



# THE SOFT FOOT ALLIANCE

An IPEN Case Study

Lush Spring Prize 2017: **Intentional Project**

## Project Summary

The Soft Foot Alliance is a new Trust dedicated to improving the lives and landscapes of people living on the boundary of Hwange National Park and at the same time achieving a sustainable co-existence with wildlife. SFA serves to design and implement long-term sustainable solutions that promote human-wildlife co-existence.

By designing actions that firstly improve the lives and the livelihoods of the people living with Lion, Hyena, Elephant, Baboon and Honey Badger and secondly promote the conservation of the animal, we aim to achieve co-existence between the two.



Regenerative co-herding training.

## SFA's Permaculture & Agroecology Education Lessons

- Put people first when seeking to achieve conservation outcomes that enable human/wildlife co-existence, particularly where people are struggling to survive through lack of opportunities.
- Build skills that create a wider range of economic opportunities, alongside developing experience in regenerative grazing techniques.

## Guiding Ethics and Principles

SFA uses Permaculture ethics and principles as guidance for the design and implementation of their project:

- Earth Care, People Care, Fair Share
- Focus on long term sustainability
- "Co-operate, don't compete"
- Respect for all life
- See solutions inherent in problems
- Work with nature not against it!

Competition for scarce resources brings people and animals into conflict situations. By maximising efficient use of resources we limit that possibility arising, and people's vulnerability. In each project, we come at complex conservation problems from the people's perspective FIRST!

We believe if we are sensitive to the needs of the people that live on the boundary of the protected area and help make their lives easier, then we can truly look forward to something sustainable.

A conservation outcome is designed into each project. But we take care of the people first because they are "the coal-face of conservation."



**Thandolwenkosi Tshuma**

### **Thandolwenkosi Tshuma – Sianyanga villager**

*Through the field trip to permaculture projects around the country “I have been working together with people now, meeting different people. I now make rocket-stoves to sell, its improving my life and family. I am also working together on a grazing plan for our cattle as well as reducing deforestation.”*

### **Mpiyekhaya Ncube – Ndawonye (Co-Herd) project coordinator**

*“I am Mpiyekhaya living on the edge of Hwange National Park, doing Holistic Grazing through the “Ndawonye project”. As we are herding livestock together, this can give us abundant food and water for people and livestock throughout the year. Through the Soft Foot Alliance phones which were given to each herder we have reduced the conflict with wildlife (lions, hyaena and elephant) through better communications.”*



**Mpiyekhaya Ncube**

### **Marlene Sabeta, local lodge owner and Soft Foot Alliance supporter**

*“We wholeheartedly support the change the Soft Foot Alliance trust has brought to the community around the national park. Their approach is holistic and they stick to their vision of “earth care, people care, fair share”, through training and empowering community members. The community is now planning and executing regeneration of grasslands, protecting cattle and wildlife, creating and cooking on rocket-stoves, recycling wood and glass and giving the participants a better chance of a livelihood, happiness and survival.”*

### **SFA’s Examples of Good Practise: WHAT Has Been Done**

The Soft Foot Alliance started by organizing ward-wide holistic participatory workshops in every village, done in three 10-day phases over a 4 month period, using experienced facilitators with expertise in holistic management in communal areas and participatory processes.

- In the first session, each village worked through story-telling, team-work and drawings to look at what life and the landscape was in the past, what it is now and what everyone dreams of for the future. Many lessons were learnt and through physical demonstrations of the problems and solutions there was a real awakening that regenerating the land is imperative to attain future dreams. Village-heads took part in the first session and named this journey “Kubusilizya Antomwe” (Regenerate Together) in Tonga, a local minority language.
- The next sessions created maps of their areas and planned their livestock grazing to both regenerate the land and protect livestock from predators.
- To conclude the sessions, SFA funded and supported a very positive stakeholder’s meeting - the first meeting the community hosted for themselves. Community leaders shared their vision of Kubusilizya Antomwe (Regenerate Together) with national parks, the forestry commission, conservation organizations, lodge owners and others, with participatory methods used to create space to build collaborative relationships.
- SFA is now supporting and monitoring the 3 villages who have started implementing the grazing plans through our existing co-herd initiative, which is linked to skills training.
- A very successful step was a competition process to find ‘fire-souls’ which selected 13 local people to acquire tools and knowledge, start implementing this, and share this with their villages. This group was taken across the country to:



**Marlene Sabeta**

- Train in permaculture and water-harvesting methods, in Chikukwa, a community that have been practicing permaculture and water-harvesting for more than 20 years;
- Visit established home permaculture and 'water harvester' projects, the PORET (Participatory Organic Research Extension and Training) project in an area with similar poor soils, dry conditions and low-rainfall to the trainees' home area, and training with farmers who had been applying the water harvesting knowledge.

The participants all came away inspired and ready to implement changes and put them into action. On their return, in each area, the group gave feedback on the trip to the local community, sharing a film, photos and demonstrating how to construct and use an A-Frame to mark and dig swales on contour. Tools were bought to start rain-water harvesting in each area, around homesteads and throughout the community. People's minds and actions can be hard to change but the power of seeing something different with their own eyes is undeniable. Most people who attended training and site visits have started implementing things they have learned such as rain-water harvesting.

#### Other achievements in 2017/18:

- 5 Rocket stove workshops in 5 villages (50 women), with each participant making their own super-efficient stove from locally available clay and manure;
- 3 "Wicking worm bed" construction training and demonstration workshops on how to build extremely water efficient vegetable beds, requiring only 80 litres of water once every 3 weeks;
- 'Kulisumpula Beads': a group of 12 women trained in kiln construction and how to make beads from recycled glass bottles from local lodges – the beads, sold as jewellery to tourists, create income for these women;
- The skills training centre for the herders operates from a rented building: carpentry is mainly taught currently;
- Co-herd herders were taken to 'The Africa Centre for Holistic Management' (Victoria Falls) to train with herders there, in exchange for a rocket stove workshop for women in the villages in that area.

## SFA's Ways of Achieving Good Practise: HOW It Is Done

**Multi-functional bee-keeping:** 3 community members from 3 villages were selected to take part in a beekeeping workshop - to test bee-hive fences around fields along the boundary with the protected area - in Kenya, bee-hive fences have stopped 80% of elephants from entering fields. The co-herders who are doing carpentry training are making hives to the "barefoot bee-keeper" design, to ensure the health and well-being of bees. The hives will eventually be used in and around communal forest areas, to protect trees, bees, the whole environment and uplift the community through income generation, selling honey and wax products.



**Herders learn skills in regenerative herding methods and carpentry – which is linked to bee keeping - giving them a range of income generating opportunities.**

**Multi-functional co-herding:** SFA's challenge was to turn herding into an opportunity to elevate the herder's status and use cattle to regenerate the landscape. Starting with a dozen herders, we gave them uniforms and linked them with the local Lion Guardians with cell phones and Whatsapp groups.

By following a **Holistic grazing plan**, collective herding in large herds helps regenerate the grasslands instead of overgrazing them. The cattle are brought back each night and held in mobile-bomas which serve the dual purpose of protecting livestock from predators and fertilizing the fields at the same time.

By cooperating and sharing the load, herders buy themselves time off. During these periods SFA offers them opportunities to learn new skills – including carpentry, how to make glass beads out of recycled bottles and weaving intricate designs around glass bottles using old sacks. These skills add "strings to their bows", and products and services they can sell to provide for their families and develop their future. They mentor their brothers so that when they move on their cattle will be looked after and their brothers get the skills.

Co-herd has the Ndebele name "Ndawonye" which means "together" and together we are uplifting a community whilst regenerating landscapes and saving lions in the process.

## Permaculture Principles & Design in Action

Permaculture design can be very complex for the communities we work with. It is often techniques that are taught, yet the overall design process is so important to communicate and understand in as simple terms as possible. This is a challenge we are working on through breaking down the process.

Permaculture Principles in Action: multi-function; multi-supply; small change for big effects; relative location; observe & interact.

## Practical Next Steps

1. Build solid relations with local leaders and the international communities alike.
2. Present living examples of practical solutions.
3. Truly energize and empower the community to move forward in a regenerative way through training.

The Next Steps are designed to be multi-functional, by meeting individual, community and livestock needs, through raising skills and developing income generating opportunities, while also protecting wildlife.

Next steps for projects:

- Finalizing the best bee hive designs and setting up fields with hives to test how well they work as a barrier against elephants entering fields – linked to skills development and income-generating opportunities.
- Establishing a village permaculture market garden in Masikili village, establishing two water sources, rain water collection and a borehole.

Next step for linking demonstration, training and raising income:

- On-going demonstrations of water-harvesting and permaculture techniques.
- Training in industrial sewing machine skills so that all mobile livestock bomas are made locally, for protection from predators, to fertilize fields and to create more income generating opportunities through making and repairing tents for local photographic safari lodges.

## Lessons from SFA's Initial Outputs & Outcomes

The biggest lesson: "The power of inspiration! Every other form of training and motivation pale in the face of people seeing and experiencing something for themselves. Positive approaches that allow people to see what is possible!"

Cultural awareness and sensitivity is vitally important for enabling change in difficult situations:

- Using participatory methods creates a space that allows those who never have a voice to be heard.
- Much cultural knowledge is tied to the protection of the land - an erosion of tradition is leading to degradation of the landscape and the social fabric.
- Each village has a different story - for most, the present is painful, and dreaming of the future is difficult for some.
- Most villages want to use holistic management but many forces at play can make it challenging to implement.

In many areas where people live with wildlife, the people are struggling to survive, the jobs in the wildlife industry are too few and people come from other areas with more qualifications and experience - these communities need more opportunities. **Creating regenerative activities and income streams are imperative for the well-being of all.**

## From Inspiration to Action

The Soft Foot Alliance provides strong lessons about linking education and skills development to improved economic opportunities that also provide beneficial protection of crops and livestock, as well as protecting wildlife.

What lessons from SFA could help your project, community or network in relation to:

- a) Project development and evolution, and scaling-up benefits in valuable ways at the local level?
- b) Permaculture and agroecology education and training, skills and enterprise that relates to local needs?

## Summary of the Difference arising from the Lush Spring Prize

The Spring Prize support has particularly helped: a) demonstrate the fact that people believe in us and share our vision; b) in terms of the exposure and funding; c) enabling us to organise and take the inspirational training trips.

In more detail, it has helped to implement ideas which we had for some time but that didn't 'fit' into a lot of standard 'conservation' or 'development' funding opportunities. As a permaculture-based funding opportunity, it gave us the freedom to work towards a community wide dream of regenerating the landscape for people, wildlife and livestock, and tackling human/wildlife conflict.

## Legal Status, Structure & Size

Soft Foot Alliance was started in 2017 and as a very young project, is a very small but growing non-profit community organisation, registered as a Trust.

## Contact Information

**Website:** [www.softfootalliance.com](http://www.softfootalliance.com)

**Email:** [laurie.nomadarts@gmail.com](mailto:laurie.nomadarts@gmail.com)

**Address:** The Soft Foot Homestead, Masikili Village, Mabale, Hwange District Post office Box 10 Dete, Zimbabwe

**Facebook:** [www.facebook.com/softfootalliance](http://www.facebook.com/softfootalliance)



## International Permaculture Education Network (IPEN)

*Increasing the effectiveness and coherence of permaculture education internationally*

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