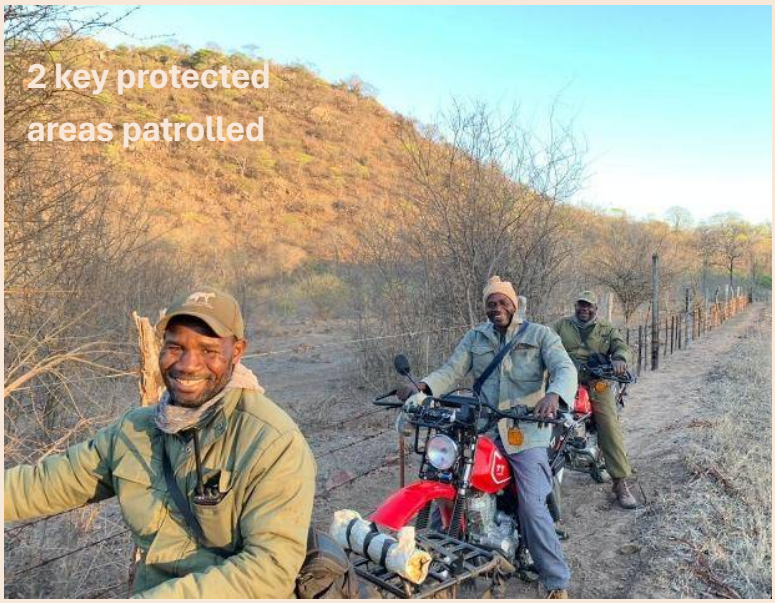
2024 Annual Report

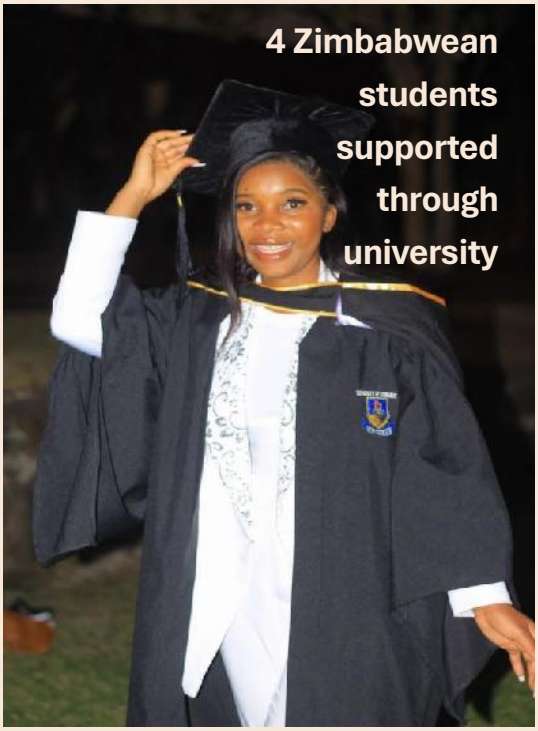
African Wildlife Conservation Fund

African Wildlife
Conservation Fund

2024 in numbers



2024 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.

Fewer 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 (Lycaon pictus) 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,** with a slight increase from 2023 population estimates. Intensive species monitoring continued in 2024. The annual count totalled **70 adult dogs compared to 63** in the previous year**.** The table below shows the changes in the population over the past 5 years.

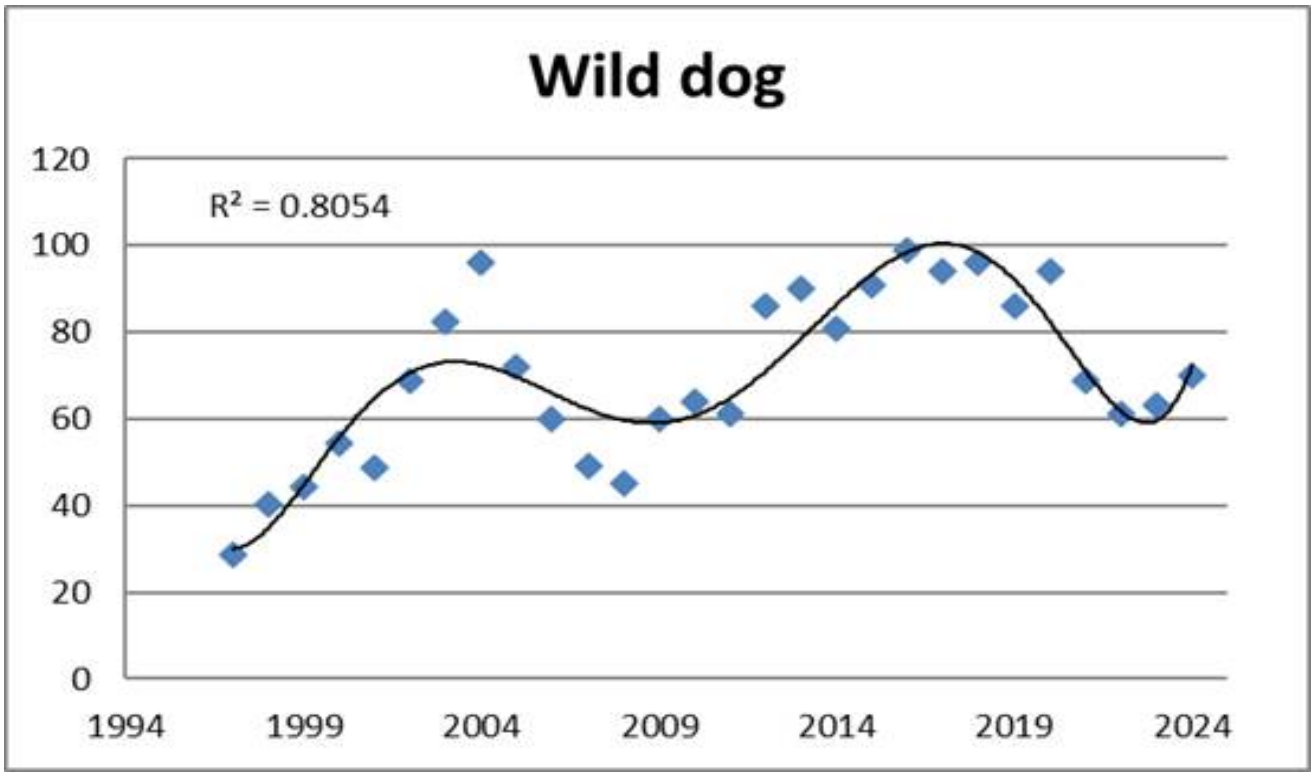


Figure 1. Trend data for African wild dogs in SVC; counts are from AWCF's Lowveld Wild Dog Project direct monitoring efforts (counts are taken from April of each year and include adult and yearling wild dogs).

In our 2024 denning season, six of the eight resident packs successfully denned, an increase on the five packs that bred successfully in 2023. A total of **39 pups were born, compared to 43 in 2023. Pup survival is currently at 87% to date.** Population trends seem to show a positive shift in numbers overall, and these numbers will continue to be closely monitored.

Table 1. Population estimates for African wild dogs in SVC for the last decade.

Species	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
African wild Dog	91	99	94	96	86	94	69	61	63	70

Gonarezhou National Park

Annual direct monitoring of wild dogs was not carried out in 2024. 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, and we plan to do this next in 2027. We have focused our research efforts on the Sengwe-Tshipise corridor to understand this vital dispersal and migration route's current wildlife dynamics and movement patterns between Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. However, we actively responded to reported incidents about carnivore welfare and conservation.

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 project title is: '*Hot Dogs: climate change impacts in an endothermic predator*'.

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 2023 drought season, compounded by the country's persistently challenging socio-economic conditions, led to increased incidents of illegal bushmeat harvesting. Regrettably, snaring remains the most prevalent method of wildlife trapping, and it continues to be the biggest threat to African wild dogs and the leading cause of mortality.

In 2024, three wild dogs were saved from snare wires across SVC and GNP. The attentiveness of AWCF field scouts enabled the snared dogs to be identified and assisted before they suffered lasting damage from the effects of the snares. All three dogs are fully recovered. The hard work of the scouts and anti-poaching teams has paid off, as we continue to observe a steady downward trend in the number of wild dogs injured/killed in snare wires. 4% of the adult population was affected by snares in 2024, compared to 7% in 2023, and 15% in 2022.

Figure 2. A snared wild dog is rescued from a double-stranded wire snare. Thanks to the swift response of scouts, this individual made a full recovery.

We have expanded our monitoring efforts to include satellite collaring to monitor packs that have been sighted beyond the boundaries of protected areas. Wild dogs moving out of conservation areas are more vulnerable to getting caught in snares. They are potential perpetrators of human-wildlife conflict when they move into communal areas. **Three wild dogs currently have collars in SVC.** These collars are an added source of information on the packs' movements. They enable us to intensify monitoring and provide early warnings to communities to be vigilant with their livestock when wild dogs have breached the perimeter fence.

Figure 3. Adult female wild dog fitted with a satellite collar.

Long-term monitoring of resident large carnivores for conservation management

In 2024, AWCF carried out the 17th and 16th annual large carnivore spoor surveys in SVC and GNP, respectively (September – November 2024), contributing to long-standing data sets and providing valuable data for ecologists and management.

Savé Valley Conservancy

We have continued to use the same methodology used for the past 16 years to maintain the uniformity of data. The total wildlife area for SVC is 2,439 km^2. The north of SVC is 1,639 km^2, while the south is 800 km^2. All transects' total length was 422.1 km. The transects driven in the north had a combined length of 288.7 km (penetration ratio = 5.68), while the south had a total of 133.4 km driven (penetration ratio = 6.00). Transects were driven on clear days with no recorded precipitation within 24 hours. The driving speed was between 10 and 20 km per hour. The spoor were identified by AWCF's head scout, Rueben Bote, who conducted the spoor surveys since their inception in SVC.

Table 2. Population estimates for key carnivore species in Savé Valley Conservancy (2012-2024).

Species	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Lion	130	115	190	284	217	223	187	205	251	118	114	102	132
Leopard	189	218	295	328	221	359	323	348	391	330	198	106	197
Spotted hyena	192	166	150	137	150	193	206	203	235	92	169	150	165
Brown hyena	41	50	75	80	70	107	128	146	134	137	105	69	96
Black-backed jackal	151	199	229	241	234	296	153	187	162	90	67	38	101

Although there is an improvement in numbers, we need to continue to monitor them closely. We are in the final stages of a dedicated lion survey in SVC. The results will help to provide a more accurate estimate of lion numbers and movement ecology.

Gonarezhou National Park

The methodology used in SVC is the same as that used in GNP. The survey was conducted from the 7th to the 17th of November 2024. A total of 650.8 km was driven (penetration ratio = 7.63). 359.7 km were driven in the north in 15 transects (penetration ratio = 7.90), while 291.1 km were driven in the south (penetration ratio = 7.29).

Table 3. Population estimates of the five large carnivore species of interest in Gonarezhou National Park from 2012-2024.

Species	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Lion	64	77	116	125	54	63	181	112	155	57	73	55	21
Leopard	524	450	398	388	312	470	402	469	368	216	172	173	91
Spotted Hyena	585	760	671	642	419	479	515	516	610	191	163	137	240
Cheetah	113	108	75	90	37	43	40	20	54	40	15	21	9

The low population estimates and decreased numbers over the past few years are a cause of concern. These warrant continued monitoring and more in-depth research into the possible causes.

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

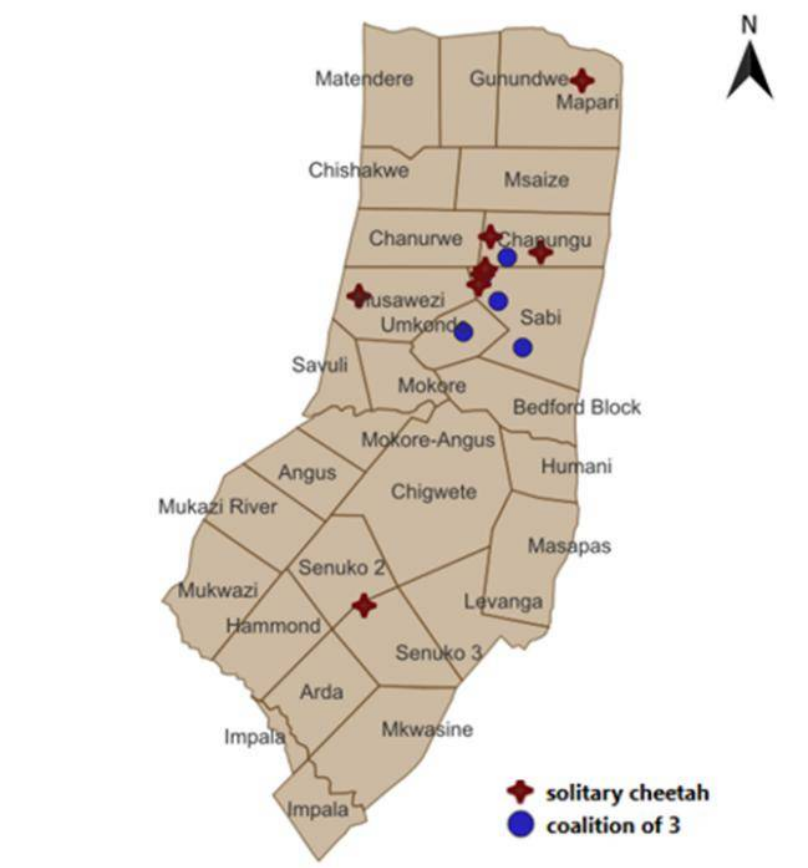


Figure 4. Cheetah sightings in SVC in 2024 consistent with previous years.

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.

Gonarezhou National Park

Sightings of cheetahs in GNP by citizen scientists and GNP staff were limited in 2024, however there were sightings of a male coalition of 3, identified in 2023, as well as sightings of solitary cheetahs.

We are still in the process of devising a long-term monitoring program for cheetahs in SVC and GNP. Our goal would be to use this as a platform to build the capacity of local conservation scientists through targeted research on various aspects of cheetah ecology and biology in both landscapes.

We will support our colleague Nkosilathi Ngwenya on his MSc studies conducting detailed research on population dynamics, presence, and distribution of cheetahs in SVC.

His study will inform overarching wildlife management decisions in the conservancy and contribute vital knowledge on the species at the national and range-wide levels.

Impact relevant research in the Sengwe-Tshipise Corridor

AWCF's head scout, Rueben Bote, continued work in the Sengwe-Tshipise Corridor (STC) in 2024, with support and input from the Gonarezhou Conservation Trust (GCT) and the Chiredzi Rural District Council (RDC).

The STC is recognized as a vital landscape for wildlife connectivity with evidence of use by endangered and vulnerable species like African wild dogs, lions, and cheetahs, as well as many other less charismatic species. 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 carnivores and key herbivores (elephant and buffalo) in the corridor.
- To identify potential and/or actual barriers to species dispersal 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.

Annual large carnivore spoor survey, 2024, STC

The survey was conducted between the 27th of August and the 15th of September 2024 in wards 13, 14, 15, and Malipati Safari Area covering a total area of 2 665 km^2. Rueben Bote caried out the tracking, following the same approach as in SVC and GNP. A total of 436.7 km was driven over 15 transects with an average length of 29.11 km.

Table 4. Wildlife species that were detected in 2024 and previous years for comparison.

Encounter rates per species

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

HERBIVORES	**2019**	**2022**	**2023**	**2024**
Buffalo	X	X	X	X
Bushbuck	X		X	X
Duiker	X	X	X	X
Elephant	X	X	X	X
Giraffe	X		X	X
Hare	X			
Impala	X	X	X	X
Wildebeest	X			
Nyala	X	X	X	
Kudu	X	X	X	X
Porcupine	X	X	X	X
Steenbok	X	X	X	X
Warthog	X	X	X	X
Waterbuck	X			
White-tailed Mongoose	X	X		
Zebra	X		X	
CARNIVORES	**2019**	**2022**	**2023**	**2024**
Aardvark	X		X	X
Aardwolf	X	X	X	X
Bat eared fox	X			
Brown hyena	X	X	X	X
Caracal	X	X		
Cheetah	X		X	
Civet	X	X	X	X
Genet	X	X	X	X
Honey badger	X	X		X
Jackal	X	X	X	X
Leopard	X	X	X	X
Serval	X	X	X	
Spotted hyena	X	X	X	X
Wild cat	X	X	X	X
African wild dog	X	X		

The table above shows that species encounter rates continue to decline, most notably herbivores and vulnerable carnivores. Species diversity in 2024 was lower than in 2023. The graph below (Figure 5) illustrates the trend in encounter rates of key carnivore species in the STC.

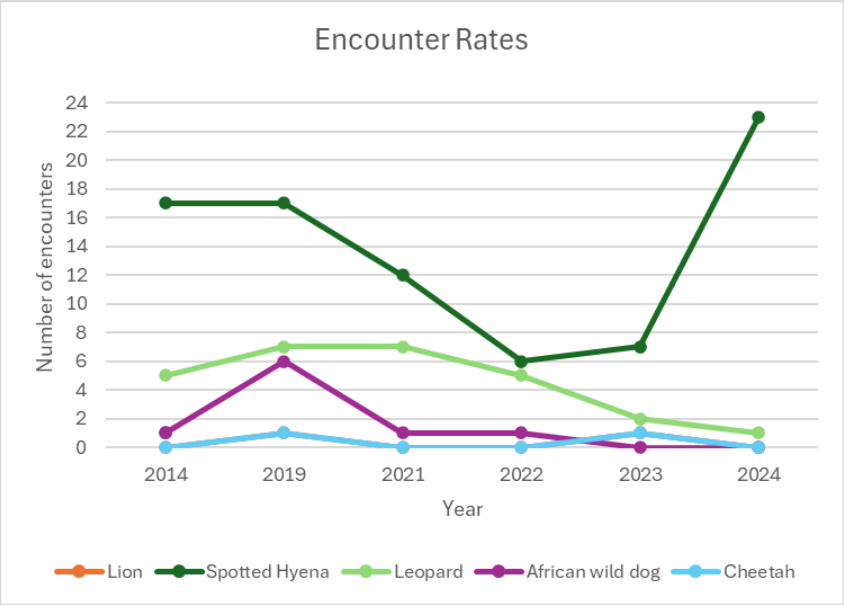


Figure 5. Encounter rates of select carnivores of interest in the Sengwe-Tshipise Corridor.

In July 2024, Rueben **picked up fresh spoor (<24hrs) of African wild dogs along the corridor**. He estimated 4 - 6 wild dogs, including two possible yearlings. Subsequent tracking and strategic camera trapping yielded no visual observations. The pack is suspected to have subsequently returned to South Africa.

Camera trap survey

Besides observing and recording animal tracks and sightings, AWCF's Rueben Bote strategically sets up camera traps in areas with signs of frequent animal movement. This has provided additional data to understand better how wild animals utilize the STC at different times of the year.

Figure 6. Camera trap photos of wild animals moving through the corridor.

During 2024, we also completed an evidence-based strategy for protecting the Sengwe-Tshipise Corridor**.** This strategy recommends a collaborative and timely approach to conservation that combines intensive habitat and species conservation with extensive community engagement. As part of the evidence base for the strategy, a UK-based MSc student used the baseline data to present a series of heatmaps showing the wildlife and livestock footprint across the landscape. We hope to use these maps to inform decision making processes.

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. 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. Teachers testified that our programs have positively contributed to increased pass rates, though the pass rate is attributed to many factors. The graphs below (Figure 7) show increased average pass rates in our supported schools for the past 10 years.

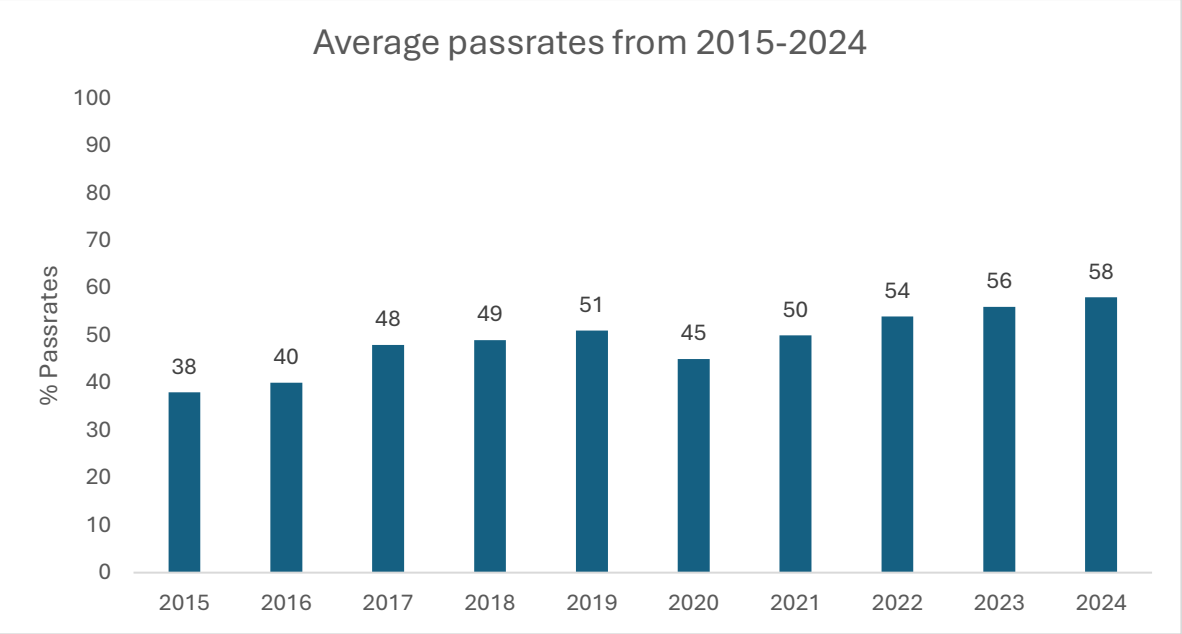
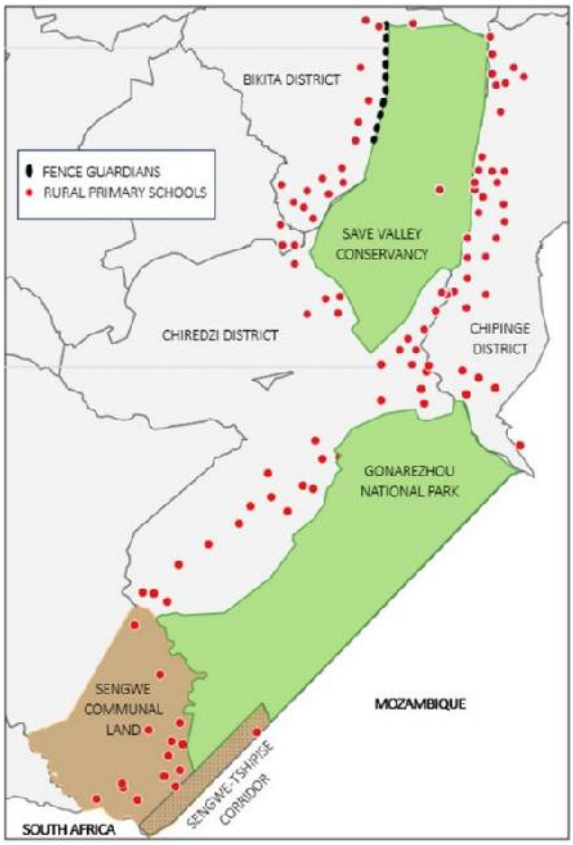


Figure 7. Average pass rates in 10 years (2015-2024).

We have noticed a change in behaviour in most of the schools we work with. More than 60 schools have planted trees in their schoolyards, and some have established orchards. All the schools we support participate in anti-litter campaigns, and some are combating land degradation by controlling soil erosion and reclaiming gullies.

Figure 8. Learners planting trees and participating in anti-litter campaigns.



The extent of our Environmental Education Program (EE) (Figure 9) in 108 primary schools around SVC and GNP is commendable. Our long-term engagement with school children has proven to positively impact knowledge retention and behaviour change (see 2023 report). The schools are taking the initiative to identify environmental issues within their communities and then go on to formulate and implement practical solutions.

Figure 9. Map of schools that benefit from AWCF` s Environmental Education Program

AWCF's education team (Victor Chibaya, Godknows Nyuwani, and Kudakwashe Takarinda) has benefited immensely from being part of the Conservation Education Network, with regular meetings with fellow conservation educators across the continent. To ensure that our work has the desired impact on our target audience and that we are utilizing the resources available efficiently, we participated in a rigorous monitoring and evaluation exercise led by the renowned environmental educator and conservationist Doctor Judy Mann. Preliminary results show that we are achieving our desired outcomes. However, there is room for improvement in our methods of delivering information to scholars.

Our education and community outreach work in 2024 expanded. Our major outputs are as follows:

- As part of our Environmental Education (EE) program we carried out 301 EE lessons to **11 460 grade six learners** in 108 primary schools adjacent to SVC and GNP, up from 10 644 in 2023.
- Continuous support of **34 conservation clubs with 1 020 learners in Bikita, Chiredzi,** and **Chipinge districts**. We facilitated the setup of **four new conservation clubs** under the USAID project in Chipinge and Bikita districts.
- Continuous support of 108 libraries in schools adjacent to SVC and GNP. In 2024, we installed six new solar systems in six libraries for learners, communities, and teachers to use in the evening.

Figure 10. Schools receiving solar systems for their libraries.

- We hosted **19 educational day trips into SVC** involving 25 schools, 360 students, 144 teachers, 36 parents, and five ward councillors (June 2024). **10 educational day trips into GNP** involving 20 schools, 200 students, 63 teachers, and 20 parents (October 2024). Day trips continue to be a much-anticipated part of the EE calendar, proving to be highly popular with both learners and the adults accompanying them. Seeing animals in the wild profoundly impacts children's views of wildlife, dispelling myths about wild animals, and highlights the important role of animals in nature.

Figure 11. Students and elders on a field trip to see wildlife in its natural environment.

- A total of 101 primary schools - directly involving **1 010 children, 303 teachers, 101 school heads, and 1 400 community members** - participated in our annual conservation interschool competitions (March, August, and November 2024). 14 youth soccer and netball teams participated in sports tournaments involving 420 young men and women at the same venues, a 100% increase from last year. These events are an increasingly popular occurrence in the local communities. They are often well-attended, providing a platform to disseminate conservation messages to all age groups in a relaxed and jovial atmosphere.

Figure 12. Activities carried out by learners and youths at community competitions.

Providing scholarships for students to attend secondary school and university

We continued to support our 17 scholarship students through welfare provisions, tuition fee payment, annual leadership training, and conservation field courses at the end of the year. We proudly announce that Edline Mashava, one of our scholars, graduated from the University of Zimbabwe.

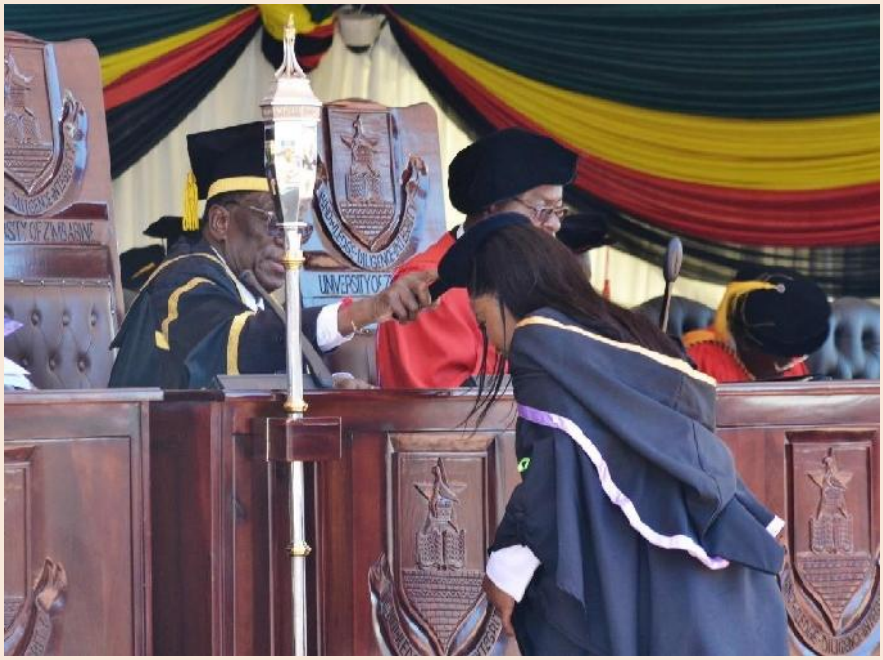


Figure 13. AWCF Scholar Edline Mashava graduated with a first-class degree and was capped by the president of Zimbabwe, His Excellence Cde Emmerson Mnangagwa.

We also have three additional students pursuing their undergraduate studies and eight completed secondary school.

Academic potential and need for support are the key selection criteria we use to choose scholarship students. In addition to welfare provisions and tuition fee payments, the selected scholars are offered basic school requirements such as uniforms and stationery. These provisions enable them to focus on achieving good grades with limited stress.

The annual conservation and leadership courses provide a platform for the learners to interact with AWCF staff, obtain mentorship, and gain career development skills. We enlist the services of a seasoned game guide to engage them in team building and confidence development activities in the bush, as well as teach them practical conservation and bush survival skills.

Understanding and addressing human-wildlife conflict in the lowveld landscape

Funding from the USAID Resilience Anchors Project enabled us to recruit **7 full-time verifiers and 21 volunteer herder mentors** to mitigate human-wildlife conflict (HWC) around SVC. The 21 community members were selected and trained in good herding practices. They conferred the responsibility of a 'herder mentor' to work alongside the HWC verifiers. They share knowledge on good livestock heading practices with farmers across their wards to prevent livestock predation. As the first responders to HWC incidents, the verifiers collect and collate HWC data. More than **300 HWC incidents** have been reported and verified to date. We use this data to map out incident hotspots (Figure 14) and thus inform our targeted mitigation interventions.

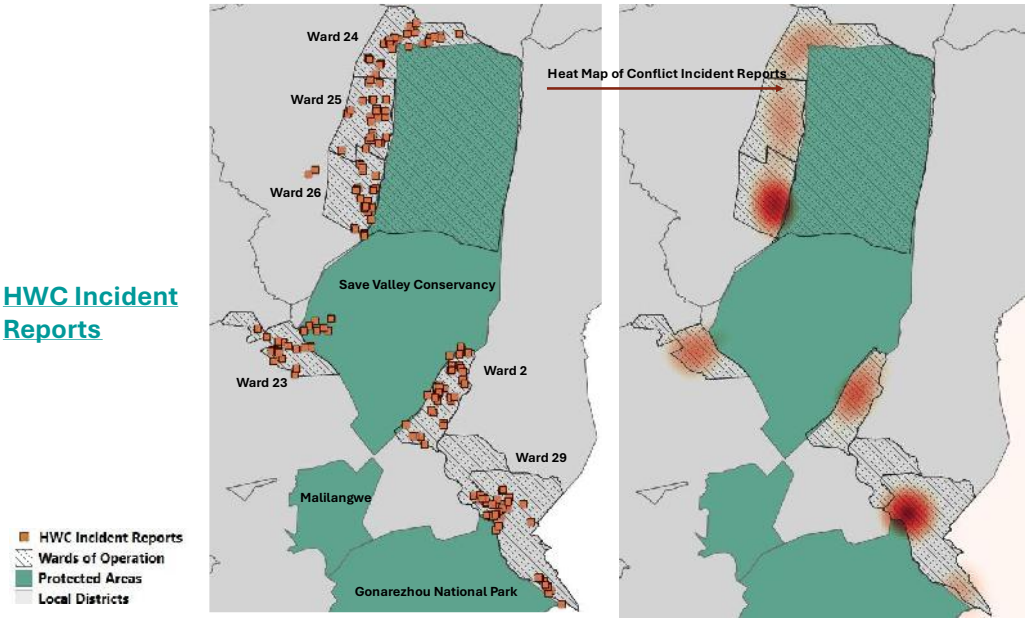


Figure 14. Human-Wildlife Conflict incidents and hotspots.

Wild animals involved in HWC incidents are shown below (Figure 15) (May - December 2024).

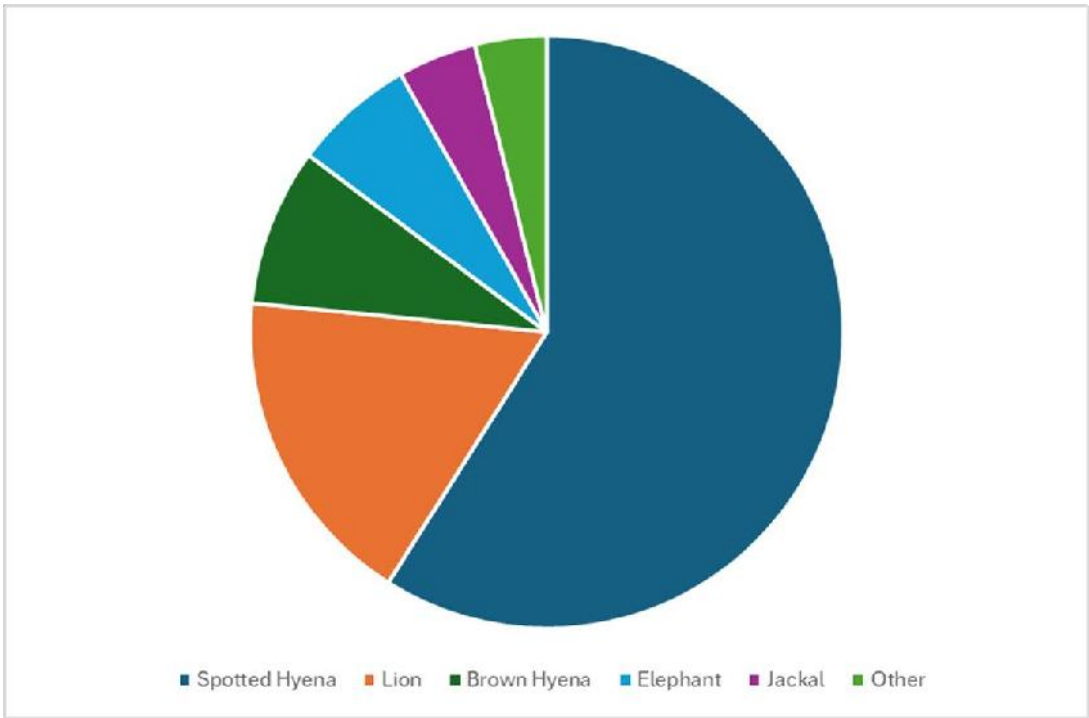


Figure 15. The most problematic species in livestock predation / human threat within the landscape are spotted hyenas (59%) and lions (18%). Brown hyenas and jackals were also recorded. Elephants raided crop fields the most (7%).

To date, we have:

- Distributed **184 noise, light deterrents, and mobile bomas** to **184 targeted households**. These households were trained to use early warning and deterrent strategies to prevent livestock predation and other instances of carnivore conflict. Since receiving these, there have been no reports of livestock predation in all the beneficiaries' households.
- Constructed and reinforced **252 traditional kraals** for livestock using locally sourced materials.

- Conducted **295 community training sessions**, reaching **11 745 beneficiaries (5 137 men** and **6 608 women**. These training sessions aim to equip community members with information on safeguarding their livestock from predators. The training offered included better herding practices, ensuring livestock are in safe enclosures after dark, and actively deterring carnivores from approaching livestock. Community members were given the platform to share their best practices and develop practical mitigation measures for their unique circumstances.

Figure 16. Human-wildlife conflict mitigation and prevention tools distributed in the communities.

- In October and December 2024, we collaborated with ZimParks and local veterinarians in immobilizations to collar large carnivores in wards 24, 25, and 26 in Bikita district near SVC. We collared two African wild dogs in two packs, one in each pack within SVC. These packs often range beyond the boundaries of SVC into communal areas. Additionally, a male spotted hyena was collared in ward 25. The hyena is part of a clan that often causes conflicts. The collar data is used to map the hyena's movement patterns. The data will be shared with local stakeholders in and around SVC for future carnivore management planning. The data also feeds into an 'early-warning system' to alert communities of hyena presence in their communities. The map below (Figure 17) illustrates the hyena's movement patterns.

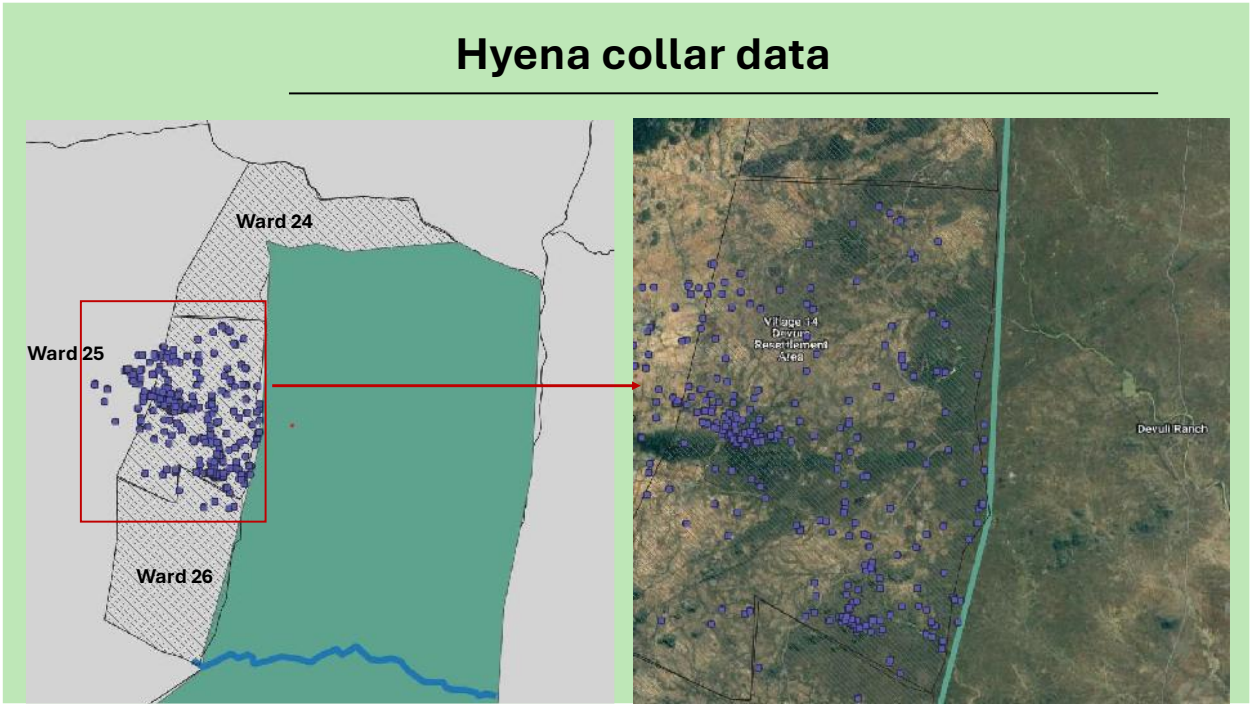


Figure 17. Collar data showing the movement of the collared hyena outside SVC.

As part of our commitment to reducing HWC in the lowveld, in 2024 we expanded our Community Fence Guardians Program, and now have **18 Fence Guardian women trained and employed**. We also ran our sewing and tailoring vocational training scheme for a second time, training an additional 30 women. Both programs are positively impacting livelihoods and relieving HWC pressures.

Figure 18. One of our Fence Guardians fixing a section of fencing (left), and two of our newly trained seamstress entrepreneurs (right).

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, 8 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 2024, we facilitated a second garment-making training course for 30 new women**. Both groups have now also completed refresher courses 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 continuing the success of this program with another 10 new ladies in 2025!

Supporting anti-poaching efforts to mitigate the threat from snaring

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, working to support our partners Anti-poaching Tracking Specialists. Any suspicious human tracks encountered have been swiftly reported to the anti-poaching authorities for investigation, helping to maximize coverage of vast areas. Reports of human tracks or snare wires assist in protecting wild dogs, as we can then identify poaching hot spots.

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 on a rabies vaccination campaign in Chiredzi District in April 2024, targeting villages around Savé Valley Conservancy. Characterized by high rates of unemployment and poverty, people living in these areas cannot afford the US$1 cost of vaccinating their pets.

From the 8th to the 19th of April 2024, 3150 domestic dogs were vaccinated in Chiredzi District; and 2427 dogs were vaccinated in Bikita District in October, giving a total of 5577 domestic dogs overall for 2024.

Conclusion

Throughout 2024, 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. We continue to grow and to employ, train, and upskill Zimbabweans, both students and staff.

Whilst our tireless efforts to conserve endangered wild dogs are paying off, so too are our efforts to provide environmental education opportunities to thousands of students across the landscape and vocational training opportunities to rural ladies.

Over the past year alone we have invested more than $400,000 in the programs we run, and our capacity for fundraising is growing. This will allow an even greater investment into Zimbabwe and her people and wildlife and allow us to meet our conservation objectives in full.

Acknowledgements

AWCF are extremely grateful to all our generous donors, supporters, and grant funders.

We would also like to extend our thanks to our key partners: