



DE BEERS

# OKAVANGO ETERNAL

PROTECTING A NATURAL WONDER

## MIDTERM REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prepared for De Beers | March 2025







# INTRODUCTION

The Okavango River Basin, which spans Angola, Botswana and Namibia, is the primary water source for **1 million people** and Botswana's Okavango Delta. The Delta is unrivaled in its biodiversity, supporting the world's **largest remaining elephant population** as well as lions, cheetahs, wild dogs and hundreds of bird species. Surrounded by the Kalahari Desert, it is a 22,000-kilometer freshwater oasis in one of the driest places on Earth.

The Okavango Delta's health is dependent on the Angola Highlands Water Tower (AHWT) and its waterways that transport 2.5 trillion gallons of water annually from Angola through Namibia and into northern Botswana. While the Delta itself holds protected status, the Okavango River Basin that sustains it largely does not. The effects of climate change, population density, water diversion and upstream commercial agriculture are putting this critical lifeline at risk.

In 2021, De Beers and National Geographic launched Okavango Eternal to catalyze and expand the work of the National Geographic Okavango Wilderness Project (NGOWP). Okavango Eternal is a strategic partnership addressing one of the most critical conservation challenges in Africa:

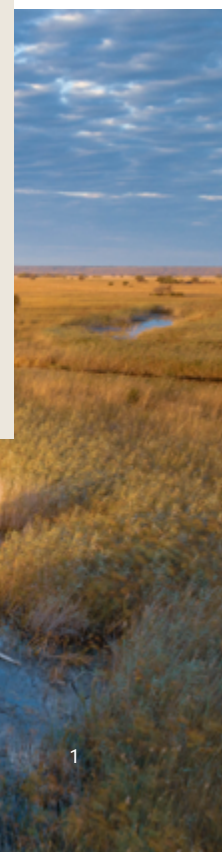
**Helping to protect the headwaters of the Okavango Delta and the biodiversity, people and livelihoods the headwaters support.**

The partnership represents critical inward investment to underpin the resilience and long-term sustainable development goals of the region in the years ahead. It works in collaboration with communities throughout the Okavango region to deliver shared ecological solutions that lead to collective economic opportunity.



**Protecting these headwaters and wetlands, miombo woodland forests – the natural heritage of Angola – is one of the most critical conservation challenges in Africa today.”**

**STEVE BOYES**  
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC EXPLORER,  
PROJECT LEAD



# PARTNERSHIP APPROACH & AIMS

Okavango Eternal is committed to two high-level objectives:

- **Protecting the Natural World** by supporting community-based systems of protection and local governments to protect biodiversity, striving to reach 5.4M hectares around the headwaters of the Okavango River Basin by 2026.
- **Supporting Communities** by enabling stronger economic foundations and providing access to as many as 10,000 livelihood opportunities by 2026.

These objectives are driven by six enabling pillars:

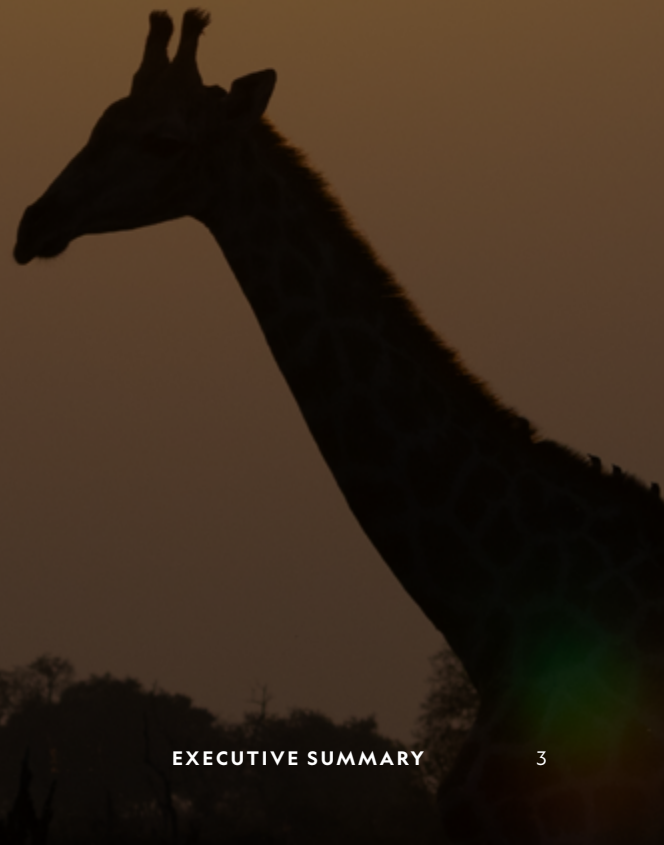
<div>1</div> <p><b>Conservation Stakeholder Engagement:</b> We work closely with decision-makers and traditional authorities to inform and co-create the programs, policies and legislation to ensure the long-term conservation of the greater Okavango River Basin;</p>	<div>2</div> <p><b>Advancing Knowledge:</b> Through groundbreaking fieldwork and research, we are advancing scientific understanding of the area, including the critical values and vulnerabilities for priority action across the greater Okavango River Basin;</p>	<div>3</div> <p><b>Traditional Knowledge:</b> By integrating traditional knowledge within all our programs, we formalize this as a primary mechanism of conservation and ensure that communities can benefit from a wider range of income opportunities;</p>
<div>4</div> <p><b>Capacity Building:</b> We help build local teams, train local technicians and support the next generation of scientists, conservationists and storytellers who will enable long-term and sustainable local impact;</p>	<div>5</div> <p><b>Community Development:</b> We work directly with communities in the Okavango River Basin, helping strengthen socio-economic and educational foundations, which improves accessibility to livelihood opportunities; and</p>	<div>6</div> <p><b>Impact Storytelling:</b> By collecting and sharing stories from the basin, we raise awareness of its wonder and importance to push for biodiversity protection and long-term transboundary cooperation.</p>

## OKAVANGO ETERNAL GUIDING APPROACH



# PROGRESS TO DATE

COMMUNITY	12,000 people benefiting from improved infrastructure in Angola, including refurbishing 2 schools, a water system and building 6 new bridges.	6,000 conservation education engagements — supported by the Nkashi Bus — in villages around the Okavango Delta, providing educational materials and literacy tools.	3,000 students, trainees, scientists, and other visitors hosted at the Nkashi Knowledge Centre in Maun for training, workshops, and community gatherings.	2,923 students supported through Okavango Eternal initiatives, such as Backyard Expeditions, internships, offerings at the Nkashi Knowledge Centres, and the Lisima Knowledge initiative.
	1,527 opportunities across Okavango Eternal-supported initiatives, such as beekeeping, regenerative agriculture, basket weaving, and entrepreneurial skill-building.	60 youth participated in Storytelling Clubs to learn how to document and share cultural and conservation messages while earning an income.	53 full-time staff hired in Angola and Botswana through the establishment of three registered organizations supporting Okavango Eternal partnership implementation.	
CONSERVATION	1.25 M hectares mapped and prioritized in the Lisima landscape to help define conservation management opportunities — such as the formalization of conservation areas.	545 environmental DNA (eDNA) samples collected to help identify biodiversity and invasive species on land and in water.	17 Hydrological and Meteorological Monitoring Project (HMMP) stations operational across the Okavango River Basin, with many stations being the first to ever monitor rivers in the system.	
	10 scientific river expeditions conducted, systematically assessing river health through biodiversity, hydrology, water quality and human impact data.	6 peer-reviewed publications based on research in Botswana, contributing to conservation strategy and habitat mapping.		
STORYTELLING	100 M individuals reached through a paid media campaign with National Geographic CreativeWorks.	4.5 M+ people experienced the incredible Okavango River Basin and Okavango Eternal through “Nkashi: Race for the Okavango.”		





# OKAVANGO ETERNAL MILESTONES BY PILLAR

1

## CONSERVATION STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT



- Okavango Eternal conducted a **Marxan analysis** of the Lisima landscape in Angola, which includes a portion of the **Angolan Highlands Water Tower (AHWT)**, analyzing a range of spatial, biodiversity, and socioeconomic data to identify priority areas for conservation. This analysis marks a critical milestone in the conservation journey for AHWT, **a crucial water source for seven African countries** and the people and biodiversity that call these countries home.
- Utilizing the results of the Marxan analysis, a proposal was submitted to designate a portion of the Lisima landscape within the AHWT as a **Ramsar Wetland of International Importance** to Angola's Ministry of Environment. Securing Ramsar status would **safeguard regional water and food security, unlock global recognition and create livelihood opportunities for the region.**

2

## ADVANCING KNOWLEDGE



- The **Hydrological and Meteorological Monitoring Program operationalized 17 stations** across the Okavango River Basin to monitor floods, droughts and water quality in real time, providing critical insights for researchers, students and local communities reliant on the river system. The HMMP is the **only independent hydrological dataset for the Okavango River Basin**, with many of the autonomous stations being the first to ever monitor rivers in the system.
- **3,170 km of river expeditions** through the Okavango River Basin have broadened our understanding of its rich, underexplored biodiversity, assessing river health and collecting **545 environmental DNA (eDNA) samples**. This non-invasive, cutting edge technology is set to **transform environmental monitoring** by detecting species through traces of genetic material without the need for physical capture, with the ability to track endangered or invasive species and revealing hidden biodiversity. With enhanced collaboration, access to technology like eDNA, and celebration of cultural heritage, the **next generation of local scientists is poised to lead and revolutionize the future of conservation across the Okavango River Basin.**

# OKAVANGO ETERNAL MILESTONES BY PILLAR

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## TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE



- Okavango Eternal has grown the annual **Nkashi Classic** mokoro race, an event that honors the traditions of mokoro (carved canoe) polers, into a nationally recognized celebration with **237 participants and over 5,000 people attending**. The event has become part of a wider 'Nkashi' social movement, propelling people forward in the same way that a nkashi (the wooden pole used by polers) propels a mokoro..
- The **Backyard Expeditions** program bridges the gap between urban teachers and rural learners in the Okavango Delta by inspiring teachers to **learn more about the local environment and traditional knowledge** and then integrate this knowledge into lesson plans helping foster pride in students' homes and heritage. In total, **54 teachers have been trained across seven expeditions, impacting 250 students**.

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## CAPACITY BUILDING



- The Okavango Eternal partnership has improved daily life for 12,000 people in Angola through upgrades to infrastructure, including:
  - building **6 traditional bridges**;
  - expanding healthcare access through a **refurbished clinic with lighting**;
  - **renovating two schools**, which support **1,950 students**;
  - increasing safety and emergency response through **one upgraded airstrip**; and
  - restoring clean water access through a refurbished government water system.
- Okavango Eternal extended the reach of vital community hubs in the Delta, growing the existing **Nkashi Knowledge Centre in Maun** by extending its programmes- **hosting 3,000 visitors, engaging 210 youth in STEM initiatives, and supporting 350 women through financial literacy**; and expanding its reach by funding a second centre in Beetsha alongside the Nkashi Bus - to 'take knowledge on the road'.

# OKAVANGO ETERNAL MILESTONES BY PILLAR

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## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



- In Botswana, **223 livelihood opportunities** have been supported through community development programs, including implementing **financial literacy training to 73 community members**, providing conservation education to more than **6,000 individuals through the Nkashi Bus** mobile resource center, and hosting **60 youth in Storytelling Clubs** learning to share cultural and conservation messages while earning an income.
- In Angola, **856 livelihood opportunities** have been supported through community development programs, including **training 123 beekeepers** in fair trade beekeeping, **educating 137 farmers** in sustainable farming techniques, supporting entrepreneurial skills of **185 basket weavers**, and **training 32 traditional midwives** in infant and maternal health challenges.

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## IMPACT STORYTELLING



- Using the power of storytelling, we've inspired more than **4.5 million people globally with "Nkashi: Race for the Okavango," an 9-time award-winning local language documentary** developed in partnership with regional filmmakers, composers and artists across Botswana. The film, funded in part by Okavango Eternal, has garnered **4.34M impressions** so far and reached an estimated **80% of households in Botswana**.
- Through paid media campaigns with National Geographic CreativeWorks, Okavango Eternal reached **audiences of over 100M**.





## FUTURE LOOK

The Okavango River Basin faces mounting pressures, and continued collaboration is essential to protecting this ecosystem and the communities and biodiversity that depend on it. The Okavango Eternal partnership has activated a broader understanding of the importance of this freshwater resource. It works hand-in-hand with communities, governments and other stakeholders to ensure that the Okavango Delta in Botswana, the critical stretch of the Kavango River in Namibia, and the Lisima landscape in Angola can meet the needs and grasp the opportunities that this ecosystem will present over the years to come.

As we look ahead to the next few years, our partnership will be critical in advancing scientific research, scaling conservation efforts and ensuring that the voices of those who call this place home remain central to its protection:

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**IN APRIL 2025**, the **Nkashi Knowledge Center in Beetsha** will formally open, and the many workstreams of Okavango Eternal in Botswana will fully and formally activate in service of the people of the Okavango Delta.

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**IN JULY 2025**, NGOWP will build a very strong case for a portion of the Angolan Highlands Water Tower to be proclaimed a **Ramsar Wetland of International Importance**, activating recognition and subsequent structured conservation for the Lisima landscape.



**Opening a knowledge center in our village is a transformative step toward empowering the community. I envision the center as a hub of opportunity, one that will not only uplift individuals but also drive economic and social development in the village for generations to come."**

**KGOSI BONANG KARUNDA, BEETSHA**

Our work on the ground, generously supported by the Okavango Eternal partnership, is poised to continue scaling over the next two years. Its profound impact will be felt by the people and biodiversity throughout the Okavango River Basin. As the work continues transitioning from capacity building and activation to implementation and local integration strategies, there will be ample opportunities for significant, lasting and positive impacts beyond 2026.



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PROTECTING A NATURAL WONDER

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