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Saving Wildlife in Zambia, and Raising Human Prospects

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MPIKA, [Zambia](#)

IT is easy to dismiss this part of the world as hopeless. Sub-Saharan Africa has some of the highest mortality rates, the lowest literacy rates, the worst unemployment, the most tenacious, soul-eroding poverty on earth. The problems are so vexing, so widespread, that the question is not so much what to do as where to begin.

Hammer Simwinga began here, in remote northeast Zambia, in a village that is little more than a gas stop for big semis plying the Cape-to-Cairo truck route. When Mr. Simwinga arrived in Mpika in 1994, farming was struggling, and poaching had supplanted crops as a money-earner. Nearby North Luangwa National Park had lost more than 15,000 elephants, thousands of antelope and buffalo, and all its black rhinos — slain for their tusks, their meat, their horns.

Mr. Simwinga was an itinerant agronomist, drifting from agricultural extension agent to commercial farm manager to volunteer gardening adviser for Catholic parishioners. To his job in Mpika, with the North Luangwa Conservation Project, he mostly brought a big heart and a grab bag of farming tips.

“There was an office, some computers and a few trucks outside,” Mr. Simwinga, 45, said recently. “And I said, ‘Hey — I think this is an opportunity for me.’ ”

That it was. In May, Mr. Simwinga became one of six winners of the 2007 Goldman Environmental Prize, a \$125,000 award recognizing “sustained and significant efforts to protect and enhance the natural environment, often at great personal risk.” It is the world’s largest and most prestigious environmental award.

Thirteen years of work by Mr. Simwinga have turned around the lives of 2,000 families around Mpika, touching perhaps 35,000 people. He has helped hold poaching in North Luangwa park, once rampant, to a near standstill.

“There are few people in Zambia who understand the value of conservation and have the commitment,” said Rolf Shenton, a former member of Zambia’s Parliament. “Hammer really dedicated himself to the equation of getting people happy and reducing their antagonism toward wildlife.”

DESCRIBING Mr. Simwinga’s work is easy: He shows rural Zambians that there are better ways to get

ahead than by killing animals. Doing it well is another matter.

Zambia's Luangwa Valley, the southernmost tip of Africa's Great Rift Valley, was a wildlife paradise until the 1970s, when economic distress and a booming ivory trade turned it into a killing field. In the 1980s, 100,000 of the valley's elephants perished; the number in North Luangwa National Park, a 2,400-square-mile preserve, dropped from 17,000 to 1,300.

In 1986, two American zoologists, Mark and Delia Owens, came to Luangwa to study lions, and found poaching so pervasive that elephants were being shot almost nightly within earshot of their camp.

"The poachers were shooting 1,000 elephants a year," Ms. Owens said in a telephone interview from her Idaho home. "We said, 'How can we study lions with this going on?'"

They set up a project to give local residents alternatives to working for the area's many commercial poachers. A German zoological society financed antipoaching units to patrol the park, and helped establish the North Luangwa Conservation Project, which offered medical care, schooling, job training and loans to start farming.

And slowly, poaching began to ebb. By 1994, poachers were taking fewer than 15 elephants from the North Luangwa park annually.

Enter Hammerskjoeld Simwinga — his name derived from that of Dag Hammarskjold, the [United Nations](#) secretary general killed in a 1961 airplane crash in northern Zambia. Hammer's father, a medical aide, had worked in mission hospitals across Zambia, leaving his son fluent in seven local languages. In the late 1980s, Hammer earned an agriculture degree, then took a job as an extension agent.

"This is where I first encountered a lot of poaching," he said, "but I could do nothing because it wasn't in mandate to control it."

Frustrated, he quit his government post, and worked several farming jobs before coming to Mpika, and the Owenses. Having reduced poaching, the Owenses needed someone to help would-be poachers toward a better life.

"After we hired Hammer, the program just took off," Ms. Owens said. "He had a way of communicating the concept to the villagers — a way of letting them understand that we were working for them as much as we were for the wildlife."

Mr. Simwinga formed "wildlife clubs," co-ops that lent cash to villagers to open stores, run grinding mills or grow crops. He taught farmers tricks, from digging fish ponds to planting hedgerows, that increased crop yields and provided new food sources.

BUT for his perseverance, the effort might have collapsed. In 1996, corrupt Zambian officials involved in poaching raided the Owenses' operations while they were abroad, seizing the assets. The assets eventually

were returned, but the Owenses, advised to stay away, did not come back. The Owenses' German financiers dropped their support — and suddenly, the project lay in Mr. Simwinga's hands. "That's when he became a real hero," Ms. Owens said. "Hammer had no money; they took his bicycle, everything. He had to walk to these villages" — often 20 miles at a time — "to see people."

Said Mr. Simwinga: "I didn't want to lose the history and the name we'd made for ourselves. That's why I continued."

Six of the project's 14 villages dropped out when the Owenses left. But with donations from the Owenses, Mr. Simwinga sustained the rest.

In 1999, his efforts were noticed by Harvest Help, a British charity that promotes environmentally friendly solutions to African poverty. With its help, Mr. Simwinga has expanded his wildlife clubs to 56 villages. He teaches sustainable farming, offers business advice, supports conservation education and even supplies medical necessities to traditional midwives. The Goldman Environmental Foundation, which sponsors the prize, estimates that Mr. Simwinga's work has increased participant incomes a hundredfold and doubled family food supplies.

A few miles from Mpika, Mr. Simwinga stood one morning in the cornfield of Emeldah Mweemba, a 36-year-old mother of four, and explained how a reedy plant there improved production.

Partly by growing the plant, Mrs. Mweemba figures to increase her corn harvest to 8,800 pounds this year, up from 5,000 in 2005. But that is not all: her farm has a compost heap, two fish ponds, a beehive and coriander bushes that provide animal feed and nectar and hinder soil erosion. She no longer clears fields by burning, which wastes nutrients, and she recycles chicken and cow manure for fertilizer.

All this comes courtesy of Mr. Simwinga, who enrolled her seven years ago in one of his wildlife groups. The Mweemba farm has since added acreage and grown its cattle herd to 30 from four.

With her profits, Mrs. Mweemba now sends three of her children — the fourth is grown — to school, at a cost of \$100 each.

Multiply the Mweemba farm by 2,000, and one gets an idea of Mr. Simwinga's influence. Indeed, Harvest Help is curtailing its support, betting that the farmers can sustain themselves.

Mr. Simwinga says he is a bit awed by his \$125,000 prize, and besieged by new friends who want to share it. He is uncertain how the money will be used.

Poachers now come to him, he says, seeking business strategies and sustainable farming tips. "They're seeing that their friends are doing better than they are stealing meat from the bush," he said, grinning.

