

Travel



International Women's Day: How pioneering women are changing the landscape of wildlife conservation in Africa

Wildlife conservation has, until recently, been a male-dominated profession – but the landscape is beginning to change



Dunia Camp in Tanzania (Photo: Kathleen Prior)

By Jill Starley-Grainger

March 7, 2021 10:15 am (Updated March 8, 2021 9:06 am)



For the past century, conservation and wildlife tourism has been largely a male preserve. Women who wanted to work in the field were mostly relegated to cooking and cleaning roles, while the more prestigious, higher-paying jobs were filled by men. But in the early 2000s, a handful of women defied the objections of friends, family and their communities to take on these positions, and now there are several hundred across the African continent.

However, there's still a long way to go. The International Anti-Poaching Foundation (IAPF) estimates that men outnumber women by 100:1 in front-line conservation. But those pioneers are making an impact that's being felt throughout the profession. "I was the first female guide – a woman among 12 male guides," says Florence Kagiso, who accepted a position as safari guide in 2004 at Botswana's luxury Chobe Game Lodge.



Florence Kagiso from Chobe Game Lodge in Botswana (Photo: James Gifford)

Kagiso made such an impression that the management decided to hire more women rangers. Soon, the company began working with the Botswana Wildlife Training Institute to encourage more female guides into the industry, and by 2010, Chobe became the first lodge in Africa with a team of all-female safari guides.

The freshest exclusives and sharpest analysis, curated for your inbox. Sign Up

"Chobe's strategy to employ women was not just to tick boxes," says Kagiso. "They were trying to make a statement that there should be more women in senior positions in tourism in Africa. And now, a woman is the minister of tourism for the country," she says, referring to Philda Nani Kereng, Botswana's current Minister of Environment, Natural Resources Conservation and Tourism. The positive impact of having women in more senior positions has trickled up within the lodge itself, and women make up 50 per cent of Chobe's management team.

Dunia Camp in Tanzania goes even further, with an all-female staff, from rangers to the General Manager. Safari guide Jonesia "Kazawadi" Dominic feels this has made a real difference to perceptions in the region. "They said, 'Bush life isn't easy for girls.' But we've shown them we are strong," she says.



Jonesia 'Kazawadi' Dominica Dunia Camp (Photo: Kathleen Prior)

In Kenya, Betty Ataitai became the country's first female safari guide in 2005. A member of the Maasai community, she now works at Mahali Mzuri Lodge in the Maasai Mara. "To my family and friends, it's not a normal job for a woman," says Ataitai. "I have succeeded in a male-dominated profession; all people should have the opportunity to pursue their dreams."

Wildlife guide Agatha Banura isn't just inspiring other women. She's set up an initiative to help them. When taking guests on mountain treks, bird walks and cultural visits in Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, she works on the social enterprise she founded. Give a Hand to a Woman supports women living in the park in marketing their crafts, diversifying their farming practices and switching to stoves that minimise damage to the environment. They have distributed 40 sheep to women in Bwindi's Rushaga community and set up a nutrition programme at its community primary school.

Dunia Camp in Tanzania (Photo: Provided)

Conservation is at the heart of what guiding, including Oratile Beula, a guide at Selinda Reserve in Botswana, who helps research projects. "I'm currently with Rhinos Without Borders, monitoring wild animals, including rhinos. It's in the wilderness where my heart belongs," says Beula.

But like all these women, her path was harder than for the men she was competing against. "At first it was tough to get a job as guide. The industry was male-dominated. But now I'm one of the veterans proving that ladies can do well in the guiding industry. To women wanting to join the industry, I say, follow your heart and do what you love the most in life."

Facing similar challenges, Beryl Makori is now lead researcher at The Pangolin Project in Kenya, which helps protect the mammals through conservation research, anti-poaching operations and community outreach. "It was difficult to get employment since there were not many projects or organisations who believed a woman could do the job," says Makori. "And many people could not understand why I would choose to study animals, like bats and pangolins, which are considered bad omens by local beliefs. But I chose wildlife conservation to be a change-maker."

On the front line of conservation

Preventing poaching is one of conservation's most dangerous professions, but it's an area where women are also making an impact. Both South Africa's Black Mambas and Zimbabwe's Akashinga are all-female units who risk their lives to protect wildlife. Their results speak for themselves. Both groups have helped reduce poaching numbers by up to 80 per cent.

At Borana Conservancy in Kenya, Faith Namelok Lengipis knows that the risk isn't just from poaching. When there is a threat to crops or livestock, that translates to a threat to wildlife. "I grew up in an area where human-wildlife conflict is a challenge. I want to educate people in my community about the importance of wildlife and habitat conservation."

Faith Namelok Lengipis from the Borana Conservancy Kenya (Photo: Provided)

As Head of Station at Cottar's Safari, Hellen Mako and her all-female ranger team also deal with human-wildlife conflict incidents at the Olderkesi Community Conservancy. "Our female teams come from the Maasai community, and the girls in the villages now see us as role models. There is no job now that a woman can't do," says Mako.

It's a sentiment shared by Petronella Chigumbura, Assistant Instructor at Akashinga in Zimbabwe, which means "the Brave Ones" in Shona. Many of the Akashinga all-female anti-poaching teams come from backgrounds of abuse, exploitation and severe hardship. But the IAPF, which funds the group, believes this is what gives them the strength to deal with the most serious threats. To new trainees, Chigumbura says, "I will teach you to fight back. I will teach you to use your power."

And her prediction for the future of women in the field, "Today we are hundred. Tomorrow we are going to be thousand and thousand."

Topics

Africa Travel / International Women's Day / Travel



Most Popular

NHS Mothers beating gestational diabetes by ignoring NHS advice call for 'proper' investigation

OPINION Michael Vaughan and JP Morgan's Jamie Dimon broke the cardinal rules of apologising

TRAVEL EXPLAINED Your questions on Covid travel restrictions answered, from cancellations to quarantine

POLITICS Face masks will not be in place 'a day longer if Omicron is no more dangerous than Delta'

FOOTBALL SPORT ANALYSIS Keane was right about Cristiano Ronaldo - even if Carragher didn't want to hear it

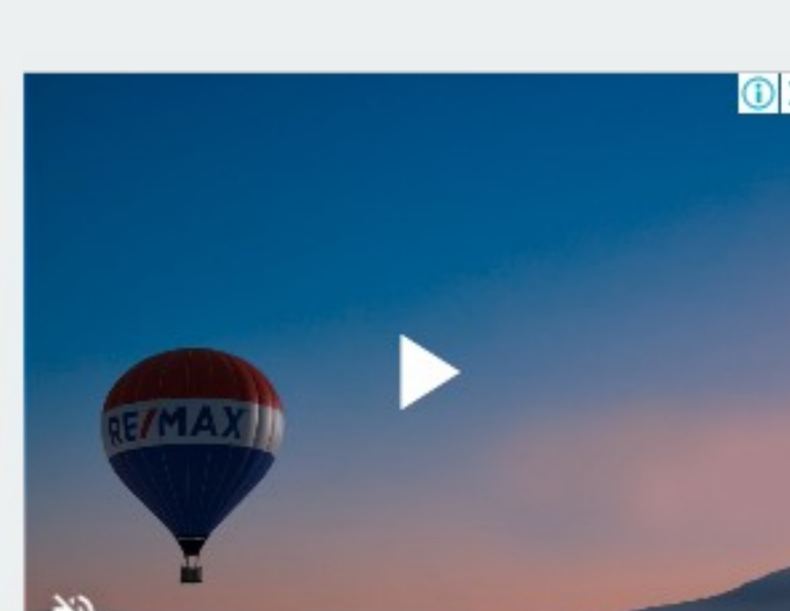
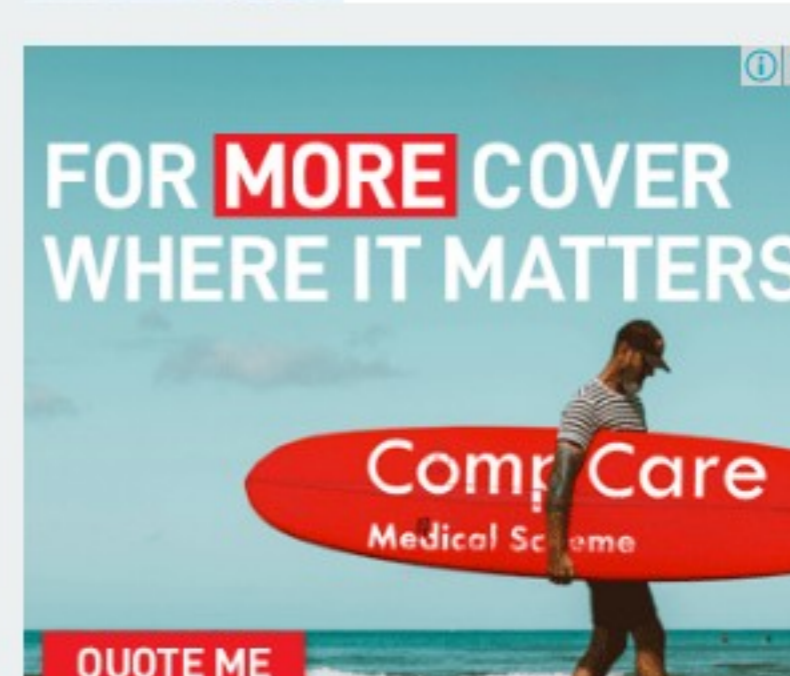
NEWS NHS booking system sees people waiting in queues of 2,500 others to secure booster jabs

POLITICS ANALYSIS The public health advice on cutting our social contacts to combat Omicron is clear as mud

NEWS Father and daughter killed at home in double stabbing in north London

OPINION After Brexit and Channel death spats with France, Global Britain's shallowness is undeniable

NEWS EXCLUSIVE Binman pleads for respect from public as refuse workers suffer baseball bat and knife attacks



Essentials

- News
Sport
Lifestyle
Culture
Opinion
ibuy

Useful links

- Contact Us
Advertise
Subscribe to i
competitions
i newsletters
i app
Sitemap

Follow us on

