



THE LONG GAME

The transformation and protection of Africa's landscapes in recent decades has been a significant and positive shift. This has been driven by a large cohort of conservation bodies, international donor agencies, philanthropists and governments working together around a collective vision. Among them is African Parks, which today shares responsibility for the long-term management of 24 national parks and reserves spanning over 20 million hectares across 13 countries — the largest and most ecologically diverse of any conservation organisation on the continent. **Sue Watt** spoke to founder and CEO Peter Fearnhead about tourism, challenges, successes and future plans



Teamwork: Peter Fearnhead (right) together with His Majesty the Litunga Lubosi Imwiko II (centre) and Hon. Rodney Sikumba, Zambia's Minister of Tourism (left), in Liuwa Plain National Park, Zambia. African Parks has co-managed Liuwa in partnership with the Barotse Royal Establishment and the Zambian Department of National Parks and Wildlife since 2003.

MARCUS WESTBERG / AFRICAN PARKS

What is different about African Parks' model for conservation and how did it become so successful?

We're granted a long term mandate to manage the daily responsibilities of our parks, but they are still owned by the governments, who determine their legislation and policies. Philosophically, that all makes sense, but we had no history of success. So we started by knocking on the doors of various countries to offer help.

In 2003, we had two breakthroughs. Malawi's Majete Wildlife Reserve was struggling through lack of funding and support. One of our co-founders had a strong relationship with the government, having worked with their Department of National Parks and Wildlife for many years.

And in western Zambia, the Barotse Royal Establishment had initially helped establish Liuwa Plain National Park, so seeing its demise under the state model alarmed them. They were passionate about conservation and their cultural linkages with the park, so that was their driver to try another solution.

After that, we were able to demonstrate the model. And now demand is constantly increasing, with governments signed up to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework to achieve 30 per cent conservation of land and sea by 2030. The sad reality is that we're not able to cope with all those requests.

What criteria do AP apply in choosing their parks?

We look through three initial lenses. The first is conservation importance. Typically, there's some form of international accreditation — a National Park, World Heritage Site, an

important birding area perhaps. We want to achieve a high conservation return on investment.

The second is sociopolitical considerations. To manage an area, we've got to understand the risks, where they're coming from and whether we can overcome them. Can we work with government and, more importantly, with communities to address those risks?

And the third dimension is finance. Where is the money coming from? Could tourism generate income? It's not essential that it does, because some parks are incredible even if political and logistical challenges make tourism difficult.

If we've got through those three lenses, then we believe we can do it.

In 2025, Akagera [in Rwanda] became your first park to become self-sustaining through tourism. Few parks will be able to achieve that, so how do you see the future of funding?

Akagera had 12–15 years of investment in the park and its people, and Rwanda is serious about developing tourism. But we can't just take on parks that will be commercially successful — that would mean important areas that generate ecosystem services for millions of people, for humanity at large, would be lost. So we need philanthropic and institutional support to secure and transition those areas. Then tourism can kick in.

We're excited about nature-based finance solutions, which we think will become an important source of funding. It's still early days and we don't know whether it's going to be anything meaningful, but if we're not on that journey, we'll never know.

Tell me about your three-tier system for tourist accommodation. Do the costs and benefits of tourism balance out?

Our three-tier system is more philosophical than financial.

With community campsites, it's important that local citizens can experience their park and celebrate their heritage. That level costs us money, but it's an investment in conservation. The middle tier is to enable influential local people like captains of industry and politicians to understand the park and its importance, because that shapes political thinking.

And the top end is typically the international market, which is important because the economic impact of every tourist is way higher. They use local airlines, bring in foreign exchange and the jobs created per bed is way higher, so it's good for the economy.

It's also better for potential revenue flowing back to the park, so it's good for conservation. I think it's the right model for a protected area. But we should have more visitors on every level.

Have you seen changes in tourism trends, such as more intrepid travel, or more adventure and conservation-based travel?

I think travellers are becoming more intrepid, particularly if that is enabled and the risk is somewhat mitigated. Because we're managing the area, and because we're honest about the security situation, that creates a level of trust.

There's also the start of a trend to want more conservation impact and less consumerist tourism, but that's still nascent. And it needs to be reflected in greater transparency on data. ➔

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MORE TO EXPLORE



African Parks was established in 2000. What will it look like in 2040?

Our mission will almost certainly remain exactly as is: to transition protected areas into the future. If another organisation does it better, or if governments are able to reabsorb them into their systems, then brilliant, we'll celebrate that.

African Parks is a vehicle to achieve good conservation results in these critically important areas. As long as that's necessary and effective, we'll continue: it's our responsibility to do more. But we'll do it carefully, like we have done, park by park.

I think we'll require more from our tourism partners. We need them — they're critical players in the bigger conservation picture — but they will need to do more for conservation and communities, and to be transparent on that. Equally, AP's tourism partners can expect more from us: if I was a tourism operator, I'd rather be investing in a park managed by African Parks than one that isn't. So it will be good for them too.

Are you optimistic about achieving your aim to have 30 parks by 2030?

Yes, definitely. We're on 24 parks now, with more than six in the pipeline. I'm not saying that all will happen, but at this stage most tend to materialise. The 30 parks should be reached before 2030 and we're now starting to think about what follows thereafter.

In 2025, when USAID support disappeared overnight, you faced a shortfall of US\$24 million. Yet, you recovered those losses. What makes African Parks so resilient?

When we have a shock to the system, we do some scenario planning then pivot quickly to respond. There is a huge amount of trust in us, and we try to maintain that.

Our resilience probably comes from three areas. First, the people who work for us are extremely dedicated. Second, our relationships with governments: our partners believe in us, and we walk

the road with them. And third, the trust placed in us by our donors. From a philanthropic view, our supporters all believe in a better world. In African Parks they see a mechanism for change and we use their money to bring the results they desire. The primary driver for institutional donors, like the European Commission, is improving governance in the countries they're operating in, stabilising their economies and building economic growth. They see African Parks in conservation areas as a way of achieving that.

Some of your parks are in, or next to, volatile countries; for example Chad and the Sudanese conflict. How do travel advisories impact your operations?

I understand governments have advisories because of a responsibility to their citizens, but often they're very broad brush strokes. It'll say 'don't go to Chad because of Sudan', but your area of operation could be 1000km away, with zero possibility of impact. The finesse of the message is lacking. Advisories have a massive impact on insurance policies, charter companies and aircraft, so they can be very unhelpful. Would I take my entire family to Zakouma [Chad] tomorrow? I would, without thinking twice.

Angola has recovered from conflict, with positive publicity from the Tourist Board. Have you noticed an increase in visitors to Iona National Park?

Not yet. They're putting a lot of money into marketing and that's positive. Iona is a beautiful landscape, but I'd like to see a fuller recovery of wildlife populations. When you've got the



wildlife, the landscape and then this amazing cultural dimension as well, the whole thing will be magnificent.

You recently returned rhino to Matusadona. You were there in the 1990s just before they were removed for their protection. How did it feel to bring them back?

At the time we were trying to save the rhinos by dehorning, but poachers were still shooting them. It was terrible. Designing AP's logo for Matusadona, we decided to have a black rhino in it, when there were none there. It was a statement of commitment: we would bring them back because they're part of the Matusadona story. So, yes, it felt very gratifying to bring them back.

Kafue had been on your wish list for years. Now you're fully embedded there. How is that going?

We first started discussing Kafue in 2002, but we were untested then. In hindsight, perhaps we were lucky they didn't commit. Now, if we get Kafue right we'll make a difference to Zambia's entire tourism economy. That's why it is so exciting. We've been in a long-term partnership with Kafue since July 2022 and the rebound of wildlife already means it's becoming continentally competitive. It's really coming together now.

Of all AP's parks, if you could only go back to one, which would it be?

That's like asking to choose a favourite child! They each have their own characteristics; something to be celebrated. But if you told me I've got five days left to live, I would probably go back to Matusadona [Zimbabwe], where I worked in the 1990s. 🦏

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