

Speech at the presentation ceremony of the BBVA Foundation Awards for Biodiversity Conservation

Susana Carvalho

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Tonight, it is an incredible honour for me to represent Gorongosa National Park at this event. I am here with two young Mozambican scientists: Jacinto Mathe and Rassina Farassi. They embody Gorongosa's approach - we integrate conservation and human development for the long-term benefit of both biodiversity and human well-being.

Gorongosa National Park covers 4,000 square kilometres at the southern end of the Great African Rift in central Mozambique. In 1960, Gorongosa became the first national park of Mozambique. It was famed for its incredible landscapes filled with abundant wildlife. Fifteen species with an IUCN status of Vulnerable, Endangered or Critically Endangered occur, including iconic species such as lion, elephant and pangolins. The Park and its surroundings host an incredible diversity of bat species: so far 51 of which 3 are new to science. The late EO Wilson called it one of the most biodiverse places on Earth. He once said "it was in places like Gorongosa that our human ancestors evolved".

Sadly, Gorongosa found itself at the epicentre of the protracted civil war that broke out soon after Mozambique gained its independence in 1975. The vast wildlife herds were decimated to feed the warring parties. Whereas once 14,000 buffalo roamed the vast plains, less than 100 remained after the war. As many as 3,500 hippo were originally found in the pans and rivers, but fewer than 100 were left.

Early restoration efforts gained further momentum when the Gregory Carr Foundation signed a long-term agreement with the Government of Mozambique in 2008. The Gorongosa Restoration Project has a dual mandate of biodiversity conservation and human-development for the approximately 250,000 people living in the designated Buffer Zone around the Park. That Buffer Zone covers

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6,000 square kilometres. Together with some other areas that Gorongosa is protecting, the total project extent covers some 13,000 square kilometres which is more or less the same size as the province of Salamanca.

Our work is guided by a simple yet powerful belief: that people and nature can thrive together. We promote regenerative agriculture with a focus on permanent tree crops, improved seeds, increased knowledge, value chain development, and better health and education to improve resilience and sustainability. For nature to rebound and thrive, it is paramount to break the cycle of poverty, and to carve real opportunities for education and jobs. A strong focus on women's education and careers is also part of the restoration project: at the moment we have 5,000 girls engaged in our girls clubs all around Gorongosa Park.

Increased protection, with some limited wildlife introductions has led to a spectacular recovery. In the 1990s there were likely less than 10,000 animals left in Gorongosa. The latest aerial wildlife count that was undertaken in October last year, yielded more than 110,000 large herbivores and crocodiles. More than 800 elephants, nearly 2,000 buffalo and 1,000 hippo were counted. Waterbuck are now the most abundant antelope with the herd of more than 50,000 animals probably being Africa's largest. This, in turn, enables us to give back, and help other parks by sending them some of our animals and repopulate other areas.

The herbivore recovery has enabled the restoration of the nearly extirpated carnivores. The lion population rebounded naturally to more than 250 today. Following re-introductions from South Africa, more than 250 African Wild Dogs can now be seen in the Park. Spotted hyena and leopard have also been re-introduced.

Students and senior researchers from Mozambican and international universities study this recovery. A full-time Master's in Conservation Biology is housed in the Park. Twelve Mozambican students live, study and undertake research in the Park. Rassina is one of our graduates.

I personally became involved for the first time in 2016. I have witnessed the dramatic positive changes. Our science is also going beyond the obvious. We are

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now looking back in the distant past, more specifically the Miocene period of minus 5 to minus 20 million years. Gorongosa holds huge potential not only because of its outstanding natural heritage but also for its amazing records of the past and, together, these can boost tourism, science and education in novel ways.

Our understanding of the past gives us new insights in our present which helps us for the future. It is at this interface that Jacinto and Rassina are conducting their doctoral research in Oxford and Coimbra Universities.

In Gorongosa, we believe that conservation needs a long-term outlook and continuity. Our agreement with the Government of Mozambique runs until 2043. This prize comes at a time when we are facing global challenges, and it give us hope to continue our mission with determination.

We will be using this prize to strengthen the basis of our conservation work. We will be investing in researcher and student accommodation, in research facilities on Gorongosa Mountain, and in the pangolin rehabilitation centre in the Park.

On behalf of all of us working on this inspiring project, I would like to acknowledge BBVA and the adjudicating jury for their vote of confidence in us. This award is a true celebration of our collective efforts. It reminds us of the importance of working together on the conservation of natural wonders such as Gorongosa, and shows that nature can rebound if given a chance. Thank you.