

Thriving TOGETHER

A NEW ALLIANCE HAS FORMED TO REVITALISE COFFEE PRODUCTION IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO AND PROTECT ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST ENDANGERED SPECIES.

The eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has seen years of economic and political turmoil, which has impacted the wellbeing of local communities and threatened the unique biodiversity of the area.

Now, a new partnership aims to promote better livelihoods for local coffee farmers and protect the region's endemic and critically endangered Grauer's gorilla.

In October 2021, the Gorilla Coffee Alliance

(GCA) was launched in collaboration with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Nespresso, Olam Food Ingredients (ofi), international non-profits TechnoServe and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), and Congolese social enterprise Asili, supported by the Eastern Congo Initiative (ECI).

"All partners of this alliance are dedicated to the conservation of Kahuzi-Biega National Park, building local livelihoods, improving the wellbeing of the communities around the park, and maintaining the ability to produce world-class coffee," says Andrew Kovarik, GCA Chief of Party and Country Manager of TechnoServe, an international non-profit that works to fight poverty by helping people build regenerative farms, businesses, and markets that increase incomes.

"Conservation has to benefit local communities in order to work, and top-quality coffee can bring farmers enormous income improvements that encourage their long-term commitment."

This initiative will mentor 8500 farmers in South Kivu, DRC, to maximise their coffee

Coffee production is being used to uplift rural communities financially and as a tool for the conservation of natural environments.

production and sales by 2026.

Kovarik says farmers around the national park struggle to access the training, coffee seedlings and shade trees needed to improve their coffee production. Many local coffee washing stations don't have the capacity or technical ability to process locally grown coffee adequately.

"The Gorilla Coffee Alliance will address these challenges by improving total farm productivity to support farmer revenues and protect long-term soil health, biodiversity, and the vital ecological function of one of the world's largest forests."

The Kahuzi-Biega National Park is a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site and one of the few remaining habitats of the world's 6800 estimated remaining eastern lowland or Grauer's gorillas.

"Fifty to 60 per cent of the Grauer's gorilla population can be found in the Kahuzi-Biega National Park, so we felt the protection of the gorilla was a natural outcome of our initiative. We aim to stimulate the community to look after the national park and reduce poaching of the Grauer's gorilla and deforestation around the national park," says WCS Technical Director Deo Kujirakwinja.

"It's an emblematic species of the project and allows us to bring attention not only to the Congolese coffee community, but also the endangered species," he says.

The WCS is a United States non-profit organisation founded in 1895. Its mission is to preserve wildlife and wilderness by understanding critical problems, developing scientific solutions, and taking conservation actions that benefit nature and humanity.

"With more than a century of experience and long-term commitments in dozens of landscapes, WCS has accumulated the biological knowledge, cultural understanding and partnership needed to ensure that the Grauer's gorilla species thrives alongside the local community of South Kivu," says Kujirakwinja.

GCA aims to regenerate coffee production in regions impacted by adversities, including climate change, deforestation, and conflict.

"The Wildlife Conservation Society will be leading the implementation of activities that strengthen the community, including solidifying local governance mechanisms, which will involve biodiversity monitoring to show the improvement of coffee quality in the national park," says Kujirakwinja.

Alongside the WCS is the support of ofi, a new operating group born out of Olam International that offers sustainable, natural, value-added food products and ingredients.

"ofi will not only be a coffee exporting partner but, with our on-the-ground presence, will contribute to designing tailored training curriculums for farmers covering regenerative agricultural practices, post-harvest techniques, farm diversification, as well as nutrition advice to promote healthy communities," says ofi Sustainability Manager Paolo van der Ven.

"Farmers will also benefit from pre-financing



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The Gorilla Coffee Alliance sets out to assist farming households in boosting their coffee production.

of crop inputs and receive high-quality coffee seedlings cultivated in our 10 dedicated coffee nurseries to be set up in the local communities to boost productivity,” says van der Ven.

According to van der Ven, about 40 to 45 containers of specialty coffee per year are produced in the whole region of South Kivu.

Thanks to the GCA, participating coffee washing stations are expected to double their capacity in the next five years, giving farmers finance and technical assistance that will improve their capacity to process coffee at quality levels demanded by Nespresso and other specialty markets.

“We really look forward to designing the training curriculum for more than 8000 Congolese coffee farmers, and working with our partners to build a more sustainable agronomic model for the community,” says van der Ven.

“For example, agronomists will help ensure the right varieties are planted, and the Alliance will ensure healthy planting material and good crop management and harvesting methods,” he says.

Using its sustainability insights platform, AtSource, ofi will be able to monitor the progress made towards the desired social and environmental impact.

Joining the initiative is USAID, an

international development agency and a catalytic actor driving development results.

“USAID’s role is to provide oversight and support to ensure that the GCA is in line with the USAID and DRC Country Development Cooperation Strategy. This objective is to create more resilient communities by increasing inclusive and sustainable economic growth, while ensuring the integrity of the forest ecosystems in the Congo,” says TechnoServe’s Andrew Kovarik.

Since 2017, USAID has been working with TechnoServe to strengthen the coffee sector in South Kivu.

“TechnoServe supports the day-to-day operations of the project, as well as its oversight and overall compliance. We also support GCA’s agronomy training curriculum design and implementation to smallholder coffee farmers, which includes encouraging pruning and rejuvenation, erosion control and establishing shade tree nurseries,” Kovarik says.

Kovarik says in many ways, GCA is a logical extension of the work Alliance partners have been doing to meet the technical needs of producers in the DRC.

“Our strategic approach is to support three key areas: the park, farms and people. Firstly, we’re promoting sustainable and regenerative agriculture practices, which aim to increase coffee productivity and incomes. Secondly, we’re working within the national park landscape to build constituencies through conservation committees, encouraging sustainable coffee production that also protect the park. Thirdly, we’re trying to create incentives for sustainable actions, and responsible stewardship of natural resources, like coffee washing stations,” he says.

And while enhancing coffee production and agriculture training in South Kivu are key endeavours of the alliance, it also thrives to provide community members with access to support networks and services.

Regional Director of Asili Valery Namuto says through the social business platform Asili, created by ECI, its goal this year is to work with community members and coffee cooperatives in South Kivu to provide essential services at affordable prices, such as improved access to health clinics and clean water points.

“We’re taking a holistic approach from the perspective of the coffee farmer. Asili is providing essential services like water and health care, so people not only see a prosperous future for themselves but meet their basic daily needs,” says Namuto.

“And with the support of ofi and Nespresso, who view this as a larger investment to not only create amazing coffee, but partner with farmers in a sustainable way, that’s going to have a ripple effect for generations to come.”

Global coffee roaster Nespresso is contributing to the initiative through its Reviving Origins program, which provides training, resources and support for coffee farmers and communities in regions under threat.

“We’re incredibly proud to be joining this partnership to breathe new life into the region’s coffee industries and communities, which will foster vital economic growth while preserving local ecosystems in South Kivu,” says Nespresso Coffee Sustainability Project Manager Charlotte Ruetz.

“Through our Reviving Origins program, we have been working to successfully revitalise production in several challenged coffee producing regions around the world since 2019, and we’re excited about the important project underway in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

“We strongly believe that coffee can be a force for good, because it can help to shape communities and preserve landscapes, leaving a positive impact on the lives of people and nature.”

Asili’s Namuto says what’s special about the GCA is its deeply collaborative method, when often development projects are conducted in a siloed approach.

“What’s really unique and exciting about this opportunity is partners coming together to build something that will last well beyond the lifetime of a project. The work that ofi is doing to secure the future of coffee production by establishing coffee nurseries, those are investments that aren’t going to go away, similar to the training that the farmers are receiving through TechnoServe,” says Namuto.

“Those are skills that people are going to end up not only taking on themselves but passing on to their children, as well as seeing the value in long term conservation through the work that WCS is doing.

“Our hope as Asili, is to build these services that people see the value in every day.”

TechnoServe’s Kovarik adds that it’s been a blessing to work together with each company, and a great opportunity to use different expertise to conduct positive and transformational change in South Kivu.

“All partners are very flexible and adapt quickly. It’s clear from the proposed interventions that each partner wants to address the community’s needs and introduce concrete steps to improve people’s lives,” Kovarik says.

“Through the training provided and support across the value chain, from the technical advisory services to producers and washing stations, we’re setting the farmers up for success.

“That’s great for producers because they become passionate about coffee, and it’s also great for the consumer, because they’re not just investing in potential, they’re buying quality coffee.” **GCR**



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