2023 Annual Report

African Wildlife Conservation Fund

African Wildlife
Conservation Fund

2023 in numbers

850,000 hectares monitored and protected

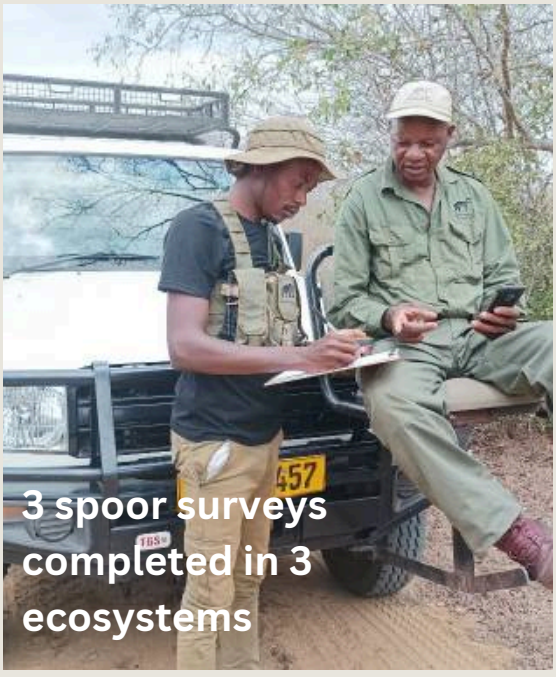
2 key protected areas patrolled.

8 female entrepreneurs expanding their sewing businesses

108 schools and surrounding communities supported

12 team members

12 Fence Guardians trained and employed



3 spoor surveys completed in 3 ecosystems

34 day trips for 750 children

12 secondary scholarship students

2023 in numbers

Our Approach

Mission

To maintain healthy and viable populations of African Wild Dogs and other large carnivores in Zimbabwe, as well as the habitats and prey species on which they depend.

We achieve this through a combination of research, conservation, and education, with a focus on improving school education standards and community livelihoods around key protected areas.

Less than 6000 African wild dogs remain in the wild today.

Why African Wild Dogs?

African wild dogs remain the flagship species of our conservation work.

They have a striking appearance, are intelligent, and highly interactive and caring; they are truly one of the most unique species alive today. However, listed as Africa's second most endangered large carnivore, they are in desperate need of our help and protection.

Viable populations of African wild dogs remain in only 8 African countries today, and Zimbabwe is one of these key countries. As such, the healthy wild dog populations in Savé Valley Conservancy and Gonarezhou National Park are incredibly important to protect and safeguard, for both the local and global conservation of the species.

The challenges facing African wild dogs are complex and ever constant; including, habitat loss, human persecution, disease (especially rabies), accidental by-catch in wire snares set for bushmeat, loss of prey and competition with larger carnivores like lions.

African wild dog conservation, population monitoring and research

Our work takes place within two prominent landscapes in the Zimbabwean lowveld: Savé Valley Conservancy (SVC/the conservancy) and Gonarezhou National Park (GNP/the park). These areas encompass around 800,000 hectares of space and are part of a wider, significant landscape called the Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area (GLTFCA).

Savé Valley Conservancy

In Savé Valley Conservancy, **African wild dogs are stable in numbers** and remain at a reasonable and average density for the species (2.6 wild dogs/100km2).

Over the year we have continued to perform comprehensive and regular monitoring of the species, with the annual count totalling 63 adult wild dogs (compared to 61 in the 2022 annual count). Please see Figure 1 and Table 1 below for the long-term trend data of wild dogs in SVC.

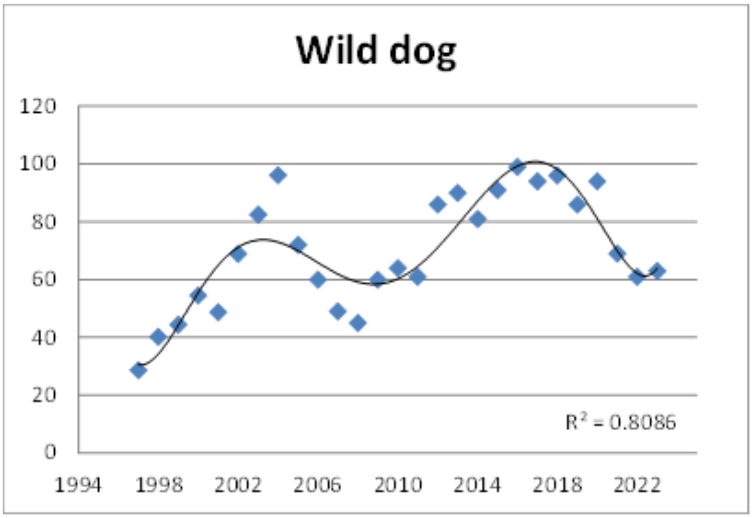


Figure 1. Trend data for African wild dogs in SVC; counts are from AWCF's Lowveld Wild Dog Project direct monitoring efforts (counts are taken from April of each year and include adult and yearling wild dogs).

Table 1. Population estimates for wild dogs in SVC for the last decade (2012-2023).

Species	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
African Wild dog	86	90	81	91	99	94	96	86	94	69	61	63

In our 2023 denning season, five of our nine resident packs denned and gave birth to puppies (similarly to five denning packs in 2022). A total of 43 puppies were born (compared to 47 in 2022). We record a 70% pup survival rate to date.

Gonarezhou National Park

This year, in conjunction with annual field surveys, AWCF conducted a comprehensive census of the wild dogs in Gonarezhou National Park**.** This was the first direct monitoring survey since 2020**.** We **report 76 adult wild dogs in the park, across 9 packs, and with at least 49 puppies born in 2023**. Similarly to SVC, estimates for the species are at their lowest in a decade (although within reasonable densities), and mirror similar and notable dips in trends for other large carnivores across the landscape.

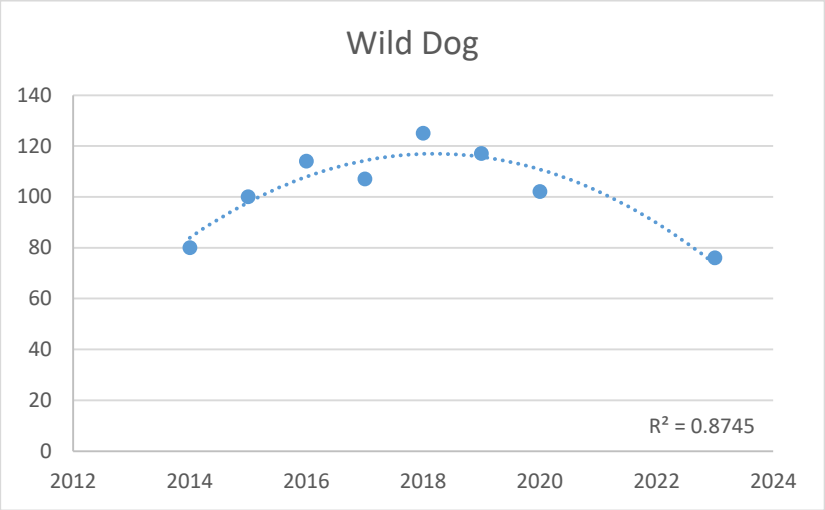


Figure 2. Trend data for African wild dogs in GNP; counts are from AWCF's direct monitoring efforts.

Annual direct monitoring efforts were not carried out in 2021 and 2022. This is due to our shift in focus to research in the Sengwe-Tchipise Wildlife Corridor south of GNP. However, it was agreed, in partnership with the Gonarezhou Conservation Trust, that AWCF would carry out direct monitoring surveys of the wild dogs in the park every 2-3 years to calibrate trend data and to stay abreast of any emerging concerns for the population.

Denning African wild dog packs in GNP. Mahenye pack with their puppies (left), and we recorded two breeding females at the Chamuchinzu pack with 18 puppies born (right).

Despite a lower-than-average wild dog population estimate, density within the park is still within expected limits and litter sizes are good, so we will continue with the every-three-year census approach unless we are concerned.

Pioneer Research: Investigating the impact of climate change on endothermic predators

Over the past few years we have been involved in a collaborative and international study aimed at understanding, projecting, and mitigating the impacts of climate change as an anthropogenic factor on the endangered African wild dog. This is a multi-site study, and the research team includes researchers from the UK, South Africa, Kenya, Botswana, USA and Switzerland, in addition to the AWCF team in Zimbabwe. The title of the project is: '*Hot Dogs: climate change impacts in an endothermic predator*'.

The **activities of the research** included:
1. AWCF team worked with international veterinarians to deploy state of the art collars (which record the daily movements) and temperature logger implants on eight wild dogs in SVC (May 2021). The movement data and core temperature of the individual wild dogs was logged and correlated with data from local weather stations, and will over time allow us to better understand how changes in ambient temperature might affect the daily movements, hunting, and provision of puppies of wild dogs.

2. Collars were removed, and explant surgeries carried out (August – November 2022).

3. The research is now in the data collation and analysis stage, and we are excited to share the outputs soon.

This research will have major implications for the conservation of African wild dogs, because it will help to target conservation action for this endangered species under climate change. Specifically, we anticipate that this work will also benefit populations of African wild dogs throughout Zimbabwe, by helping to indicate how the national wild dog population might best be managed over time, and by helping to predict its likely impact on ungulate populations. We anticipate both academic and conservation outputs from this work, and it will undoubtedly put Zimbabwe on the map as a leader in international conservation and climate science for endangered species.

Monitoring trans-boundary movements and anthropogenic impacts on wild dogs and other large carnivores

The biggest threat to adult African wild dogs and the leading cause of mortality continues to come from snare wires set for bushmeat (Figure 4). **In 2023 across SVC and GNP, we successfully saved six African wild**

dogs from snare wires. Unfortunately, four other wild dogs died from snare related injuries. This equates to 7% of the adult population of wild dogs injured / killed in snare wires compared to 15% in 2022.

The AWCF team remained active and vigilant, quickly responding to reports of wild dog injuries. Given the lower estimates of African wild dogs in both SVC and GNP compared to the previous 10 years of research, every animal that we can rescue from a snare wire injury is an accomplishment. Losing a pack member has a lasting impact on the social hierarchy of the group and weakens the pack as they are often forced to restructure which can disrupt the alpha breeding pair. This can take time and result in a reduction of puppies born, ultimately affecting population stability.

African wild dog freed from a nasty snare injury in October 2023. The snare had multiple lose wires which had caused ulcers on his neck and also on his palate from where he has bitten through.

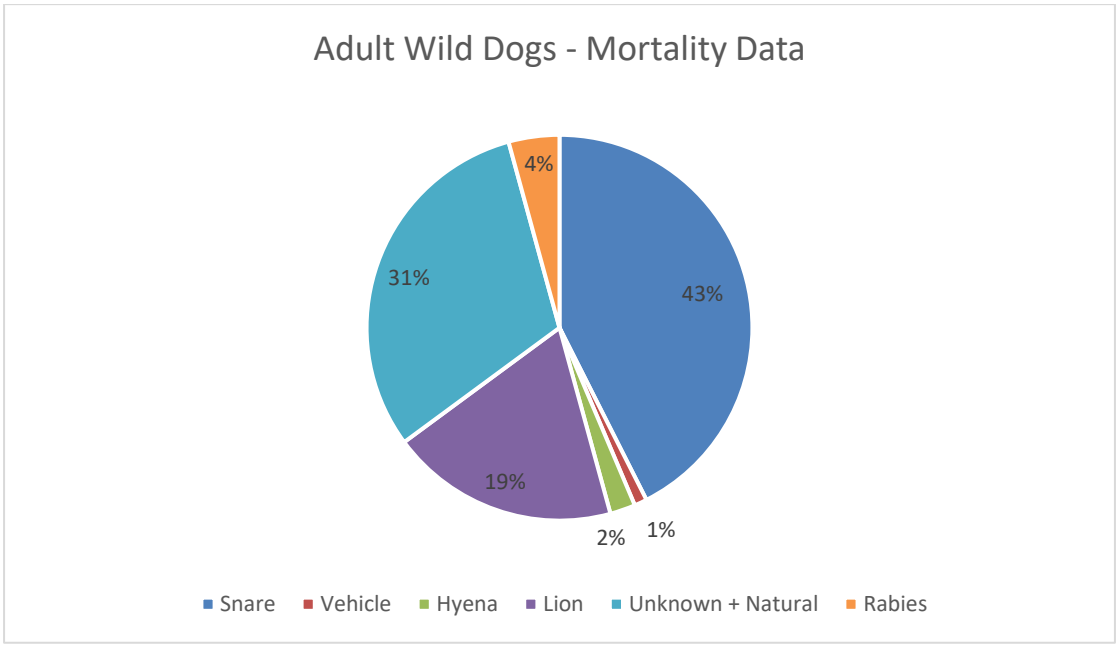


Figure 4. Mortality data for adult wild dogs between 2008 and 2023 (15 years of data collection).

In addition to close monitoring of each resident pack through traditional spoor tracking, to better understand trans-boundary movements we **make use of a geo-fencing system that alerts us to collared wild dogs**

leaving the protected areas. In mid-2023, the scouts were alerted to a female dog, Pug from Chapungu pack, dispersing out of the conservancy to the north. Pug continued to roam beyond the boundaries for various stints over the next few months, clearly in search of breeding opportunities and territory (Figure 5). Unable to find a safe niche / space, Pug eventually returned too and settled within the conservancy. This information is important when considering the potential for connectivity at the landscape level.

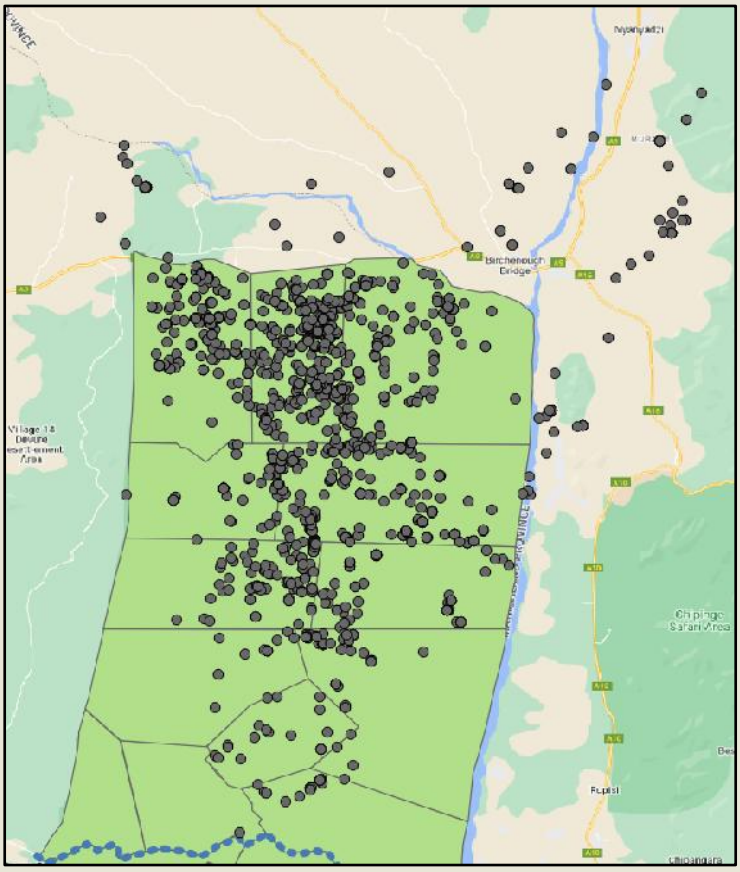


Figure 5. The movement of Pug as recorded by data from her satellite collar showing her dispersal attempts beyond the boundaries of SVC between May-November 2023.

We also **relied on the use of a geo-fence and early warning system to help mitigate human-wild dog conflict** when a pack of wild dogs denned in the Mahenye community north of GNP (July 2023) and goat predation escalated. Through the use of locally employed community guardians (trained by our team) and guided by notifications from the collar, we were able to temper the conflict during the denning period.

Very sadly, however, the collared female was snared (left – captured on den camera) and died (September 2023) before we were able to help her. Despite best efforts, we were unable to deploy another collar on the pack.

Long-term monitoring of resident large carnivores for conservation management

In 2023, AWCF carried out the 16th and 15th annual large carnivore spoor survey in SVC and GNP respectively (September – November 2023), contributing to long-standing data sets and providing valuable data for ecologists and management.

Savé Valley Conservancy

Exactly the same methodology has been used annually since 2008. These are methods pioneered in SVC by Davidson and Romañach (2007), and based on those used by Stander (1998) in Namibia.

The total area of SVC is 3,490km^2. However, the effective wildlife area (excluding the 1051km^2 of resettled land), comes to only 2,439km^2; 1,639km^2 north of the Turgwe river and 800km^2 south of the Turgwe. In northern SVC, the total length of all transects combined was 268.15 km, giving a penetration ratio of 6.11. In southern SVC, the combined transect length was 132.4 km, giving a penetration ratio of 6.05. For the conservancy as a whole, 400.55 km were driven (penetration ratio 6.09). Transects surveyed were the same as those used in 2007-2022. Each transect was driven at a speed of between 10 and 20 km/hr with one tracker, AWCF head scout Rueben Boté, sitting on the front of the vehicle scanning for spoor. Transects ranged between 13 km and 30.5 km in length, with a mean transect length of 22.3 km. The survey was carried out between the 20th of October – 2nd of November 2023.

Table 3: Population estimates of the key carnivore species in Savé Valley Conservancy from 2012-2023.

Species	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Lion	130	115	190	284	217	223	187	205	251	118	114	102
Leopard	189	218	295	328	221	359	323	348	391	330	198	106
Spotted hyena	192	166	150	137	150	193	206	203	235	92	169	150
Brown hyena	41	50	75	80	70	107	128	146	134	137	105	69
Black backed jackal	151	199	229	241	234	296	153	187	162	90	67	38

As can be seen from the data above for SVC, and below for GNP, we have **detected a notable dip in the trends for large carnivores across the landscape** (in both protected areas) over the past few years. This is something of concern and which we are working diligently to understand timeously, and address identified causes; in close consultation with all partners and stakeholders.

To better understand the dynamics of the resident lion population in SVC, AWCF plans to partner with the conservancy to carry out a focused lion survey in mid-end 2024. The survey will not only help to provide a more accurate estimate of lion numbers (to calibrate spoor survey results), but will provide information on

the population structure and home ranges of the species too, and feed into a focused lion management strategy for the area.

Gonarezhou National Park

Exactly the same methodology has been used annually since 2008, and is the same as that used in SVC.

A total of 664 km were driven, representing a penetration ratio of 1:7.47 (total number of kilometres driven to total sample area). In the northern section, a total of 359.6km were driven as transects (penetration ratio 1:7.90) whilst in the southern section, a total of 304.4km were driven (penetration ratio 1:6.97). Transects ranged from 12km to 43.5km in length with a mean length of 24.0km. The survey took 16 days to complete, and was carried out between the 25th of September and 10th of October 2023.

Table 4: Population estimates of the five large carnivore species in Gonarezhou National Park. Data was extrapolated from the survey area for north of the Runde River between 2009-2021. In 2022 and 2023 methods were revised and included transects north of Runde River.

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Species												
Lion	64	77	116	125	54	63	181	112	155	57	73	55
Leopard	524	450	398	388	312	470	402	469	368	216	172	173
Spotted Hyena	585	760	671	642	419	479	515	516	610	191	163	137
Cheetah	113	108	75	90	37	43	40	20	54	40	15	21

The low lion numbers in the park since 2021 have been a cause of concern and highlighted the need for a more in-depth study which is now being undertaken by Gonarezhou Conservation Trust. We continue to assist with wild dog and cheetah monitoring.

Monitoring cheetah in SVC and GNP for regional and international conservation importance

We are making good progress towards obtaining and collating important historical and baseline data for cheetah in both protected areas. Both SVC and GNP are important areas for large carnivore and threatened species conservation, and have an important role to play in cheetah protection. Recent annual surveys have proven ineffective to gather an accurate understanding of the elusive species (Table 5), and so dedicated interventions are necessary. Moreso, trend data for carnivores across the landscape show a decline, making this research timely and urgent.

Table 5: Spoor encounter rate for cheetah in GNP and SVC for the past 5 years

Cheetah	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
GNP	4	12	10	4	6
SVC	0	2	0	0	1

As can be seen from Table 5, we have not been able to detect enough spoor of cheetah in either protected area through spoor surveys to be able to accurately estimate a population size, and as such we have established a dedicated individual-based monitoring for cheetah.

The **overarching aim** of this long-term project remains; *to develop an improved understanding of the resident cheetah population in Savé Valley Conservancy and Gonarezhou National Park, including population number, age and sex ratio, and distribution throughout the protected areas*.

Methods include increasing data collation, setting camera traps in areas showing higher cheetah activity, and utilising smart database systems. In time, and depending on what the initial data reveals, it is our intention to explore options to upscale research efforts – e.g., locating cheetah play trees, strategic and comprehensive deployment of camera traps, collaring of key individuals.

Cheetah movement in SVC

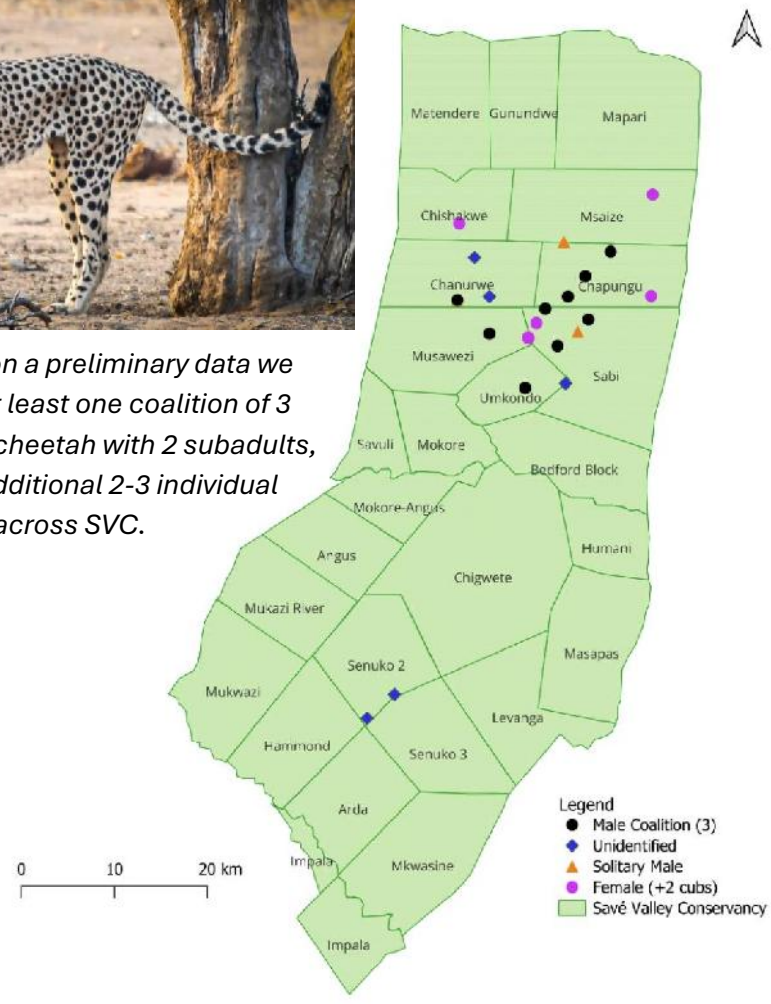


Figure 6. Based on a preliminary data we have identified at least one coalition of 3 males, a female cheetah with 2 subadults, and at least an additional 2-3 individual cheetah moving across SVC.

Through the comprehensive data compiled through this fieldwork we will continue to build on plans for a long-term monitoring program that will provide robust data upon which a management and conservation strategy can be formed for the cheetahs in SVC and GNP. In addition, we have the scope to support student projects during this process providing valuable opportunities and experience for Zimbabwean conservationists at the start of their career. For example, Nkosilathi Ngwenya, AWCF's research assistant, will be conducting his MSc project on Cheetah in SVC in 2025, relying on this baseline data.

Impact relevant research in the Sengwe-Tshipise Corridor (STC / the corridor)

AWCF's head scout, Rueben Bote, began operating fulltime in the greater Sengwe-Tshipise Corridor (STC) in July 2021. This work is being carried out with permissions from and under the authority of the Chiredzi Rural District's Council (RDC), and in collaboration with both the RDC and the Gonarezhou Conservation Trust (GCT).

The STC is recognized as a vital landscape for wildlife connectivity with evidence of use by endangered and vulnerable species like African elephants, African wild dogs, and cheetah. However, due to the depletion of the ecosystem from human encroachment , there is an urgent need for comprehensive data collation to fully understand the viability of the area as a corridor for wide-ranging carnivore species, and to drive action with regards to policies and management before the land is lost.

The key research objectives for this work remain:

- To understand the seasonal, temporal, and spatial dynamics of all large carnivore and key herbivore (elephant and buffalo) species in the corridor.
- To identify potential and/or actual barriers to the dispersal of species to gain insight into the effectiveness of the corridor.
- Provide scientific evidence to underpin imminent and long-term strategies to drive positive change to protect the STC.

We conducted our first survey in greater STC in 2014 and our comprehensive and sustained efforts since then have been vital for displaying wildlife trends and movement over time highlighting the conservation concerns for the area. A key component of this approach has been an annual spoor survey.

Annual large carnivore spoor survey, 2023

The survey was carried out between 11th September - 24th September 2023. The location of the survey was wards 13, 14 and 15 and Malipati Safari Area, covering an area of 2,665 km2 in total. Head Scout Rueben Boté undertook the tracking, supported by research assistant and driver Nkosilathi Ngwenya. Oversight was provided by Fadzai Chauke from Chiredzi Rural District Council (RDC). A total of 442.6 km was driven.

As reflected by AWCF's long-term and consistent data, both the **diversity and abundance of prey species has decreased in the corridor** (Table 5)**;** we cannot comment on density or population estimates, and the data strongly suggests a **lack of sustainable resident populations of large carnivores**. Encounter rates are worrying low (Figure 7).

Table 6: Wildlife species detected in the corridor during 2023 survey and compared to the surveys in 2022 and 2019.

Encounter rates indicated for each species.

1-10 encounters	11-20 encounters	21-30 encounters	31-40 encounters	41-50 encounters	>50 encounters

HERBIVORES	**2019**	**2022**	**2023**
Buffalo	X	X	X
Bushbuck	X		X
Duiker	X	X	X
Elephant	X	X	X
Giraffe	X		X
Hare	X		
Impala	X	X	X
Wildebeest	X		
Nyala	X	X	X
Kudu	X	X	X
Porcupine	X	X	X
Steenbok	X	X	X
Warthog	X	X	X
Waterbuck	X		
White-tailed Mongoose	X	X	
Zebra	X		X
CARNIVORES	**2019**	**2022**	**2023**
Aardvark	X		X
Aardwolf	X	X	X
Bat eared fox	X		
Brown hyena	X	X	X
Caracal	X	X	
Cheetah	X		X
Civet	X	X	X
Genet	X	X	X
Honey badger	X	X	
Jackal	X	X	X

Leopard	X	X	X
Serval	X	X	X
Spotted hyena	X	X	X
Wild cat	X	X	X
African wild dog	X	X	

It is clear from Table 6 above, that the diversity of species recorded, as well as the encounter rates for most species, has notably decreased over the last few years.

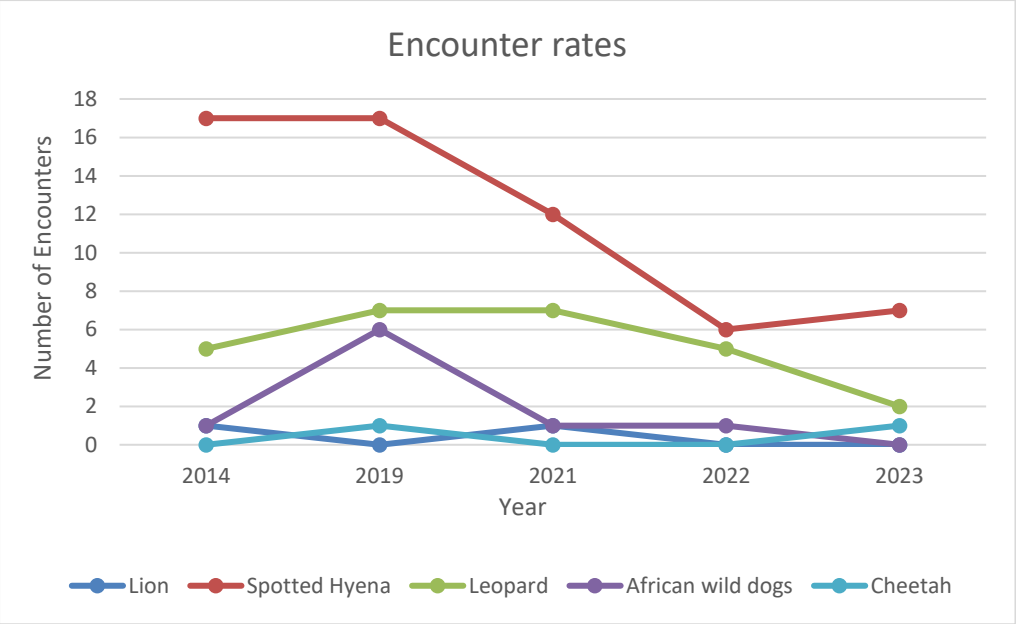


Figure 7: Encounter rates for large carnivore species over the years

Direct monitoring of large carnivores

Positively, we **did detect the presence of cheetah in the corridor** during the 2023 survey (Table 6) indicating the potential of the area for wide-ranging carnivores. In addition, and whilst we did not find any den sites for African wild dogs in 2023 in the Sengwe area, our research has **confirmed a group of 5-6 wild dogs which move between GNP and into Sengwe**. We also received a report of tracks of two wild dogs east of the corridor and near the Mozambique border (November 2023), and our African wild dog census, which was run concurrently in GNP in 2023, confirmed at least eight other resident packs in the park highlighting the importance of the Sengwe corridor area as possible range expansion for this strong source population of the endangered species.

Rueben and Nkosilathi set camera traps in strategic hotspots in an attempt to capture packs of African wild dogs and other carnivores moving into the STC, unfortunately with no captured sightings.

In August 2023, with the assistance of our partners, GCT, we **removed a snare from an African wild dog pack north of the STC**. While we were able to free the wild dog from the wire, the incident indicates the ongoing threat of snaring in the greater landscape and the urgent need for a strategy to improve security and community attitudes towards wildlife, especially with a confirmed presence of packs roaming nearby who may be attempting to disperse.

Finally, the project has recently attracted the attention and support of the Africa Range-Wide Cheetah Conservation Initiative and through them we have **recruited an MSc student to accelerate data outputs and publications for this work** and to dissemination of our results and recommendations to authorities and decision makers.

2023 Attachment Student

Every year, AWCF welcomes an attachment student from a Zimbabwean university to live and work with us on site, gaining practical experience of wildlife conservation.

Kashin Tegwere is a Bulawayo born 3rd year student at the National University of Science and Technology studying towards a bachelor of Science Honours Degree in Forest Resources and Wildlife Management.

She has a passion for wildlife ecology with a focus on African wild dogs. She has been with the project since mid-2023, has gained many new skills in research and community engagement, and is looking forward to continuing to contribute to the conservation of large carnivores and commencing her research project.

Education and Outreach in the schools surrounding GNP and SVC

We have a long history of very positively influencing environmental learning in the schools we support (Figure 8). Not only do children show increased knowledge and improved attitudes with regards to conservation and environmental issues after exposure to our Environmental Education Program (EE) for one year, but we have noticed that our sustained presence in the schools over the last 12 years has positively influenced the baseline knowledge of the children too (from an average of 15% in 2012 to 68% in 2022).

In addition, our day trip activities for students are also helping to improve children's knowledge and attitudes about wildlife conservation and protected areas, both in the short and long-term; with **survey data showing knowledge retention and positive attitude change six to twelve months after the day trips** (Figure 9).

Importantly, we are **consistently seeing positive action and behavioural change** from our supported schools. Some examples from the past year include;

- Negwari Primary children made their own litter bins and recycling stations with posters throughout their school to reduce litter.
- Gully reclamation projects around school yards, in response to extensive soil erosion and areas that become impassable and dangerous in heavy rains, causing problems in accessing the schools.
- Chikonwe Primary children planted a tree next to their handwashing station to put excess water to good use and put into action the concepts that they learnt during the AWCF-provided 'World Around Us' lesson.

Children's knowledge of, and attitude toward, conservation after being part of our EE program.

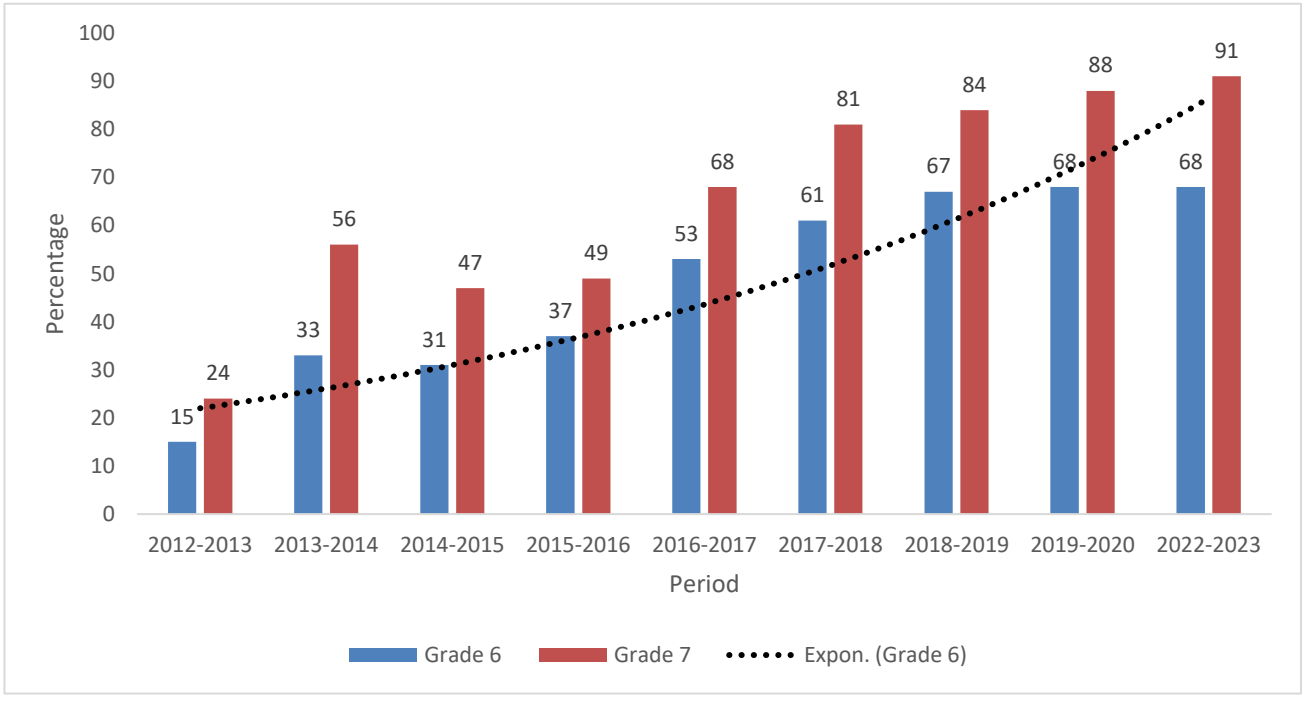


Figure 8. Overall percentage increase in children's knowledge, and understanding of, and attitude towards, wild dogs and other large carnivores and conservation in general from Grade 6 (blue) to Grade 7 (red) after one year's exposure to our program for the period 2012-2023. The same children were surveyed a year apart. N = 180 schools and 180 students (10 boys and 10 girls were surveyed across 20 schools each year). [Due to disruptions from the Covid-19 pandemic survey data was inadequate / incomplete for the period 2020-2022].

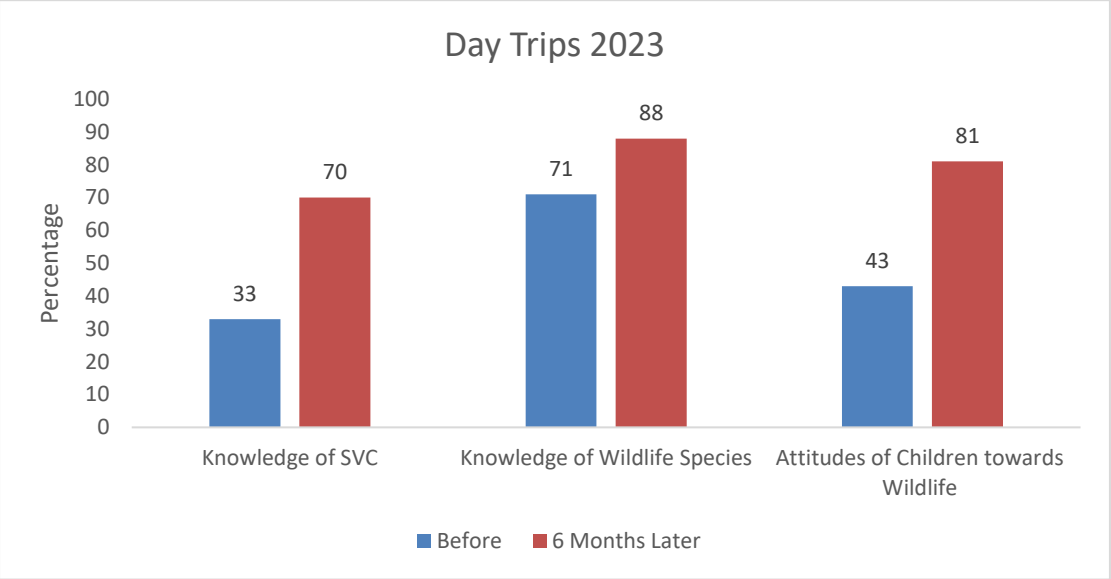


Figure 9. On average children display long-term knowledge retention and positive attitude change after our day trips. N = 30 children across three schools. The same children were surveyed six months later.

Similarly in GNP, we saw an **increase from an average of 54% across all concepts to an average score of 94%** when the same children were surveyed nine months after the day trip (N = 20 children across four schools).

To further investigate the impact of our education program, we have joined a Conservation Education Network and are collaborating with other organisations across Africa who also do conservation education, to share resources, ideas and data. We will also be part of a professional M&E program, which should both provide formal data on existing impact as well as guidance for adaptations to improve impact. These results will be published.

Key outputs of our education and outreach work in 2023 includes:

- As part of our environmental education (EE) program we carried out **EE lessons to 10,644 grade 6 students in 108 primary schools adjacent to SVC and GNP**.

- In 2023, **we hosted 34 day trips in total –** 14 educational day trips into SVC involving 280 students, 102 teachers and 28 School Development Committee (SDC) members (June 2023); and 20 day trips into GNP for 470 students, 108 heads and teachers, 34 SDC members, and two Ministry of Education Officials (October 2023).

Day trips for groups of primary school students and their teachers are one of the most anticipated activities in our community program. The trips give participants a rare opportunity to experience and learn more about wildlife in its natural habitat as they enjoy game drives through safari areas and visit points of significance. Throughout the day we familiarise participants with aspects of wildlife management and the importance of its protection, including the career opportunities found in the fields of conservation and tourism. The trips provide local children with aspirational role models as they meet ecologists, rangers, wildlife scouts and team members from nearby tourism ranches.

We carry out these trips for students primarily, but believe it is incredibly important to involve leaders and influencers in the communities too, including school heads, teachers, school development committee members, ward councillors etc. As one of the key activities of our program, we believe in constantly evaluating the impact of the day trips (Figure 9).

Students show a clear improvement in their attitude and knowledge about the protected areas and its wildlife after attending a day trip with our team.

- In October, we invited **34 schools to participate in a training workshop to improve their extra-curricular conservation clubs** - 97 teachers attended across two days and **four new clubs were established**. The well-attended clubs provide children with the opportunity to learn more about the environment, their role in protecting it and sustainable agriculture practices and empowers them to spread the conservation message.

- We **distributed 1,000 solar lights to 20 primary schools**. The lights are borrowed from school libraries along with library books for learners to take home and use for reading, study and homework in the evenings.

- Hosted **four youth ball games where 220 adolescents competed in soccer and netball competitions**. The youth make up the majority of community members in our target areas. Often, due to poverty, these young people are forced to drop out of school and are at risk of engaging in illegal and damaging practices such as bushmeat poaching. These sports tournaments, closely

linked to our cluster competitions (with the final played on the same day), are a way to engage the youth in dialogue around the impact of their actions and choices.

- Carried out 13 annual **conservation interschool (cluster) competitions** benefitting 82 primary schools and directly involving 820 participants, 276 teachers and 1,652 engaged observers.

Students eagerly present their poster on the cheetah to the audience (left), and Chipinge District Schools Inspector Mr Nhamo presenting the first prize to Mwanyisa primary (right).

Providing scholarships for students to attend secondary school

We **continue to support (with tuition and welfare) our 12 secondary secondary school students and five university scholars though our scholarship program**. This support included a conservation and leadership field course in December 2023.

These students have been especially selected for their educational attainment, commitment to their studies and showing an active interest in pursuing a conservation related career. Throughout the year we support them with school uniforms and supplies, with exam and tuition fees and with welfare support to allow them to focus on achieving their goals. These children are all needy, and none of the students would have had the opportunity to attend secondary school or university without our support. The students are known as Predator Scholars, in order to maintain the link between the wildlife and the benefit.

The **annual scholarship course** (always hosted at our project base in SVC), alongside equipping the children with sound conservation knowledge, includes team building and confidence work, as well as career development and professional skills. This is in an effort to prepare them for work or study opportunities.

Understanding and addressing human-wildlife conflict in the lowveld landscape

We have made significant progress in addressing this goal over the past year. In close consultation with SVC, and with funding from USAID Resilience Anchors Project, we have taken the first steps in developing locally relevant, RDC approved, and sustainable human-wildlife coexistence (HWCx) strategies in the south-eastern lowveld.

In October, we hosted three high level HWCx meetings in three districts: Bikita, Chipinge and Chiredzi, welcoming 71 stakeholders. This was followed by 11 ward level meetings, attended by 843 enthusiastic community members. The meetings were largely positive and interactive with an exchange of new ideas and strategies to protect important wildlife species from human threats and to mitigate the impact wildlife have on the livelihoods of nearby villages.

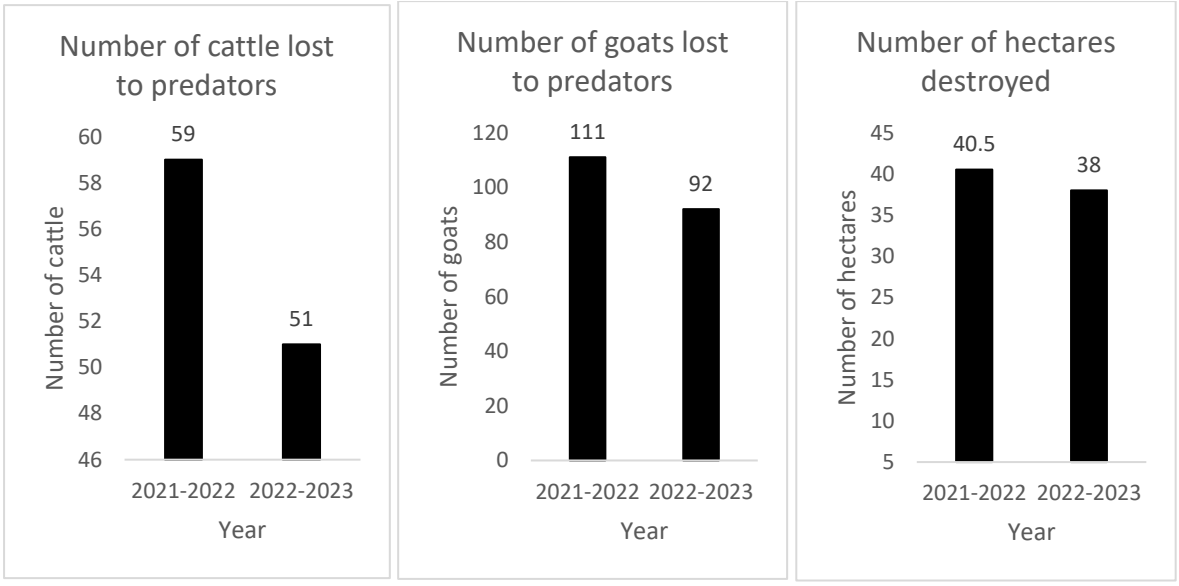
We engaged deeply with community members, facilitating accessible opportunities for discussion and decision making.

This is the **start of a long-term project** which will set up the framework for reshaping human-wildlife conflict (HWC) around SVC. Through the recruitment of >30 locally placed individuals we will facilitate the on-going collection and collation of HWC data which will guide targeted approaches to mitigate the conflict. Mitigation measures will include tried and tested approached such as, mobile kraals, geo-fencing for early alerts, guidance on herding practices, wildlife guardians stationed in the communities etc. This work is still in it's infancy, but we are progressing quickly and will have much more to report soon!

As part of our commitment to reducing HWC in the lowveld, in 2023 we **expanded our Community Fence Guardians Program**, and secured funding (2023-2024) to include **another 30 ladies in our garment making vocational training scheme**. Both programs are positively impacting livelihoods and relieving HWC pressures.

Some of our fence gaurdians lady on patrol along the boundary of SVC (left), and our vocational training scheme started with 8 ladies in 2021 and will soon include another 30! (right).

As part of our evaluation of the fence guardians program, baseline surveys were carried out in May 2022 prior to the start of the pilot program, and respondents were surveyed again in May 2023 after one year of the program. Findings from the survey conducted in three villages (Village 15, 19A and B) in Ward 25, showed that cattle predation decreased by 13% and goats lost to predators decreased by 17%. Additionally, the survey showed a 5% decrease in the number of hectares destroyed by wild animals.



Figures 10, 11, and 12: Respondents were surveyed from 44 households living in Ward 25, nearby to the section of the perimeter fence being maintained by the fence guardians. We will carry out follow up surveys in May 2024.

In addition to the conservation impact we are seeing, the **project has proven to be transformative for the women** who have undertaken the role of fence guardian. A regular salary has enabled them to become more food secure, pay the school fees for their dependents and invest in other enterprising activities to provide a

better standard of living for their families. For two ladies, the revenue generated from the work, and their other enterprises, is used to pay local boys to look after their livestock while they are working on the fence – providing additional employment and further helping to reduce human-wildlife conflict.

We are seeing **similar benefits for the ladies involved in our garment making vocational training scheme**. In 2021, eight women graduated from our three month vocational training course in sewing and tailoring. Sharing just two sewing machines between them, they began to build their businesses, providing services to their villages.

In April – June 2023, we facilitated a refresher training course where their techniques were refined, new skills were learnt, and best practice shared between the group. Now their businesses are thriving with some women earning up to $100 income per month, crafting school and church uniforms, women's skirts, and made-to-measure garments. We look forward to including another 30 ladies in this program soon!

Supporting anti-poaching efforts to mitigate the threat from snaring

The AWCF scouts ready for action; to save snared African wild dogs and support anti-poaching efforts.

Effective anti-poaching is fundamental to fight the threat of snare wires and deter bushmeat poachers. Our scouts have proven to be a great asset to the anti-poaching efforts in both SVC and GNP. Any suspicious human tracks encountered have been swiftly reported to the anti-poaching authorities for investigation; helping to maximise coverage of vast areas. Reports of human tracks or snare wires assist in protecting wild dogs, as we can then identify poaching hot spots. In the last six months of 2023, the SVC Antipoaching Unit reported a total of 318 snare traps removed from within SVC and 40 arrests made.

Rabies Vaccination Campaigns

We recognise the importance of protecting people and wildlife from rabies disease and assisting with domestic animal welfare. Given the potential devastating effect a rabies outbreak could have for local wild dogs we embarked a rabies vaccination campaign in Bikita District in September and October, targeting six villages around Savé Valley Conservancy.

Characterised by high rates of unemployment and poverty, people living in these areas cannot afford the US$1 cost of vaccinating their pets.

4850 dogs were vaccinated (93% of the population), well exceeding the threshold to significantly reduce the possibility of an outbreak.

AWCF peer-reviewed publications in 2023

- Tijmen de Lorm, Catharine Horswill, Daniella Rabaiotti, Robert Ewers, Rosemary Groom, Jessica Watermeyer & Rosie Woodroffe. (2023). Optimising the automated recognition of individual animals to support population monitoring. Authorea. DOI: 10.22541/au.167845477.77416758/v1

- Neil R. Jordan, Krystyna A. Golabek, Courtney J. Marneweck, David G. Marneweck, Moreangels M. Mbizah, Dedan Ngatia, Daniella Rabaiotti, Botello Tshimologo, and Jessica Watermeyer. (2023). Hunting Behavior and Social Ecology of African Wild Dogs (Chapter 6). M. Srinivasan, B. Würsig (eds.), Social Strategies of Carnivorous Mammalian Predators, Fascinating Life Sciences, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-29803-5_6

- Comley, J., Wijers, M., Leslie, A., Groom, R., Watermeyer, J. (2023). Finding a safe space: denning range dynamics of African wild dogs in Zimbabwe. *African Journal of Ecology; AJE13140 – In press, February 2023*.

Conclusion

Throughout 2023, we continued to implement impactful activities that protected African wild dogs, their prey species and the communities that co-exist with them across the landscape. Looking ahead, our focus now lies on sustaining these efforts and capitalizing on the momentum that our team have created through their field conservation and community outreach activities. Our organizational strategy remains ambitious, while realistically reflecting the immediate conservation needs of the landscape and considering a long-term plan for wildlife conservation in the south-eastern lowveld of Zimbabwe.

AWCF's main partners are: