



## **Empowering women through conservation-driven communities**

As Women's Month draws to a close, the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) reflects on the role a conservation organisation has to play in empowering women, both in the workplace and in communities. Ndzalama Chauke, The EWT's Wildlife in Trade Programme Administrator, elaborates: "As a young woman, many people were surprised at my desire to get involved in conservation – they told me this was a man's job, but I think I've shown them that anyone can have a career in conservation if it's really what they want! Prior to getting involved with the EWT, first through a Conservation Leadership Training Programme, then as an intern, and now as a full-time member of staff, I had no idea of the scope of the conservation industry – I thought you either had to be a field guide or an environmental educator. But there's so much more to it! And the EWT really places an emphasis on what's important to each individual team member and his or her development. I was never treated like someone who could only make photocopies or do other jobs that wouldn't build on my experience, and when I met up with other interns, I realised that the amount of exposure to different elements of conservation work we were given at the EWT was unique. And with the support of my manager and mentor, I know I will continue to find my way to achieving my dreams."

Women make up more than half the team at the EWT, and the organisation takes a firm stance on providing equal opportunities to all employees, regardless of gender or race. A strong emphasis is also placed on a culture of learning and development, and many of the women of the EWT have grown their careers within the organisation, starting out as interns and progressing from there, much like Ndzalama. More importantly, a number of the EWT's *conservation in action* programmes are designed to include community work which empowers women.

The EWT was the first conservation NGO in the country to recognise the importance of Population, Health and Environment (PHE) programmes as a means of acknowledging women's reproductive and health rights and the role of empowering women in keeping family sizes sustainable and small. These kinds of programmes provide an important model for marginalised rural areas where community health and wellbeing is dependent on ecosystem health, like many of those in which the EWT operates. PHE programmes integrate improved sexual and reproductive health services with conservation actions and the creation of livelihoods. They have been proven to result in greater health, human welfare and conservation outcomes than single sector approaches, and the EWT is proud to be the only South African conservation organisation currently implementing such programmes.

One example of this work is the ground-breaking initiative run by the EWT called "Hayi Laa!" (meaning "Not Here!" in Shangaan) in Hluvukani, Limpopo, funded by the British High Commission Prosperity

Fund.. This innovative project addressed both social and wildlife crimes in the community, through a series of five day workshops attended by more than 600 people. The workshops were based on a model designed to create community-wide attitudes of zero tolerance towards all forms of sexual assault, domestic violence, child abuse and HIV/AIDS stigma, developed by the EWT's project partner The Thohoyandou Victim Empowerment Programme (TVEP). While the primary focus remained on women's rights and the social crimes that impact on these, awareness of wildlife crime was incorporated into the model as well. This was important as both social and wildlife crimes tend to be underreported, and because the criminal syndicates that can infiltrate communities as a result of wildlife crime also tend to attract other social problems such as alcohol and drug abuse, and prostitution, impacting on the women of the community.

Alternative livelihood projects are another core offering from the EWT that facilitate the empowerment of women in the community. These projects are incorporated into a number of the organisation's programmes, including the African Crane Conservation Programme (ACCP), which has provided start-up capital for livelihood activities that do not cause wetland degradation, including craft making, poultry production, beekeeping and backyard gardening, and have also trained female nature guides so that they can gain the technical skills needed for them to be employed in the ecotourism industry. In Groot Marico, the EWT's Source to Sea Programme has partnered with businesswoman, Mickaela Fay, in a social enterprise silk production start-up. This will facilitate the setting up of small-scale silk worm farms, and the team is currently developing the business plan and sourcing the materials and equipment for a pilot. If this social enterprise proves to be viable, they will upscale and expand, thereby increasing the number of business and job opportunities available to the people in this community.

The EWT's Threatened Amphibian Programme's Natural Resource Management project also has a particular emphasis on women – the target for employment is 60% women and the team is currently on about 29 (43%) females out of a team of a total of 67. Tawanda Msomi, a young woman and supervisor on the project's Bluff team says: "It gives me a sense of pride to know that I am doing my bit to help the environment by working with the EWT on this project." The project entails alien plant clearing and wetland rehabilitation work as part of the Pickersgill's Reed Frog project. This naturally involves hard physical labour in terms of alien plant clearing, but the EWT team has also provided training on plant propagation, establishing living nurseries to grow indigenous plants for rehabilitation purposes, wetland rehabilitation and vegetable gardening activities with a reduced impact on the wetland areas in which the EWT is working. These are skills which can also be utilised in other areas of the women's lives, adding to the empowering effect.

Precious Morgan, receptionist at the EWT, whose mother also worked for the organisation for many years as its bookkeeper, sums it up by saying: "I think the EWT is a really special place to work, not just because of what we do to save animals and habitats, but also because the work we do has such an important impact on communities. The work that we do with schools, helping children to get food by learning to garden, and with women in communities like Groot Marico, where we help them to find alternative ways to make a living, is so important to me."

