

Oryx

Developing a new cadre of wildlife conservation leaders in sub-Saharan Africa

By Ibrahim Abu-Bakarr & Mohamed I. Bakarr, 23rd May 2022

Across Africa, the urgency to safeguard forests and wildlife remains a major priority. Yet the availability of well-trained conservation professionals falls far short of what is needed in most countries. As a result, threats to forests and wildlife remain pervasive and opportunities to develop and implement practical solutions are not adequately tapped.

There are many academic and technical programmes that are providing training for conservation professionals, such as regional wildlife colleges in Cameroon and Rwanda (serving west and central Africa), Tanzania (serving eastern Africa) and South Africa (serving southern Africa). These institutions continue to play significant roles in addressing specific needs of the wildlife management profession in their respective regions. They are also evolving to meet the changing demands for conservation expertise. But as threats to wildlife increase, the wildlife conservation profession demands new and diverse skills that go beyond those offered by traditional academic training.



MENTOR-PACE fellows meeting with the Founder and Director of Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary, Sierra Leone.

Because wildlife conservation professionals are increasingly confronted with complex and challenging problems, additional competencies and skills are needed to help prepare them for effective leadership. Specifically, technical competencies combined with soft and people skills will prepare and ensure that such professionals can perform as influencers and drivers of innovation. This was the rationale behind the creation of Mentoring for Environmental Training in Outreach and Resource Conservation (MENTOR). The programme was launched in 2007 by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service through a collaborative effort with various partners to support conservation leadership and capacity development across Africa.

The MENTOR programme was founded on the conviction that a combination of training and mentorship is key to strengthening leadership capabilities and competencies for conservation professionals to tackle emerging challenges facing species and ecosystems. The specific aim was to develop a cadre of African leaders who will ultimately apply their acquired knowledge and professional skills as individuals or through teamwork to influence conservation outcomes. Between 2007 and 2018, five different MENTOR programmes were implemented, focusing either on conservation of a globally threatened wildlife species or tackling the threats facing wildlife. Each combined rigorous academic and field-based training with mentoring, team building and experiential learning for 8-10 fellows over a 10 to 18-month period. The five programmes involved 42 professionals with diverse backgrounds and expertise, across at least 11 countries.



Group photo of fellows who participated in the program on Protection of Apes and Conservation of Ecosystems (MENTOR-PACE).

Our [article](#) reports on an ex-post assessment of the MENTOR programmes and their impacts on the fellows. The assessment, led by Njala University in Sierra Leone, showed that all participating fellows had acquired new skills and knowledge, and that their professional development was

positively affected by participation in the programme. When compared to other conservation professionals who did not attend the programme, the assessment found a large treatment effect on professional growth and professional outcomes for the MENTOR fellows. Regarding soft or people skills, fellows rated themselves significantly better than the comparison group did, regardless of their age or gender.

Fellows attributed changes in their capabilities, confidence, and professionalism to the overall programme approach, and most believed they have had important impacts in conservation as a result. As one fellow put it: 'The most valuable part of the programme was the opportunity to work with professionals who have full-time jobs and build their capacity while they are in their jobs also giving direct on the job benefits.'



MENTOR-PACE Fellows meeting with official of the Forestry Development Authority in Monrovia, Liberia.

As demand for conservation leadership increases, there is need to expand professional training across the continent beyond traditional pedagogical systems. The MENTOR programme demonstrates the added value of structuring capacity and leadership development processes around specific challenges that reflect realities of conservation across the continent. Fellows not only acquired new skills and expertise to advance their careers, but also developed relationships that will endure for years to come.

While it will take time for the achievements to translate into direct benefits for the targeted species and ecosystems, the overall approach shows great promise for developing African conservation leaders. The fact that training modules for some of the MENTOR programmes have been incorporated into curricula at various higher education institutions suggests the strategic importance of this approach. Additional priorities such as the need to achieve gender balance and

integrate social science research methods and anthropological principles could be further strengthened.

All photos: Ibrahim Abu-Bakarr

The article [Capacity and leadership development for wildlife conservation in sub-Saharan Africa: assessment of a programme linking training and mentorship](#) is available in *Oryx—The International Journal of Conservation*.



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