

Wildlife Works

One company's revolutionary, market-driven solution for conservation.

BY JODI MACFARLAN | PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID JOHNSON

Back in 1997, a San Francisco-based consultant took a safari that would change his life in more ways than one.

Traversing the Kenyan bush opened Mike Korchinsky's eyes not only to the beauty of Africa's landscapes and wildlife, but also to the cycle of violence that so often accompanies them: Armed poachers battling armed rangers, all set amid communities lacking sustainable jobs.

Upon his return to the U.S., Korchinsky sold his successful consulting firm in order to found a new company with a simple yet powerful mission: to create a market-based solution for wildlife conservation that provided real, long-term development for local communities. If you want abundant wilderness and wildlife, he surmised, you have to make sure it works for local people.

Narrowing in on an area between Tsavo East and Tsavo West National Parks in Southeastern Kenya — a “bruised, balding land, barren of wildlife” — Korchinsky settled on what would become Wildlife Works' first project: the Rukinga Sanctuary. He purchased 80,000 acres of land, built a small factory, and began pursuing an idea to create T-shirts that could be sold in the West. Hiring 10 local seamstresses and 10 local rangers, he and his crew began plugging away, developing a language and a market for ethical, sustainable fashion where none yet existed.

Now, more than 20 years after that fateful first trip, Wildlife Works boasts the world's only carbon-neutral, fair-trade apparel factory. By offering living wages and full health benefits, the Wildlife Works Eco Factory and surrounding sanctuary enable the company's more than 300 local employees to provide for their families without engaging in poaching or slash-and-burn agriculture. Seventy employees — 95 percent of which are women — work



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full time in the factory, while the remainder serve as rangers, community outreach officers, greenhouse farmers, shop technicians, builders and more.

The eco factory's fair-trade products include those made by its own private label as well as those created by such international clients as Raven + Lily, ASOS, Puma, ENZI Footwear and more.

“My life has changed a lot since I joined Wildlife Works,” says Janet Wanjala, a 41-year-old single mother of three who first began working for the company in 2011. “Thanks to my job, I can now access necessary benefits like healthcare.”

Janet embarks on a two-hour walk to and from the company's organic greenhouse every work day, with the current goal of making sure that her youngest daughter completes secondary education. “I want my children to have a better life,” she says.

And indeed, because of her job with Wildlife Works, Janet has been able to build a house for her family and send

her children to school, all while learning “to appreciate Mother Nature and know the importance of taking care of trees,” she adds.

Together with the Wildlife Works greenhouse team, Janet helps to grow indigenous tree seedlings that are then donated to the community to reduce deforestation. For in addition to focusing on job creation and wildlife protection, the company has also greatly devoted its recent efforts to forestry defense.

In fact, Wildlife Works is now the world's leader in the carbon REDD+ market, aiming to fight climate change by reducing emissions from deforestation and degradation. In Kenya's Kasigau Corridor, for example, the company has expanded beyond the original 80,000 acres it owns to work with landowners for the protection of more than 500,000 acres. If left unprotected, this region would become deforested in less than 30 years; since Wildlife Works got involved, however, the community has continued to reap

Wildlife Works gives the communities around Tsavo an opportunity to combine conservation and manufacturing through work at an apparel factory that provides a stable income and benefits — security that changes their relationship with the land, preventing poaching and slash-and-burn agriculture.



3,9 BILLION
INVESTED IN TRADE AND PROJECTS FINANCE IN 2017

1 MILLION
JOB CREATED IN 2017



benefits from the land but in a more profitable and sustainable manner, which will offset 1 million tons of carbon dioxide emissions *per year* for the next 30 years.

“We want to be able to replicate this model in as many endangered forests around the world as possible,” says Joyce Hu, marketing director for Wildlife Works Carbon.

By successfully using the emerging marketplace for REDD+ carbon offsets, Wildlife Works has been able to fund projects to protect threatened forests,

Comprised of 80,000 acres, Wildlife Works’ Rukinga Sanctuary provides protection for the land and helps to integrate the local community into a sustainable future.

wildlife and communities throughout the world; in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Wildlife Works has already used carbon offset revenues to defend 750,000 acres of rainforest, as well as support a mobile medical clinic and build three schools (four more are under construction). Plans are also currently emerging for additional projects across Africa, Asia and South America.

As for the wildlife that started it all, suffice to say that the animals are thriving. Though no elephants remained in the Rukinga Sanctuary 20 years ago, now herds of the animal — with a total of roughly 2,000 in the area — can be found drinking and bathing in local watering holes. Lions, zebra, giraffe, leopards and more have likewise made the Kasigau Corridor their home.

That’s not to say that poaching and deforestation have outright vanished; both problems remain daily threats in the region, but with consistent outreach — and consistent proof that alternative livelihoods can be made — Wildlife Works is proving that wildlife can indeed work for local people. ■

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