

MALAWI

# Liwonde

National Park

548 km<sup>2</sup>

African Parks Project since 2015

Governed by: African Parks Limited in partnership with  
Malawi Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW)

Dutch Postcode Lottery, The Wyss Foundation  
and WWF-Belgium were major funders in 2017



*A darted bull elephant waits for the anesthetic to take effect in Liwonde. © Frank Weitzer*





# Liwonde

CRAIG REID | PARK MANAGER

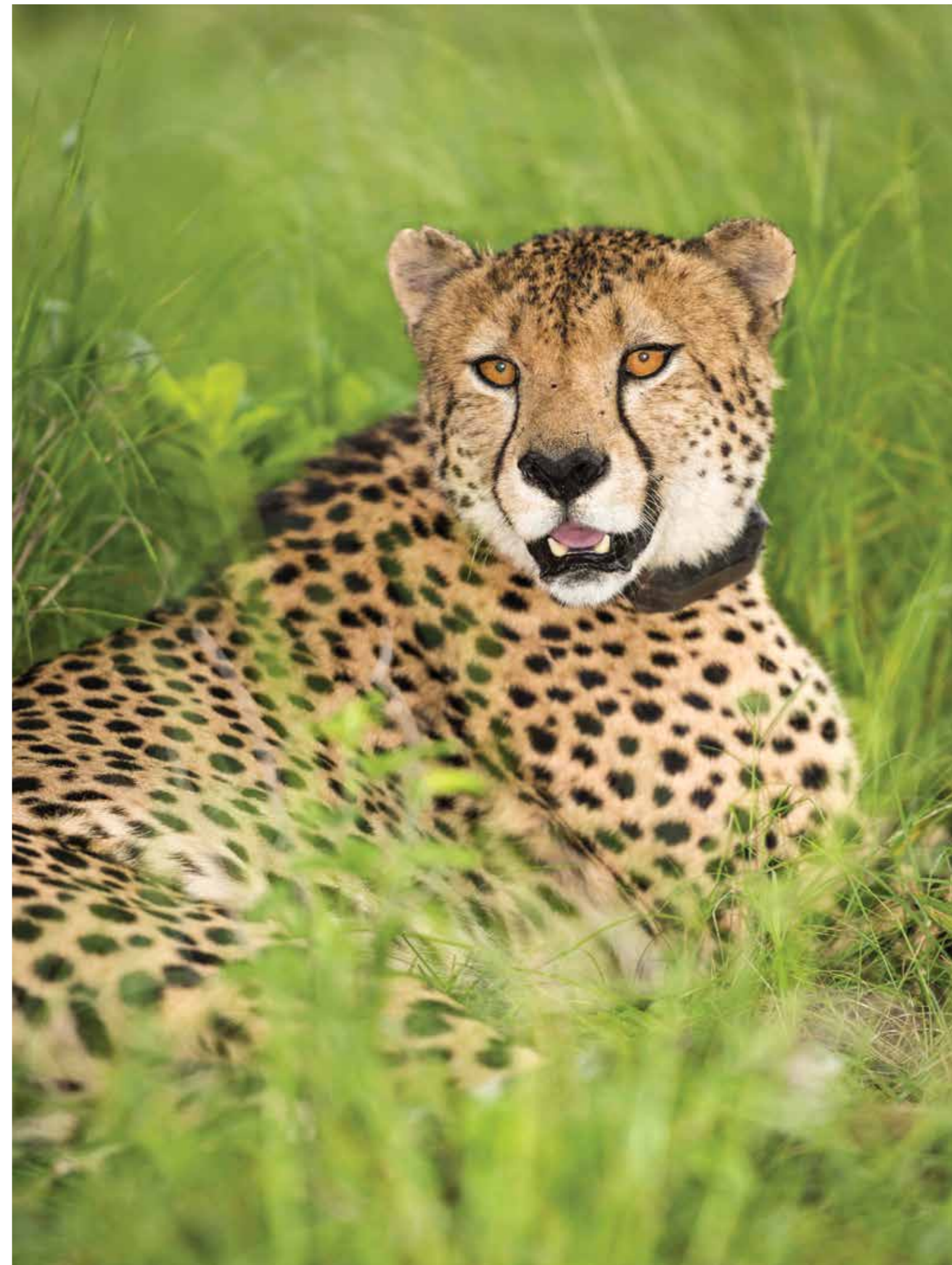


**MALAWI** – When African Parks assumed management of Liwonde National Park in Malawi, in partnership with the Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) in 2015, the park was riddled with tens of thousands of wire snares – more snares existed than large animals – and had some of the highest human-wildlife conflict levels in the region. People were killing everything in the park, and tragically were also being killed by elephants and crocodiles. It was lawless and fraught with challenges. African Parks immediately began constructing an electric fence to keep wildlife inside the park. Just one year later, Liwonde was at the epicentre of one of the largest elephant translocations in history, through which a total of 336 elephants were relocated to Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve, reducing pressure on Liwonde’s natural habitats while helping to solve the deadly conflict situation. Since 2015, over 31,000 snares have been removed from this 548 km<sup>2</sup> park, and poaching is now under control. After restoring security, cheetahs were reintroduced in 2017, bringing the species back to the park after 100 years, and lion reintroductions are planned for 2018. Wildlife populations are on the rise, and so are the people who are coming to the park to marvel at the revival. The number of tourists is up 25 percent and revenue has increased by 70 percent since 2016. In just two short years, Liwonde has been given a second chance, and it is being restored and transformed, right before our very eyes.

## BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

A total of 105 elephants were captured in 2017 and translocated to Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve, with 34 of those going to Nyika National Park, further north in Malawi. It marked the completion of the historic two-year ‘500 Elephants’ initiative, which overall reduced the local elephant population from 869 to around 550. The initiative was aimed at repopulating Nkhotakota, and also restoring balance in this small park by reducing the negative pressure of large herbivores on habitats as well as reducing the dangerous levels of human-wildlife conflict that were negatively impacting the surrounding communities. As part of the translocation process, Liwonde also provided 101 buffalo to Nkhotakota, while additional animals were translocated from Majete Wildlife Reserve to Liwonde including seven hartebeest, 19 sable, 25 eland, and 27 zebra to help improve the viability of these populations. The overall translocation was hailed as a conservation success and generated significant positive attention from around the world.

The endangered black rhino is a key species in the park, and at the close of the year the population was at 10 animals after one was poached. This small population was enhanced by the birth of three new calves, one of which sadly died from natural causes. Liwonde reached an important milestone with the reintroduction of seven cheetahs, the first to return to Malawi in 20 years and to the park in 100 years. They were introduced into a state of the art predator enclosure for habituation and then released into the wild. Two of the females produced litters at the end of year, delivering seven cubs between them. This successful collaboration with the Endangered Wildlife Trust was the first chapter in a long-term vision to restore predators that were once present and improve the ecological functioning of the park, while also enhancing tourism. By year end, most of the arrangements required for the lion reintroduction, planned for early 2018, were in place.



One of seven adult cheetahs that were reintroduced to Liwonde, marking the return of the species for the first time in 100 years. © Sean Viljoen



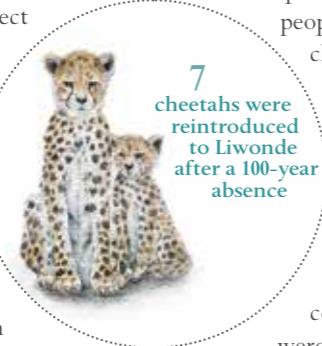


Liwonde's rangers confiscate illegal items, including fishing traps found within the park. © Sean Viljoen

## LAW ENFORCEMENT

Liwonde's team grew from strength to strength this year. Much emphasis was placed on capacity building, with several rangers participating in various tracking courses. Some became Instructors, enabling more training to be done in-house. The first African Parks Standard Obstacle Course was constructed with support from The Thin Green Line Foundation, aimed at training new recruits while providing for conditioning of all rangers. A partnership was forged with the British Military who provided tactical support and mentorship to the rangers over a three-month period. Technological advancements were made throughout the year including the introduction of CyberTracker units to collect field data; the Vulcan Ltd. Domain Awareness System (DAS) was rolled out to enable real-time monitoring and Poacher Cameras were trialled with Panthera as illegal activity detection tools. The park also benefitted from having the helicopter present for the entire year.

The significant investments in the law enforcement team paid rich dividends, with 6,295 patrol man-days being achieved and 79 poachers arrested, resulting in 60 convictions. Included in this number are three individuals who poached a black rhino in the park in July. The horns were recovered, and the perpetrators were swiftly brought to justice by the Malawian Courts, receiving a combined 36 years in prison. This record sentence was a result of the newly revised Wildlife Act which made global headlines, demonstrating Malawi's strong commitment to conservation. One elephant was poached, but the ivory recovered. This is in stark contrast to the first year-and-a-half of operations during which 27 elephants and one rhino were killed. A reduction in the number of snares set in the park was seen in the removal of 9,584 compared to over 16,000 in 2016.



7 cheetahs were reintroduced to Liwonde after a 100-year absence

Four firearms and 33 gin traps were recovered and 126 boats used for illegal fishing in the park were seized.

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Successful restoration of a park requires that local communities must value and benefit from the park's existence; and this begins with active community engagement. African Parks is a significant employer in the area, providing 185 full-time jobs to local employees and up to 250 to temporary employees. Combined with tourism jobs and the local procurement of goods and services, the park is a significant driver of the local economy. Malawi is an impoverished and densely populated country, and people living in and around Liwonde have limited choices for making a sustainable livelihood.

To improve the local economy we distributed 450 goats to households, and supported 26 Moringa growers, 13 beekeeping groups and 17 micro irrigation groups. We negotiated with buyers to secure a market and take this to scale to produce meaningful benefits for communities over time. Three boreholes were drilled outside the park to provide safe and sustainable water supplies; and two were drilled inside the park to feed reticulation schemes in the villages beyond the fence. A ferry was donated to a community that manages the transfer of people across the Shire River and the proceeds from this supports a local school. The completion of the 140 km electric perimeter fence has dramatically reduced the historically chronic levels of human-wildlife conflict, now allowing people to live and work more safely around the park.

Delivering education is necessary to create a constituency for conservation, helping children value the park as they grow up. Liwonde contributed to infrastructure at five schools including classroom and administration blocks,



Kester Vickery helps an anaesthetised elephant to the ground during the translocation in Liwonde National Park. © Frank Weitzer

supplying materials to refurbish classrooms and donating 100 school desks. More than 3,142 children went through Liwonde's environmental education programme, and the park provided 11 university and 23 secondary school students with scholarships to continue their studies. To stimulate community involvement in tourism, we continued with the Community Guides programme, which trains and supports young local people in marketing their services as tourist guides at the main entrance. They were provided with uniforms and a new kiosk as their base. We anticipate this opportunity to grow as tourism visitation increases.

## PARK MANAGEMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

The rhino sanctuary was expanded, increasing to four times its original size to reduce territorial impacts and to plan for a growing population. Considerable effort went into grading over 160 km of roads for the elephant translocation. The roads were used for tourism thereafter, vastly improving visitors' experience. Improvements to the main road will facilitate easier access to the tourism lodges and provide staff access deep into the park during the wet season. These improvements were all made by a small local contractor, demonstrating one of the many economic benefits park restoration provides to local communities. The entrance gate upgrade was completed, and a shop opened as an outlet for Malawian produce. The Environmental Education Centre was further upgraded, and the Park Manager's house was completed by mid-year. Three management boreholes were drilled in the park and the two airstrips were maintained and registered, and more work was done on securing the aircraft hangar, including a bulk fuel supply for the helicopter. Three 30-metre towers were constructed to support the installation of infrared cameras in 2018, and a boatyard was excavated to facilitate management and tourism boating operations, which will also be completed in 2018.

## TOURISM

The ecological restoration of Liwonde through the translocation of elephants, the introduction of cheetahs and increasing wildlife numbers through better security is having a direct positive impact on tourism and revenue generation. Tourist numbers increased by 25 percent from 12,945 in 2016 to 16,384 in 2017, also increasing revenue by 70 percent from US\$196,303 to US\$329,699 by year-end. Two concession agreements were signed for new tourism lodges in the park and are expected to be operational in 2018, further increasing revenue and helping to make Liwonde a greater asset to local communities through job creation and associated enterprise development. The park received top-tier local and international media coverage associated with the elephant capture, cheetah translocation and the British Military deployment to the park, helping to increase visibility and position Liwonde as a burgeoning wildlife destination in the region.

## OBJECTIVES FOR 2018

- Reintroduce two unrelated prides of lion
- Reintroduce leopard from within Malawi
- Assume management of the 375 km<sup>2</sup> Mangochi Forest Reserve, contiguous with Liwonde
- Increase income through the operationalisation of two new tourism lodges
- Further invest in technological support for law enforcement operations
- Maintain focus on mitigating human-wildlife conflict