

Paola Bouley

Tue, 8/11 12:22PM 35:40

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

park, species, painted, wolves, mozambique, rewilding, people, conservation, lions, world, national park, carnivore, landscape, projects, tourism, habitat, leopard, area, recovery, ecosystem

SPEAKERS

Jack Humphrey, Paola Bouley



Jack Humphrey 00:15

You're listening to the rewilding Earth podcast. The rewilding Earth podcast is supported by businesses such as Patagonia Tula and bio habitats, as well as the Wheaton foundation and listeners like you. If you love the work that the rewilding Institute is doing, please consider donating@rewilding.org and be sure to sign up for our weekly newsletter while you're there. Paola boulais grew up in South Africa completed her academic training in the US and is now based full time in Mozambique. She's an ecologist and conservationists dedicated to the recovery of Large carnivores and their coexistence with human communities in the Gorongosa ecosystem of Central Mozambique. Today pile up paints a picture of a rewilding success story in the making. The parks story along with all the dedicated staff working to preserve and protect it is an inspiration to all who are working all around the world on rewilding projects.



Paola Bouley 01:20

Mozambique is a nation in southern Africa, on the eastern side of the continent. And so Gorongosa National Park is in Mozambique we're in the center of Mozambique. We're boarded by the Indian Ocean on the eastern side, and the mountains that that connect us to Zimbabwe on the west. And Gorongosa National Park is a vast wilderness, it actually forms part of a mosaic of a much larger area of protected reserves forestry reserves, the park. So we're in the middle of an incredible wilderness that hasn't rebounded since the Civil War in the 1970s.



Jack Humphrey 02:04

I saw an article in the independent and some other references about a major turnaround.



Paola Bouley 02:10

So yeah, Mozambique endured a pretty rough period of civil war, spanning the 1970s to the early 1990s. But at the cessation of the war, a dedicated team of people reestablished in the park, which was actually one of the centers of the conflict during the war. It was absolutely devastated. But a group of conservationists and wildlife managers jumped in and began to secure the boundaries of the park. And then, in the mid 2000s, the car foundation Greg Carr, a philanthropist from Idaho in the in the United States, was invited to Mozambique to reestablish the park and secure a long term recovery process. For not only the park, but also the communities surrounding the park. And so that really kicked in around 2006. And so we're almost 20 years into a process at the moment. And we're seeing a spectacular resurgence of wildlife in this park. That includes a natural recovery, many species have come back on their own. And the beauty of boring ghost is even though it experienced the devastation of a civil war, and many of the large mammals were wiped out the habitat remained intact. And so the building blocks for the recovery were really here, right after the war, and we're now seeing this ecosystem coming back to life,



Jack Humphrey 03:53

really rewilding



Paola Bouley 03:55

Definitely rewilding. Um, the one thing you learn when you work in a place like Gorongosa, you learned quickly is how resilient a landscape can be, especially when the habitat is still intact. So you can have such a stunning reduction in the number of species or numbers of our population. But if the habitat is there, there's such such a resilience to a place. And so that gives us a lot of hope and inspiration in the work that we do from day to day, the place itself while we're here, and we're doing the conservation, the conservation is still a challenge from day to day. It's not that it doesn't need protecting anymore. We still work in conservation and they places need their defenders right?



Jack Humphrey 04:48

What is that like? What types of things are you working on in terms of protections is poaching every problem there or what What kinds of things do you need to protect the part from

P

Paola Bouley 04:59

yeah So unlike many protected areas on the continent, one of the main factors that we face is population growth. Mozambique is a little unique in that because of the Civil War, we had a lot of settlement into the park. During those bad periods, the park was a refuge from conflict or there was land for agriculture or supplies of water, things that people really needed during those bad times. So in these parks, we still actually have a significant amount of communities that are living here in the park alongside wildlife. poaching or illegal hunting is still an issue. It's an issue across the world in most protected areas, but it's specifically an issue in areas where we see high levels of poverty. And so Africa happens To be one of those places where we still have communities that live from day to day putting, you know, food on the table. So poaching is definitely an issue, encouragement as an issue. And more and more, the challenge that we face is really putting many large landscapes together in terms of corridors, and not not seeing fragmentation over time. So the spaces between these parks growing bigger and bigger, but that we actually reverse that and create the corridors that we need to connect these spaces so that lions and elephants and painted wall can survive and long term.



Jack Humphrey 06:44

What does the future seem to hold for connectivity projects? Is there a political will or groundswell and support or against that right now,

P

Paola Bouley 06:54

there is a vision that we have in Virgo, so we call that mountains to mangrove so that's connected The landscape from Mount Gorongosa which borders on our western boundary, and is partly National Park, all the way across to the Indian Ocean to where we actually have a significant landscape of mangrove, which are severely threatened across their range. And so the mountain to mangrove vision is allowing us to work with multiple partners across the landscape, forestry, former hunting concessions and National Park systems to put this landscape together to ensure that the conductivity survives into the long term, so that we can achieve this grand landscape idea that is so necessary for the conservation. And so that's all underway, we could actually just took over management of a former hunting concession so there is no longer trophy hunting on that concession this

video ticular concession is home to the largest indigenous closed canopy forests left in the region. It's a precious place it has leopard painted wolves, an endemic species of zebra. And so we currently manage that. And we've begun Marin managing forestry concessions as part of that large landscape Mosaic, securing that, that grandness that we need to keep these species alive and to the long term.



Jack Humphrey 08:32

It seems like a collection of data sets that would be very interesting to look at for other rewilding projects around the world to see for one for inspiration with the dramatic comeback of species and numbers but also the work that you're doing with the conductivity the corridors, do you feel like you You, you could be an example or provide an example to other projects that might not be Be as fortunate to be in this situation that you've enjoyed thus far with all of its challenges to use for their research for their planning. And do you work with other parks around the continent or around the world people asking you for advice and, and things like that input on their projects.



Paola Bouley 09:20

One of the unique elements of the Gorongosa restoration project is that we have a robust science program. So all the management decisions we make the trajectories we pursue, based in science, some of the coolest science out there going back to conservation biologists that set the tone for what we need to do decades ago. And we're implementing that here in Gorongosa today. But we're building the data sets to really reveal what a restoration story how it blossoms over time, so the company of species, their abundances, their interactions, how that evolves over time. We're closely monitoring most of what's going on. That includes herbivores, it includes carnivores. And it goes all the way down to the microfauna, which is the most biodiverse, or most diverse element of our ecosystem, all those little things that make ecosystems tick. So we have the eo Wilson biodiversity laboratory here based in the park itself. And there's scientists that visit from across the world, every year to do research here in the park. And that's forming part of a massive growing data set on on the restoration of a large ecosystem here in Central Missouri, and I think that will be very useful to other restoration projects in the future. I think it may be one of the only I know of that integrates so many different species and scales simultaneously.



Jack Humphrey 11:11

On a personal note, I just have to ask you, what is it like to live where you do and do the

work that you do? I think a lot of people listening would be very fascinated to hear that because it's not a question that might be often asked of people that do work like you do. It just seems from the outside looking in like a magical thing. I'm sure the work is hard, and that there are challenges, but what's it like to do what you do?



Paola Bouley 11:41

Yeah, so there are days where you just want to hide under something and not come out? Yeah, because your hardware conservation is a crisis discipline. We do what we do because we're trying to reverse the massive decline in biodiversity and habitat quality and all the things environmental things that we need to care about. We're trying to reverse that trend right and day by day, it's it's a, it's pushing against a massive tide. But the beautiful side of what we do is that we're out there with some of the most incredible forest species from day to day, we're immersed in this place, it really becomes part of who we are and what we fight for. And it's a very difficult place to leave. I guess I don't want to it's kind of a little bit like an addiction. You know, you don't want to like, let it go. There's really an opportunity here to make a big difference. And I think that's what keeps us all here in the face of so much to global tragedy, we have a chance here to really reverse the tide and do something positive. And while we're doing that hard work, we also are so privileged to be living among these species. You know, we get to hear lions whirring at night and we get to work with painted wolves and, and dodge elephants on the road and hear, like hundreds of species of birds in the forest that surround us. So that's really a gift. But with that gift comes a massive responsibility. So, you know, it's it's, yeah, we we dance with that?



Jack Humphrey 13:38

Yeah. Well, thank you for that, because I think that's a it's, there are a lot of people who will never ever be able to visit your park. You're listening to the rewilding Earth podcast. Did you know we also published insightful and inspirational content from leading rewilding scholars, poets, artists and organizers from around the world. You can visit rewilding.org and sign up for our weekly digest to receive brilliant, fresh insights on everything rewilding, you'll find over a decade of articles and news from the frontlines of wild lands, protection and all kinds of restoration efforts. Check us out at rewilding.org. And don't forget to share it with friends. I appreciate your caution that it's not all roses. It's a crisis around the world. And that responsibility I am sure weighs heavily always and is always there but for you to be one of the examples on the hill so to speak, and, and have some portion of promise and hope and involved in what you do. It's seems like a very fortunate thing, despite the fact that would be better if we weren't destroying the planet as fast as we are and, and we depend so much on people like you and parks like this, to to

help us hold things together. What is the pandemic and the travel ban? How much pressure is that does that put on your title? Have park in terms of tourism dollars that are not being seen right now. Is that in a? Is that a very big concern for you right now as it is in other places?

P

Paola Bouley 15:10

Yeah, it's a very good question. For our particular project, we're not dependent on tourism revenue to keep, you know, the lights on, so to speak, but many parts are so tourism is a major source of revenue for many parks across the world, right. Tourism is the lifeblood for these parks. But in our case, and this is really the genius of, of our team in terms of putting together funding sources is we have a very diverse array of funding. So we're not just reliant on that single source, but we have multiple sources, mostly from government funding the US, Ireland, Norway, multiple countries that are supporting the efforts here, we managed to keep doing the work that we need to do from day to day. But tourism is still an important part of who we are. So, you know, clearly, it's gonna have a hit on everyone, just not as much on us as other places. In terms of operations, you know, we're still working COVID is just taking off here in Mozambique, although it's very difficult to know how much it is because it's very little testing. But for example, our Rangers who are the frontlines of conservation, or our health workers and our education staff, they're all feeling this very much so because they have to be out on the frontlines every day doing work to protect the park, right. So, yeah, there's more of a personal professional kind of impact there. Little bit of unknown that we have to deal with, but the work keeps going on. So rangers for all are considered essential services as we do law enforcement. So we have to keep holding that then green line to ensure that, you know, no one takes advantage of these periods to exploit wildlife.



Jack Humphrey 17:24

That's very, very good news. We were just talking with another guest who is in charge of raising money for different parks and is really feeling the pinch. Another very fortunate aspect of your situation, obviously, is that you're not as much,

P

Paola Bouley 17:43

I think, you know, with Gorongosa this case, we've been dealing with so many challenges over the years. It's tourism is we definitely have tourism and, for example, Professor eo Wilson, you know, the first time he ever saw a lion in the wild was here. And Gordon goes into cement 12. And so we have people like yo Wilson and people from across the world

who come here every year who are seeing lions and elephants for the first time in their lives. Tourism is an important part of like, again, the culture of who we are, and we wouldn't want to see it disappear. But because we've had conflict and there's been challenges in Mozambique tourism hasn't. It's not like as booming as it would be in say Kruger National Park. Right. Right. So we've, we've by design, being resourceful and I think we can weather weather this downturn to some degree in comparison to some other places, but we still feel the pain. I mean, conservation is not just us, right? It's, it's all of us together. And we can't afford to be losing these other places, not for a year. Not just can't happen.



Jack Humphrey 19:02

We here in North America don't have a lot of experience with elephants and lions. But we do know an awful lot about our wolves. I wonder if you could talk to us a little bit about painted wolves though? What are what's the deal with painted wolves?



Paola Bouley 19:18

painted wolves are one of the coolest species ever. You know, if you'd asked me 10 years ago about painted wolves, I wouldn't have known what you were talking about. But when I began working here in Gore and goes I quickly became clear that we were missing some of the key predators that we used to have in this ecosystem. So we have an indigenous population of lions, best lions ever, in my opinion, but, but they really are the only indigenous predator that were present in the park after those years of conflict. So we get between began a process of of considering reintroductions of these key species. And a little bit by accident, we landed on the painted wolf story. So initially, we wanted to bring back leopard first, I guess I'm a cat lady. So we started with the cats. But it turns out that leopards are actually very difficult to move across borders. It's very political species. And while we're in the middle of that struggle, we had the endangered wildlife trust, which is a conservation organization in South Africa approached us with an idea for a range expansion of the painted wolf. Like, oh, wow, this sounds like a cool idea. And within a year, we had our first pack of painted wolves landing in Gorongosa National Park, the first pack seen like in the park in decades, and we began a process of a reintroduction. These dogs were flown from across the border in South Africa, habituated in a Boma for about eight weeks and then released into the wilderness. And we haven't looked back ever since we released our second pack. Well, the first pack was released in 2018. The second in 2019. We quickly double the population and just two years and at the this year we have five packs dinning. So, we've gone from having zero painted wolves in the park to over 50. And we may reach over 100 by the end of the Denning season. And so painted wolves have just taken off in Gorongosa and they are a rare and endangered carnivore on the

continent. They're only around 6000 left in the wild, for many reasons, they were persecuted. They're naturally rare. So being an endangered species, we thought we'd have a big challenge and re-establishing them but they've really just taken off in the park. And I think it's because we have so much prey and good habitat here. There's so much space for the species. And so we've gone from not really having them on our radar to seeing them almost every day. They're rearing pups, and they're, they really become a part of the ecology very quickly. They're preying on species that usually, you know, don't have to care about predators. Things have changed.



Jack Humphrey 22:47

I have to ask a very serious scientific question. Okay. After I read the first paragraph of the independent, an article about you and your work and the wild dogs African wild dogs are not known for their heavenly scent. Quite the opposite. So you have to feel for the pilot and vet who have been flying in a tiny sweltering plane with 14 of the malodorous animals from South Africa to Gordon's National Park in central Mozambique. Why do they stink?



Paola Bouley 23:21

Why do they stink? Well stink is relative. So yes, you painted wolf person. They're gonna tell you that's not a stink. In fact, when you come across that scent in the wilderness, you know, you're hitting on something great, because, you know, you're either finding a place but they've been resting or they're dancing. And I wouldn't say it's a bad smell. It's just a very strong smell. So they have an out overpowering scent. That's part of who they are.



Jack Humphrey 23:56

You spoken very diplomatically and as a great editor, advocate for painted wolves would say, good. I just thought that was a really funny way to start the whole article out and it brought you right in which I like to do here, as much as possible, bring people right into it. I mean, we were only on a podcast. So, you know, talking about sights, sounds, smells everything as much as possible. And I just thought that was a really funny way for them to have started that article at the independent, which will be linked here. If you're listening to the podcast on rewilding.org, and if you're not go to rewilding.org, and check out the rest of this podcast page, because I'm going to put a lot of resources here with the help of Paola to get you guys really into this and feel what this is like as much as possible without being there. What about the other species? What's going on? conservation wise kind of

programs or goals that you have that are really outstanding in your mind is something that's really exciting going on with lions or elephants



Paola Bouley 24:58

on the lion front? Do we Really are seeing finally robust recovery of the indigenous lions. We can barely keep track with all the Cubs that are popping out, which is a very good thing. It was very different when we arrived here 15 years ago. So we've managed to really push a recovery of the lions, painted wolves. We now have a number of packs roaming the park. They're dancing successfully. We're seeing pups we have pups in dens as I speak. So that's very exciting and cute. We are planning a hyena reintroduction in the next couple of years. And leopard, we're still pushing on a leopard reintroduction, but in the meanwhile, we actually are seeing a natural recovery of leopard sorry, the very beginning of a lipid recovery happening here just naturally. And so we started to pick up on A couple of leopards roaming through the quarter Park. And those are coming from areas that are being protected outside the park. So that's that's the importance of those corridors I was talking about.



Jack Humphrey 26:12

I was just gonna say, all this talk about all this flourishing carnivore activity speaks to a very, very healthy herd population ungulates and others what I mean, there has to be enough food to support all of this. What is that? Like? What are the herds? Like? Are there any challenges there in terms of those species and interactions that you might be trying to mitigate or encourage?



Paola Bouley 26:39

Over the past decade we've seen such a remarkable increase in the number of herbivores every couple of years we do an aerial census and so we count literally the science team will count every animal they see over 40 hour flying period through the park. That's not a trivial task. I think most people's brains, especially being in a helicopter for 40 hours, it's a it's a massive task, but they count everything. So we have a very accurate picture of the number of herbivores that we have in our core area. And so we understand carrying capacity, we understand how many lions we could have how many painted wolf packs we could have. And so for example, we have about 65,000 waterbuck, which make up 100,000 You know, they're part of 100,000 different herbivore individuals that we have out there. And so there's a massive amount of food. The carrying capacity is huge. There's enough food for lions, there's enough food for leopards, hyena painted wolves. When you

go out onto the floodplains here, you will just see Thousands and thousands of antelopes on the plane. It's remarkable. People talk about Willoughby's migrations in the Serengeti. I think we have one of the largest aggregations of what about on the continent. It's spectacular, you won't believe you are. So the in terms of food resources, prey herbivores, we're still haven't reached the limit. We've got a ways to go. And so there's a lot of space for these species of carnivores to recover into.



Jack Humphrey 28:34

I love hearing that. And I'm also thinking about people in less fortunate places who are trying to piece a much more fragmented mosaic of wild lands together. Just wishing and I think it's an inspiration more over than anything, just just wishing that they had that level of abundance and also a core area that like yours. But it's something for everyone to you know, I would think look at and and aspire to, you know, that is why in other places around the world we're so feverishly trying to reconnect areas that have been horribly fragmented or moderately fragmented. And people need a place. And I think this is one of the most important reasons to have you on the show. They need an example. They need something to look at and go it's possible. Look at this, this is this could be the future for our area. It's in so many ways. Tell us a story about people who are visiting from another place where they're trying to do rewilding, maybe where they're having more of a challenge then then you do in some ways, and what are they learning when they come to visit?



Paola Bouley 29:49

Yeah, we have a number of visitors every year, different agencies, different parks, even from different continents. I think we learned as much from others as they would Learn from us. You know, I think when you look across the world, you actually see a number of stellar projects that are doing work like this. There's the Tompkins Foundation, you know, the work that is going on in origin. There's numerous projects on the African continent, African parks. So we formed part of that family of projects across the world. And I'm only naming like probably point 1% of those that are happening, that are doing this kind of work. And so I really think it's, it's a massive, we need to do more, yes. But there's so many projects doing amazing work together. And when we can connect, we do a lot of us have a hard time leaving the places we work in, right. We're so busy. When we do have colleagues visiting here, you know, we're fortunate, I mean, we have a science center so we can actually interface with the science. That's going On the park and the various scientists that are visiting, we have our Conservation Department. So many people have, for example, seen penguins for the first time in their lives. We have a rescue center here in the park, for penguins that are rescued from from traffickers in the country, and those are

rehabilitated and released into into wilderness areas. And then there's also the human development components. You know, I think the one thing that we're emphasizing more and more in the conservation world is we can't do this alone, right? We need to build support among communities, we need to build ownership with communities. So these lions, you know, they belong to the people that have to live with them. So we have to find ways to be able to create connect people that live here to the places that we are protecting, and really demonstrate that the survival of these places is tied to the survival of these communities, right? Because that really is true. We all are dependent on the survival of these wildernesses for our own survival. And so it's not just visiting the Science Center, and seeing penguins and lions, but it's also understanding that we're doing the human development work, the education, the health care, the community development that's so essential to the to the long term viability of of conservation.



Jack Humphrey 32:41

Finally, I wanted to ask you about what you feel and what you think about in your most hopeful moments in your most inspired moments when our audience is probably among the most aware of all the problems and we a disproportionate amount about problems and one of my missions here with this show is to, to spread the hope that we all share together in many different ways. And so in in your moments of just when you've got that big smile on your face, and you've just seen something incredible, a giant herd or painted wolves running around, what is your hope for the work that you're doing the work that your compatriots are doing around the world? What does that feel like? What's that sound like when you're when you're in that moment?



Paola Bouley 33:36

Now that I've worked in multiple places, and probably Gorongosa will be my life's ends work? I don't know if I'll be anywhere else after this. But of the of the various places I've worked. I think what I've learned is that no matter where we are, we can make a difference, right? I used to work with wild salmon in Central California. I'm now working with painted wolves in central Mozambique. And I think wherever we put our energies wherever we put our love and our attention, we can really create something positive. And I've learned that from the various places that I've worked. Whether it's restoring a native plant species, or reintroducing a painted Wolf, we can have a positive impact. I really do believe that I've seen it with my own eyes so many times. And so that's what keeps us ticking from day to day is and if we can, if we can really inspire people to do that no matter who you are and what work you do, or where you are, is just to do it. We could have such a massive positive influence on where we're going on this planet.



Jack Humphrey 34:53

Thank you so much for taking the time to be here today.



Paola Bouley 34:56

Thank you jack is so inspiring to tell.



Jack Humphrey 34:59

Thanks For listening to the rewilding Earth podcast, we do what we do because of you. This podcast is supported by listeners like you who longed to live in a Wilder world. please consider donating at rewilding.org and subscribe to our weekly news and articles digest while you're there. To go the extra mile you can follow and share rewilding Earth on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. Bonus points for sharing this podcast with your friends. To listen to past episodes, go to rewilding.org slash pod that's rewilding.org slash pod.