



Forest of
Hope

**2025: Year in
Review**



WHO WE ARE

We are a Rwandan non-government organisation founded in 2012, rooted in the communities that live alongside our forests. From the beginning, we have believed that conservation works best when local people lead it.

Our work began in Gishwati Forest at a time when the landscape had suffered severe degradation. Through our Community-based Forest Protection Initiative, we worked closely with surrounding communities to protect what remained and restore what had been lost. This collective effort helped pave the way for Gishwati Forest to gain national park status, now recognised as part of Gishwati–Mukura National Park.

Over the years, our approach has delivered clear results. Illegal activities in Gishwati Forest have dropped by 80%. Forest cover has expanded from 886 to 1,570 hectares. Biodiversity has recovered, including the chimpanzee population, which has grown from 13 to 40 individuals. These changes reflect steady, community-led action and long-term commitment.

Today, we continue this work across Rwanda's protected areas. We focus on landscape restoration, community-led forest protection, environmental awareness, livelihood improvement, and reducing human–wildlife conflict. We work in partnership with communities to strengthen conservation while improving daily life, because healthy forests and resilient livelihoods depend on each other.

Much work still lies ahead. Yet Gishwati Forest shows what is possible when communities are trusted as stewards of nature, and when restoration is built on shared responsibility and hope.



A YEAR OF ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION AND STRATEGISING

Forest of Hope's work this year focused on conservation action, ecological restoration, and careful planning for the future. We strengthened climate and land resilience by implementing a landscape restoration initiative that combined agroforestry with the planting of fruit and indigenous trees. Strong community engagement sat at the centre of this work, enabling local people to take an active role in restoring their land.

We also continued our research by monitoring the primates of Gishwati to support their well-being, inform conservation decisions, and create employment opportunities for neighbouring communities. This year also marked an important milestone for our organisation, as we began developing our first strategic plan to guide and strengthen our future work.



130,000 TREES PLANTED ON 280 HECTARES OF LAND IN THE GISHWATI AREA

These efforts include planting agroforestry species, distributing fruit trees, and promoting assisted natural regeneration. The initiative created jobs for 120 local community members and reached 5,000 beneficiaries. Through this approach, communities are restoring their land while securing long-term environmental and livelihood benefits.

12 YOUNG PEOPLE TRAINED ON TREE MONITORING AND MAINTENANCE

12 young people were trained in tree maintenance and monitoring. They are already serving as community guides, offering technical support on how to care for the newly planted trees. They will also monitor all the trees planted this year to ensure healthy growth and long-term success.



TWO PRIMATE SPECIES ARE BEING MONITORED AND GRADUALLY HABITUATED BY 11 TRACKERS FOR FUTURE TOURISM OPPORTUNITIES

We are proudly contributing to one of Gishwati's most exciting conservation achievements: the ongoing monitoring and habituation of its iconic primates, chimpanzees and golden monkeys. This work is laying the foundation for safe, responsible, and world-class primate tourism, strengthening the Gishwati tourism activities viewing experiences. This effort is transforming Gishwati into a growing ecotourism destination while reinforcing the protection of its wildlife.



12 SHEEP DISTRIBUTED TO 12 HOUSEHOLDS

Through our livelihoods initiative, FHA distributed sheep to members of the IMBONI Cooperative, formerly part of the "Community Forest Protection Initiative Committee." The programme was designed with a "pass-on" approach: after the third birth, each beneficiary was required to give one sheep to a neighbouring household. This simple but effective model will enabled the livestock to multiply and reach more families over time.

1 INCOME GENERATING BUSINESS STARTED FOR VULNERABLE PEOPLE

The INDASHYIKIRWA Association, made up of 38 vulnerable community members, was supported to start a tea seedling domestication business. This assistance enabled them to grow more than 30,000 tea seedlings for sale, strengthening their financial stability.





Community-led restoration is shaping the recovery of Gishwati community farmlands

Communities around Gishwati Forest have lived with the impacts of long-term deforestation. Over the past 50 years, the area lost more than 98% of its vegetation due to encroachment. This led to land degradation, declining soil fertility, shrinking harvests, and limited livelihood opportunities for many families.

In response, we launched a landscape restoration initiative that combined agroforestry, fruit and indigenous tree planting, and assisted natural regeneration. The project also created paid work for 120 local community members who raised, planted, and cared for the trees, strengthening both impact and local ownership. As the trees began to take root, communities started to see positive change, including healthier soils, improved crop performance, and increasing green cover. Families receiving fruit trees also anticipate new sources of nutrition and potential income close to home. To date, more than 5,000 people have directly benefited from the initiative. While it is still early to see the full ecological impact, the project has strengthened community commitment to restoring landscapes, earning income, and building long-term environmental resilience.

One farmer shared: **“It was the first time I saw an organisation provide exactly the number of tree seedlings I needed, Bamboos, Alnus, Avocados, and Grevillea, completely free of charge. I’m very happy because after just one year, almost all of them are growing well. These seedlings have truly been a blessing.”**





Another local resident, Ndagijimana Sebastien, added: **“The trees we planted are not just growing, they are giving us hope for our children’s future. Seeing the growth of my trees, I feel like our land is coming back to life.”**

We also recognised that many young people in the Gishwati area do not own land and often face limited opportunities to engage in restoration work, despite their strong interest in conservation. To address this, we trained 12 young people in tree maintenance and monitoring, equipping them with practical skills and confidence. These trained youth now serve as community guides, supporting households to care for newly planted trees and ensuring proper techniques are followed. They are actively monitoring all trees planted this year, helping secure healthy growth and long-term success.

Beatrice, one of the trained youth, shared proudly: **“Being trusted to be part of the team that supports our parents in maintaining the trees gives me pride and motivation. It makes me feel responsible for protecting our land and shows me that young people have a real role to play in shaping the future of our community.”**

Our work continues to focus on conserving and restoring Gishwati–Mukura National Park in western Rwanda, and this year, the return of primates offered a powerful sign of progress. As our coordinator Thierry Aimable Inzirayineza reflected:

“A moment that stayed with me this year was seeing chimpanzees regularly using a part of the park we started restoring not long ago. Watching them move through an area that was once degraded reminded me why our work matters. Sometimes it takes a long time to see the results of your efforts, but you have to keep trying. I was so glad to see the chimps there; it showed that our efforts are taking hold already and improving the habitat for the wildlife that depends on it.

Reflecting on the site’s history, he concluded: **“This area was completely cut before we began restoring it by planting trees and supporting its natural recovery. Seeing the primates return felt like more than a reward.”**



Small starts, wider impact

The IMBONI Cooperative has long been committed to protecting the Gishwati forest, yet many members faced limited livelihood opportunities. In response to this challenge, we introduced a livestock initiative that provided sheep to cooperative members through a simple pass-on system. After a sheep's third birth, each beneficiary gives one offspring to a neighbouring family, extending benefits beyond the initial recipients.

The turning point came when the first animals began to reproduce. Families who once felt left behind became part of a growing cycle of shared progress. More households are now expected to benefit from livestock ownership, strengthening resilience while reinforcing community-led conservation.

As one cooperative member, Rukara Steven, shared, **“This sheep was a small beginning, but it opened a real path for my family. It helped us improve our household income, gave us hope, and showed us what we can achieve with a little support. And now, because of what we gained, I’m able to help my neighbour in the same way, passing on the opportunity that was once given to me.”**

Within the INDASHYIKIRWA Association, 38 vulnerable members also struggled with limited income opportunities and no stable livelihoods. So we supported the group to launch a tea seedling domestication enterprise, providing training and resources to produce high-quality seedlings for local markets. When the first production cycle succeeded, the association scaled up to more than 30,000 seedlings, demonstrating the business's viability.

Today, the association earns reliable income, strengthening household financial stability and laying the foundation for a long-term, community-led enterprise.

As one member, Ayingeneye, proudly shared, **“This business has given us confidence we never had before. For the first time, we can earn our own income, support our families with dignity, and see a real path toward a better future. It has shown us that with the right support, we are capable of transforming our lives.”**



Looking Ahead to 2026

In 2026, we plan to:

- **Expand our restoration work** by planting 100,000 trees across 70 hectares. This effort will create more than 50 temporary jobs and engage over 2,000 farmers in hands-on restoration activities.
- With support from Maliasili, **we will finalise our strategic plan** and begin communicating and fundraising to support its effective implementation.
- We will also continue **monitoring and habituating Gishwati's primates** to strengthen conservation outcomes and support responsible ecotourism development.

A Message to Our Supporters

We are deeply grateful to our partners, donors, and friends for their invaluable support. To Maliasili, TerraFund for AFR100, Wilderness Rwanda, Rwanda Development Board, West Chester University Foundation, the International Tree Foundation, Jeff and Rita, your contributions made this year's achievements possible. Together, we are building a future where conservation strengthens both healthy ecosystems and resilient livelihoods.

To our stakeholders, we remain committed to working alongside you and ensuring that we grow together. Your collaboration is essential to our progress, and we will continue to strengthen our partnership so that we can achieve our shared goals and create lasting impact for our communities and landscapes.

Thank you so much from all of us at Forest of Hope.

