MAVA FOUNDATION
For People and Nature: 1994–2022
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Upon this occasion to commemorate the achievements of the MAVA Foundation, its founder Luc Hoffmann and its President André Hoffmann, it would be too simplistic to say that we are losing strong partners in the global effort to fight the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change. Whilst true, this would not fully capture the impact of the MAVA Foundation, its staff and its founders, the Hoffmanns, on nature conservation globally over the past 70 years.

Through the visionary guidance of Dr Luc Hoffmann, born from his passion for nature and quest to better understand it, conservation as a discipline and a movement gained its footing; while through the discipline, strategic guidance and hands-on efforts of André Hoffmann, conservation organisations flourished. Indeed, Luc, André and the MAVA Foundation served as partners, but more importantly they served as visionaries, innovators, mentors, collaborators and capacity-builders.

Many conservation institutions — IUCN, WWF, Wetlands International and Ramsar — were born from the vision and innovation of the Hoffmanns. Take a moment to think about that list. WWF is the world’s largest conservation organisation with a presence in more than 100 countries. IUCN is the world’s largest and most diverse environmental network — the founder of the Red List of Threatened Species and CITES, a scientific observer and advisor for nature to the United Nations. It is a global advocate for nature, bringing together nations, civil society and scientists into a membership union.

With distributions of over US$1 billion, the MAVA Foundation has supported thousands of projects in dozens of countries. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been distributed in the past five years alone. Quickly distributing large sums to dozens of conservation organisations at this precise moment of crisis is arguably one of MAVA’s greatest innovations. By investing generously and immediately in projects across the world, MAVA helped address biodiversity loss and climate change head-on while inspiring others to join the cause, build capacity and set the stage for future success. No doubt this was a tremendous accomplishment for the MAVA staff and they are to be commended for such a Herculean effort.

Much of what can be said about MAVA Foundation can also be said about André Hoffmann. André is a strong supporter of nature, he dives into conservation with his heart, soul, ambition, clarity of purpose and drive to succeed. Without him, conservation as an institution would be less effective, its voice not as strong, its cause not as urgent. It is with a deep sense of gratitude that I extend my best wishes to André and his entire family as they move on and continue striving to make the world a better place. There will always be a seat at the table reserved for André and the Hoffmanns. They earned it through their hard work and passionate advocacy.

As MAVA exits this space with grace, let us work to keep our commitments and ensure that the organisations and capacities that MAVA so dutifully supported endure and flourish to carry the legacy of MAVA into the future, protecting nature and the diversity of life on earth.

Foreword

RAZAN AL MUBARAK
Managing Director, Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, and President, International Union for Conservation of Nature
The decision to write a book about MAVA was not one we took lightly, as humility was always part of MAVA’s DNA. We always preferred to keep our partners in the foreground with our own contributions in the background. However, as our planned closure drew closer, we recognised that we had a wealth of experience to share, making the idea of leaving behind a physical memento of our work more and more appealing. It is our hope that other funders and the conservation community can learn from both our successes and our challenges.

As well as a learning resource, this book is also a keepsake and a collection of personal stories. We’re proud to share a broad range of stories, featuring partners we have supported throughout our lifespan and stretching across the globe. Of the nearly 500 stories we received, we selected partners and projects that represent the diversity of issues, approaches, geographies and themes we worked on over the years.

We hope their anecdotes raise a smile and bring back happy memories. We love the image of the book being slipped off bookshelves and shared for many decades to come.

If you are interested in understanding more about MAVA’s approach, our way of operating and the lessons we have learned, we invite you to explore the appendices to this book where we have compiled a list of all our learning documents.

The closure of MAVA is the end of a chapter, not the end of a story. Beyond this book, we hope the MAVA story lives on through our partners, the special people we had the honour of collaborating with and, of course, the projects we funded, helped shape and co–created, which we hope will continue to thrive for many years.

This was a shared journey and we trust you will enjoy this set of collective memories. We tried to capture in words the friendliness, collaboration and trust that characterised our common journey.

The MAVA board and team
A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR GENERAL

MAVA began its existence as a one-man show, created by an exceptional man – our founder Dr Luc Hoffmann. As a trained scientist with a lifelong fascination with the natural world, he was an expert in the field of nature in the broadest sense. However, he also had an ambitious vision for conservation and the determination to realise it. Over the years, the foundation grew, gaining engaged board members, competent staff and more than 500 dedicated partners.

His son André Hoffmann, another exceptional man, took up the reins after Luc stepped back in 2010 and led MAVA to even greater heights, with his own clear vision and sense of determination.

What I will remember most about MAVA is the people. Every single person who worked with MAVA turned up because they were determined to protect the natural world. Their commitment is something I greatly admire and have learned a lot from.

Our small, dedicated team was always extraordinarily busy tackling many different conservation challenges at once, so the process of creating this book gave us the rare opportunity to step back and reflect. By examining the context in which MAVA existed, and seeing our achievements collated for the first time, we gained valuable perspective on our journey and contribution to conservation.

Hearing the voices of our partners and fellow funders was an excellent parting gift for us all.

I am very proud when I see the relationships that have grown between our partners and the networks we nurtured. When we launched our outcome action plans, binding partners together in shared missions, we hoped to create opportunities for people to meet, collaborate and share wisdom. This participative approach is incredibly important to achieving long-term results.

The future belongs to collaboration, and my hope is that the creation of strong and durable collaborations will be one of MAVA’s enduring legacies. The fact that this community of actors has continued to develop independently of MAVA is pivotal, just like the tree that grows without human intervention once the seed has been planted.

I am a strong advocate for developing leadership skills in individuals to better serve the community. We invested in a strong community of passionate leaders who shared our values and helped equip them for the challenges of the future. We hope that these people, even now that our funding has ceased, will continue implementing projects in line with what we call the ‘MAVA spirit’.

We are publishing this book partly to help us draw a line in the sand. MAVA’s role in conservation has come to an end, but sharing our experiences for others to learn from helps to ensure our legacy will endure.

Thank you for your interest in our book and your contribution to the preservation of our planet.

Lynda Mansson
MAVA Director General
MAVA AT A GLANCE
MAVA AT A GLANCE

Offices
Headquarters in Gland, Switzerland, with a regional office in Dakar, Senegal.

Funding
Over its lifetime, MAVA allocated a total of CHF 1.14 billion across approximately 1,500 projects implemented by more than 500 partners.

Programmes

Mediterranean Basin
In the Mediterranean, MAVA focused on freshwater, coastal and inland wetlands, marine coastal ecosystems, critical ecosystems in cultural landscapes and priority species.

Sustainable Economy*
With the goal of contributing to the creation of a more sustainable global economic system and integrating with its regional programmes, MAVA focused on valuing natural capital, finance for biodiversity and circular economy.

Impact & Sustainability**
MAVA’s Impact & Sustainability Unit invested in the development of a dynamic conservation community, helping to secure lasting impact and financial sustainability for its partners after closing.

Global
Taking on broad threats and cross-cutting issues, MAVA’s global grants provided the flexibility to support important initiatives that complemented its priority programmes and helped to secure a future for people and nature.

West Africa
In West Africa, MAVA focused on sea turtles, coastal wetlands, seabirds, mangroves, seagrass beds and small pelagic fish.

Switzerland
In Switzerland, MAVA focused on rivers, sustainable agriculture, ecological infrastructure and circular economy.

Themes
- Freshwater and wetlands
- Marine ecosystems
- Cultural landscapes
- Species
- Finance and economy
- Circular economy
- Natural capital
- Impact and sustainability

Ten biggest partners in terms of funding received over the years:

- WWF
- IUCN
- PABA
- CHATHAM HOUSE
- BirdLife International
- Euronatur
- Naturefriends
- Nature CH
- Nature Norge
- Nature Islandia

*added in 2014 | **added in 2016
Mission
We conserve biodiversity for the benefit of people and nature by funding, mobilising and strengthening our partners and the conservation community.

Vision
We envisage a future where biodiversity flourishes, particularly in the Mediterranean, coastal West Africa and Switzerland; where the global economy supports human prosperity and a healthy planet; and the conservation community is thriving.

Values

Unifying
We gather the relevant key players to address biodiversity conservation challenges and mobilise support for conservation action.

Flexible
With our ability to mobilise funds, rapid decision-making and understanding of the need for adaptive management, we are an agile player able to fund innovative initiatives.

Empowering
We are convinced that nature conservation projects can only be successful if rooted locally, respecting local cultures and building the capacity of local organisations.

Persevering
We aim for collective, long-term conservation successes with delivery of tangible results as key milestones.
THE FOUNDATION’S HISTORY
MAVA’S ROOTS

Luc’s early life

MAVA’s story has its roots in Luc Hoffmann’s early interest in nature, starting decades before the foundation was created.

Luc was born in 1923 in Basel, Switzerland, to a wealthy family. His grandfather, Fritz Hoffmann-La Roche, set up the pharmaceutical company Hoffmann-La Roche in the late 1800s and multiplied the family fortune through its success.

Hoffmann-La Roche’s growth contributed to Basel’s flourishing chemical industry. Luc focused his studies at boarding school around chemistry, as expected of the company’s heir, but soon discovered his passion lay elsewhere.

Luc’s habitual solitary walks and birdwatching expeditions provided ample opportunity to ponder his future. He eventually decided to pursue his love for the natural world by switching his studies to zoology, publishing his first academic paper at the age of 18 before beginning his further education in botany and zoology at the University of Basel. Luc was conscripted and a two-year stint in the Swiss Army interrupted his studies, but he returned to education after the end of World War II and completed his PhD in ornithology, studying the arctic tern. It is easy to understand how this fascinating bird captured his interest; it breeds in the Arctic region during the northern summer before migrating to the Antarctic coast for the southern summer, which is by far the longest migration known in the animal kingdom.
The Camargue

By 1948, Luc was in his mid-20s. Inspired by the unique environment of the Camargue, France, where the Rhône meets the Mediterranean, and concerned by the endangered greater flamingo population, he bought an old farm and its land at the Tour du Valat, an area within the Camargue, with the intention of making it his home.

This 1,200-acre estate lacked running water or power but its location, surrounded by wetlands teeming with life, was a haven of peace. Its remoteness suited Luc, who was known for being quiet and private.

Despite his love of solitude, the area was too special – and fragile – for Luc to keep it to himself. He devoted himself to studying the populations and migration of the estate’s waterbirds, realising that they, as well as the countless other species that called the Tour du Valat home, were threatened by planned urbanisation and agricultural development. In order to effectively protect the Camargue’s complex wetland ecosystem, he needed to better understand it.

Luc invited scientists and naturalists to visit and study the wetlands. The Tour du Valat’s reputation and number of visitors grew and it soon developed into a biological station, including the first permanent bird ringing centre in the area. From there, it gradually evolved into a renowned international research station, which has welcomed hundreds of biologists over the past seven decades. This continuity of action, which was relatively unique, was made possible by consistently available funding and Luc’s own tenacity, which was later translated into MAVA’s value of ‘persevering’.

Luc’s efforts to train, mentor, encourage, finance and connect the next generation of conservationists have resulted in the Tour du Valat’s alumni and their own mentees becoming responsible for protecting huge swathes of land across the planet.

Luc and his wife Daria raised their four children in a farmhouse on their estate at Tour du Valat. Their son André described growing up there as “certainly paradise. We had no electricity, we had no television, the central heating was finally installed the day I was born. I’m sure sometimes it was horrible and full of mosquitos, but I remember it being a communion with nature.”

Their daughter Vera agreed, saying, “It was an ideal place to grow up. It was so remote that my parents had to set up a community school for us. They hired a teacher and we learned alongside the children of local farmers and fishermen, with all of us – aged five to 14 – learning together in one room.”

The location was isolated, but “the world came to us,” as Vera put it. Biologists and naturalists of all kinds were in and out of the house during her childhood. She recalled being sent to the house of famed British ornithologist Sir Peter Scott to learn English, with her early English vocabulary unsurprisingly focusing on the names of different bird species.
A fascination with wetlands

Luc was one of the first people to recognise the vital importance of wetlands like the Camargue in the natural world. In the 1950s, they were overlooked as ‘damp places with little to offer’ at best, or avoided as disease-ridden environments at worst. However, they are widely recognised today as extraordinary cradles of biodiversity. For example, more than 1,500 of the 4,700 flowering plant species identified in France are found in the Camargue, according to the Tour du Valat research institute. Wetlands provide sanctuary to wintering migratory birds, and breeding grounds and homes to countless other species. They also serve to mitigate the impact of storms and flooding. This transformation of perception was largely driven by Luc’s vision and tireless advocacy.

“With man, not against him”

Much of Luc’s success in the Camargue, particularly in re-establishing the greater flamingo population, couldn’t have happened without the cooperation of local inhabitants. These people relied on the wetlands to support their unique way of life, including livelihoods like hunting wild boar, rice farming, salt farming and the monades, groups of semi-wild Camargue horses or cattle led by herders or manadiers. Despite how embedded their lifestyles were with the natural world, certain inevitabilities such as flamingos eating crops were understandably unpopular with the Camargue’s residents.

Over time, Luc and his allies were able to show the local population how they would benefit from conserving the area, and how they needed to protect the ecosystem if they wanted to retain their traditional lifestyles. Luc’s motto of “with man, not against him” became a defining feature of how he operated. He passed this on to MAVA, as well as all the other organisations he created, which strove to always serve people and nature together.
Pioneering the conservation movement

In the 1950s, when Luc’s work began, conservation as a concept was still in its infancy. The interdependencies of insects, fish, birds and plants with humans weren’t fully understood and ecology wasn’t widely regarded as a science, but as the niche pursuit of enthusiasts. As Luc explained in 2011, “I was convinced that ecologists had the duty to follow the evolution of ecosystems and preserve them from irreversible losses. At that time, conservation was generally seen as an activity antagonistic to economic development and the dominant view was that it should be confined to protected areas which were kept outside the general trends.”

Luc was instrumental in the global recognition of conservation as a science-based movement throughout the second half of the 20th century. He was a true pioneer with a clear vision and tireless generosity of spirit, who drove change across countries, continents and generations.

Luc firmly believed that conservation would only work if different groups joined forces to work together in partnership. With this in mind, he contributed to the founding of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 1948, before later becoming its vice-president from 1960 to 1969.

In 1961, buoyed by his initial successes but ever-aware of the scale of the challenge, Luc helped co-found the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) alongside conservationists such as Sir Peter Scott and Edward Max Nicholson, with the goal of forming an international body to serve and fund local conservation agencies. WWF has become one of the largest conservation organisations in the world, working in over 100 countries with millions of direct supporters. At its formation, Luc became Vice-president, mostly remaining in the background and making generous financial contributions that helped the organisation to grow into the conservation powerhouse it is today.

An approach based on iconic sites

From 1947 to 1993, Luc dedicated much of his time and energy to the conservation of five sites: the Camargue in France, Doñana in Spain, the Banc d’Arguin in Mauritania, the Prespa Lakes in Greece, Northern Macedonia and Albania and the Bijagós archipelago in Guinea-Bissau. The stories of these special sites are told in more detail in the ‘Success stories’ chapter later in this book.

Doñana National Park

The Doñana National Park in Andalucia is a diverse, 140,000-acre Spanish wetland home to the Spanish imperial eagle and the Iberian lynx, established in 1969 by WWF and the Spanish government as the fledgling WWF’s first campaign. Luc’s drive and financial backing was pivotal to the park’s creation, as was the leadership of the Spanish naturalist, José Antonio Valverde, whose two-decade campaign to protect the area was inspired by Luc’s success at the Tour du Valat.

Conservation is not the protection of nature against human development, but the preservation of life-supporting systems and processes as a basis for lasting development.

Luc Hoffmann
Banc d’Arguin National Park
In 1976, French scientist Théodore Monod convinced the Mauritanian government to create the Banc d’Arguin National Park (PNBA) to protect the vast coastal wetland that stretches along the Mauritanian coast. The park’s land and air provide a habitat for millions of birds, while its waters are bursting with marine life. In 1986, working closely with local authorities, Luc helped establish the International Foundation of the Banc d’Arguin (FIBA) to help manage and preserve the park against threats like overfishing.

The Prespa Lakes
The Prespa Lakes have been officially protected since 1991 by the Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP), but Luc’s relationship with the area stretched back to the early 1970s. His diplomacy and charisma were tested through engagement with the Greek military dictatorship and the Albanian and North Macedonian governments, but piece by piece, the SPP’s efforts were successful.

The Bijagós islands
The last of MAVA’s iconic sites was the Bijagós islands of Guinea-Bissau in West Africa. In 1996, when UNESCO declared the archipelago a Biosphere Reserve, naturalist Pierre Campredon invited Luc to visit. He was immediately struck by the beauty of these 88 islands and the marriage between nature and culture exemplified by the lifestyles of the native Bijagós people. They were the islands’ best defence against the dangers of overfishing, tourism and oil exploration intensification. Using a regional approach embedded in local traditions and cultural context, a network of protected areas was created, which remains co-managed by the Bijagós people.

International protection efforts
In addition to taking specific actions to protect each of these sites individually, Luc acted on a broader international level to encourage their preservation too. In 1971, he helped spearhead the Ramsar Convention for Wetlands of International Importance, the world’s first international environmental treaty. Today, it covers more than 170 countries.
MAVA’S BIRTH

The early years (1994-2007)

In 1994, Luc created MAVA, Fondation pour la Nature, to tie together the threads of the conservation projects he had devoted his life to. Its name, based on the names of his four children, Vera, Maja, André and Daschenka, all raised in the farmhouse at the Tour du Valat, marks MAVA as a Hoffmann family endeavour from the start. Vera, Luc’s eldest daughter, was on the board from the very beginning, with Maja and André joining in 2008. MAVA’s generous funding was initially from Luc, but he later established a guaranteed income flow for the foundation via a beneficial interest in family-owned shares of Hoffmann-La Roche (which later became Roche).

The creation of MAVA coincided with conservation beginning to be recognised more widely as an urgent concern, marking the beginning of Luc’s transition to a more formal way of operating. However, its beginnings were still relatively informal. The foundation was seen as an instrument rather than its own entity; a logical consequence of Luc’s many philanthropic projects and a convenient way of consolidating them.

Although many of its processes were informal, the early MAVA board created a framework to guide its actions based on Luc’s motivation and pragmatic vision which remained a guiding force throughout its lifespan. It included priorities of threatened species and ecosystems, followed by the conservation of landscapes and sustainable management of nature, without excluding the fight against pollution and reducing the waste of resources and energy. The framework also included specific geographical criteria, focusing on the Mediterranean, West Africa and Switzerland, and guidance on providing funding quickly to urgent projects.

MAVA’s early successes relied heavily on Luc’s personal vision, commitment, network and wisdom. Its first board was mostly composed of Luc’s old friends. They made regular visits to project sites and jointly decided whether to grant funding to new projects, making their decisions based on intuition and personal expertise rather than a broader formal strategy. Luc’s longtime collaborator and close friend Jean-Paul Taris became MAVA’s Director General in 2005 and remained so until 2010. Jean-Paul was an experienced and celebrated conservationist who held many different conservation roles throughout his lifetime, including at the Tour du Valat.

Most of MAVA’s partners in this early stage also had close ties to Luc, such as WWF, IUCN, the Tour du Valat Biological Research Station, FIBA and the SPP.
MAVA’s first milestones
A notable success during this formative period was the creation of the Regional Partnership for Coastal and Marine Conservation (PRCM) in 2000, which refers to a coalition of organisations working on West African coastal issues across seven countries. MAVA helped design this structure with the goal of improving collaboration between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in West Africa that were all working towards separate agendas and sometimes at cross-purposes. Today, PRCM brings together people working in all areas of marine conservation, from donors and investors to researchers and ministers. Collectively, they network, fundraise, strategise, advocate and innovate.

The recruitment of Holger Schmid in 2005 as an administrative and technical officer marked the birth of the MAVA secretariat and the first step towards true professionalisation. MAVA was still operating from Luc’s house in Montricher, Switzerland, as it would be for many more years, but the team—and therefore the scale of its actions—began to grow.

In a long-term relationship typical of MAVA’s staff, Holger remained with the foundation until 2022, managing both its Switzerland and Sustainable Economy programmes at the time of closure. Holger’s memories of MAVA in the early days are in stark contrast with the foundation’s endings. He remembers sharing an office with Luc, working through renovations with papers covered in dust and the milestone of installing the foundation’s very first official phone line, allowing him the opportunity to interact directly with partners.

During this phase, MAVA began to develop a sharper strategic plan as part of its efforts to strengthen its secretariat and governance. The strategy introduced a region-based approach, initially focusing on Mediterranean and West African wetlands alongside a presence across the Alpine Arc. The team began looking for credible partners already executing conservation programmes in these regions.

MAVA was becoming so well-known in the conservation world, not only in Europe but also beyond, that its team was soon inundated with funding requests – appropriate and otherwise. This was challenging because each request required a thorough review process, ending with funding decisions being voted on by board members. The introduction of MAVA’s increasingly targeted strategy helped filter through requests so that staff and board members could focus on projects of interest to the foundation instead of rejecting proposals.

At this point the board decided to expand the team, hiring two additional programme managers, Thierry Renaud and Paule Gros. Holger, Thierry and Paule were each charged with managing the portfolio of projects for one priority region.

MAVA’s sunset clause

As MAVA went from strength to strength, discovering Luc’s plan to permanently close its doors in 2022 often surprised people. This end date was not well-known or widely discussed throughout much of the foundation’s existence.

Luc’s intention had always been to finance the foundation’s spending through dividend payments from Roche in a 25-year arrangement. MAVA was designed as a vehicle for Luc’s passion and a tool to achieve his dreams. He wanted his family to pursue their own philanthropic interests without being forever tied to his.

This was followed later by the establishment of other trust funds such as the Prespa Ohrid Nature Trust and BioGuinea Foundation.

The changing of the guard

A major turning point for the foundation was in 2010 when André Hoffmann took over from his father as MAVA’s President and Lynda Mansson was hired as Director General. Luc remained on the board, attending meetings until he passed away in 2016 at the age of 93. As André’s understanding of conservation evolved, he came into his own as a leader, shaping MAVA’s strategy around his own vision of effective philanthropy.

Rather than biology, André’s background was in business. The combination of his childhood in the Camargue with his corporate experience provided a unique perspective on conservation. His approach to the presidency naturally differed from his father’s, but his commitment was just as strong.

André’s vision was to contribute to the creation of a more sustainable global economic system by directly mitigating the root causes driving biodiversity loss; often human
factors like lack of employment opportunities and poverty. He saw a huge role for the business community in creating this crucial change, rather than continuing to create problems that conservationists were left to solve. In André’s words, “If you destroy nature to make a profit, then you are creating the problem that you then try to solve with philanthropy. So, you need to be much better at sensibly making money, rather than making money at all costs.” He believed it was unacceptable to make a philanthropic donation to balance the scales after the damage was done; and devoted himself to changing the system.

A time of transformation

André and Lynda’s objective was to continue professionalising MAVA and focus its work in three specific areas: the conservation of biodiversity and ecosystem functions, the management and sustainable use of natural resources, and a strong and effective conservation community. They were supported by a refreshed cast of board members chosen for their relevant experience. The board’s role also changed from decision-making to strategic oversight.

Soon after her arrival, Lynda introduced many changes at MAVA, including more focused five-year strategies for each programme and changes in selection criteria and decision-making procedures within the team. She remembered being struck by the loose processes in place, but the challenge of improving them excited her. “It was like a startup, but you had the money and the reputation and the staff. It was a great situation for a new Director and fun to be able to shape it into a more structured and streamlined organisation,” she explained.
Lynda also transformed the role of MAVA’s staff, especially the programme team, which by this point had grown to eight people, whose skills and experience had developed far beyond the existing scope of their roles. Lynda utilised her experience in leadership development to prepare the programme managers to take on larger roles and become more autonomous. The level of decision-making capacity and empowerment she introduced to the team wasn’t commonplace in foundations like MAVA, but the benefits were significant, taking staff from strength to strength professionally while enabling MAVA to become more agile.

The programme team later described how this overhaul made their jobs more challenging, but also immensely more creative and rewarding. Paule Gros, who was hired in 2009 and became Director of the Mediterranean Basin Programme and later the Head of Strategic Partnerships, recounted, “We had to adapt and to develop new capacity, new attitudes, new approaches, all the time. I loved that challenge and finding myself equal to it.”

Thierry Renaud, Director of the Impact & Sustainability Unit, said of this period, “This transitional phase was conducted at full speed, with a resolute focus on the future and great enthusiasm. The confidence of the board and the empowerment of the team profoundly changed our roles, opening up professional perspectives that each of us still capitalises on today!”

This period was also transformative for MAVA’s administration, finance and communications staff. For example, when Rachel Sturm, MAVA’s Director of Administration and Finance, joined in 2010, she created, with the help of an intern, a sophisticated Excel sheet to collate all the information about MAVA’s grants for the first time. This developed into a custom-made project administration tool, created in collaboration with the company Aid Impact.

Alongside this profound growth and development, staying true to Luc’s original vision remained a priority. The board and staff resolved to precisely define MAVA’s values and settled on four: empowering, flexible, unifying and persevering. Paule described this as “trying to download Luc’s mind, whereas previously we did everything based on his vast knowledge and experience”.

From intuition to structure
As MAVA’s funding and influence increased, the foundation professionalised partly by design and partly by necessity. It had grown into one of the world’s largest grant-making environmental foundations. With a sizeable annual budget, rigour was necessary to make sure all the funding went to good use.

As such, MAVA’s region-specific programme areas, the Mediterranean Basin, Coastal West Africa, Alpine Arc and Switzerland, were formalised in 2010, joined in 2014 by a cross-cutting Sustainable Economy Programme introduced by André.

André and Lynda both had backgrounds in economics and business which lent a fresh perspective to MAVA’s approach to conservation, including delving deeper into solving the root causes of conservation issues. André’s interest in the relationship between biodiversity loss and socio-economic issues like lack of sustainable job opportunities and exploitative business practices grew and he wanted to explore how MAVA could contribute. He summarised this realisation simply: “We will not protect nature if we don’t look at humanity first.”
The new programme area was a gradual transition that arose from a period of learning, testing, and pilot projects. MAVA explored opportunities and gained knowledge on the subject before deciding to make Sustainable Economy an official pillar of its programme areas going forward, led by Holger.

The MAVA team also moved from Luc’s house to an office space in the IUCN building in Gland, Switzerland, surrounded by conservation organisations. In a radical culture shift, the foundation began communicating more transparently and actively about its priorities, criteria, and actions, which also helped attract the right kind of partners and somewhat stemmed the flow of speculative applications.

Suzanne Amrein, MAVA’s Executive Assistant & Head of Communications, described, “When I started at MAVA in 2011, one of my first tasks was to create a brand new, inspiring and lively website that would answer the evolving need to communicate through the internet. I didn’t know anything about websites back then and didn’t have a clue how to start! From finding background information, powerful images, or interesting facts and figures – everything was new. The website ended up being a beautiful tool and it was the first time we communicated openly and transparently about MAVA’s activities. Although we had nothing to hide before, this was a big step forward for the foundation to show itself openly to the whole world.”

The foundation’s evolution

A period of adjustment was required for all stakeholders to adapt to MAVA’s rapid transformation. Staff needed to evolve with the many changes in processes and responsibilities. There was a need to gently align the differing visions of Luc and André on how best to achieve the mission, and partners needed to learn a new way of interacting with the foundation.

Holger, as MAVA’s longest-serving employee, reminisced about the jarring difference between sitting at Luc’s table at home allocating funding with a few friends, to being in an office surrounded by a team, while being personally responsible for a significantly larger budget in his programme area than the entire foundation’s budget when he first began, describing it as “an explosion of resources and capability”.

In terms of experience, knowledge, and administrative standards, the transition positioned MAVA as one of the leading conservation foundations. Naturally, this process required a considerable degree of adaptation to change from staff, board and partners.

Further growth and consolidation

This growth and structural adjustment necessitated recruiting a team of conservation experts as programme directors and managers. These new hires began assembling a coherent portfolio of projects to sit under the high-level objectives defined in the strategy. Staff continued making regular field visits to forge and maintain close relationships with MAVA’s increasingly long list of partners, still an important component of how the foundation operated. Their internal relationships were close too; the office was a joyful place full of laughter with a team who enjoyed spending time together.

In 2015, MAVA merged with its West African partner, International Foundation of the Banc d’Arguin (FIBA), resulting in many FIBA staff joining MAVA. Lynda explained, “This was a big decision that ultimately made sense for both parties, especially because MAVA was starting to consider the reality of its sunset clause and what its legacy would be.”

MAVA’s goal was to create a strong, resilient community of organisations to continue important conservation work in its focal regions, but the continuous and intensive engagement required for its West African projects meant the small team in Switzerland was reaching its operational capacity. FIBA, on the other hand, was struggling to define its future. Aware that funding from MAVA would cease seven years later, it had nurtured a network capable of taking on much of its traditional work.

The merger united their respective strengths: FIBA’s well-honed capacity development, organisational strengthening skills, presence on the ground through its location in Dakar, and extensive experience in the region were a natural complement to MAVA’s expertise, convening power and financial resources.
Charlotte Karibuhoye, director of MAVA’s West Africa programme and later Head of Strategic Alliances, spent 10 years at FIBA before the merger. She recounts that “the biggest challenge for FIBA staff post-merger was learning to take a step back from hands-on work and act through partners. We used to be implementers, so we really had to learn to let other people ‘do’.”

Simon Mériaux, Impact & Sustainability Manager at MAVA, who was originally part of FIBA, concurred: “When I joined MAVA from FIBA, I passed from directly implementing projects to ‘wearing the donor’s hat’. At the same time, it was also an amazing opportunity to work with many more partners from different geographies.”

Nathalie Cadot, who worked alongside Simon as an Impact & Sustainability Manager and also moved across from FIBA, explained, “This merger option was also very positive for FIBA’s partners as it brought them closer to MAVA, which was already funding more than 90 per cent of FIBA’s projects.”

Following the merger’s completion, MAVA absorbed most of FIBA’s staff, expanding the team from nine to 21 people, with 11 based in Dakar, Senegal. The newly enlarged MAVA staff united for a series of discussions and workshops to co-create its future and plan how to consolidate the group, despite the distance between Switzerland and Senegal. Lynda said of this period, “We were creative and sometimes radical in rethinking how we worked. We designed an ideal way of interacting with each other across offices and thought of ways to reduce the workload of staff while accomplishing more. Overall, this created a sense of solidarity and involved everyone in shaping the future, laying the groundwork for a very high level of joint ownership within the foundation.”

During this period of change, the family board membership also saw some changes. In addition to André, Vera and Maja, André’s wife Rosalie joined in 2011 and their son Fred followed suit in 2015. Fred was in his early 20s when he became the first member of the third generation of Hoffmanns to join the MAVA board. He was a valuable new addition, bringing a fresh perspective to challenge established assumptions.
In 2016, a new strategy and the final phase of MAVA were locked into place. The strategy focused on meeting biodiversity challenges by achieving specific outcomes. In addition, more emphasis was placed on enabling MAVA partners to continue having an impact in conservation after its closure, while also providing an exemplary transition for partners and staff.

The knowledge that only six years remained of MAVA’s lifespan sharpened the team’s focus in a way that Paule described as “a great luxury.” They began a final push to make as much impact as possible and to prepare their partners, in the knowledge that a successful closure would secure partners’ past achievements and ensure their essential work could continue without MAVA. The foundation communicated broadly about its closure during this period, with partners reacting differently to the announcement and keen to understand what it would mean for them.

A strong community of conservation actors

The extent to which securing lasting impact and financial sustainability for partners was the priority that shaped the foundation’s last few years cannot be overstated. To create a community of institutions that would continue collaborating post–MAVA, forging mutually beneficial relationships between partners became increasingly important. The creation of outcome action plans uniting partners in joint missions was one important element of the transition.

Lynda looked back on this with pride, saying at the point of closure, “We’re leaving behind an amazing community of people who are now bound together in ways that they were not before.”

MAVA created an Impact and Sustainability Unit led by Thierry Renaud to strengthen the conservation community. It looked beyond the wider philanthropic ecosystem and grants to consider the broader context of how partners were operating. The Unit aimed to support and improve their management, governance, human resources processes, fundraising, leadership and communication.

Tackling these considerations sparked the creation of the MAVA Leaders for Nature Academy, preparing the next generation of conservation leaders to take up the mantles of their predecessors, before taking on roles as mentors themselves.

The innovative approach of combining senior and junior professionals was a powerful way to build intergenerational understanding. Participants greatly appreciated the opportunity to work on their personal leadership skills and reported sometimes life-altering personal development.

To nourish the fields of conservation and philanthropy, MAVA also invested significant time into producing and promoting a series of learning tools to distill the foundation’s knowledge and experience into resources for other donors and NGOs.

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**DESIGNING FOR IMPACT (2016–2022)**

We’re leaving behind an amazing community of people who are now bound together in ways that they were not before.

Lynda Mansson

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Left: The MAVA team in Kopački Rit Nature Park, Croatia, June 2012.
Building sustainable funding mechanisms

The other pressing issue on MAVA’s plate was securing the financial future of its partners after funding ceased. The foundation approached this in several ways, creating donor collaboratives, promoting partners to other donors and providing fundraising courses.

However, MAVA’s ambitious goal wasn’t just to replace its funding one-to-one, but to create new self-sustaining mechanisms that went beyond simple donor–beneficiary models to provide more money. The team explored a variety of innovative sustainable financing mechanisms to secure and scale investment from public and private sectors to unlock additional funds, including trust funds, blue carbon and impact investing.

If the aim is sustainability, we cannot rely solely on people’s charity or philanthropy. Sustainable models must have a sustainable financing model. If we can create a system with recurrent cash flows, then we are more likely to be successful in the long-term than if we are just relying on one-off payments from time to time.

André Hoffmann

The final steps

MAVA’s board and leadership team were just as preoccupied with the future of their 21 staff as that of their partners. In addition to generous financial severance packages, staff received support to make the transition easier, such as extra days off to plan their next career steps, budgets for customised training and new job titles that more accurately reflected their responsibilities. By treating staff with the respect, fairness and transparency they deserved, while helping them flourish in their careers post-MAVA, almost all staff members stayed until MAVA’s last day to address the needs of their partners.

Eve Cabo, who worked as Manager for MAVA’s West Africa Programme, expressed her gratitude for how the closure was managed. “Every story has an end, but in life, every end is a new beginning. 2022 was a year full of challenges to which I was proud to contribute, but also an opportunity to recreate and project oneself positively towards the future thanks to MAVA’s constant support,” she said.

As planned, MAVA ceased grant-making activity in 2022 and closed its doors for the last time in 2023.
MAVA’S APPROACH
MAVA’S APPROACH

M AVA’s values of unifying, flexible, empowering and persevering flow from the founding family. After Luc stepped down as President, the foundation formalised these values to help ensure his spirit wasn’t lost.

A champion of people and nature

Nature is an interaction between people and the planet. As well as building a strong, resilient and collaborative conservation community, MAVA always strove to engage local communities on nearby biodiversity issues. Luc had a special knack of turning sceptical or unwilling people, who saw limited benefit in protecting species or ecosystems, into conservation champions, and the foundation sought to replicate his success.

Reminiscing about his experiences leading MAVA, André describes how inspiring it was to be “surrounded by a community of people who are earnest, passionate and courageous, going over and above what they could be doing to make the world a better place and building a future in which humanity can live in harmony with nature.”

A foundation rooted in people and conservation

In MAVA’s early days, the foundation focused on iconic sites and protected areas. Despite growing significantly in size and scope across its lifetime, from a small gathering of friends in Luc’s home to a group of professionals based in offices across two continents, it stayed true to these roots.

Luc always put people at the heart of his conservation efforts and MAVA followed suit. From his support of young researchers to nurturing the early development of the Tour du Valat alumni, who now populate the conservation field, and the later creation of the MAVA Leaders for Nature Academy, MAVA invested in preparing the next generation of conservationists to follow in its footsteps.

A holistic, long-term perspective

Conservation takes time, ambition and scale. Conservationists plan in decades, not years; MAVA worked with its partners over time to apply long-term solutions that would live on past its closure, rather than temporary fixes. The secure, steady stream of funding that Luc set up enabled the foundation to commit to ambitious long-term goals and work on a scale that was rare in the conservation world.

In addition to requiring long-term thinking, conservation issues are complex, with no single cause or solution. To achieve its goals, MAVA cultivated relationships with a variety of partners,

We were allies, not simply donors – we were not there just to fund the programme. We were also there to help partners with structure, ambition and development, and connect them with other people to create new networks.

André Hoffmann
including local and international NGOs, individuals, universities and government officials, bringing them together to collaborate and build relationships that would remain after its own involvement ceased. To describe this holistic approach, working on different levels from fieldwork to policy, the outgoing MAVA team coined the term, “feet on the ground, hands in the system”.

A true partnership with grantees
Forging authentic partnerships with the organisations and individuals MAVA funded, built on trust in a way that perhaps isn’t the norm in philanthropy, lay at the core of its work. These partnerships were possible because the foundation respected the conservation wisdom of its partners and committed to focusing its energy on supporting instead of directing wherever possible.

However, MAVA’s relationship with its partners wasn’t without challenges. The team tried to be as responsive and flexible as possible, but this attitude occasionally clashed with the need to implement major changes. For example, during its transition phase, MAVA created strategic ‘outcome action plans’ that brought its partners together to tackle a specific conservation challenge. Because it was a complex process to manage and a new way of working for everyone involved, the creation of these plans challenged the foundation’s wish to keep things simple. The results were worth the complexity, and the deep collaboration it catalysed formed a key part of MAVA’s legacy, but it was certainly a departure from its established best practice of keeping things simple and agile.

Another example of MAVA making exceptions to its internal rules was its commitment to flexibility, a pledge much praised by its partners. Such exceptions sometimes had operational consequences, but they also enabled conservation successes that wouldn’t have been possible with a more rigid mindset. Towards the end of the foundation’s lifespan, this flexibility also made the closing-down process trickier. Partners were conditioned to expect flexibility and exceptions as long as their reasons were valid, so MAVA’s need for firm adherence to its closure timelines sometimes came as a surprise.

A convener of a community of actors
Whenever there were opportunities for cooperation between partners, MAVA introduced them to each other. In its last phase, the foundation doubled down on this approach by catalysing deep collaboration between its partners that would continue after its closure.

For example, this approach was particularly impactful in West Africa, where traditional top-down project implementation from individual NGOs was standard for a long time. It was a long road, but the foundation encouraged NGOs of all sizes, government representatives, researchers and local community members to work together, particularly for marine and coastal preservation issues. At the point of MAVA’s closure, there were positive signs this amazing community would continue to thrive.

An engaged donor
Having friendly, transparent and understanding relationships with its partners helped catalyse many of MAVA’s conservation successes while rewarding staff on a personal level too. On the other hand, this closeness sometimes made it hard to make tough but necessary decisions.

The foundation’s support went far beyond just writing cheques, including leadership training, organisational development and network-building. MAVA’s 2021 publication Be an octopus – Reflections from an engaged donor explains in more detail how the foundation saw the donor’s role in the philanthropy system and how its relationship with partners evolved over its 28 years of grant-making.
An empowered team

Another unique aspect of MAVA was the level of decision-making authority it delegated to individual members of staff. The foundation tended to employ staff on a long-term basis, enabling them to build a great deal of expertise and mutual trust, and had robust processes for vetting and designing projects.

This high level of autonomy allowed the foundation to reap many benefits. It could be agile and responsive with fewer layers of approval and far more decentralised decision-making compared to most of its peers. This set-up also benefited partners, who worked hand-in-hand with the MAVA team to shape their collaboration.

A taker of calculated risks

The team’s understanding of conservation and how MAVA could have the most impact continued to develop over its three decades of funding. Calculated risks allowed the foundation to pioneer new ideas and experimental approaches, such as launching its Sustainable Economy programme and setting up the first conservation trust fund in West Africa to protect areas of Mauritania.

Some risks involved navigating political unrest or civil war, but as long as the potential impact remained high, MAVA would try to make it work. Cecilia Gas, who was an intern at MAVA, wrote for the foundation’s website about how politically or socially unstable countries receive little funding to support conservation. She explained, “Often donors are afraid of investing in them because they are wary of the situation, prefer surer bets, or do not realise that the projects can be impactful despite the difficult local context. Supporting projects in these countries can lead to promising results and be a signal of hope for many of them.”

For example, MAVA supported a small NGO in Northern Cyprus called Society for the Protection of Turtles (SPOT) which protected sea turtle nesting sites. The region’s complex political situation contributed to funding being scarce, but their work...
was critical. Political instability and military unrest were frequent challenges in Guinea-Bissau while MAVA funded projects there, but against all odds, the foundation’s steady commitment contributed to preserving biodiversity in the Bijagós Islands. Today, the site is iconic and a core part of MAVA’s legacy.

Of course, taking risks sometimes resulted in failure, like the ill-fated Facebook game trialled by a MAVA partner as a fundraising tool in the early days of social media, but the team treated setbacks as learning experiences.

A contributor to a more sustainable economic system

Particularly under André’s leadership, MAVA promoted a better understanding of the intrinsic and economic value of nature. The foundation recognised the huge potential of nature-based solutions, harnessing nature to address societal challenges while simultaneously providing benefits for both human wellbeing and biodiversity to accelerate the transition to a more sustainable global economic system.

The foundation’s Sustainable Economy programme included promoting nature-based solutions as a valid infrastructure alternative for project planners and investors. By encouraging the integration of natural capital into financial decision-making and national green economy planning, MAVA contributed to a slow shift in the finance community’s perspective on nature. Over the years, this community arrived at an understanding that healthy ecosystems underpin the health of our economy.

A commitment to driving conservation forward

MAVA ended up as a leader in its field. It was committed to harvesting and sharing lessons that would improve practice both in the field and amongst fellow funders. In the final years before its closure, the foundation produced a range of guides and documents, including this book, to capture its unique experiences and pass on its learnings, many of which were hard-won through navigating tricky situations and making errors, making them all the more valuable to share.

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There are no easy wins in conservation. Generating the necessary knowledge, building trust and relationships locally, establishing a common understanding and vision all require time, perseverance and patience. Luc Hoffmann and the MAVA Foundation understood this all too well.

Demetres Karavellas, WWF Greece

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