative, but after a trip to Zimbabwe for knowledge sharing, the efforts were reignited. Over the past few years, the initiative:

- Expanded from a single group of seven members to six savings groups totaling 49 members and internal capital being generated through savings, lending and income from agricultural and poultry activities.
- Successfully delivered seven workshops on community saving practices, financial planning and informal credit systems.

YOUTH MAPPERS

The Youth Mappers Project aims to craft a future where Indigenous and local communities wield the power of geospatial technologies, ensuring livelihoods, conserving vital ecosystems and building a world where tradition seamlessly blends with innovation.

- The Youth Mappers program consists of five members, with training offered through specialized workshops covering topics like Esri's QuickCapture program. Their mapping efforts now cover agricultural zones, tree species, pest presence and new infrastructure.

OVERALL IMPACT: Across the Okavango Eternal period, a total of 922 community livelihoods were supported through direct engagement in Angola.



STORY SPOTLIGHT

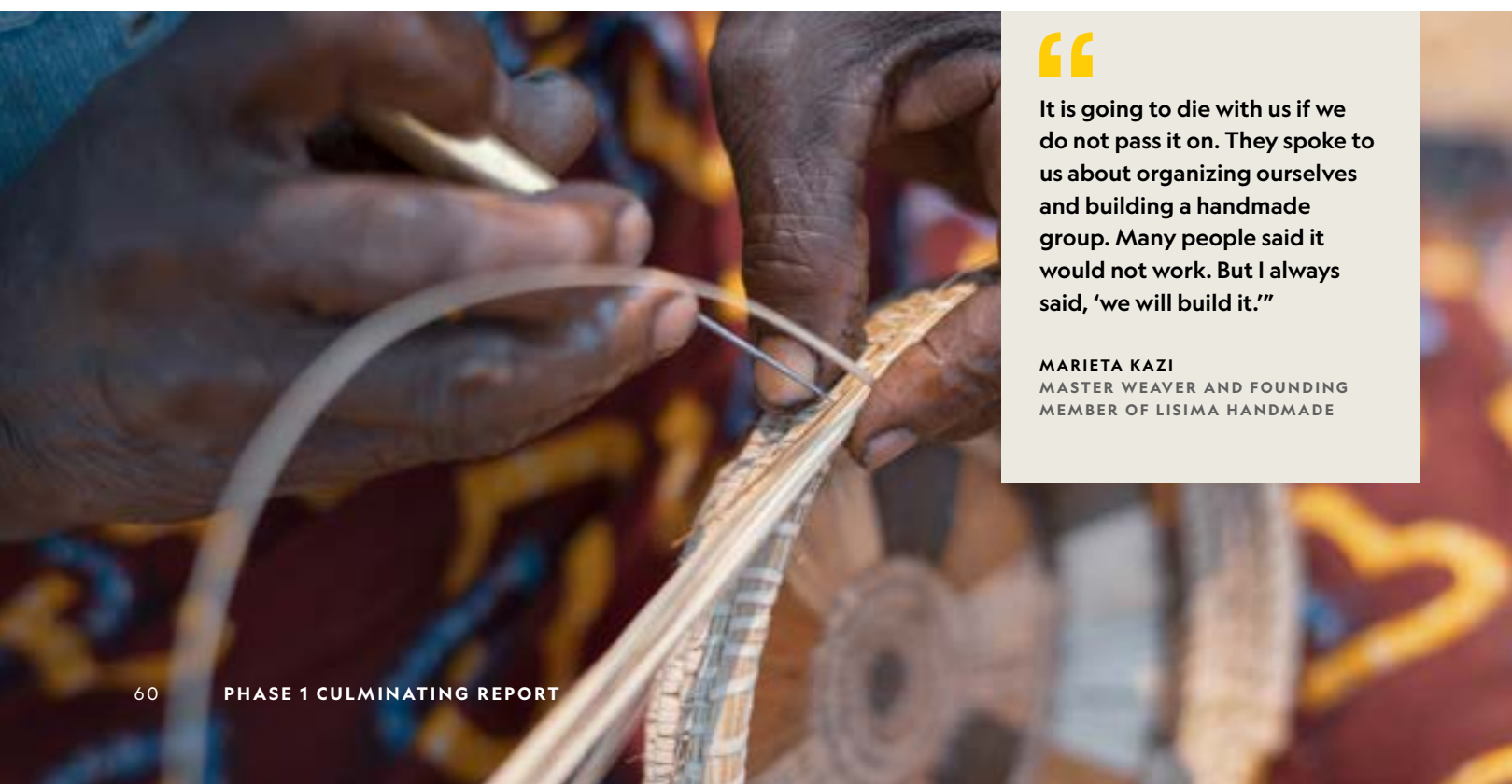
Woven with Purpose: How Lisima Handmade Revived an Ancient Craft to Support Sustainable Livelihoods

THE BASELINE

A Heritage at Risk of Extinction

Throughout the Okavango Eternal partnership, sustainable livelihoods have become a cornerstone of conservation across the Basin. The Lisima Handmade Initiative is one of the clearest examples of that impact in action, and its success has shown how protecting ecosystems and building stronger local economies can go hand in hand.

In the Angolan Highlands landscape, traditional basket weaving is a time-honored tradition. Historically a household staple used to store grain or carry water, this generational craft was nearly lost after three decades of civil war that left Moxico province fragmented and nearly isolated. Even as peace returned, industrial development arrived, bringing with it new challenges. Traditional basketweaving practices began losing ground to cheap, imported plastic alternatives. A perception emerged, especially among younger generations, that basket weaving was archaic and didn't bring economic opportunity. But one community member, Marieta Kazi, was determined to change that perception. Now in her seventies, Marieta was one of the few remaining women in the entire landscape who still possessed the intricate knowledge required to create these baskets. While she had the knowledge and a knack for galvanizing community members, she needed the support to scale what became Lisima Handmade. That's where Okavango Eternal came in.



“

It is going to die with us if we do not pass it on. They spoke to us about organizing ourselves and building a handmade group. Many people said it would not work. But I always said, 'we will build it.'”

MARIETA KAZI
MASTER WEAVER AND FOUNDING
MEMBER OF LISIMA HANDMADE

THE IMPACT

Transforming Craft into Conservation Currency

With the support of Okavango Eternal, Lisima Handmade was launched in 2023, catalyzing a fading tradition into a powerful engine for community resilience and economic opportunity, especially for women and girls. Driven by the tireless championing of Marieta Kazi and implemented on the ground by Fundação Lisima, what began with just eight weavers has scaled into a thriving enterprise across seven communities with a membership of about 350 artisans.

Fundação Lisima has been subsidizing this project by buying baskets to exhibit, as well as test or develop, in national and international markets. However, until a sustainable value chain is established, this income stream will remain supplementary and inconsistent.

The initiative has also expanded economic opportunity for people who have traditionally had few livelihood options. Marieta is unable to walk, so she has not been able to pursue farming or other physically demanding work. Lisima Handmade has provided her independence and allowed her to earn her own income while preserving a cultural tradition and inspiring legions of women basket weavers – whom she affectionately calls “The Mamas.”

Lisima Handmade also reinforces nature-positive practices, because every basket depends on a healthy forest. One of the most significant handicrafts of the local people is the Chihele, a tightly coiled basket intricately woven from the roots of the mukenge tree. Artisans harvest mukenge roots sustainably, gathering them only when conditions prevent damage to the trees, and use exclusively natural materials and traditional plant dyes.

Lisima Handmade and The Mamas have now earned recognition beyond the Angolan Highlands. With support from Okavango Eternal, the basket weavers have participated in cultural exchange programs in Zimbabwe, which is a huge point of pride and, for many, the first time they have ever traveled outside Angola. Their work has also since been showcased in internationally renowned galleries and auction houses, including Design Afrika, Kim Sacks Gallery, and Strauss & Co. Most notably, the collection has been selected to represent Angola at IFAM in 2026.

By investing in traditional knowledge and artisans as a pathway to sustainable livelihoods, Okavango Eternal has demonstrated that preserving cultural heritage is inseparable from protecting the landscapes – and the communities – that sustain it.



“

When they first came to ask about the handmade things we make here and the skills people had, many people said it would not work. They said it was not true; that we would never succeed. But I always said, ‘No, we will build it.’ I told them that many of us were getting old and fewer young women were weaving. I said, ‘It is going to die with us if we do not pass it on.’ Now, it makes me happy to see what the younger women are achieving. We make the Chihele so there is something to remember. The basket and our memories will still be here, and the plastic one will be gone.”

MARIETA KAZI
MASTER WEAVER AND FOUNDING MEMBER OF LISIMA HANDMADE



COMMUNITY
DEVELOPMENT
BOTSWANA

HOW IT STARTED

Community development in Botswana began as a focused effort in financial literacy and knowledge centers, designed to build practical money management skills, encourage savings, and support women and youth in financing small enterprises. It gradually expanded into far broader community opportunities.

HOW IT EVOLVED

Over Phase 1, this pillar evolved beyond its initial scope to include youth education pathways, ecotourism livelihoods and community-owned enterprises. What started as a simple mapping exercise grew into the structured Nkashi Trails ecotourism program, while Storytelling Clubs shifted from a media initiative into a genuine youth career pathway with permanent staff hires and a national exhibition. Alongside these new ventures, the financial inclusion program significantly exceeded its Phase 1 savings group targets.



Financial Inclusion and Enterprise Development

Financial Inclusion and Enterprise Development in Botswana supports savings groups, financial literacy, and enterprise development to strengthen household resilience and expand conservation-compatible livelihood options in Okavango Delta communities. The focus is on building practical financial skills, encouraging savings and investment, and supporting individuals, particularly women and youth, to develop and finance small enterprises.

WHY IT MATTERS

Economic insecurity is one of the most direct drivers of unsustainable resource use. Savings groups and financial literacy create the economic stability that makes conservation-compatible choices realistic and not just aspirational.

PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- Grew financial inclusion from two savings groups and 73 people trained in 2024 to 17 groups, BWP 635,000 saved and 465 beneficiaries by the end of Phase 1, so that households in the Delta have a real, locally run alternative to informal moneylenders, which ultimately let participants fund enterprise applications and shift, in the groups' own words, "from dependency to financial autonomy."
- 8 youth participants were motivated to move beyond savings to enterprise development by preparing enterprise funding applications for government social grants. Three of the youth successfully submitted applications, with results pending.
- 3 Smega Digital Wallet agents were supported in Gunotsoga and Eretsha, with three additional applications awaiting Bank of Botswana approval, extending formal financial services to a community that previously had to travel to Shakawe for them.
- 132 Entrepreneurs (85% of whom are women) from the five villages of the eastern panhandle engaged in diverse livelihood activities, including horticulture, food sales, retail, second-hand clothing, internet services and informal trading, took part in enterprise development training.
- The first round of one-on-one mentorship sessions was conducted in Beetsha, reaching 14 participants. Mentorship provided tailored support to assess business needs, identify growth opportunities and strengthen enterprise strategies.





Nkashi Knowledge

The Nkashi Knowledge initiatives in Botswana reduce barriers to education, skills development and learning opportunities in remote Okavango Delta communities. The initiative supports learners and educators whose access to schooling, professional development and STEM exposure is limited by geography, cost and infrastructure through three core efforts: the Itsoseng Out-of-School Youth program in Gudigwa, Educator Expeditions and STEM engagement activities designed to strengthen foundational learning, exam completion and science-based skills.

WHY IT MATTERS

In remote Delta villages, young people face a high risk of dropping out of school, while teachers often lack a practical connection to their students' ecological and cultural realities. This program expands pathways into further education, employment and conservation leadership.

PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- To support disadvantaged youth seeking a second chance at their Junior Certificate or BGCSE exams, the Itsoseng Out-of-School Program in Gudigwa initially provided full funding for tutoring, study materials, transport, meals and exam accommodation. To build on this foundation and avoid operating in parallel, the initiative aligned with the Government of Botswana's new Bula Buka Program, using the Nkashi Knowledge Bus to mobilize, register and guide 75 eligible youth across five villages — six of whom were selected for government exam rewrites, with vocational training selections anticipated in 2027.

Nkashi Trails for Community-Led Ecotourism *Botswana*

The Nkashi Mokoro Trails initiative is developing a community-led, low-impact tourism model in the eastern Okavango Delta that places local mokoro polers at the center of trail design, guiding and enterprise ownership. The work focuses on skills development, safety training and participatory reconnaissance of potential mokoro routes that align with cultural values, environmental sensitivity and no-trace tourism principles.

WHY IT MATTERS

Mokoro polers are custodians of deep place-based knowledge and are integral to conservation and tourism, yet they often remain confined to low-value positions in the tourism value chain. Community-owned trail enterprises create incentives for conservation that are owned, not imposed.

PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- Nkashi Trails spent Phase 1 building the four elements that any community-led tourism enterprise needs to operate: legal governance, a mapped and permitted product, trained people, and outside capital. None of that is visible to a paying guest — but without it, there is no trail to sell. While Phase 1 didn't produce a finished trail, the foundational building blocks for community-led trails were established. Phase 2 is where those pieces combine into an operating, revenue-generating ecotourism enterprise.

- **Governance:** Nkashi Trails signed a formal Memorandum of Agreement with the Okavango Jakotsha Community Trust, ensuring mokoro trail development is directly governed by the community rather than an outside operator — establishing the essential legal foundation for the entire project.
- **Product:** Supported by the UNDP Small Grants Program, the team conducted mini-crossing and reconnaissance trails to test the model, georeferencing 12 islands in the NG12 concession. Three communities (Eretsha, Beetsha & Gunotsoga) were officially allocated three campsites by Landboard after the applications were facilitated by Nkashi Trust Engagement, with OKACOM's World Bank workshop further presenting this community-led approach to Basin-scale policy audiences.
- **Enterprise Structure:** The initiative provided business development support to four community-owned companies, ensuring that fully functional local businesses are prepared to operate the campsites as soon as approvals are finalized.
- **Workforce:** The program trained 24 polers in camp operations, health and safety, and water-based guiding, with an additional eight polers undergoing certified guide training co-funded by the Royal African Foundation — positioning a fully trained workforce for Phase 2.
- **Livelihood Opportunities:** Through ongoing mapping and trails development work, 10 temporary livelihood opportunities were created for these polers.
- **Outside Investment and Validation:** A newly established partnership with a private safari lodge will further develop the Nkashi Trails methodology, converting training directly into eight to 16 full-time poler jobs and demonstrating clear market demand for the program's model.



Storytelling Clubs

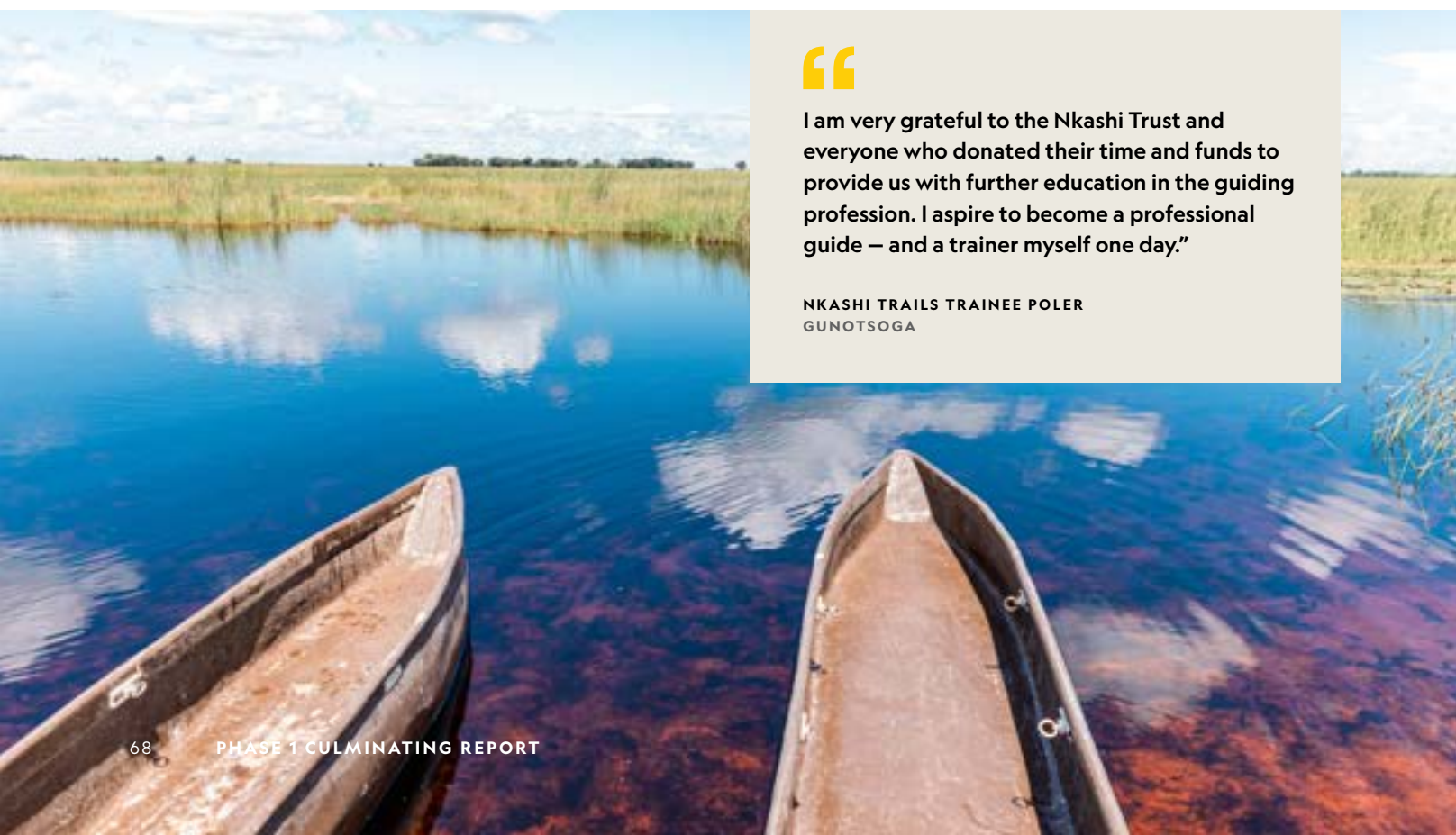
The Storytelling Clubs are a youth-led capacity-building and livelihoods pathway that trains young people from Okavango Delta communities in ethical storytelling, photography, visual documentation and TEK. The program combines creative skills development with conservation education, financial literacy and enterprise basics, enabling participants to document their landscapes, cultures and environmental challenges from within their own communities. The initiative culminates in public platforms that bring together multiple cohorts to share their work with communities, decision-makers and partners.

WHY IT MATTERS

Young people in the Delta are often excluded from formal conservation narratives despite being deeply connected to the landscape. By equipping youth with technical, ethical and entrepreneurial storytelling skills, the program preserves cultural knowledge, strengthens identity and creates new pathways into conservation, media and creative livelihoods. The expansion of the Storytelling Clubs in Phase 2 will not only build skills for more youth but also develop real income opportunities for members who can turn those skills into a practical enterprise.

PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- Over 100 storytellers participated across six distinct community cohorts: including Hambukushu, Wayei, San, Deaf, Girls and Maun groups.
- The initiative hired three storytelling assistants as permanent paid staff and supported four female media interns from the University of Botswana.
- Participants documented more than 100 visual stories and artisan interviews across 2025 and 2026, which contributed to the launch of the "Stories of Our Land" website and a national exhibition tour featuring 58 young storytellers that drew 205 attendees.
- Youth storytellers earned income by providing paid coverage for more than 50 Nkashi Trust events and workshops. Additionally, 23 of the Storytellers received commissions from various sources including Disney/De Beers.
- Program participant Manda Julious earned creative commissions for Disney and De Beers, retook her Cambridge exams, and began professional training in camp management and guiding.



“

I am very grateful to the Nkashi Trust and everyone who donated their time and funds to provide us with further education in the guiding profession. I aspire to become a professional guide — and a trainer myself one day.”

NKASHI TRAILS TRAINEE POLER
GUNOTSOGA



LOCAL IMPACT COMMUNICATIONS

Focusing on collecting and sharing authentic stories directly from the Basin provides a platform for local community members to showcase the real-world change and impact driven by this partnership. By highlighting these narratives, Okavango Eternal raises global awareness of the Okavango’s unique wonder while reinforcing the vital role of traditional knowledge in protecting the natural world. This storytelling approach, aligned with De Beers’ Building Forever focus on Livelihoods, Nature and Climate, does more than just inform; it builds the deep-rooted community support and transboundary cooperation essential for long-term biodiversity protection.

HOW IT STARTED

The original framing for Conservation Media under Okavango Eternal focused on high-production international content: the Nkashi film, the National Geographic-Disney partnership and a paid media campaign. These were delivered, and the results were significant: 4.34 million viewers for the Nkashi documentary and 100 million people reached through the NatGeo CreativeWorks campaign.

HOW IT EVOLVED

What evolved alongside this, and arguably became the more lasting contribution, was the shift toward locally authored content. The Storytelling Clubs, the “Stories of Our Land” exhibition, the national Photo Camps in all three countries, and the “Batho Ba Metsi” film represented a deliberate shift from producing content about communities to building the capacity of communities to produce it themselves. The pillar’s name change from “Conservation Media” to “Local Impact Communications” in the 2025 report reflects that evolution.





PHASE 1 OUTCOMES



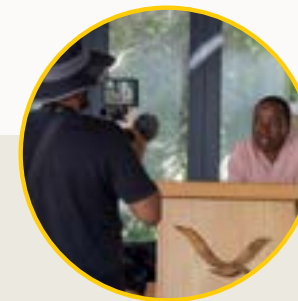
15M

content views across
all platforms



1.2M

total followers across
all platforms



700K+

combined content
interactions



600K+

visits to our social
media profiles

Digital Storytelling and Social Media *Regional*

Social media is critical for telling the story of our partnership. It elevates the voices of Explorers and community leaders who bring the work to life, fosters a community of engaged, loyal supporters connected to our mission, and builds transparency into the progress we've made.

WHY IT MATTERS

Visibility shapes understanding, support and influence. For younger and more global audiences, social media is often their first touchpoint into a brand or partnership, and it entices them to explore further through our website and earned media coverage. Social media also allows us to extend the reach and lifespan of earned media coverage. Strong digital reach ensures that community voices, traditional knowledge and field-based research are seen and valued beyond local contexts. For community partners, digital storytelling creates pride and recognition. For donors and institutions, it provides transparency.

- During Okavango Eternal Phase 1, the partnership's digital communications have expanded to a combined audience of more than 1.2 million followers, generating over 15 million content views and 700,000 content interactions across Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn.
- **Wild Bird Trust:** Continued to anchor the partnership's digital presence, growing a community of more than 1.1 million followers.
- **Nkashi Trust:** Grew from a small community audience into one of Botswana's most prominent conservation communication platforms, reaching more than 33,000 followers and generating 3.89 million Facebook content views.
- **Fundação Lisima:** Established a strong digital presence for conservation in Angola, building an audience of more than 4,000 followers, including nearly 3,000 on LinkedIn.
- **Kavango Wilderness Project:** Launched in 2025, establishing a new conservation brand and reaching more than 1,000 followers, 143,000 content views and 4,500 content interactions within its first 18 months.
- **Okavango Wilderness Project:** Built an engaged audience of more than 100,000 followers.





Conservation Education and Community Outreach *Botswana*

The Conservation Education and Community Outreach initiative focuses on building environmental awareness, fostering stewardship and promoting community ownership of conservation solutions in the Okavango Delta. The program uses mobile outreach, community events and place-based learning to connect people directly to conservation issues affecting their local landscapes. Key delivery platforms include the Okavango Eternal-supported Nkashi Knowledge Bus (programming) and Nkashi Knowledge Centers, which function as mobile and fixed hubs for conservation dialogue, storytelling and community engagement.

WHY IT MATTERS

Communities living closest to degraded or at-risk ecosystems play a critical role in their recovery and protection. Conservation knowledge and engagement opportunities remain uneven across the Delta, and this program brings them to where communities are.

PHASE 1 OUTCOMES

- **Nkashi Knowledge Bus:** Reached 823 students (of which 450 were girls) through its school program across the five primary schools of the eastern Panhandle and, during the last two Nkashi Classics, 638 people participated through VR, quizzes, film screenings and storytelling.
 - The Bus has also reached 9,687 people through conservation education, extension services and village film screenings in villages the fixed Knowledge Centers can't reach.
- **World Lion Day (2025):** 700+ community members were reached through joint events with CLAWS Conservancy in Gunotsoga, Eretsha and Beetsha.
- **Fire management training at Beetsha NKC:** 32 participants (17 men, 15 women) from four villages produced village-specific fire plans, ensuring each village returned home with a plan tailored to its unique landscape rather than a generic template.
- **Conservation film screenings:** More than 250 Setswana-language screenings were held across the region, delivering critical environmental programming directly to audiences in their native language rather than on English-language conservation media.
- **“Nkashi: Race for the Okavango” documentary:** Reached 13 villages and 4,500 people through a roadshow; 2.2 million viewers on Nat Geo Wild; and 2.14 million via BTV.
- **National Geographic Creative Works paid media campaign:** Public outreach efforts reached 100 million individuals, securing a 94% campaign recognition rate and 76% message recall among the target audience, while driving 1.1 million active digital engagements.





PHASE 1 OUTCOMES



Premiered in Maun and Gaborone in March 2023 with an introduction in Gaborone by President Mokgweetsi Masisi and remarks by Society and De Beers CEOs.

151
million readers of print, online and social media coverage.

9
awards received, including Anthem, Jackson Wild, Telly and Pridelands.

26,900
trailer views across Vimeo and Instagram.

4,500
local Motswana attendees at rural community roadshows.

18
filmmakers trained through ISL workshops.

Impact Film Botswana

“Nkashi: Race for the Okavango” is an impact film created by the National Geographic Society’s Impact Story Lab and partially funded by the Okavango Eternal Partnership. It was produced through a collaborative partnership between the Society and Batswana storytellers.

WHY IT MATTERS

“Nkashi: Race for the Okavango” was created and produced with a Batswana-owned production company and an all-local cast and crew, making the film a genuine cultural artifact rather than an imported narrative. At the end of its dissemination life cycle, the impact film will have helped ensure that audiences understand the Okavango Delta as a place of people, culture and living traditions that are central to conservation — not just lodges and wildlife.



“
For me, conservation education is about more than just creating awareness: it should empower people to become active stewards of their environment, to change their attitudes and perceptions about protecting their environment for the better. I have witnessed and heard people in the communities taking ownership of conservation initiatives because they understand that the future of the Okavango Delta depends on all of us, and being proud of all this. Through dialogues, education, and collaboration, I strive to nourish a shared sense of responsibility for protecting one of the world’s most important wetland ecosystems, ensuring that it continues to thrive and sustain livelihoods for many generations to come.”

GOSAITSE TUBATSI
NKASHI SCIENCE AND CONSERVATION EDUCATION OFFICER





THE IMPACT

From One Film to a Cultural Movement

That vision began with “Nkashi: Race for the Okavango,” a documentary that reimagined how conservation stories could be created in Botswana. The production prioritized local talent at every stage: from crew members and cinematographers to musicians behind the soundtrack and artists and designers who created the film’s visual identity.

The world took notice. “Nkashi” earned international acclaim, including honors at the prestigious Jackson Wild Media Awards, elevating Botswana’s creative talent onto the global stage while also earning praise from the country’s president, ministerial leaders and traditional chiefs. But perhaps its greatest impact was felt at home. Following the film’s release, attendance at the annual Nkashi Classic increased by 157%, introducing thousands more people to the race’s celebration of traditional mokoro culture and the livelihood opportunities that come with poling while strengthening community pride in the Delta’s cultural heritage.

Building on the success of “Nkashi,” Okavango Eternal has continued to invest in locally-led storytelling as a force for conservation impact. The partnership helped establish the Nkashi Storytelling Clubs, creating a forum where more than 80 emerging storytellers and photographers receive mentorship, document the Delta through their own authentic perspectives, and develop skills that can lead to meaningful livelihood opportunities. The Nkashi Knowledge Centers in Maun and Beetsha have offered a hub where they can learn, collaborate and share their work with their communities.

That investment is already creating new opportunities. In 2025, members of the Storytelling Clubs presented “Stories of Our Land,” an exhibition at the Nhabe Museum that welcomed audiences ranging from local school groups to the UK High Commissioner, with prints available for purchase to support the artists. Several participants have since secured employment, including full-time positions with the Nkashi Trust and roles documenting the Okavango Delta Crossings’ scientific expeditions.

As Okavango Eternal enters its next phase, this vision offers an opportunity to grow beyond Botswana, by creating a network of storytelling clubs across the Basin that amplify local voices, create economic opportunity and ensure the story of the Okavango is told by those who know it best.

STORY SPOTLIGHT

Elevating Local Voices: How Nkashi Storytelling Clubs Are Reclaiming the Basin’s Narrative

THE BASELINE:

A Story Told by Others

For decades, stories about the Okavango Basin were largely told through an outsider’s lens. Often, stories focused on the region’s abundant wildlife and sustaining waters — but hardly the people who live there. While international filmmakers brought attention to the Basin, local communities were rarely behind the camera or shaping the narratives of their own home, reinforcing a deep-seated perception of “parachute storytelling.”

When Okavango Eternal launched in 2021, building on the Society’s theory of change, the initiative recognized that protecting the Okavango required more than science and conservation. It required powerful storytelling that could inspire people to care and act to protect the landscape — and that storytelling needed to be led by local voices. Rather than simply producing another conservation film, the partnership set out to transform how stories are created in Botswana, investing in local filmmakers, musicians, artists and young creatives while helping to build the Basin’s creative economy.



The Delta is one of the most photographed places in the world, yet too often, the people who live there are not behind the camera. That’s what inspired the Storytelling Clubs at Nkashi Trust. They learn how to identify a story, capture it visually, edit their work and share it with the world. With support through the Okavango Eternal partnership between National Geographic and De Beers that aims to create livelihood opportunities, we have also been able to scale and expand the clubs to reach more people. We now have several cohorts.”

“I want to expand the clubs across the Okavango Delta and eventually throughout Botswana. My vision is to build a network of skilled local storytellers who create work that supports livelihoods, strengthens cultural identity and promotes conservation. Over time, these storytellers will influence how our communities and the world see the Delta, shaping policies, tourism and cultural pride.”

KARABO LEBRONPETER
STORYTELLING MANAGER, NKASHI TRUST



I didn’t know I could just hold a camera ... in terms of holding a camera and telling a story about a picture, it wasn’t in my dream. [...] Now I will say I am a storyteller and a photographer — a storytelling photographer.”

ERIC HAIMBIRI
NKASHI STORYTELLING ASSISTANT, NKASHI TRUST



Media Highlights by Year

2021



National Geographic Society

De Beers And National Geographic Partner To Protect A Natural Wonder



Botswana Youth Magazine

De Beers' 4 Primary focus areas towards Okavango Delta Protection



Ethos

A Diamond Is Forever and Africa's Vulnerable Okavango Basin Should Be Too, Says De Beers



Elite Traveler

De Beers Joins National Geographic to Protect Okavango Delta



Mining.com

De Beers, National Geographic partner to protect Okavango Delta source waters



Voice of America

De Beers, National Geographic Form Partnership to Protect Botswana's Okavango Delta

NOTABLE STATS



2023: The announcement of the premiere of "Nkashi: Race for the Okavango" generated **139 pieces** of earned and social media coverage, with an estimated total audience of 151 million.

Coverage report



2025: The **announcement** of the Nkashi Knowledge Center in Beetsha generated **72 pieces** of earned and social media coverage, with an estimated total audience of 204,000.

Coverage report



2026: The announcement of the Lisima Ramsar designation generated **22 pieces** of coverage, with an estimated total audience of 6.9 million.

Coverage report



Featured Article from 2021 – Ethos:
A Diamond is Forever and Africa’s Vulnerable Okavango Basin Should Be Too, Says De Beers.

Focusing on the high-end luxury and sustainability angle, Ethos covered the launch of the partnership, highlighting how it’s an extension of De Beers’ Building Forever strategy. The article explains how Okavango Eternal is expanding on work already underway by the National Geographic Okavango Wilderness Project – and, if the partnership achieves its goals, it will help to create one of the largest transboundary protected areas in sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, the article highlights the partnership’s focus on creating livelihood opportunities – a point that resonates with the outlet’s audience of conscious travelers and consumers.

“By sharing our expertise and resources and working with local communities, governments and other NGO partners, we will deliver a positive impact that is far greater than what any of us could achieve on our own, and ultimately protects the natural world and improves people’s lives.”

BRUCE CLEAVER
FORMER CEO, DE BEERS GROUP

2022

-  **Discover Botswana**
[The Quest to Measure the Heartbeat of the Okavango](#)
-  **Your Botswana**
[Okavango Eternal, Protecting a Natural Wonder](#)

2023

-  **National Geographic Society**
[The National Geographic Society Recognized with Two Jackson Wild Media Awards](#)
-  **National Geographic**
[Steve Boyes traces life to its source in the Angolan Highlands](#)
-  **National Geographic Society**
[National Geographic Society and De Beers Proudly Announce World Premiere of Nkashi: Race for the Okavango to Take Place in Botswana](#)
 - [DailyNews \(Botswana\): President Hails Nkashi Documentary](#)
 - [Mmegi \(Botswana\): Nkashi celebrates Botswana cultural heritage - Masisi](#)
 - [The Ngami Times: Nkashi: Race For The Okavango Premieres In Botswana](#)
 - [The Ngami Times: Film About People Of The Okavango Hits The Screens](#)
 - [Africa Press: Nkashi Wows Maun](#)
 - [Diamond World: Nat Geo & De Beers To Unveil Documentary On Okavango Delta Conservation](#)



2024

-  **National Geographic Society**
[National Geographic Society’s Impact Story Lab Releases Short Film, ‘Mokoro wa Okavango’](#)
-  **The Ngami Times**
[Nkashi Classic’ This Weekend!](#)
-  **The Okavango Express**
[Nkashi Classic Back Tomorrow At Maun Cresta Resort](#)

2025

-  **National Geographic Society**
[The National Geographic Society and De Beers Announce Opening of New Nkashi Knowledge Centre in the Okavango Delta](#)
 - [Sunday Standard \(Botswana\): De Beers and National Geographic deepen conservation footprint in Okavango Basin](#)
 - [The Ngami Times: ‘Nkashi Knowledge Centre To Uplift Livelihoods’](#)
 - [Africa Press: Organisation Vows to Safeguard the Okavango Basin](#)
 - [Mmegi: Nkashi Knowledge Centre Hub for Community Development](#)
-  **Mmegi (Botswana)**
[Molwa’s lens focus on local youth empowerment](#)
-  **Sustainability Magazine**
[National Geographic & De Beers Q&A: Enhancing Water Security](#)
-  **Botswana Daily News**
[Nkashi Clubs Keep Heritage Alive](#)

Featured Article from 2025 – Mmegi:
Nkashi Knowledge Center Hub for Community Development

Botswana leading national outlet Mmegi covered the opening of the Nkashi Knowledge Centre in Beetsha, positioning it as a community hub built to support sustainable livelihood development, preserve traditional knowledge and foster conservation leadership in Botswana’s Okavango Delta. The article celebrates the role of the Okavango Eternal partnership in making this possible.

“The Nkashi Knowledge Centre serves as a catalyst for discovery, innovation, and the vibrant exchange of ideas. It provides a space where learning is continuous, where traditional wisdom meets new insights, and where future leaders are empowered to protect nature and people.” **De Beers Group’s vice president of Corporate Affairs, Oitsile Mabeo**, expressed hope the centre will act as a space that brings people together to drive change for the benefit of both the remarkable communities and exceptional biodiversity of the Delta.

2026



National Geographic Society

Angola Designates First Ever Wetland of International Importance

- eNCA (Southern Africa): Angola designates first ever wetland of international importance
- Daily Southern & East African Tourism Update: Okavango Delta headwaters protected under Ramsar



Getaway Magazine (Southern Africa):

Winged Messengers



Forbes

How National Geographic Society And De Beers Are Investing In Scientists, Communities, And Centuries-Old Knowledge To Protect One Of Africa's Most Vital Water Systems



National Geographic

The Okavango wilderness gives up its most vital secrets



Beyond the Lens

Episode 118. On Location in Botswana with Karabo LeBronpeter: The Okavango Wilderness Project, Wildlife Photography, and Visual Storytelling Mentorship



Featured Article from 2026 – Forbes: How National Geographic Society And De Beers Are Investing In Scientists, Communities, And Centuries-Old Knowledge To Protect One Of Africa's Most Vital Water Systems

Note: Forbes reaches 135 million readers monthly. Reporter Afdhel Aziz also shared the article on his personal LinkedIn (nearly 34,000 followers), and in his weekly newsletter, Good is the New Cool, with 3,000 subscribers. De Beers also amplified the piece on LinkedIn for its 307,000 followers.

On Earth Day 2026, Forbes covered the Okavango Eternal partnership between the Society and De Beers from a cross-Basin perspective, including one of its biggest feats to date: facilitating Ramsar designation for the Angolan Highlands, the source of the Okavango Delta. Forbes features several initiatives De Beers is supporting. It highlights the traditional knowledge and community development work that Explorer Kerllen Costa is leading in Angola at the source of the Okavango and Explorer Goabaone Ramatlapeng's research on water chemistry in Botswana's Okavango Delta. While they have different research focuses, they're linked by a common river system and a conviction that conservation is local. Forbes says, "Okavango Eternal was designed to take that conviction seriously. For De Beers, it represents a genuine reckoning with what responsible operation in a fragile ecosystem actually requires – not just funding, but long-term presence, community co-creation, and the willingness to let local knowledge lead."

"Safeguarding a system as vast and vital as the Okavango Basin cannot be achieved by any one organisation alone," says Sandrine Conseiller, CEO of De Beers Brands. "It requires deep collaboration, mutual trust, and a willingness to listen as much as to lead. Both National Geographic Society and De Beers bring almost 140 years of complementary strengths across science, conservation, exploration, local partnerships, education, and storytelling."

Featured Article from 2023 – Ngami Times: Film About People Of The Okavango Hits The Screens
The 2023 local premiere of "Nkashi: Race for the Okavango in Maun, Botswana – supported by the Okavango Eternal partnership – was a powerful validation of the partnership's focus on storytelling. By premiering the film in Maun, the gateway to the Delta, the premiere engaged the very people most capable of taking direct action on our shared conservation goals. The premiere highlighted two crucial perspectives from local leadership, applauding the partnership for supporting this film – and for championing a local approach to storytelling.

"Batawana acting Paramount Chief, Kgosi Kealetile Moremi, emphasized the deep cultural resonance of the location, sharing that "there could not have been a better place to host the first screening of the film than in Maun in the North West, as this allows residents to appreciate and relate." Furthermore, she noted that by focusing on the people who safeguard the Delta, "the world will get to appreciate the existence of people, and not just wildlife."

Minister of Environment Philda Kereng praised the production crew for using the nkashi (a traditional wooden pole used to navigate the Delta) as a vital storytelling tool to showcase local livelihoods and culture. Terming the film "just a tip of the iceberg to the untold stories of Botswana," Kereng challenged the National Geographic Society, De Beers, and local filmmakers to continue uncovering the human stories embedded within the country's other natural wonders.

Social Media Highlights

2026

- Facebook (FB) – [Lisima Lya Mwono wetland post](#) from Explorer Kerllen Costa collab with WBT
- Instagram (IG) – [OE Impact Report collab](#) with WBT (reshared by Society) FB
- IG – [Lisima Lya Mwono new Ramsar designation](#) (post by Explorer Kerllen Costa) collab with WBT and Kerllen Costa

2025

- IG – [World Lake Day](#) collab post with WBT and the Society
- IG – [Beetsha Knowledge Center opening](#) collab post with Nkashi

2024

- FB – [Delta Crossing](#) post collab post with Nkashi and WBT
- FB – [Delta Crossing](#) post collab post with WBT
- FB – [Geology post about the landscape/Earth Day](#)

2023

- IG – (reel) [visit with Explorers Koki Mookodi and Kerllen Costa to Tempué](#)
- IG – [Explorer Steve Boyes’ Impact Story](#)

2022

- IG – [Delta Crossing](#)
- IG – [Delta Crossing](#)

National Geographic Society Channels

2026

- LinkedIn – [2025 Impact Report](#)
- IG – [World Wetlands Day](#)
- IG – [Ramsar designation](#), collab post with ITO and WBT
- LinkedIn – [Jill Tiefenthaler’s Angola 50th Anniversary event post](#)

2025

- FB – [Pass the Flag](#) (collab post with Museum of Exploration)
- IG – [Pass the Flag](#) (three-way collab with ITO and Museum of Exploration)
- LinkedIn – [Pass the Flag](#)
- IG – [50th Anniversary of Angola’s Independence collab with ITO](#)

2023

- FB – IG – Nkashi Trailer



Future Look

Five years ago, National Geographic and De Beers came together to invest in the Okavango Basin and the people who have always called it home. The partnership set out to shift the standard model of conservation and recenter it in community-based conservation, cultural heritage preservation and the localisation of direct benefits from natural resources to local communities spanning the Okavango Basin. Combining cutting-edge scientific research with Traditional Ecological Knowledge and working in collaboration with traditional leadership and local communities, we are transforming this critical information into long-term, sustainable protection for the world's largest underdeveloped basin.

Our groundbreaking scientific research tracing the source of the Basin's waters from the Highlands of Angola through Namibia and into the storied Okavango Delta in Botswana, combined with repeat surveys of the system's hydrology, water chemistry, biodiversity and ecosystem health laid, an unprecedented scientific foundation for community-driven conservation planning, sustainable development, and decision-making. We have forged deep, lasting relationships across this transboundary landscape elevating how local communities have been protecting it for millennia, supporting local scientists and educators, investing in infrastructure, and cultivating opportunity.

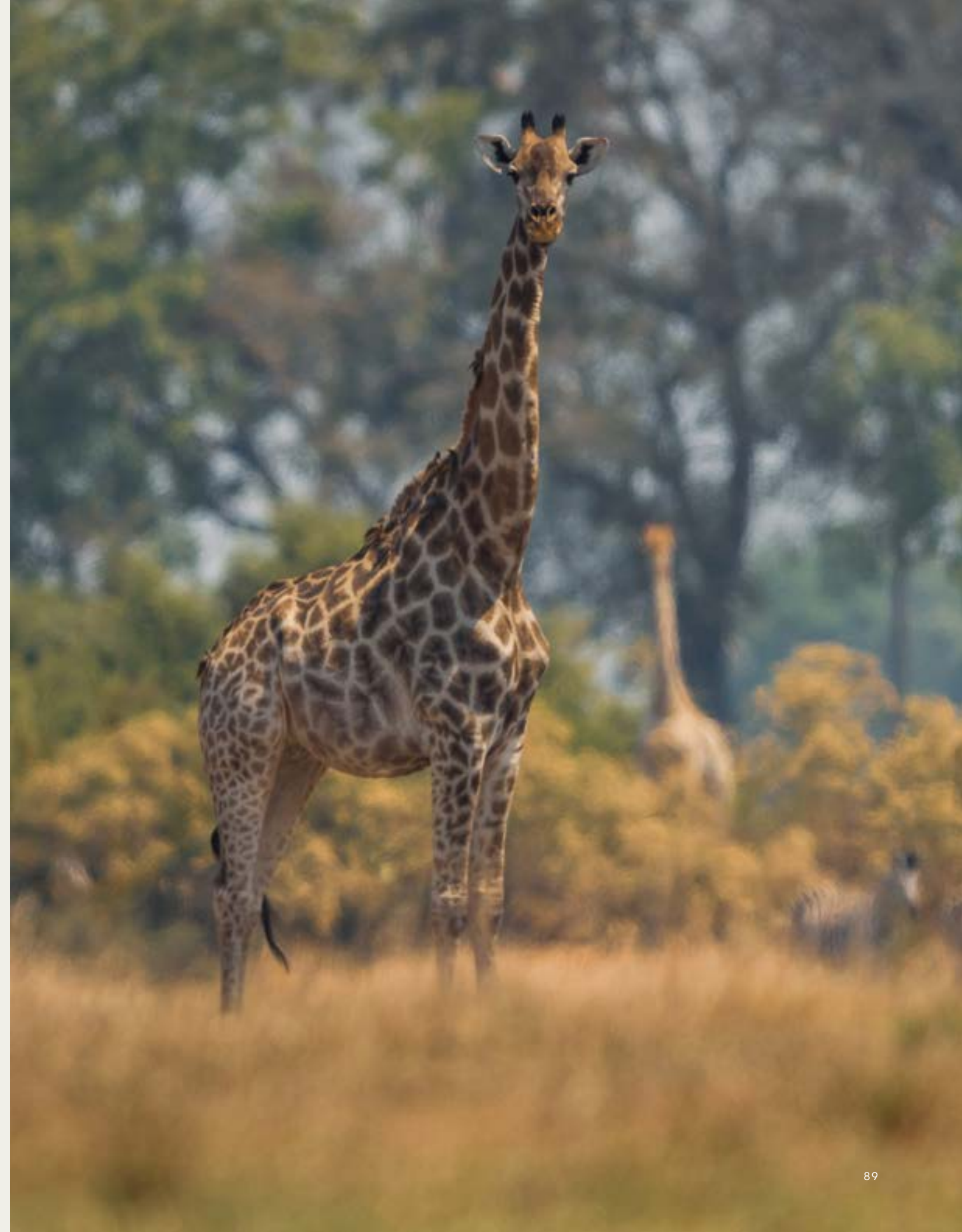
Reflecting on the work we've achieved so far, we are humbled by how we have been able to accomplish so much in building a framework to support the future protection of the Okavango Basin, piece by piece. For the first time in its history, the Okavango is now monitored from source to Delta by an interconnected network of 18 hydrological monitoring stations. We trained 82 Watchers, who now patrol 20,000 km² on foot, guided by traditional authority rather than imposed upon it. We helped establish three locally led, nationally registered organizations: Nkashi Trust, Fundação Lisima and the Kavango Wilderness Project. Together, they now employ 95 people, of whom 76 are directly funded by the partnership, almost all from within the Basin itself. And in early 2026, this work culminated in Lisima becoming Angola's first Ramsar site: 5.4 million hectares of headwater internationally recognized and locally managed.

What we value most about this partnership is that De Beers never asked us to choose between rigor and relationship. The same five years that produced 12 peer-reviewed papers and the discovery of species new to science also produced 32 trained midwives, a champion poler building a home with her prize money, and a new Nkashi Knowledge Center in Beetsha, providing services previously unavailable. This is what Building Forever looks like on the ground: nature, climate and livelihoods advancing together because they were never truly separate.

Phase 1 has proven the model. Phase 2 is about scale and permanence: making deeper investments into the communities surrounding the Okavango Delta by expanding our livelihoods programs, growing the Watcher program in Lisima to translate Ramsar recognition into day-to-day management, bringing Tempúé fully online, and supporting a new generation of Basin scientists — several of whom we have trained ourselves — to carry this work forward long after this report is filed away.

Thank you to De Beers for five years of genuine partnership, and to every community member, Watcher, midwife, researcher and storyteller named in these pages. This is your report as much as ours.

STEVE BOYES
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC EXPLORER AND NGOWP PROJECT LEAD



OKAVANGO ETERNAL

PROTECTING A NATURAL WONDER

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