

Case Study #11: Wildlife, Wetlands & a New Way Forward – How Conserve is Rewriting the Rules of African Conservation in Zambia’s Forgotten Wilderness

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In the shadow of Africa’s famed national parks lies a hidden frontier—one with just as much ecological significance, but far less attention. It’s not the Serengeti, not the Okavango, nor the Kruger. Welcome to Tondwa Game Management Area, a forgotten gem in far northeastern Zambia characterised by pristine rivers, lakes and wetlands. Once teeming with wildlife and rich in indigenous heritage, Tondwa has for decades quietly eroded under the pressure of poaching, deforestation, and neglect.

That is, until now.

At the helm of this bold new chapter is Conserve, a conservation initiative shaking up the traditional blueprint of African environmental protection. Their mission? To go *beyond* the boundaries of national parks and into the overlooked connective tissue of Africa’s wilderness—its conservancies, concessions, and game management areas. It’s a philosophy rooted not just in biodiversity, but in *people, livelihoods, and equity*.

Beyond the Borders

Africa’s 850,000 km² of national parks are vital sanctuaries—but they are only part of the story. Surrounding them are an additional 1.7 million km² of conservation landscapes where communities live, farm, fish, and depend on the environment daily. These spaces are both buffer zones and biodiversity corridors. And while they’re often the first to fall victim to deforestation, mining, and commercial overexploitation, they also hold the greatest promise for reimagined, community-driven conservation.

Tondwa is a case in point.

Part of a vast ecological tapestry linking Nsumbu, Kaputa, and Mweru Wantipa national parks, the 134,000-acre Tondwa area is as crucial to wildlife migration as it is to local food systems and culture. Home to Tabwa-speaking people, along with Bemba and Lungu communities, the area's history traces back to the Luba–Lunda kingdom. But in recent years, it's been at a breaking point. Poaching, firewood harvesting, and snaring have pushed many species to the brink. Hardwood trees are vanishing, and with them, the ecological integrity that holds the system together.

Enter: Conserve in 2022

Founded to fill the gaping void between good intentions and boots-on-the-ground action, Conserve doesn't just support conservation—they manage it. In Tondwa, this has taken form through Tondwa Conservation Limited (TCL), an in-country entity backed by partnerships with the Frankfurt Zoological Society, Baobab Safaris Limited, and crucially, the Nsama Community Resource Board under the guidance of Senior Chief Nsama.

The aim? A radical rethink of what conservation looks like. Not fences and fines, but cooperation, capacity-building, and economic development. "This is conservation with communities, not around them," says Jimmy Muwowo, TCL's new Community Programmes Manager. And that's not just a slogan—it's the bedrock of their model.



Wildlife Returns & Local Revival

Despite decades of decline, the signs of ecological recovery are already emerging. In 2024, camera traps captured a long-missing resident: Lichtenstein's Hartebeest, roaming again in Tondwa's plains. Eland, roan, sable, elephants, and buffalo are also being regularly observed.

While much of this success is due to improved law enforcement, it's also about infrastructure and other operations. In just one year, TCL doubled its staff, built new ranger accommodations, opened critical firebreaks, and launched vehicle and tractor support to maintain roads and trails.

And they're not stopping at wildlife. TCL is restoring the *human* ecology of the landscape, too.

They've launched socioeconomic surveys across 700 households to inform their "resilient societies" framework. A key objective was to understand local dependency on natural resources, especially the abundant fish stocks of Lake Tondwa where a seasonal fishing camp supports many livelihoods. They're piloting Gender Action Learning Systems (GALS) in local villages, a tool that helps communities articulate their vision for their land and resources. They've even partnered with Margaret Pyke Trust and Ipas to assess sexual and reproductive health access across Nsama District.

Fires, Fisheries & Future Finance

Fire is one of the most pressing threats in Tondwa—and TCL is taking it seriously. They've implemented early burning regimes to avoid devastating late-season wildfires and even trained local teams in controlled burn practices. On another front, TCL is now managing fisheries governance on Lake Tondwa, laying down guidelines for sustainable offtake that are being adopted by local fisheries committees run by the communities. TCL is also implementing monitoring frameworks to ensure sustainable harvesting of the critical fish resource on which so many people are dependent.

The real game changer, however, could be in the form of **nature-based finance**. TCL has begun laying the groundwork for a **carbon credit** and **biocredit** system—innovative models that could turn ecological stewardship into sustainable income streams for communities. With a feasibility study underway, stakeholders from across the region are being brought to the table to ensure everyone understands the opportunities and implications of this emerging market.

A Spark for Sustainable Tourism

Tondwa's untouched landscapes and wildlife are its best asset, and now, with the Zambian government and the World Bank's Great Tourism Development Matching Grant project, the area is preparing to open up to visitors with a purpose. TCL has been named a mentor in the scheme, helping communities prepare for tourism that benefits, not displaces, the people who call this wilderness home.

The Bigger Picture

Tondwa may be one patch of protected land in a massive continent, but its story is emblematic of something bigger. Conservation in Africa is no longer about setting aside land and locking out people. It's about partnership, pragmatism, and reimagining nature not as a fortress, but as a foundation—one that supports livelihoods, empowers communities, and restores the balance between human survival and ecological health.

As Conserve looks to expand into Kaputa, the stakes and the possibilities grow. If their model works here—among the miombo woodlands and sparkling wetlands of northern Zambia—it could work elsewhere, too.

And that's something worth watching.

