

Improving protected area management in Western Equatoria, South Sudan

Beneficiary: Fauna & Flora International
Location: South Sudan, Africa
Grant Cycle: 2023 - 2026
Type of Grant: three-year program support
Animal Welfare & Protection
Website: fauna-flora.org

Established in 1903, Fauna & Flora International (FFI) is the world's oldest international conservation organisation. For more than 120 years FFI has been working with its partners around the world to protect and conserve threatened species and ecosystems. The Nando and Elsa Peretti Foundation's commitment to protecting the environment dates back to its founding in 2000 and Flora & Fauna was one of the first organisations the Foundation partnered with to help preserve the world's biodiversity. Since 2001, the NaEPF has worked with Flora & Fauna on several projects, and in 2023 the NaEPF renewed its support for the organisation with a grant of over EUR 3 million that will fund six new projects to preserve the environment and biodiversity worldwide. Southern National Park (SNP), established in 1939, covers more than 22,000 km² and is South Sudan's oldest and largest national park. SNP offers an expansive, intact savanna woodland habitat, where recent scoping suggests it is still teeming with wildlife. Recent camera trapping undertaken by Fauna & Flora indicates the presence of wild dogs, leopards, spotted hyenas, lelwel hartebeests, and several primates, including the eastern chimpanzee. The exact status of once-abundant species, including lions and elephants, is unknown due to data deficiency, but efforts to confirm their presence in SNP are ongoing. For some time, there has been only anecdotal evidence that lions live there. However, an exciting camera trap image from June 2022 confirms that this is in fact true by recording a male lion carrying his warthog kill in SNP. Fauna & Flora has worked in partnership with communities and the Ministry of Wildlife Conservation

and Tourism (MWCT) in Western Equatoria, South Sudan, since 2010. This partnership has focused on biodiversity conservation and sustainable natural resource management in Western Equatoria, laying the foundations for the improved management of Southern National Park (SNP) as an anchor for broader environmental management, development, and stabilisation goals. Fauna & Flora has utilised decades of experience in conflict-afflicted countries to manage South Sudan's often fragile political and security situation, which has enabled the organisation to maintain an almost continuous presence on the ground, with solid support from the government and communities. By developing conflict-sensitive approaches to improved management and partnerships between park authorities and neighbouring communities, including those holding ancestral rights to buffer areas, FFI has supported resilient livelihood development, resulting in enhanced social cohesion and greater biodiversity protection. Despite the sheer size and significance of South Sudan's natural heritage, its protected and unprotected wilderness areas have largely been without investment for generations, underpinned by a lack of capacity and resources. Additionally, due to the recent conflict (2013-2020) and the ensuing economic collapse, social exclusion and food insecurity remain significant challenges throughout South Sudan. The World Food Programme currently estimates that over 70% of the population faces "severe food insecurity". These challenges exacerbate a multitude of direct threats to biodiversity. Unmitigated and illegal extraction of resources through hunting and logging for high-market-value resources is

driven by pressure from local groups facing severe poverty and food insecurity. Recent and potential conflict, weak infrastructure, and economic collapse expose the Western Equatoria landscape to further unregulated resource extraction that could undermine potential opportunities for long-term stability and economic growth based on sound natural resource management. FFI understands that consistently and respectfully engaging and ultimately empowering local people to understand and invest in these areas' management and sustainable utilisation is vital in achieving conservation goals.

The overall strategic goal for the South Sudan Programme supported by the NaEPF is to create a network of functioning protected areas in the Western Equatoria landscape (Southern National Park, Bire Kpatuos and Bangangai Game Reserves) that can secure connectivity and biodiversity whilst enhancing human well-being. Therefore, the project's specific purpose with regard to the support of the Nando and Elsa Peretti Foundation is to ensure an ecologically functioning ecosystem core zone within Southern National Park whilst enhancing human wellbeing. The goal is supposed to be reached in 2026 through two objectives:

- 1- improve the protected area management in the 5,000 km² core zone in and around Southern National Park: develop park infrastructure, provide necessary equipment to rangers and Community Wildlife Ambassador (CWA) to conduct biomonitoring and anti-poaching patrols, provide additional ranger training on Protected Area Management, and conduct ongoing camera trap monitoring of key wildlife species;
- 2- involve local communities in wildlife monitoring activities and promote sustainable natural resource handling: strengthening community capacity and governance to afford all community members the opportunities and skills to participate in natural resource management and sustainably meet their needs.

The funding from the **Nando and Elsa Peretti Foundation** will be critical for further catalysing and sustaining an expansion of engagement in the Western Sector of SNP over 3 years. It includes: assuring security, building technical and operational capacity, designing locally appropriate and participatory governance and management strategies, analysing and monitoring biodiversity, and supporting livelihood development as a means to promote conservation and support for protected areas.