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AWEI
African Wildlife
Economy Institute

Impact Report 2024

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Table of contents

Introduction 1

AWEI's Vision 1

Strategic priorities and goals 1

AWEI's Theory of Change 2

AWEI's impact in 2024 3

Input into Southern Africa's evolving biodiversity policies 3

Exploring East Africa's Wildlife Economy ..4

A voice for Africa in international wildlife economy policy platforms 5

Strengthening multi-disciplinary networks and approaches 7

Skills and knowledge for sustainable wildlife economies 8

Expanding our reach and engagement 9

Taking stock 11

Introduction

This year marked a period of significant growth and impact for the African Wildlife Economy Institute (AWEI) as we worked to advance sustainable wildlife economies across Africa through targeted activities under our core approaches of thought leadership, stakeholder engagement, and professional development.

A key focus in 2024 was to expand our team by recruiting new post-graduate students, interns, research associates, and senior researchers to the AWEI Community, bolstering our ability to undertake impactful work.

Collaborating with our valued partners, we convened impactful dialogues that brought together diverse voices from across the wildlife economy sector.

These discussions, alongside our targeted research and commentary on critical themes such as wild foods, wild enterprise, wild standards, and wild policy, deepened understanding and informed decision-making

A highlight of 2024 was the successful hosting of the inaugural African Wildlife Economy Colloquium in November. This landmark event significantly expanded AWEI's networks and stimulated multidisciplinary discussions. The Colloquium not only celebrated achievements but also identified exciting opportunities for future research and collaboration.

In this report, we are pleased to share the impacts of our activities throughout 2024.

AWEI's Vision

AWEI envisions transformed, enhanced, and maintained African landscapes managed as complex socio-ecological systems to deliver biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, inclusive economic opportunities, and community well-being.

We contribute to this vision by promoting an inclusive, diversified, and flourishing wildlife economy across the African continent.

Strategic priorities and goals

Overall, AWEI's work supports the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Sustainable Development Goals relevant to AWEI's work are:

With the adoption of the Kunming-Montreal **Global Biodiversity Framework** (GBF) by the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in December 2022, the Institute was able to directly focus its efforts on supporting the GBF and its targets on the use of wild species.

The Global Biodiversity Framework

The Global Biodiversity Framework consists of four goals and 23 targets for 2030:

The four goals are (A) Protect and Restore, (B) Prosper with Nature (C) Share Benefits Fairly and (D) Invest and Collaborate. We see the wildlife economy contributing to **Goal B (Prosper with Nature)** and, in particular to these two targets:

Target 5: Ensure that the use, harvesting and trade of wild species is sustainable, safe, and legal

Target 9: Ensure that the management and use of wild species are sustainable, thereby providing social, economic, and environmental benefits for people

AWEI's Theory of Change

To achieve our vision and goals, we aim to:

A: Strengthen the enabling environment

Key public and private policy and regulatory frameworks supporting the growth of a sustainable, inclusive, and transformative wildlife economy.

B: Promote thriving wildlife enterprises across the continent

Contributing to wildlife conservation and sustainable development.

We do this through:

1. **Thought leadership**

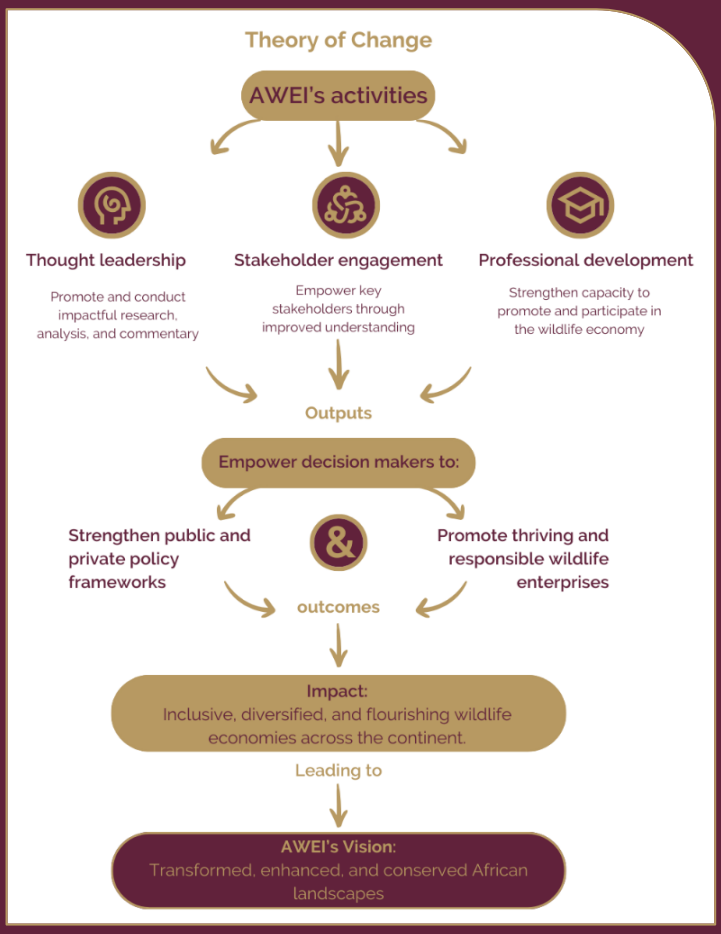
   Addressing gaps in knowledge and understanding that inhibit the wildlife economy and wildlife enterprise through impactful research, analysis, and commentary.

2. **Stakeholder engagement**

   Empowering stakeholders across Africa to identify and support the growth of the wildlife economy and wildlife enterprise

3. **Professional development**

   Sustaining thought leadership and stakeholder engagement through postgraduate studies, professional development and internships.



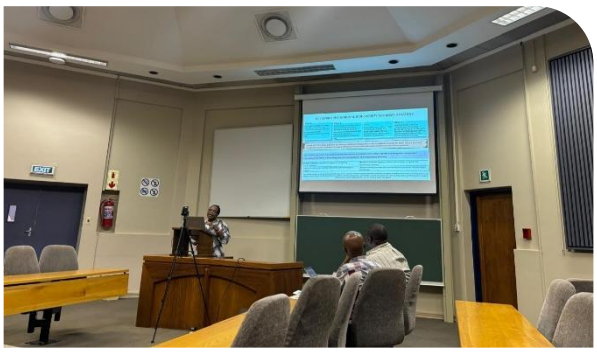
AWEI Theory of Change

AWEI's impact in 2024

Input into Southern Africa's evolving biodiversity policies

Recognising the potential of the wildlife economy for achieving conservation while building inclusive rural economies, several Southern African countries have been reviewing their policies to enhance enabling environments. In 2024, AWEI supported pertinent policy processes in South Africa and Zimbabwe through collaborative research, stakeholder engagement, and professional development. In South Africa, AWEI signed a formal MOU with the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) to provide inputs related to the wildlife economy. We provided feedback on its revised Biodiversity Economy Strategy and wrote commentaries on the AWEI info hub, in the Daily Maverick and The Conservation Africa to explain the policy in response to public concern related to the 'mass commoditisation' of South Africa's wildlife. This public engagement also led to an interview with AWEI researcher, Dr Hayley Clements, on South Africa's investigative journalism television series Carte Blanche.

This revised strategy aims to channel investment into scaling the South African wildlife economy, with DFFE setting up an investment portal to attract investors.



Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment presenting the revised Biodiversity Economy to stakeholders

To support this initiative, we collaborated with DFFE, the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), and the wildlife ranching sector to highlight the significant financial and socio-economic impacts of the wildlife economy. This research was published in 2024, and the results were made available on the investment portal.

A new PhD student, Susan De Wit, also joined AWEI in 2024 to explore opportunities for financing the wildlife economy across Southern Africa. We believe that fostering a better understanding of the impacts of the wildlife economy and their alignment with investor motivations and mandates could be a real game changer in channelling the investment needed to scale the wildlife economy.

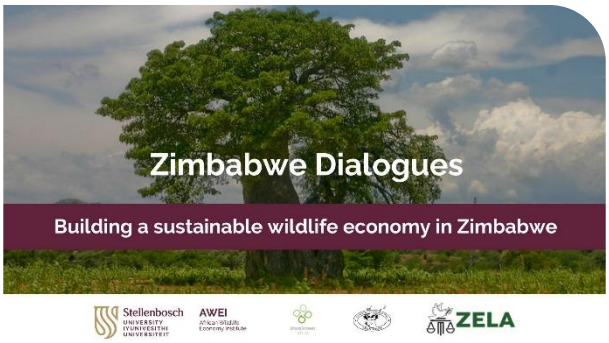
Recognising this, South African National Parks (SANParks) have an innovative programme to loan wildlife from their parks to emerging farmers, and Klarine Schutte, our new MSc student, started working with SANParks in 2024 to help them understand the impact of this programme and how it can be enhanced. AWEI was also invited by SANParks to a roundtable discussion for the development of the Xhariep Game Meat Processing Facility for emerging game farmers in the Xhariep Region.

The game meat sector in Africa holds significant potential to advance sustainable development by enhancing food security, supporting rural livelihoods, and promoting biodiversity conservation. The sector's value chains, however, remain poorly developed, largely informal, and insufficiently understood, with significant illegal activity taking place. In support of the region's game meat industry, AWEI published studies on scaling opportunities and the governance of value chains.

South Africa sees game meat as a significant, largely untapped opportunity for scaling its wildlife economy and contributing to food security. The Institute actively support South Africa's Game Meat Strategy broadly and in partnership with DFFE through research and technical engagements. In 2024, AWEI supported the game meat sector through facilitating discussions on value creation, game meat processing opportunities, and safety. An MSc student, Sarah Whitehead joined AWEI as a research associate to study the operational and regulatory issues related to availability and access to meat processing facilities, as well as compliance with safety and hygiene requirements in South Africa. This work also suggests actionable policy interventions for enabling access to processing facilities and compliance with safety standards by South African game meat producers. Closely related to this, PhD student Lydia Bhebe joined in 2024 to study how the South African game meat industry can achieve environmental, public, and animal health.

AWEI's work on game meat has attracted industry-wide interest, and AWEI researcher and Programmes Manager, Dr Wiseman Ndlovu, was invited as a keynote speaker at The Snaring Symposium and to give a lecture at the Wildlife Forensic Academy on how developing game meat value chains could be a solution to illegal game meat trade.

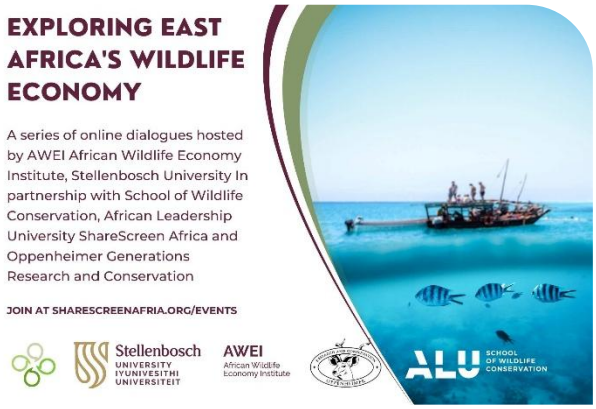
Moreover, the Institute organised a series of five online dialogues (15 February to 14 March 2024) to build on the Zimbabwe Biodiversity Economy Report's findings, focusing on key opportunities for Zimbabwe's wildlife economy, such as game ranching. These dialogues, held in partnership with the Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association (ZELA), Share-Screen Africa, and Oppenheimer Generations Research and Conservation, explored how to enable a sustainable wildlife ranching sector that benefits both people and wildlife.



Regarding professional development, AWEI developed a CITES induction course and the Capacity Building Strategy for SANBI to strengthen its capacity as the Scientific Authority of South Africa (SAoSA). The SANBI CITES introduction course was presented live and is now also available online. Aligned with South Africa's Biodiversity Human Capital Development Strategy, AWEI's work here supports young biodiversity professionals and technicians, particularly with respect to supporting sustainable and legal trade of wild species.

Exploring East Africa's Wildlife Economy

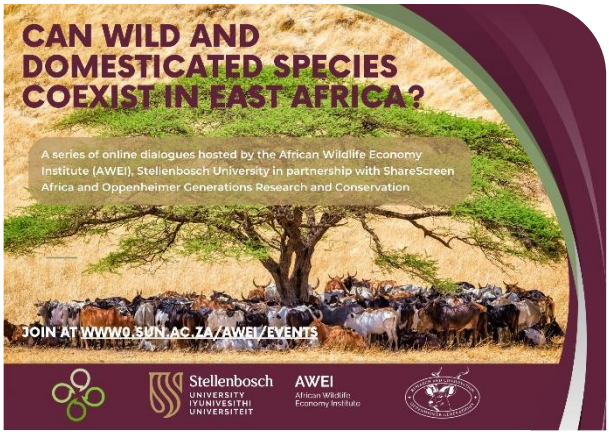
After successful dialogues focusing on Zimbabwe's wildlife economy, AWEI expanded its focus to include East Africa. In 2024, we hosted our first series of online dialogues on East Africa, Exploring East Africa's Wildlife Economy, in partnership with the African Leadership University's School of Wildlife Conservation (ALU SOWC), ShareScreen Africa, and Oppenheimer Generations Research and



Conservation.

These dialogues focused on the various uses of wild species in East Africa's wildlife economy, what mechanisms are in place to ensure these are sustainable, and what mechanisms or policy pathways are still needed to promote sustainability.

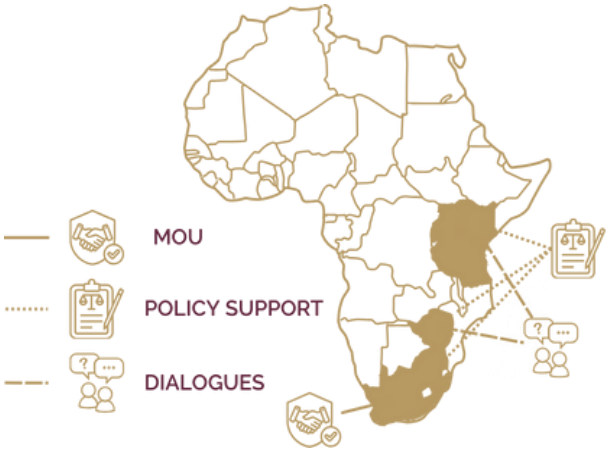
A second series, Can Wild and Domesticated Species Coexist?, explored how landowners and managers in East Africa are addressing the GBF targets by implementing innovative measures to enhance the coexistence of wild and domesticated species.



These dialogues reached over 912 stakeholders from academia, NGOs, government, and the private sector.

Kenya has a renewed interest in the wildlife economy, with its Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife launching a task force in 2018 to investigate the potential for the sustainable consumptive utilisation of wildlife, through the cropping of wildlife for the sale of game meat, and the trade in live wildlife. In collaboration with the African Conservation Centre (ACC) and SANBI, with the support of the French Development Agency (AFD), two workshops were hosted in Kenya in 2024 (in Nairobi and Narok) to understand the state and trends of the wildlife economy in Kenya and identify opportunities for its expansion. In response, the Minister requested a White Paper on options, and AWEI members, Dr Clements and Dr Matthew Child, are collaborating with ACC and partners to support the development of this White Paper.

AWEI's collaboration with the FairWild Foundation on a Darwin Initiative project to study the frankincense value chain in Kenya and Somalia underscores its commitment to advancing East Africa's biodiversity economy. This project analyses sustainable harvesting and trade of frankincense, a high-value wild resource, to enhance livelihoods and economic resilience for rural communities. In promoting fair trade practices and sustainable resource management, the initiative supports job creation, income diversification, and ecosystem conservation, aligning with AWEI's mission to foster inclusive wildlife economies. This work strengthens East Africa's economic development by integrating local communities into global value chains, building on AWEI's 2024 efforts to expand sustainable biodiversity use beyond Southern Africa.



Engagement that AWEI has provided to promote sustainable wildlife economies in Africa.

A voice for Africa in international wildlife economy policy platforms

Integrating the African agenda and context into international policy considerations, development, and implementation is a crucial function of an institute like AWEI. In 2024, AWEI Director Prof Francis Vorhies wrote a brief for the Institute for Economic

Affairs (IEA), London, UK, called The Elephant in the Room on why the proposed ban on importing hunting trophies to Britain could undermine conservation efforts in Africa and the UK's multilateral commitments regarding international trade and biodiversity conservation. The IEA also produced an interview on the brief and disseminated a news story widely in the mainstream media.

Dr Michael Musgrave and Prof Vorhies also produced a brief on the GBF targets regarding the use of wild species and whether these could be used to provide opportunities for scaling up Africa's elephant economy. The brief presented various products that could come from elephant use, followed by a case study on the previous use of elephants in Kruger National Park in South Africa, and concluded with an analysis of the trade measures in place for African elephants under CITES, highlighting opportunities for facilitating sustainable and legal trade of elephant products. Complementing this, AWEI Research Associate, Mike 't Sas-Rolfes', 2024 research article in Conservation Biology critiques CITES' restrictive trade measures, advocating for market-based approaches to support conservation and local livelihoods.

For Biodiversity Day (22 May 2024), Prof Vorhies wrote an article about how AWEI's work contributes to enabling the conservation of Africa's socio-ecological landscapes and seascapes through wildlife economies by connecting local wildlife enterprises to global value chains.

AWEI advanced African discourse on wildlife economies by exploring intra-African trade at the Africa Liberty Forum in Tanzania and by participating in panel discussions on wildlife trade. Resultantly, Dr Ndlovu was invited to contribute to a chapter in the Review of African Social and Economic Development. The chapter explores how free trade frameworks can enhance Africa's biodiversity economy by facilitating sustainable wildlife product markets, including game meat, medicinal plants, and insects.

These works highlight AWEI's role in fostering international engagement and thereby shaping intra-African trade policy discussions.

Dr Wiseman Ndlovu (second from left) participating in a panel discussion at the Africa Liberty Forum in Tanzania on "AfCFTA - The Potential for Improvements in Human and Wildlife Health in Africa."

Members of the AWEI community participated in and contributed to 54 international conferences and workshops in 2024 and several key events throughout the year that kept the African wildlife economy on the global agenda. These included the Global Baobab Congress in London in April, the Building a Wildlife Economy Side-Event at the 33rd CITES Animals Committee Meeting hosted by the CIC and AWEI in Geneva in July, the Conservation Optimism Summit in Oxford in September, and the African Wildlife Consultative Forum in Stellenbosch in October.

Prof Frank Vorhies (second from right) on the panel in the Building a Wildlife Economy side-event at the 33rd CITES Animals Committee Meeting

Strengthening multi-disciplinary networks and approaches

Throughout 2024, AWEI engaged in several stakeholder engagement projects and partnerships with over 20 institutions to promote the wildlife economy, including the following:

African Baobab Alliance

AWEI joins to support the growth of the baobab industry across the continent

African Leadership University School of Wildlife Conservation (ALU SOWC)

Partner in the East African dialogue series, a new African Wildlife Economy Community of Practice, and a communications intern, Fibert Minja

Atlas Network

Strengthening AWEI's development capacity and engaging with an Africa-wide network of trade liberalisation think-tanks

International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC)

Participation in the General Assembly and partnering on side events at CITES meetings

Cornell University Center for Conservation Social Sciences (CCSS)

Partner for the AWEI Colloquium and resident research associate, Francine Barchett

Department of Science and Innovation - Human Sciences Research Council (DSI-HSRC)

Continued support for our programme officer, Thapelo Lebopa, through its internship programme

Oppenheimer Generations Research and Conservation (OGRC)

Continuation of our core funding grant, participation in the annual research conference and East African dialogues, and the development of an online trading platform for game meat.

Peace Parks Foundation

Collaborated in the conceptualisation of a large-scale project to diversify and grow wildlife enterprises in socio-ecological landscapes

South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI)

AWEI developed a capacity-building strategy for young professionals and an online training course to support the country's Scientific Authority to fulfil its CITES obligations

Southern African Wildlife College (SAWC)

Partner for the AWEI Colloquium and development of a champions initiative to support the wildlife-based economy in SADC

Sustento and Susfon Development Services

Established a new partnership for capacity-building initiatives supporting South Africa's wildlife economy

Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association (ZELA)

Partnered on a Zimbabwe dialogue series and developed reports on tourism investment potential in Namibia and South Africa

We also broadened our engagement with other units at Stellenbosch University, including the Centre for Sustainable Transitions, the Department of Agricultural Economics, the Department of Conservation Ecology and Entomology, the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, and the Development and Alumni Relations Division.

Skills and knowledge for sustainable wildlife economies

With 16 new members recruited in 2024, the AWEI Community now consists of a growing team of wildlife economy specialists, including master's and PhD students, post-docs, senior researchers, fellows, interns, and industry advisors.

In 2024, 25 research projects were initiated across the themes of wild meat, wild enterprise, wild standards, and wild policy. The topics of these projects included sustainable and legal trade (e.g., CITES), food health and safety (e.g., game meat industry), biodiversity conservation, investments, and economic resilience.

In 2024, we published seven research articles, four briefs, 13 short articles, and shared 14 relevant resources.

Inaugural African Wildlife Economy Colloquium

The inaugural African Wildlife Economy Colloquium, held in Stellenbosch from 4–6 November 2024, brought together 64 in-person and 281 online participants from 17 countries, including 12 African countries. Featuring 52 expert speakers from across Africa, the US, and Europe, the event sparked critical multidisciplinary discussions on the future of the wildlife economy. Key takeaways included the need for policies that deliver both wildlife conservation and enhanced local livelihoods, leveraging inter-African trade in wildlife products, and scaling up wildlife services such as tourism and carbon sequestration to position wildlife use as an effective economic driver. Standards and certification systems emerged as a game-changer in boosting market trust and ethical standards.

The Colloquium highlighted untapped market potential beyond tourism, hunting, and ranching, stressing the importance of frameworks that account for grassroots wildlife product use. Expanding industries like game meat and insect farming were identified as potential new revenue streams, and ethical hunting and the One Health approach were identified as essential to ensuring sustainability and resilience in wildlife enterprises. Access presentations, recordings, and the full programme here.

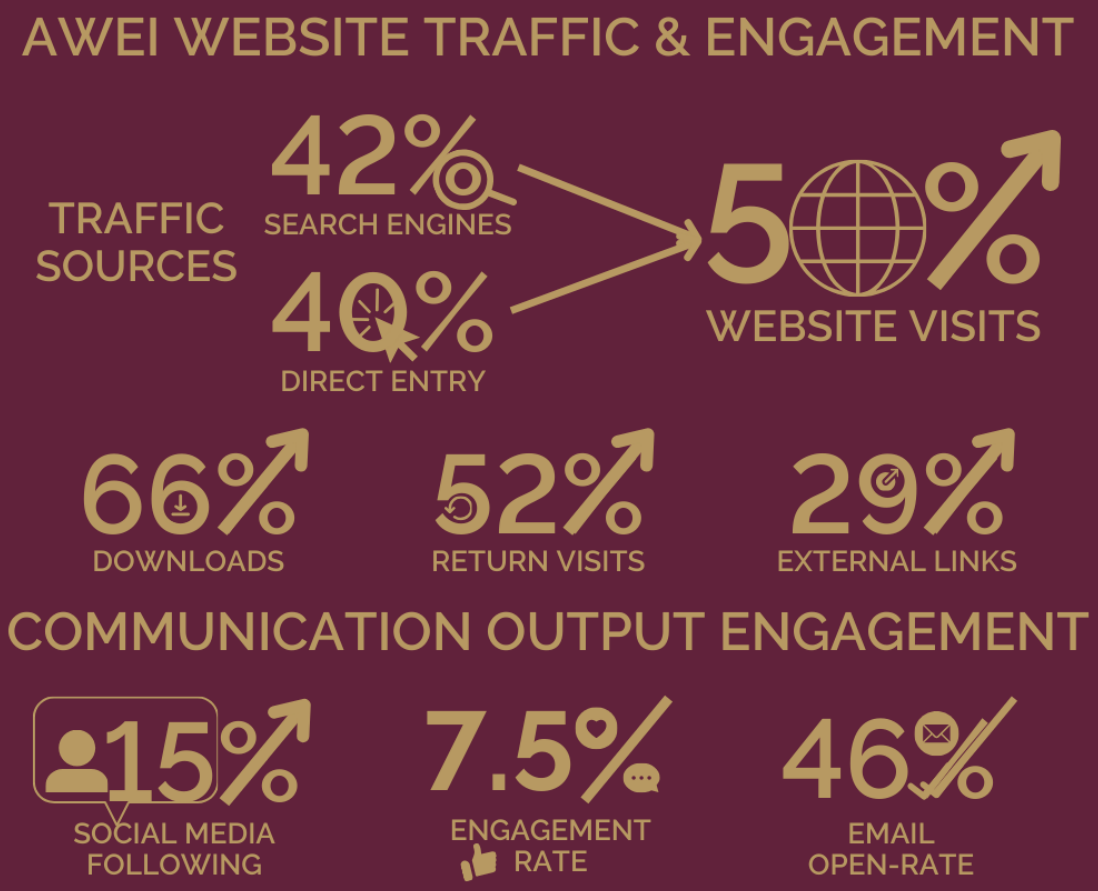
Panel discussion facilitated by AWEI's Dr Wiseman Ndlovu at the 2024 African Wildlife Economy Colloquium.

Expanding our reach and engagement

One of the primary targets for the year was to launch a revamped and upgraded website to reflect the Institute as an academic think tank and to provide a central repository (info hub) for information related to the African Wildlife Economy. The info hub displays academic research, policy, legislation, and other resources, short articles from the AWEI community, training courses, and information about relevant events. The hub was launched and experienced a significant increase in engagement:

- Traffic grew by 50%, strengthening stakeholder engagement and investment potential in wildlife economies
- Countries where the most traffic originated were South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, the USA, and Uganda
- Search engines accounted for 42% of traffic and direct entry for 40%, indicating effective Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and a loyal audience
- Returning visits increased by 52%, showing deepening trust, though engagement strategies are needed to retain new users
- Downloads increased by 66%, and external link clicks rose by 29%, confirming the value of shared content.

AWEI's newsletter performance also exceeded NGO benchmarks (25-30%) with a 46% open rate. While social media engagement was not as high as the previous reporting period, our combined following grew by an impressive 15%, above average for organic growth.



Taking stock

AWEI Director, Prof Francis Vorhies

The African Wildlife Economy Institute (AWEI) was launched in late 2018 with a vision to align the conservation of Africa's iconic wildlife with the enhancement of African livelihoods, particularly for rural communities living alongside wild species. Initially, AWEI began with a few dedicated volunteers and without funding, limiting its ability to undertake impactful initiatives. Nevertheless, in early 2019, we launched a website as a knowledge hub on Africa's wildlife economy and leveraged social media to share insights and raise awareness.

A turning point came in mid-2021 with a generous donation from the Oppenheimer Generations Fund – ZAR 2 million per year for 5 years – providing critical core funding. This support, combined with significant guidance from Oppenheimer Generations Research and Conservation (OGRC) to help us refine our theory of change and to engage with key stakeholders on topics like "the taste of game," transformed AWEI. With support from OGRC and the Faculty of AgriSciences, we built our capacity to lead impactful research, produce policy briefs and articles, amplify conservation efforts across Africa through social and mainstream media, host webinars, participate key conferences, and build a professional network of postdocs, postgraduates, interns, research associates, and trainees.

AWEI's vision – harmonising conservation and development through the sustainable use of wild species – was, however, controversial for many traditional conservationists. Instead of advocating for protected areas to protect wildlife from people, we proposed utilising wild species within socio-ecological landscapes to benefit people. Rather than focusing on combating poaching and illegal trade, we supported regulated local harvesting and legalised wildlife trade. Instead of top-down wildlife management, we championed empowering local communities to manage and benefit from their wild resources. We argued that unlocking a sustainable, inclusive wildlife economy demanded a complex, interdisciplinary approach based on the centrality of using wildlife to deliver conservation and development. Stellenbosch University and Oppenheimer Generations boldly took a risk in backing this vision, for which we are most grateful.

Whether our ideas succeed or falter, our goal has been to spark discussion, debate, and impactful research into how wildlife use could yield tangible environmental, social, and economic benefits for people. This required blending insights from the natural sciences with insights from business, economics, law, philosophy, and public leadership.

Though we very much considered ourselves to be in a pilot phase, 2024 unexpectedly became the year of the proof-of-concept. Building on growing brand recognition and credibility, AWEI forged significant engagement with key players, including South Africa's Department of Forestry, Fisheries, and the Environment (DFFE) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). We advanced discussions on unlocking Zimbabwe's wildlife economy and expanded the conversation to East Africa, exploring diverse uses of wild species in the region.

New publications included an issue brief on growing Africa's elephant economy and a policy brief addressing the UK's proposed ban on hunting trophy imports. We bolstered our research team with a new research director and additional postgraduate students and developed a tailored training programme for South Africa's Scientific

Authority to support sustainable, legal wildlife trade.

A highlight came in November 2024 with the inaugural African Wildlife Economy Colloquium – a dynamic, multidisciplinary, multi-stakeholder event tackling complex issues around wild species use. Presenters ranged from agronomists and economists to scientists, historians, lawyers, and philosophers, while participants included professionals from government, the private sector, nonprofits, and academia. The thought-provoking presentations, lively discussions, and sustained energy over three days confirmed our concept's viability. There is a space for a 'think-do tank' to promote Africa's wildlife economy.

As 2024 closed, we recognised that we were coming to the end of AWEI's initial pilot phase. With the concept proven and interest in our vision surging, we are now shifting our focus to institution-building. AWEI needs to establish a sustainable business model, generating revenue through postgraduate training, impactful academic and applied research, advisory services, professional short courses, and innovative technologies. With 18 months left of the initial Oppenheimer Generations grant, in 2025, we will prioritise strengthening our governance and management while concentrating on developing a portfolio of income-generating, high-impact activities. From proof-of-concept to institution-building – watch this space.

In-person attendees of the 2024 African Wildlife Economy Colloquium

The **African Wildlife Economy Institute** (AWEI) sits within the Faculty of AgriSciences of Stellenbosch University in the Western Cape province of South Africa.

Connect with us via email, post, social media, or in person

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