

# Forest of Hope

## STRATEGIC PLAN

2026-2030



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# LETTER FROM THE BOARD COMMITTEE

It is with sincere gratitude that we present the Forest of Hope Association (FHA) Strategic Plan 2026–2030. Since its creation in 2012, FHA has undertaken a remarkable conservation journey, beginning with the restoration of the severely degraded Gishwati Forest. This effort ultimately contributed to the establishment of Rwanda's Gishwati-Mukura National Park, demonstrating what is possible when vision meets commitment.

Today, FHA remains a committed conservation organization, built on strong community partnerships and guided by the belief that people can respect and coexist with nature, ensuring mutual benefits for both. Our vision is clear: through community-based conservation, protected areas thrive, creating lasting positive impacts for both ecosystems and local communities. We are committed to restoring landscapes where ecosystems are protected, livelihoods are strengthened, and future generations can inherit protected ecosystems and sustainable livelihoods.

This Strategic Plan is both a roadmap and a call to all who believe that conservation is about more than protecting forests. It is about building hope, resilience, and opportunity by defining our priorities for the next five years: protecting biodiversity, empowering local communities, advancing sustainable development, and reaffirming our mission to create lasting impact.

We are grateful to our partners, donors, and friends for your invaluable support. Your contribution makes this vision possible, and together, we are building a future where conservation secures both healthy ecosystems and livelihoods.

**The board committee**
Forest of Hope Association - Rwanda

# LETTER FROM THE COORDINATOR

As we present the Forest of Hope Association (FHA) Strategic Plan 2026–2030, we acknowledge a collective effort by our staff, communities, and partners who are continuously shaping conservation endeavors in the Gishwati-Mukura landscape.

This Strategic Plan builds on our past journey and sets a clear path for the next five years. Guided by our commitment to collaborative conservation, community empowerment, climate resilience, and knowledge sharing, this plan envisions a future where biodiversity is protected and thrives, livelihoods are improved, and communities are active stewards of the landscapes they call home.

This plan aims to strengthen our conservation efforts in the Gishwati area, expand initiatives across the region, and ensure that both people and ecosystems benefit from our work.

Throughout our journey, we learned that conservation succeeds only when it is inclusive, participatory, and forward-looking. Therefore, the next five years are not just about sustaining what has been achieved but also deepening our impact and building resilience in the face of climate and development challenges.

We are deeply grateful to all parties who have contributed to this process. Special appreciation goes to the Maliasili team for their thorough guidance, and to other partners whose dedication makes our conservation efforts possible.

**Thierry Aimable Inzirayineza**
Coordinator,
Forest of Hope Association - Rwanda



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since its founding in 2012, Forest of Hope Association (FHA) has been at the forefront of Gishwati forest conservation, a vital natural forest that shelters diverse wildlife and sustains neighboring communities. Through community-driven conservation, restoration of degraded landscapes, and support for local livelihoods, FHA has demonstrated that protecting nature and empowering people can go hand in hand. Over the years, FHA has built strong relationships with local communities, government institutions, and other partners, laying the foundation for lasting conservation impact. With this strategic plan, FHA intends expanding its efforts from Gishwati to Mukura Forest to ensure ecosystem connectivity and to strengthen the resilience of the broader landscape (Gishwati-Mukura National Park).

Looking ahead, FHA envisions thriving landscapes where communities are active stewards of biodiversity, and where conservation delivers tangible benefits for both people and nature. This vision embraces a future in which forests are resilient, wildlife flourishes, and local communities enjoy sustainable livelihoods supported by healthy ecosystems. FHA believes that long-term conservation success depends on fostering a sense of shared responsibility and partnership across all stakeholders.

## Over the next five years, FHA will focus on four strategic pillars:

1. **Building strong collaborative conservation initiatives with government and partners**
2. **Empowering communities to lead sustainable livelihoods**
3. **Enhancing climate resilience through restoration and sustainable practices**
4. **Strengthening knowledge management for evidence-based decision-making**

These pillars reflect FHA's commitment to integrated approaches that combine ecological restoration, community engagement, and adaptive management to address the complex challenges facing the Gishwati-Mukura landscape.

Achieving this vision will require commitment, resources, and collaboration. FHA aims to secure diverse and sustainable funding through its eco-tourism initiatives, build organizational capacity, and mobilize communities and partners to drive measurable impact. By integrating ecological restoration, community empowerment, and climate resilience, FHA is dedicated to safeguarding the Gishwati-Mukura ecosystem and ensuring thriving forests and communities for generations to come. This strategic plan reaffirms FHA's mission to protect nature while improving lives, inspiring hope for a future where people and forests thrive together.





# FHA'S STORY OF RESILIENCE AND COMMUNITY-DRIVEN CONSERVATION

## A brief history of the Gishwati Forest

Gishwati Forest, located in the northwestern part of Rwanda near Lake Kivu, is one of the country's last remaining montane forests. Once part of a vast belt of rainforests stretching across central Africa, Gishwati extended west connecting with the rainforests of the Congo Basin and south connecting to Nyungwe Forest. Over time, this once contiguous ecosystem became severely fragmented due to population growth, deforestation, and expanding human settlements.

During the 1970s, large-scale cattle farming projects were introduced in Gishwati as part of Rwanda's drive to modernize agriculture. These schemes led to widespread clearing of the forest, with vast areas of native vegetation replaced by grazing land. Following the Rwanda genocide, waves of refugees seeking safety and farmland settled in the area, accelerating deforestation. The area was degraded by cattle ranching and agriculture until it became unproductive.

In 1970, there were approximately 28,000 hectares remaining of Gishwati Forest. In 2002 only 600 hectares remained. At this time, the Gishwati area faced numerous challenges resulting from extensive deforestation. Landslides claimed lives, soil erosion devastated farmlands, and water quality declined sharply. The loss of the forest began to severely affect the wellbeing of surrounding communities, marking a critical turning point, and the launch of the first initiative aimed at restoring the original Gishwati Forest.

The first initiative, Projet d'Appui à la Reforestation au Rwanda (PAFOR), ran from 2005 to 2008. Its goal was to establish a sustainable forest management system across Rwanda, designating Gishwati Forest as a zone for sustainable management. During this period, the forest was allowed to regenerate, and its coverage expanded to 886 hectares. From 2008 to 2011, the Great Ape Trust, through the Gishwati Area Conservation Program (GACP) funded by the Great Ape Fund, implemented targeted reforestation efforts, particularly on steep hillsides. In these years Gishwati Forest expanded to 1,484 hectares, and the chimpanzee population increased from 13 to 16 individuals. It was also during this time that plans for a forest corridor connecting Gishwati, Mukura, and Nyungwe Forests began to take shape.

When the project ended, Forest of Hope Association was founded in 2012 by a small group of former GACP employees to continue this important work, enhancing local participation and a long-term commitment to conservation of the Gishwati Forest.



# The Forest of Hope Association

To launch its operations, a fresh conservation graduate was brought on board as the first and only staff member, serving as the coordinator. Looking back, the coordinator describes the early days as particularly challenging:

> "We had no funding and very limited resources. I was handling all responsibilities alone, and people often called it a one-person organization."

Despite the challenges, it was the combined resilience and dedication of both the coordinator and the organization's early members that kept it going through its most critical period.

At that time, local communities heavily depended on the forest for firewood, grazing, illegal mining, and the collection of herbs, often unaware of the long-term damage these activities caused. Simeon Habyarimana, a co-founder, shares a memory:

> "When community members came to complain about crop damages, they would say, 'Your animals have damaged our crops,' as if the chimpanzees belonged to the FHA coordinator himself."

This highlighted the deep lack of connection or sense of ownership between the forest and the neighboring communities. Despite these difficulties, FHA continued its efforts to conserve the forest, working closely with communities to curb illegal activities and improve community engagement.

In 2016, Gishwati was gazetted as a national park alongside Mukura Forest, forming the Gishwati-Mukura National Park. This park is managed by the Rwanda Development Board (RDB) in collaboration with FHA and Wilderness Rwanda, a renowned tourism company. This milestone marked a new chapter, bringing increased government investment in forest protection and opening more opportunities for the surrounding communities, especially through a tourism revenue-sharing scheme, where 10% of all park tourism income is returned to communities living near national parks, including those around Gishwati-Mukura National Park. FHA continues to support the community with livelihood initiatives such as landscape restoration, beekeeping, handicraft, and agriculture to sustain their lives and reduce forest dependency.





FHA's story is one of resilience - overcoming limited resources, uncertainty, and environmental threats through consistent commitment, community partnership, and adaptive conservation strategies.

As Thierry, the FHA coordinator, reflects,

> "Despite the challenges we are proud of what we have achieved. The forest is doing well, biodiversity is increasing, and the community is now our partner in protecting this precious natural heritage."

This journey inspires hope that, with continued dedication and collaboration, thriving protected areas can be restored and protected by empowered communities for lasting benefits to both people and nature.

# Timeline

### Pre 1970s

**A Continuous Rainforest System**

- Gishwati Forest is part of a vast belt of rainforests stretching across Central Africa, connecting westward to the Congo Basin forests and southward to Nyungwe Forest.

### 1970s

**Large-Scale Cattle Ranching and Deforestation**

- Government-led cattle farming schemes introduced to modernize agriculture leading to extensive clearing of native forest for pastureland.
- Forest cover drastically reduced to about 28,000 hectares.

### Up to 2002

**Post-Genocide Against The Tutsi In 1994, Resettlement and Severe Degradation**

- Influx of refugees after the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994 led to widespread clearing for settlement and farming.
- Consequences: landslides, soil erosion, declining water quality, and loss of biodiversity, sparking a call for restoration.
- 600 hectares of forest cover left by 2002.

### 2005 - 2008

**Projet d'Appui à la Reforestation au Rwanda (PAFOR)**

- First structured restoration initiative which focuses on establishing sustainable forest management systems.
- Forest regenerates to 886 hectares.

### 2008 - 2011

**Great Ape Trust / Gishwati Area Conservation Program (GACP)**

- Reforestation focuses on the steep hillsides and habitat recovery.
- Forest increases to 1,484 hectares.
- Chimpanzee population grows from 13 to 16 individuals.

### 2012 – 2014

**Founding and Legal Registration**

- FHA is founded and officially registered in 2012 and obtains full legal status in 2014.

### 2015 – 2016

**National Park Status Achieved**

- FHA's restoration work contributes to the official gazettement of Gishwati-Mukura National Park (GMNP) in 2016, now Rwanda's fourth national park. FHA deepens local engagement and sustainable livelihood programs around the newly protected area.

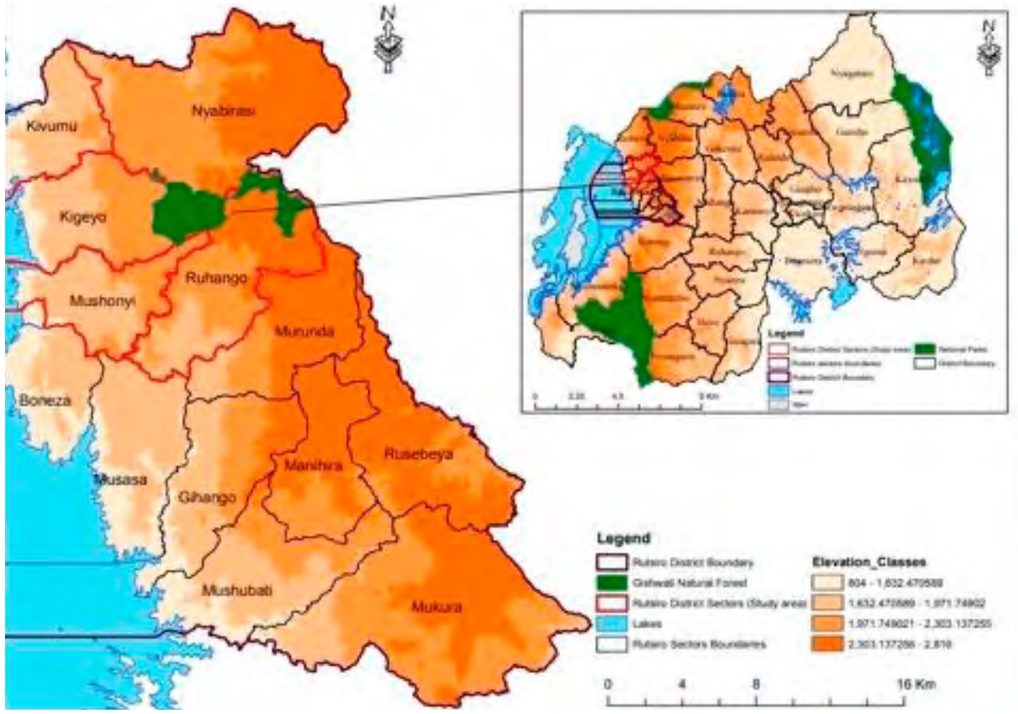
### Today

**Gishwati–Mukura National Park**

- Restoration efforts continue under strong partnerships between FHA, RDB, Wilderness Rwanda, and research institutions.
- The forest stands as a symbol of resilience and a model for landscape restoration in Rwanda.

# GEOGRAPHIC COVERAGE

FHA operates in the Rutsiro district, where the Gishwati Forest is located. Its operations concentrate inside the forest and in surrounding sectors, namely Nyabirasi, Kigeyo, Ruhango, and Mushonyi. Gishwati Forest, currently covering approximately 1,570 hectares, is part of the larger Gishwati-Mukura National Park, whose size is around 3,500 hectares.



# UNDERSTANDING FHA'S CONTEXT



## Achievements and strengths

### Restoring a once-degraded forest

> When FHA began work in 2012, Gishwati Forest covered 1,484 hectares, following previous restoration efforts by Great Ape Trust/GACP. Through sustained restoration efforts, FHA has expanded the forest cover to nearly 1,570 hectares, a recovery of more than 5.7%.

This transformation has revitalized the ecosystem, restored vital water and soil services for surrounding communities, and recreated safe habitats for wildlife, proving that degraded landscapes can be successfully brought back to life.

### From a degraded forest to a national park and an internationally recognised important biodiversity area

> FHA's efforts on the ground and leadership contributed to Gishwati's elevation to national park status in 2016, and later its designation as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2020.

These milestones secured permanent legal protection for the forest and positioned it as a globally recognized conservation success story. This has also attracted new partners and investments in tourism and conservation plus international recognition for Rwanda's conservation-development leadership.

### Increasing primate populations in Giswati forest

> Through FHA's protection and habitat restoration efforts, Gishwati Forest is witnessing a remarkable comeback of wildlife.

Primates in the forest have shown visible recovery; chimpanzees increasing from 19 in 2012 to over 40 in 2025, and golden monkeys from 100 in 2015 to 174 in 2019. FHA's work has also enabled the return and growth of diverse bird, amphibian, reptile, and insect populations, along with rich forest flora. This resurgence of species across multiple groups demonstrates that Gishwati Forest is once again functioning as a healthy, resilient ecosystem, with FHA playing a central role in securing its recovery.

## Communities as partners in conservation

> FHA has transformed local communities from forest exploiters into committed conservation partners.

Through trust-building, awareness programs, and livelihood support, communities surrounding the forest are now actively engaged in restoration and protection. This approach ensures conservation is not imposed top-down on communities but co-created with them, making community members stewards safeguarding biodiversity for future generations.

## Sustainable nature-based livelihoods and community tourism

> By strengthening nature-based livelihoods and linking them to conservation, FHA has improved household incomes, empowered communities, and created long-term incentives to protect biodiversity.

To reduce reliance on forest resources, FHA has strengthened six local cooperatives in areas such as beekeeping, handicrafts, traditional healing, and cultural dance which provide alternative sources of income to communities. The beekeeping cooperatives have merged into a union operating a modern honey processing center, while others now integrate their products into eco- and cultural tourism.

## Integrating scientific research into conservation practice

> FHA, with support from West Chester University, established a Research Center that attracts both local and international scientists.

Research findings directly inform and guide forest management, restoration initiatives and community programs, embedding evidence-based decision making into conservation action. This approach has enhanced FHA's capacity to protect biodiversity and strengthened the effectiveness and impact of its conservation efforts.

## Inspiring the next generation through youth-led conservation

> FHA has inspired and trained the next generation of conservation leaders through 13 school eco-clubs and a community library.

Over the years, students have participated in park visits, conservation trainings, and environmental competitions. These initiatives have not only fostered environmental awareness in local schools and communities but have also influenced peer networks, strengthened community engagement in Gishwati, and contributed to long-term biodiversity conservation outcomes. Despite pauses due to funding gaps, the legacy of these programs continues to shape youth leadership and promote sustainable conservation practices in the region.



# Our Weaknesses

## Limited visibility and inadequate communication

> Although FHA has achieved remarkable impact on the ground, its visibility beyond the local level remains limited.

The organization lacks a strong digital footprint with minimal activity on professional platforms like LinkedIn and an outdated or infrequently updated website. This limits its ability to effectively showcase achievements, share success stories, and engage with potential donors, partners, and supporters. As a result, FHA's powerful conservation impact and community model are not widely recognized nationally or internationally, constraining opportunities for resource mobilization, collaboration, and influence.

## Overreliance on donor funding with limited diversified and sustainable funding streams

> FHA heavily relies on short-term, project-based donor funding and, until now, has not had a well-defined roadmap for growth, impact, and sustainability, making long-term planning and sustainability difficult.

This dependency restricts flexibility in expanding key activities such as community programs, climate resilience initiatives, and conservation education. It also affects the organization's ability to attract competent staff or invest in communications, monitoring and evaluation, and fundraising. The lack of core and/or unrestricted funding exacerbates the challenge, as it hinders the FHA from covering operational needs that fall outside of project-specific budgets.

## Insufficient staffing capacity with unclear and overlapping roles and responsibilities

> FHA operates with a lean team, requiring staff to take on multiple roles and responsibilities.

For example, the coordinator manages strategic leadership, donor engagement, and on-ground responsibilities such as guiding tourists in the field. Such multitasking limits the time available for high-level planning, fundraising, and external engagement. Additionally, key functions such as communications, MEL, and fundraising are not filled, leading to gaps in documenting impact, sharing results, and attracting new support.



# Opportunities

## Leverage Gishwati's National Park and UNESCO Biosphere Reserve status for growth and impact

> The designation of Gishwati as a National Park and UNESCO Biosphere Reserve elevates its global conservation profile and creates new avenues for FHA to scale its impact.

This recognition strengthens FHA's credibility and opens doors for partnerships, research collaborations, conservation funding, and sustainable ecotourism initiatives.

## Alignment with national restoration and development agendas

> FHA's mission and work are strongly aligned with Rwanda's national priorities, including the Green Growth and Climate Resilience Strategy, the Forest Landscape Restoration (FLR) commitments, and Vision 2050.

This alignment positions FHA as a trusted local partner for implementing government-led conservation and community development initiatives. By contributing directly to national targets such as forest restoration, biodiversity protection, and sustainable livelihoods, FHA can attract increased government collaboration, policy support, and funding from development partners seeking to deliver on these frameworks. This creates a strategic opening for FHA to scale its impact and demonstrate how locally driven conservation can advance national goals.

## Scaling successful conservation and community models

> FHA has a unique opportunity to expand its proven restoration and community-based conservation approaches into the adjacent Mukura Forest and other regions.

By replicating successful initiatives such as habitat restoration, primate protection, and sustainable livelihoods, FHA can extend its positive impact to more communities, promote sustainable practices at a larger scale, and strengthen ecosystem connectivity. This expansion will amplify FHA's influence, foster broader community and stakeholder engagement, and build a more extensive network of partners committed to long-term conservation, positioning FHA as a regional leader in community-driven environmental stewardship.

### Establish a conservation and learning center to inspire

> FHA can create a conservation and learning center that highlights the history, biodiversity, and restoration achievements of Gishwati Forest.

This center would serve as a living classroom, educating visitors, students, and communities about ecosystem restoration, species conservation, and climate resilience. By showcasing tangible restoration successes and local conservation efforts, it would inspire community stewardship, strengthen environmental literacy, and encourage active participation in conservation.

Additionally, the center could generate sustainable revenue to support ongoing restoration programs while reinforcing FHA's role as a leader in knowledge-driven, community-based conservation.

## Threats

### Climate Change and landscape vulnerability

> FHA's conservation work in the mountainous Gishwati–Mukura landscape is increasingly at risk from the intensifying effects of climate change.

The steep and fragmented terrain makes the area particularly vulnerable to extreme weather events, including heavy rainfall, landslides, soil erosion, and droughts. These climate-related hazards threaten ecosystem restoration, reduce forest stability, damage habitats, and can undermine the long-term sustainability of biodiversity and community-based conservation efforts. Without adaptive strategies, climate variability could significantly disrupt both environmental and livelihood outcomes in the landscape.

### Invasive alien species threatening native ecosystems and biodiversity

> Invasive and alien species are a major threat to the natural forests where FHA operates. These species often outcompete native flora, altering soil nutrients and structure, which disrupts the balance of the ecosystem.



Over time, this reduces biodiversity and limits the ecological services provided by these natural forests. In particular, exotic tree species can affect water availability, soil fertility, and the composition of the forest, making it harder for native species to thrive. The long-term impact of these species could significantly delay or even reverse the success of reforestation and restoration of native species, impacting biodiversity and ecosystem health.

### Weak coordination between organizations working in the landscape

> FHA is well recognized by the government. But it has limited involvement in consultations with conservation NGOs coming into the region, and its low recognition as a peer in the area by these organizations weakens its ability to coordinate with other stakeholders.

This lack of collaboration and poor communication leads to fragmented conservation efforts, with duplicated or misaligned activities. Over time, weak coordination reduces the overall impact, making it harder to achieve large-scale restoration goals.

### Poverty and limited land driving unsustainable resource use

> High population density and limited agricultural land in communities surrounding Gishwati–Mukura creates significant socio-economic pressures.

Many families face poverty and few livelihood opportunities, which can lead to the unsustainable use of natural resources, including illegal harvesting of timber, firewood, and other forest products. These practices increase pressure on ecosystems, causing habitat degradation, biodiversity loss, and heightened human-wildlife conflict. Without viable alternative livelihoods, this cycle of poverty and resource exploitation threatens the long-term success of FHA's conservation and restoration efforts, making it more difficult to sustain ecosystem health and community engagement in conservation programs.

# STRATEGY FRAMEWORK

## Problem statement

Rwanda's biodiversity faces significant threats from deforestation, habitat degradation, climate change, and unsustainable human activities. Gishwati-Mukura National Park, a vital protected area, continues to experience such challenges that threaten its long-term sustainability despite ongoing conservation efforts.

Key threats include illegal mining, tree cutting, and unsustainable collection of medicinal herbs. These activities are largely driven by surrounding communities' dependence on forest resources for their livelihoods, as they lack sustainable alternatives to meet their basic needs. This pressure is further intensified by a lack of community ownership towards conservation initiatives and sometimes weak law enforcement.

Climate change exacerbates these challenges by altering rainfall patterns, reducing forest ecosystem resilience, and increasing the vulnerability of communities around the forests as they face landslides and heavy rains that negatively impact the agricultural systems that many depend on.

Moreover, the lack of a clearly defined buffer zone around Gishwati-Mukura National Park increases human-wildlife conflicts and forest encroachment, further threatening the ecosystem's integrity.

## Vision

Through community-based conservation, protected areas thrive, creating lasting positive impacts for both ecosystems and local communities.

## Mission

To promote community-based conservation and sustainable livelihoods in and around Rwanda's protected areas.





# Value Proposition

## Reviving landscapes and restoring biodiversity

FHA transforms degraded forests into thriving ecosystems, demonstrating measurable impact on biodiversity, endangered species, and ecological health.

## Communities as conservation champions

We transform local communities into active stewards, empowering them with skills, livelihoods, and ownership to restore, protect and manage their natural heritage.

## Balancing nature and development

FHA proves that conservation and development are not mutually exclusive, creating models where thriving ecosystems and thriving communities coexist.

## Co-creating win-win solutions with communities

FHA works hand-in-hand with local people to design collaborative approaches that balance community needs and conservation goals.

## Leveraging local knowledge for sustainable conservation

FHA taps into the deep understanding and traditional knowledge of local communities to design effective, context-specific conservation strategies, ensuring that interventions are practical, culturally appropriate, and sustainably managed.

# Values

## Bold ambition and action

We dream big, set high goals and work diligently to achieve them. From restoring the Gishwati Forest to integrating community-led conservation, we embrace bold ideas, take decisive action, and remain resilient in the face of challenges. Results matter, and our ambition drives lasting impact.

## Community at the center

People are central to our mission. We listen, engage, and empower local communities as co-creators of conservation solutions. By fostering ownership, dignity, and shared responsibility, we ensure that both people and nature thrive together.

## Care for the Environment

Nature is our foundation. We protect, restore, and celebrate the natural world not only for beauty or biodiversity, but also because nature supports life and sustains communities. Every intervention respects ecosystems, safeguards endangered species, and promotes sustainable practices, cultivating a culture that values biodiversity and secures long-term ecological health.

## Accountability and Reliability

We take responsibility for our actions and deliver on our commitments. At FHA, accountability is a core principle that guides both our internal operations and our external relationships. We believe in honest, transparent reporting, timely delivery, and dependable service to our communities, partners, and funders.

## Partnerships and collaborations that multiply impact

We believe that conservation is a shared effort that requires strong partnerships and collective action. We achieve more together. Collaboration with communities, governments, and global partners strengthens our work, aligns efforts, and creates lasting solutions.



# THEORY OF CHANGE

Forest of Hope Association believes that long-term conservation success can only be achieved through the active engagement and empowerment of communities living around protected areas. Our approach integrates community-driven conservation, sustainable livelihoods, climate resilience, and evidence-based decision-making to reduce pressure on natural resources and ensure the ecological integrity of protected areas.

FHA's priority is to restore and conserve biodiversity through collaborative protected area management and community involvement. Interventions such as ecological restoration, biodiversity and threat monitoring, and community awareness programs aim to reduce conservation threats and build local stewardship. **By reducing threats and involving local communities in decision-making, FHA supports the long-term conservation of protected ecosystems.**

Secondly, FHA promotes sustainable livelihood options such as beekeeping, ecotourism, agroforestry, and handicrafts to reduce dependency on forest resources. These efforts are complemented by investments in social welfare, including access to clean water, education, and health insurance. **As communities gain tangible benefits from nature conservation, their reliance on protected areas declines, promoting a healthier environment and stronger local support for conservation.**

To increase resilience to climate change, FHA implements restoration and clean energy solutions such as reforestation, agroforestry, and clean cooking initiatives. These not only protect habitats but also improve food security and community health and reduce environmental degradation. **Such interventions directly contribute to both thriving ecosystems and resilient communities.**

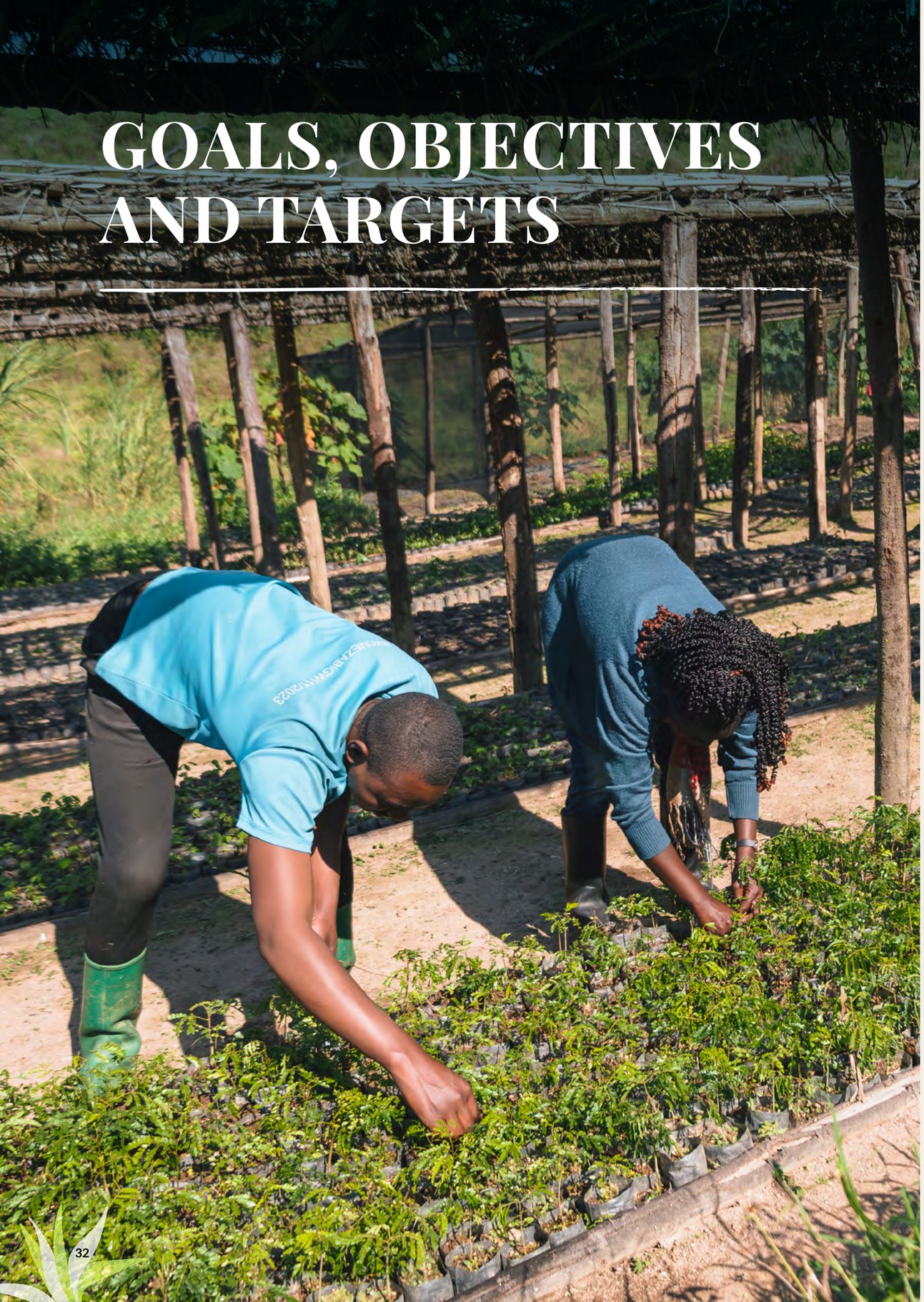
Finally, FHA strengthens conservation outcomes through biodiversity research and knowledge management. By using scientific data to inform strategies, we ensure our actions are targeted, scalable, and responsive to real conservation and livelihood needs.

This learning-based approach allows FHA to continuously improve impact and move closer to its vision of protected areas sustained by empowered communities.





# GOALS, OBJECTIVES AND TARGETS



## Goal 1: Restore biodiversity of the Gishwati-Mukura landscape through collaborative conservation

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE:

**Success in restoring and protecting the Gishwati–Mukura landscape is evident when degraded areas have been rehabilitated, native forests are thriving, and ecosystems are functioning healthily.**

Biodiversity is visibly increasing, with native species populations recovering and habitats well-connected. The landscape is stabilized, with key threats such as deforestation and habitat loss effectively managed, allowing ecological processes to operate naturally. Overall, the Gishwati–Mukura Forest demonstrates resilience, vitality, and a restored balance, reflecting sustained efforts in conservation and ecosystem protection.

### Objective 1: Restore degraded areas of the Gishwati–Mukura landscape.

Efforts focus on rehabilitating deforested or degraded zones to bring back native vegetation and ecosystem functions. This will include developing and implementing a long-term Gishwati–Mukura National Park Restoration Plan in collaboration with the Rwanda Development Board (RDB).

INTERVENTIONS

1. By 2028 develop a long-term Gishwati–Mukura National Park Restoration Plan in collaboration with the Rwanda Development Board.
2. Conduct baseline mapping of degraded zones by 2028.
3. By 2030 reforest 300 hectares of degraded land with native tree species.
4. Establish 10 tree nurseries in communities by 2029.

## Objective 2: Monitor biodiversity to track restoration progress and ecosystem health

Regular monitoring of species populations, habitat conditions, and ecological processes ensures that restoration efforts are effective. Data collected guides adaptive management and informs strategies to maintain and enhance biodiversity over time.

### INTERVENTIONS

1. Conduct annual biodiversity surveys in 100% of restored and protected areas.
2. Develop and maintain a biodiversity database by 2030.
3. Conduct annual monitoring of at least three key biodiversity groups: birds, primates, and vegetation, to track population trends and ecosystem health.
4. Implement a phased and carefully managed removal of invasive exotic species, particularly *Acacia* and *Alnus*, across extensive sections of GMNP, clearing 15 ha per year to reach 60 ha by 2030.

## Objective 3: Expand successful Gishwati-based conservation initiatives to Mukura to support community resilience and overall conservation outcomes.

Mukura forest, 51%, of the Gishwati-Mukura National Park has experienced severe degradation and encroachment. Limited conservation efforts have left its ecosystem fragile. Building on the lessons learned and success achieved in Gishwati Forest, FHA will extend restoration and conservation models and community engagement approaches to Mukura Forest. The aim of this expansion is to enhance ecological resilience and connectivity and improve conservation outcomes of the entire Giswhati-Mukura landscape.

### INTERVENTIONS

1. By 2028 conduct an assessment of the interventions and approaches in Gishwati to identify best practices that can be replicated in Mukura.
2. Adapt and implement community-based conservation and restoration programs in Mukura based on models from Gishwati.
   - » **Target:** At least two projects are implemented in Mukura Forest by 2030.
3. Introduce and integrate community awareness and sustainable livelihood initiatives that have shown positive outcome in strengthening resilience in Gishwati.
   - » **Target:** Conduct two awareness campaigns annually from 2028 – 2030. Introduce at least two nature-based livelihood projects in Mukura by 2030.
4. Strengthen the capacity of Mukura community groups and local leaders through training and exchange visits to Gishwati.
   - » **Targets:** Conduct one training annually from 2028 to 2030. Conduct two exchange visits annually through 2028 – 2030.





# Goal 2: Empower communities to take ownership and leadership in conserving natural resources

### WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

**Communities are at the forefront of conservation efforts, leading initiatives that reflect their priorities and knowledge. They recognize the value of conservation because it delivers both environmental and social benefits: clean water, improved incomes, and better living conditions.**

They take pride in, and actively participate in protecting nature, adopting climate-resilient practices such as agroforestry and using clean energy. Strong, trusted partnerships link communities, government, and conservation actors, creating a unified approach to protecting natural resources. Local institutions are empowered and capable of managing conservation activities effectively. Conservation practices are rooted in community ownership, resulting in sustainable management, accountability, and long-term stewardship of natural ecosystems.

## Objective 1: Build the capacity and leadership of local community structures to manage and sustain conservation efforts.

Strengthening local structures and community leadership deepens the foundation for sustainable conservation. Capacity-building initiatives will equip community structures to design, implement, and monitor their own conservation programs with confidence and accountability.

INTERVENTIONS

1. Strengthen the capacity of community committees in conservation knowledge, community engagement and human-wildlife conflict mitigation. Two trainings annually.
2. By 2027 develop at least three community conservation action plans that reflect local priorities.

## Objective 2: Foster community ownership through co-creation of conservation interventions and participatory decision-making.

Encouraging community ownership ensures that conservation is not externally driven but locally sustained. Engaging communities directly in design, planning and decision-making strengthens ownership, accountability and sustainability. By involving communities, conservation becomes more relevant, culturally appropriate, widely supported, and a shared responsibility.

INTERVENTIONS

1. Organize and implement 12 joint patrols with community committees to monitor threats and illegal activities annually.
2. Organize and implement two joint actions annually through community work - Umuganda - in and around protected areas including tree planting, removing exotic tree species, filling mining pits, and other activities identified in collaboration with committees.
3. Co-create interventions with local communities to mitigate human-wildlife conflict around protected areas including cultivation of wildlife resistant crops.
   - » **Target:** Reach at least 200 households located within a one km radius of the forest.



## Objective 3: Promote increased conservation awareness and knowledge in schools and community groups.

1. Strengthen and expand environmental clubs in schools and youth groups to build conservation knowledge and environmental leadership among youth.
   - » **Target:** Up to 12 new clubs created and supported.
2. Increase public awareness through community outreach using diverse platforms such as radio, campaigns, social events, Umuganda, and tournaments to reach a wider audience.
   - » **Target:** 15,000–20,000 people reached annually.
3. Raise awareness on wildlife behavior, compensation laws, and processes through regular community engagement.
   - » **Target:** At least four meetings annually with RDB and local government in 10 sectors (two meetings around Gishwati; two around Mukura).
4. Enhance FHA's conservation library by expanding its collection and promoting its use to inspire and nurture future conservation leaders.
   - » **Target:** 100 new conservation books added. At least 60 children accessing the library monthly.

## Objective 4: integrate local and indigenous knowledge into the management and conservation of protected areas.

Local and indigenous knowledge is systematically recorded, respected, and actively applied in the conservation of protected areas. Community practices, traditional ecological insights, and cultural values are reflected in Protected Areas management plans and decision-making. Conservation strategies are enriched by this knowledge, leading to more effective, context-sensitive, and culturally appropriate management. Communities feel their contributions are valued, strengthening ownership, engagement, and long-term stewardship of natural resources.

INTERVENTIONS

1. Develop a comprehensive and accessible collection of indigenous knowledge by 2028 and actively use it in conservation and education programs.
2. Support one cooperative of traditional healers to cultivate native medicinal herbs and trees outside protected areas, maintaining traditional practices and earning income.



# Goal 3: Support sustainable conservation-driven livelihoods to strengthen communities' wellbeing and their resilience to climate change

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

**Communities around Gishwati Forest have reliable, sustainable sources of income that are linked to conservation practices, reducing pressure on the forest. Livelihood activities are diversified, environmentally friendly, and climate-resilient, enabling households to adapt to changing climatic conditions.**

Communities demonstrate improved well-being, with increased food security, income stability, and social cohesion. Conservation and livelihood objectives are mutually reinforcing, so that protecting ecosystems directly contributes to sustainable development and long-term community resilience.



## Objective 1: Promote sustainable livelihood activities that reduce environmental pressure and align with conservation goals.

Communities around Gishwati Forest adopt livelihood activities that are environmentally friendly and compatible with the sustainable use of natural resources. These activities, such as sustainable agriculture and beekeeping, help reduce pressure on the Gishwati Forest ecosystems while providing reliable sources of income. Aligning livelihoods with conservation ensures that economic benefits do not come at the expense of biodiversity.

INTERVENTIONS

**By 2030:**

1. Five cooperatives in beekeeping, handicrafts, pottery and carpentry are supported with business development and increased market access.
2. Develop six new and strengthen existing cultural and community-based tourism products such as village tours, traditional beer processing, healing practices, local cuisine, and dance troupes.
3. Support productive small-scale farming by providing inputs including seeds, fertilizers and domestic animals to four community cooperatives around PAs.
4. Promote adoption of clean and efficient cooking technologies to reduce dependence on forest resources, improve household health, and cut carbon emissions.
   - » Target: 5,000 improved cookstoves distributed and in active use.

## Objective 2: Improve the welfare of communities living around protected areas to strengthen their engagement and commitment to conservation.

Strengthening the well-being of communities surrounding protected areas is essential for fostering genuine and lasting participation in conservation. When basic needs such as education, water, and financial stability are addressed, communities are more empowered to support and actively engage in protecting natural resources. FHA will promote inclusive welfare initiatives that build trust, reduce dependence on forest resources, and reinforce shared responsibility for conservation outcomes.

INTERVENTIONS

1. Establish community revolving funds to provide micro-loans that help households meet essential needs such as school fees, health insurance, and agricultural inputs during critical periods.
   - » **Target:** One revolving fund established and operational in 2029.

2. Launch a scholarship program to support children from disadvantaged families who demonstrate interest and commitment to conservation values and practices.
    - » **Target:** At least 100 students from 10 schools in 10 sectors surrounding GMNP supported through scholarships.
3. Develop and maintain community water infrastructure to improve access to safe and reliable water for households around protected areas.
    - » **Target:** Four water supply projects in four sectors installed and operational.

## Objective 3: Strengthen community resilience and adaptive capacity to effectively respond to climate change and its impacts.

Strengthening the adaptive capacity of communities who rely on natural resources is important for both their well-being and long-term ecosystem stability. FHA will promote practical, community-driven climate resilience measures such as agroforestry, soil and water conservation, and adoption of clean energy solutions that safeguard livelihoods while reducing pressure on natural resources.

### INTERVENTIONS

1. Promote agroforestry and fruit tree planting to restore degraded lands, enhance soil fertility, and diversify community livelihoods.
    - » **Target:** 1,000 hectares of degraded land restored through agroforestry and fruit tree planting initiatives.
2. Support the implementation of water retention and soil conservation measures, including drainage trenches, terracing, and rainwater harvesting systems, to reduce erosion and landslide risks.
    - » **Target:** 2,500 households adopt water retention and soil conservation practices.





# Goal 4: Strengthen the availability, access and use of conservation data and knowledge to support adaptive management and informed action

### WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

**Reliable data and evidence on biodiversity and ecosystems in the Gishwati Forest and community areas are systematically collected, analyzed and stored in an accessible knowledge management system.**

Information flows efficiently among conservation partners ensuring continuous learning and improvement. Collaborative research initiatives generate new insights. Monitoring results and local knowledge are well documented and readily available to guide conservation planning and implementation. FHA and its partners use data-driven insights to develop and refine conservation strategies, demonstrate impact and share lessons.

## Objective 1: Establish and maintain a system to collect, analyze, and share conservation data and local knowledge to support evidence-based decision-making.

A reliable and well-coordinated system for data management is essential to ensure that conservation decisions are guided by credible ground-truthed evidence. By building internal capacity and developing a user-friendly knowledge management platform, FHA can enhance how data and local knowledge are collected, analyzed, stored, and shared. This system will not only improve organizational learning but also promote collaboration and transparency among conservation partners as well as provide evidence to inform local and national decision-making on conservation strategies.

### INTERVENTIONS

1. Design, develop and operationalize a secure, user-friendly knowledge management system to store, organize, and share biodiversity data, research findings, and community insights. Target: By 2027 functional system developed, tested and fully operational.
2. Develop data collection tools and protocols for consistency, comparability, and quality information.
   - » Target: By 2027 standard tools and guidelines developed.
3. Build the technical capacity for FHA staff on modern data collection, analysis, and management techniques to ensure consistent and high-quality data generation.
   - » Target: At least two training and refresher sessions conducted annually.

## Objective 2: Promote knowledge sharing and accessibility for all stakeholders.

Ensuring that conservation knowledge on restoration, biodiversity, and community engagement is widely shared and easily accessible enables all stakeholders to make informed decisions and take coordinated action. By providing timely access to data, research findings, and lessons learned, communities, partners, and policymakers can apply evidence-based insights in their work around restoration and protection of forests and natural resources.

### INTERVENTIONS

1. Facilitate FHA participation in national and international conservation conferences (e.g. International Congress for Conservation Biology (ICCB), Business of Conservation Conference (BCC), Conference of the Parties (COP)) to share lessons learned and bring back innovations that enhance local conservation practices.
   - » **Target:** Attend at least one conference per year.
2. Set up regular information-sharing forums, including meetings and report distribution, to ensure government partners receive the latest findings and recommendations.
   - » **Target:** Organize at least three meetings or workshops annually.

## Objective 3: Strengthen collaboration with conservation stakeholders to develop and integrate research, data, and knowledge into national conservation planning and decision-making.

Effective conservation requires strong partnerships between research organizations and government agencies. By formalizing agreements and establishing regular knowledge-sharing mechanisms, FHA ensures that its data, monitoring results, and research findings are intentionally communicated and utilized. This strengthens evidence-based decision-making at the national and local levels and enhances the impact of conservation initiatives.

### INTERVENTIONS

1. Formalize partnerships by establishing MOUs with key government agencies (e.g. RDB, RFA, local government) to integrate FHA research and data into policy and planning processes.
   - » **Target:** By 2027 at least three MOUs signed.
2. Engage and collaborate with academic and research institutions to co-design studies and pilot projects, ensuring new findings directly inform conservation strategies and on-the-ground interventions.
   - » **Target:** Establish or strengthen five partnerships with local and international research institutions.



# STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Strategic partnerships are central to our mission and success. Effective conservation and restoration of the Gishwati–Mukura landscape require strong, long-term collaboration including with government, private sector, and research institutions. Through these partnerships, FHA leverages strengths, resources, and expertise to achieve shared conservation goals and create lasting impact for people and nature.

## Private Sector

Wilderness Rwanda has been a key partner that supports primate habituation and tracking by funding the salaries of about 20 full-time local trackers who monitor wildlife, collect data on ecological patterns, and help locate primates for visiting tourists. This partnership strengthens conservation, tourism, and local employment and has also funded a refurbishment of a two-bedroom guesthouse that generates income to support FHA's operations.

## Academic and research institutions

FHA collaborates with universities to strengthen scientific understanding of the forest ecosystem and biodiversity. This generates data, insight and innovations that inform adaptive management and guide restoration strategies. For instance, Chester University has funded the development of the FHA research center, equipped to host field researchers.





# IMPLEMENTING AND RESOURCING

Achieving lasting conservation impact requires a strong and resilient organization with the right structures, systems, and resources in place. FHA will focus on building an organization that is well-governed, financially sustainable, and equipped with a skilled and motivated team capable of delivering high-quality programs.

Strengthening our internal capacity, including governance framework, team competencies, monitoring systems, and communications will enhance efficiency, accountability, and strengthen credibility. A well-resourced FHA will be able to plan strategically, attract and manage funding effectively, and establish and maintain meaningful partnerships. By investing in institutional growth, FHA will position itself as a leading restoration organization driving measurable, long-term change in Rwanda.

## Organizational capacity

A strong and well-coordinated team is the backbone of successful restoration and conservation work.

FHA will invest in staff development, clear organizational systems, and an enabling work culture that fosters innovation, accountability, and collaboration. This will include refining roles, improving internal coordination, and ensuring staff have the necessary technical and leadership skills to deliver results efficiently. We will:

1. Develop and implement a recruitment plan aligned with strategic goals and maintain an updated organogram clarifying roles, responsibilities, and competencies.
2. Provide staff with professional development opportunities including technical training, leadership and team building.
3. Recruit additional staff to fill critical gaps, particularly monitoring and evaluation, communications and fundraising.
4. Enhance staff remuneration, motivation, and benefits by increasing salaries, establishing performance-based incentives and supporting local health insurance.
5. Review and improve internal policies and standard operating procedures to build efficiency and accountability.

## Resource mobilization

To sustain and scale its impact, FHA will focus on diversifying its funding base through grants, partnerships, and innovative financing mechanisms, securing more core and flexible funding to invest in the team and core functions. Building more and strong long-term funding relationships, developing investable proposals, and demonstrating accountability will strengthen financial resilience.

FHA will develop a comprehensive fundraising strategy that will focus on both long-term and short-term initiatives to unlock additional funding opportunities for continued restoration of Gishwati Forest and expansion to Mukura Forest. With our strong reputation and proven track record in delivering interventions, emphasis will be placed on communicating impact as the organization grows. Specifically, FHA will focus on the following:

1 Develop a comprehensive fundraising strategy to guide donor engagement, grant applications, and diversified income streams.

2 Promote alternative income-generating initiatives, including promoting the FHA eco-lodge with tour operators, improving quality service and guest experience, to provide sustainable revenue for conservation activities.

3 Build internal capacity for resource mobilization by training staff in proposal development, donor engagement, and impact communication.

## Communications

Strategic communication will position FHA as a credible voice in conservation and a trusted partner to communities, government, and donors. Through clear messaging, storytelling, and consistent outreach, FHA will raise awareness of its work, share evidence of impact, and strengthen advocacy for conservation across all levels.

FHA will craft a communication strategy to enhance outreach and engagement with current and potential partners and funders, as well as deepen connection with the communities we serve. Specifically:

1. Develop a strategic communications plan to guide messaging, branding, and outreach activities and develop communication materials tailored for different audiences, including donors, communities, and partners.
2. Strengthen digital and media presence through social media, website updates, newsletters, and storytelling.
3. Organize annual or biannual stakeholder engagement forums to share progress, lessons learned, and impact stories.

## Monitoring and Evaluation

Robust M&E systems are essential for tracking progress, learning from experience, and informing decision-making. FHA will improve data collection, analysis, and reporting systems to measure both programmatic and organizational performance.

Lessons learned will feed into strategic planning and adaptive management, ensuring continuous improvement and accountability. We will:

1. Develop and implement a Monitoring and Evaluation framework.
2. Train staff in data collection, analysis and reporting to ensure high quality and timely monitoring.
3. Establish a learning culture by documenting lessons learned and best practices and sharing them internally and with partners.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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We further acknowledge the continued support and collaboration of our donors, the Rwanda Development Board (RDB), Rutsiro District, the local communities, and all other partners who have contributed to advancing conservation and community development in the region. Their engagement, advice, and shared commitment have been central to FHA's achievements so far and will continue to support FHA's mission.

Together, these partners, collaborators, and communities continue to inspire and strengthen our efforts to conserve nature, protect wildlife, and improve livelihoods for generations to come.



Forest of Hope

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