With over 500 partners and 1,500 projects supported over the years, it is impossible to capture all the successes the foundation contributed to.

This chapter tells 25 stories that represent the breadth of MAVA’s partners’ work, starting with its most iconic sites. The stories are categorised by which of MAVA’s four values – unifying, empowering, flexible and persevering – they best exemplify.

MAVA’S ICONIC SITES

At the heart of MAVA’s inspiration were five key sites: the Camargue, Doñana, the Banc d’Arguin, the Prespa Lakes and the Bijagós archipelago. This first collection of stories describes the foundation’s long history with these diverse wetland environments and how they were protected and preserved over the years.

Left: Pine trees partially buried by a sand dune, Doñana National Park, Andalusia, Spain.
ESTABLISHING THE EXTRAORDINARY SITE WHERE MAVA’S JOURNEY BEGAN

For MAVA, the Tour du Valat was where it all began. When Luc purchased the estate in 1948, captivated by its vast marshes and the countless bird species that called it home, the events leading to MAVA’s birth were set in motion.

Luc was one of the few people who could see how fragile and endangered this land was, with threats including drainage, farming and urban development circling. The creation of the Tour du Valat Biological Station in 1954 turned the sprawling wetland into an open-air laboratory unlike anywhere else in the world. Its seven decades of applied, practical and long-term research, covering diverse topics from wetland salinization to antibiotic resistance, form an invaluable gift to today’s conservationists, public authorities and research institutes.

Over time, Luc and his team demonstrated the value of the wetlands and the Tour du Valat’s remarkable biodiversity, not just for its own sake, but for the benefits it provided to local communities. Its rice farmers took some persuading that flamingos were a blessing rather than a pest eating their crops, but the estate settled into a harmonious relationship between people and nature.

Today, the Tour du Valat’s impact stretches far beyond its borders. It was instrumental in creating global and regional initiatives such as MedWet, a Ramsar Regional Initiative focused on wetland management that unites 27 Mediterranean and Mediterranean-bordering countries. It also helped to launch the Mediterranean Alliance for Wetlands, which brings together 18 international NGOs and six research organisations to increase the visibility of wetlands in Mediterranean society, plus national, regional and international policies. Its own Mediterranean Wetlands Observatory continues...
to guide public policy through the dissemination of papers and reports on the region’s wetlands and their socio-economic value. Its researchers have also attended the Ramsar Convention as part of the French government’s delegation.

The research station has played a substantial role in changing worldwide perception of wetlands and safeguarding their future, but its smaller-scale achievements merit mention too. In a poignant addition to Luc’s legacy, the Tour du Valat’s researchers successfully encouraged his favourite bird, the collared pratincole wader, to use the estate as a breeding ground. Jean Jalbert, Director General of the research institute since 2004, described watching the waders feeding over the marshes in the evening as “a very moving spectacle”.

Alongside the many other inspiring people who have worked at the Tour du Valat over the years, Jean Jalbert deserves a special mention for his passionate wetlands advocacy, which has shaped the future of these unique places for the better. Another figure inseparable from the Tour du Valat was Jean-Paul Taris, a long-time collaborator of Luc’s who also led MAVA from 2005–2010. A keen ornithologist, Jean-Paul started as a field assistant at the research station before becoming the Director General then President of Tour du Valat and making an enormous impact on its development during his time there.
Doñana National Park is a dramatic expanse of land in southern Spain. Its endless coastal marshes and beaches make it the largest wetland in Europe protected as a national park. Before the park was established, it was a forgotten corner of the continent that provided sanctuary to millions of migratory birds.

In the 1960s, Luc joined forces with scientist José Antonio Valverde, Doñana’s greatest protector, to amplify José Antonio’s existing campaign to protect the site from threats like drainage and monoculture farming.

Luc, who was already well-known in the conservation field, lent his reputation, network of contacts and diplomacy skills to the cause. After the pivotal 1957 ‘Doñana Expedition’ gathered some of the best-known ornithologists, photographers and documentarists to capture the stunning natural wealth of the site, attention on the wetland began to grow.

Francisco Franco’s Spanish dictatorship and the country’s ensuing international isolation made the wetlands’ protection politically challenging. Despite the interest of the scientific community, renewed by Luc and José Antonio’s presentations at high-profile scientific congresses on the importance of the marshes to bird migration, development plans continued to nibble at Doñana’s borders.

José Antonio announced a fundraising effort in 1959 to purchase the heart of Doñana’s land and protect it, but larger-scale action was required. In 1961, several members of the Doñana Expedition, along with Luc and José Antonio, launched the World Wildlife Fund, which later became the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). Their broad objective was to raise funds to defend threatened nature around the world, but their first task was to save Doñana.

Through a pioneering international communication campaign and the first crowdfunding effort in the history of nature conservation, resulting in thousands
of donations from bird-lovers, sufficient money was raised to purchase 6,671 hectares of Doñana’s most precious forests and marshes to create a national park. Activating WWF’s newly created subsidiaries in different European countries helped spread the message further, increasing the pressure on the Spanish government which eventually provided a large contribution. Behind the scenes, Luc arranged a loan from his family company Roche’s Spanish subsidiary to ease the sale.

Therefore, Doñana, WWF and MAVA’s histories are all closely intertwined. From the outset, MAVA was one of Doñana’s staunchest defenders through its support of WWF Spain. Juan Carlos del Olmo, Secretary-General of WWF Spain and a champion of the wetlands since the 1990s, was an indispensable ally in the two organisations’ collaboration. Protecting Doñana’s water from the demands of tourism and agriculture comprised the core of WWF’s work. The EU Water Framework Directive was a useful tool but it was not fully implemented by the authorities responsible for the protection of Doñana.

Water loss due to drainage, growth of intensive agriculture for strawberry cultivation and the increase in illegal water use, worsened by the reduction in rainfall resulting from climate change, remains the park’s biggest threat today and the battle to halt illegal irrigation continues. Solutions, such as innovative drip irrigation to reduce water consumption, will be key to securing Doñana’s future and helping its rich natural resources serve people and nature equally. WWF Spain will continue holding the Spanish government accountable and its efforts are supported by MAVA’s significant contribution to the Doñana Defence Fund. This conservation finance mechanism will provide sustainable funding for WWF’s guardianship of the park for many years to come.

“In Doñana are our roots. We have a responsibility to care for and honour the work of pioneers like Luc and José Antonio Valverde, and to protect this natural heritage for the conservation of a large part of Europe’s birdlife and wildlife. Our commitment is firm and thanks to MAVA’s support and enormous legacy we will continue to care for Doñana for decades to come.

Juan Carlos del Olmo, WWF Spain

Right: Spanish imperial eagle, Doñana, Spain.
PROTECTING THE JEWEL IN WEST AFRICA’S CONSERVATION CROWN

The Banc d’Arguin National Park (PNBA) was created in 1976 as an initial measure to protect this vast coastal wetland, teeming with life and its millions of bird inhabitants. MAVA’s involvement with the Mauritanian site began when Luc first visited in 1982. He was immediately struck by the area’s magic and committed himself to its protection. The park’s designation as a Wetland of International Importance in 1982 and a natural World Heritage Site in 1989 helped safeguard it, but didn’t directly counter the explosion in the number of industrial fishing fleets plundering the park’s rich waters.

Working closely with the PNBA and other Mauritanian authorities, Luc helped establish the International Foundation of the Banc d’Arguin (FIBA) – which eventually merged with the MAVA Foundation in 2015 – to co-manage the park in close collaboration with the Imraguen communities who had lived there for thousands of years. The PNBA and FIBA supported the Imraguen to manage, fish and patrol the park’s waters, becoming its stewards and receiving exclusive fishing rights in return, as long as they committed to using their traditional, non-motorised crafts or wading.

The preservation of the Banc d’Arguin serves as a beautiful example of how people and nature can help each other thrive. Thanks to the enduring dedication of its local stewards over four decades, the park was researched, restored and protected against threats.

I personally followed the establishment of BACoMaB with interest and satisfaction. This well-accomplished task finally crowns all the efforts that Luc Hoffmann and his son André made through FIBA and MAVA. Today, these two institutions will disappear from the Mauritanian environmental landscape, but the essential part will remain. The Mauritanian and international ecological world will be grateful to them for this.

Gabriel Hatti, former Director of the Banc d’Arguin National Park and former Advisor to the Presidency of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania
Thoughtful additions, such as opening a boatyard with boatbuilders recruited from Brittany to enhance local knowledge, empowered and motivated the Imraguen in their role as custodians. The two organisations collaborated to tackle illegal shark and ray fishing and other risk factors that threatened the park’s biodiversity and its ecosystem’s delicate balance.

The park’s management involves continuous scientific research to thoroughly understand its diverse environment. No one has been more dedicated to uncovering its secrets than PNBA’s Sidi Cheikh, who has dedicated years to mapping seagrass cover. Like any natural environment, the park still faces challenges, such as the pressures of climate change and commercial fishing, but its people and nature are undoubtedly vastly better off for the protection Luc helped implement in the 1980s.

The PNBA’s work will continue after MAVA’s closure. Its funding is secure, thanks to MAVA and a coalition of partners establishing and endowing a sustainable funding mechanism called the Banc d’Arguin and Coastal and Marine Biodiversity Trust Fund (BACoMaB), which will indefinitely support the park’s conservation and management work. This fund was the first of its kind in West Africa, but conservation finance has since become widespread, with BACoMaB serving as inspiration, more organisations, banks, governments, entrepreneurs, donors and private investors have entered the space.

MAVA’s commitment, at various levels of responsibility, has been decisive in the creation of the Banc d’Arguin and Coastal and Marine Biodiversity Trust Fund, its development and the credibility it has enjoyed with the authorities and technical and financial partners. The quality of the dialogue made it possible to successfully complete the process of creating BACoMaB, its establishment and regular operation through targeted and effective support and active participation in its governance.

Ahmed Lefghih, BACoMaB
BUILDING TRANSBOUNDARY CONSERVATION IN THE HEART OF THE BALKANS

Over decades of dedication, the Society for the Protection of Prespa transformed this exceptional site from a no–man’s–land eyed by developers into a groundbreaking transboundary park.

Prespa is a diverse conservation site stretching around a magical pair of alpine lakes high in the mountains of Albania, Greece and the Republic of North Macedonia. Turquoise waters, vibrant meadows, deep-green forests and snow–capped mountains make it a tranquil corner of Europe and a haven for birds that is truly special for conservationists. Its ecosystems are home to countless species, including more than 50 not found anywhere else.

When Luc first visited Prespa in the early 1970s, he was instantly enchanted, particularly by the opportunity to see Europe’s last breeding pairs of Dalmatian pelicans, but realised the area was under threat from local development plans. He persuaded the Greek military dictatorship that the area was worth protecting and, to the surprise of everyone involved, it agreed. Plans to exploit its natural resources were halted and the Greek part of the site was placed under national forest protection.

However, this designation was only a partial solution. Prespa’s position on the border of three different countries with a historically turbulent relationship played a significant role in conservation being a low priority for its diverse communities. New development plans in the 1980s for the Greek section put the entire Prespa site at risk once more.

Celebrated conservationist Thymio Papayannis visited Prespa in 1985 and immediately became concerned about its future. Luc and Thymio, who went on to become longtime close friends and collaborators, launched a campaign to protect Prespa. They set up WWF Greece and joined forces with biologist Giorgos Catsadorakis to found the Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP), a small environmental organisation supported by a wider network of larger organisations including WWF and the Tour du Valat, which helped gain the international recognition necessary to ensure Prespa’s safety.

Demetres Karavellas, CEO of WWF Greece, recalled a dinner attended by himself, Luc, Thymio, Giorgos and Managing Director of the SPP Myrsini Malakou that proved pivotal for Prespa. He recounted, “We shared with Luc and Thymio a crazy idea – to propose the creation of the first transboundary protected area in the Balkans, in the Prespa Lakes region, involving all three...”
countries. This was no easy or obvious proposition. Political tensions, limited capacity of environmental actors on the ground and conflicting priorities made it a very far-fetched idea. Luc listened carefully to the idea and our very basic plan of how we might proceed. He smiled in that warm, almost mischievous way and said “Yes, let’s try it!”

On the auspicious date of World Wetlands Day in 2000, the prime ministers of Albania, Greece and North Macedonia agreed to create the Prespa Transboundary Park – a triumph for both the people and nature of Prespa. Demetres described, “We could hardly believe that the three prime ministers had come together in the tiny village of Agios Germanos to jointly agree on a more sustainable future for the region. At the same time, we all knew this was just the beginning of a process. Time, hard work and resources would be needed in order to turn this political declaration into real action that could benefit the people and nature in the region.”

Engagement with local people was key to driving protection efforts. The SPP made significant efforts to hear the concerns of Prespa’s people and guide them towards living in peaceful cooperation with nature. For example, Prespa’s Dalmatian pelicans had historically been a source of annoyance for fishermen, as the birds ate their catch. The forest service had even offered bounties for every egg or dead pelican brought to them.

MAVA’s legacy is evident in so many ways in Prespa, in its vitally important biodiversity and ecosystems and across the whole lakes basin, which is shared by Greece, North Macedonia and Albania. The area suffered intensely from wars, from the translocation of people and from environmental degradation during the 20th century, but now, and precisely because of the incredible contribution and support from MAVA, after an era of conflict and turbulent changes in the wider environment, the area is stable and thriving.

Myrsini Malakou, Society for the Protection of Prespa

“This picture is a view of Prespa Lake from the Greek side. It was taken during a hiking tour with our partners from Albania and Greece. It always reminds me that nature doesn’t know borders and that if we want to make a real change we have to work together.”

Daniela Zaec, Macedonian Ecological Society
One of the SPP’s first victories was persuading fishermen that the pelicans were worth more to their community alive than dead. The issue was forced to a head when a drought left the birds with nowhere to nest except on top of the fishermen’s traps, destroying them in the process. Myrsini described the moment the tide turned: “We told the fishermen that whether or not their grandchildren would see this bird alive on Earth was in their hands. Watching the boats go out at dawn the next morning, we held our breath – but as they approached the traps, they stopped their engines and rowed quietly by.” These same fishermen went on to become fierce protectors of the pelicans, whose numbers swelled to over 1,000.

SPP won numerous awards, including one of the first Ramsar Wetland Conservation Awards in 1999, for its work with local communities, reintroducing traditional agricultural practices like wet meadows and promoting organic farming.

Ultimately what MAVA and the SPP began, and the three states and local communities have subsequently created together, could be seen as a living memory, a collaboration rooted in these past decades yet reaching towards the future – one that is renewed through each new circumstance and situation in which we find ourselves. In these times of conflict and uncertainty, this sense of hope has never been more important.

Julia Henderson, Society for the Protection of Prespa

One of the SPP’s first victories was persuading fishermen that the pelicans were worth more to their community alive than dead. The issue was forced to a head when a drought left the birds with nowhere to nest except on top of the fishermen’s traps, destroying them in the process. Myrsini described the moment the tide turned: “We told the fishermen that whether or not their grandchildren would see this bird alive on Earth was in their hands. Watching the boats go out at dawn the next morning, we held our breath – but as they approached the traps, they stopped their engines and rowed quietly by.” These same fishermen went on to become fierce protectors of the pelicans, whose numbers swelled to over 1,000.

SPP won numerous awards, including one of the first Ramsar Wetland Conservation Awards in 1999, for its work with local communities, reintroducing traditional agricultural practices like wet meadows and promoting organic farming.

Ultimately what MAVA and the SPP began, and the three states and local communities have subsequently created together, could be seen as a living memory, a collaboration rooted in these past decades yet reaching towards the future – one that is renewed through each new circumstance and situation in which we find ourselves. In these times of conflict and uncertainty, this sense of hope has never been more important.

Julia Henderson, Society for the Protection of Prespa

However, Prespa’s remote location and complex needs make it an expensive place to operate. With the SPP’s future funding needs in mind and a desire to preserve the future of this beloved site, MAVA needed a different approach. The foundation’s chosen solution was the Prespa Ohrid Nature Trust (PONT), a transboundary conservation trust fund created using an initial tranche of funding from MAVA and the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development through KfW Development Bank, along with the technical support of WWF Greece and the Frankfurt Zoological Society. Modelled on other successful nature trusts, this innovative sustainable funding mechanism offers security for SPP and other NGOs and national parks working nearby. Lynda Mansson explained, “The creation of the Prespa Ohrid Nature Trust led to significant resources being made available for support to conservation actions in perpetuity in this important region.”
CONSERVING THE WADERS AND WONDERS OF THE BIJAGÓS

Tiniguena and IBAP’s protection of the Bijagós Islands served the archipelago’s people and nature, with their approach to conserving its natural splendour characterised by strong community engagement and involvement.

Tiniguena and the Institute for Biodiversity and Protected Areas (IBAP) were MAVA’s long-term partners in the protection of the lush Bijagós Islands in Guinea-Bissau, an 88-strong archipelago of tropical forests, turquoise waters, pristine beaches and countless rare species.

Tiniguena is a small environmental NGO founded by visionary activist Augusta Henrique in the early 1990s. Its name means ‘this land is ours’ in the local Cassanga language, a fitting tribute to the organisation’s leading role in Bissau-Guinean conservation. In 2012, she passed the NGO’s leadership on to its current director Miguel de Barros. Miguel fell in love with the archipelago’s rich natural resources and sacred waterways when he visited as a child on a learning exchange programme run by Tiniguena.

Miguel enhanced Tiniguena’s reputation as a formidable defender of the islands while simultaneously developing his own as a respected environmental advocate, Indigenous rights champion and equality campaigner. Although he was from the nation’s capital Bissau, Miguel was accepted by the Indigenous Bijagós as one of their own after he was stung by a stingray and saved by an elderly fisherman using traditional medicine — an unorthodox rite of passage that created unbreakable mutual trust.

Tiniguena and IBAP’s protection of the Bijagós Islands served the archipelago’s people and nature, with their approach to conserving its natural splendour characterised by strong community engagement and involvement.

MAVA’s technical, financial and institutional intervention in the Bijagós Archipelago in Guinea-Bissau, West Africa has left important legacies and results — both locally and worldwide — regarding the process of integration between the conservation of species, habitats and ecosystems, and the need for the participative and sustainable development of local communities.

Justino Biai, IBAP
IBAP was set up by Guinea-Bissau’s government in 2004 to manage the country’s network of protected areas. Together, Tiniguena and IBAP form a dynamic duo, working to empower local communities, include women and enrich traditional culture as the keys to their success. As Charlotte Karibuhoye, MAVA’s West Africa Programme Director, explained: “We cannot conserve biodiversity if we do not value local people, cultures, traditions and spiritual identity.”

Their proudest joint achievement is the creation of Guinea-Bissau’s first community-based marine protected area in the Urok islands. The area is co-managed through a unique governance system that pools the strengths of Bijagó communities, IBAP officials and Tiniguena’s staff. Local people, including women and young people, lead on decisions regarding ecosystem management and community development, while local fishermen enforce regulations via patrols.

This special participatory model received global recognition and has been replicated elsewhere as a best-practice example of community-based conservation. The attention has helped attract other donors to the Bijagós Islands to sustain and develop Tiniguena and IBAP’s work post-MAVA. The establishment of Fondation Bioguiné, a conservation trust fund designed as a sustainable financing instrument for the conservation of biodiversity in Guinea-Bissau, further secures this exceptional archipelago’s future.
These stories describe how the foundation acted as a unifier to forge partnerships between grantees, develop strong networks of like-minded conservationists, convene stakeholders across borders in a common goal and rally people around promising new initiatives.
CHAMPIONING THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY

The foundation’s reputation and unifying power helped launch a powerful circular economy movement in its home country.

In 2018, MAVA’s Sustainable Economy programme considered how it could promote the concept of a circular economy in Switzerland. The country is heavily dependent on raw material imports and its per capita consumption of resources is high. However, it also has a high per capita income and world-leading waste management and recycling policies. Combined with a positive initial reception to several existing small-scale circular economy projects, these conditions laid a strong foundation to build upon.

The foundation was able to move quickly from concept to catalyst, convening a network of interested parties including the Migros Engagement Fund and the Swiss Economic Forum. MAVA’s philanthropic reputation and André’s stature as a businessman supplied authority to the pursuit, and Circular Economy Switzerland (CES) quickly developed its own identity as a respected coordination and advocacy platform.

The CES network soon became empowered to drive forward without MAVA’s direct involvement, although the foundation continued to fund it. It worked on three levels: engaging business leaders and entrepreneurs to promote innovation, engaging authorities to promote relevant policy, and engaging consumers to influence their behaviour and consumption decisions. Today, CES has an unmistakable influence on city planning and politics while travelling down the road towards financial security.

Many people contributed to the endeavour’s success. The network was expertly coordinated by circular economy campaigner Nicolai Diamant, whose experience running an open access design and repair workshop in Basel provided real-world circular economy experience that bolstered CES’ knowledge.

Together, we will achieve much more than we can alone.
Nicolai Diamant, Circular Economy Switzerland
PROVING MARINE CONSERVATIONISTS ARE STRONGER TOGETHER

Without MedPAN, MPA managers in the Mediterranean would be left to fight their daily battles in isolation, unaware of possible sources of inspiration, technical support and funding. They would also experience difficulties dealing with issues that stretch beyond their MPA borders, such as the conservation of mobile species like marine turtles. The network’s formation means its public institution and NGO members can collaborate and share best practices. It organises exchange visits, workshops and training sessions, amongst other activities. The network engages other key conservation players in the region, such as WWF and IUCN, to align on priorities and a unified approach, while also collaborating with other networks outside the region to amplify its impact.

MedPAN has over 130 members, who manage more than 191 MPAs throughout 21 Mediterranean countries. These contributors either have direct responsibility for managing existing MPAs, or participate in the management or development of new MPAs in the Mediterranean region. Members have a significant role in developing the network, with the MedPAN board being mostly composed of MPA managers.

There was a time when the network’s success seemed unlikely, but MAVA’s faith in its mission was justified. When MedPAN’s future looked uncertain in 2011 and it needed an extra push to fully occupy the niche it had identified, the foundation provided a tranche of unrestricted funding.

Thanks to the technical and organisational support MAVA provided alongside its grants, and excellent collaboration between the foundation’s team and MedPAN, the risk paid off. Organisational development focused on strengthening MedPAN’s fundraising capacity and building financial risk reserves to help face unpredictable events in the future. MedPAN now benefits from the support of new public and private donors, with good prospects for the sustainability of this support.

The strength of this network would not have been possible without Purificació Canals, Chair of MedPAN and Marie Romani, its Executive Secretary, who worked tirelessly to strengthen the movement and promote marine conservation, as well as the dedication and commitment of the MedPAN board and secretariat team.

“MAVA believed in us from the very beginning and was a key support to developing and sustaining the network. When MAVA began supporting us, MedPAN was small and not well recognised. That was just the beginning of the adventure!

Marie Romani, MedPAN”
The Mura, Drava and Danube rivers stretch along a 700-kilometre green belt full of unmatched biodiversity. As well as hosting many endangered species, more than 250,000 migratory waterfowls use the rivers to rest and feed. Additionally, the largest population density of white-tailed eagles in Europe uses the floodplains to breed. Luc had a strong interest in the region’s waterways, so contributing to its preservation was a natural fit for MAVA.

This success story is a tale of one influential and effective man, Arno Mohl, who spearheaded the project. Arno had developed a deep love for the natural world during his childhood spent playing on the verdant banks of the Drava in Carinthia, Austria. When a dam was constructed, he witnessed the area’s destruction, cementing his determination to see this river system protected.

His perseverance and ambitious vision, supported by his companions and partners in public institutions and NGOs across the five countries, allowed the biosphere protection campaign to become a reality over 30 years of dreaming and hard work. This was achieved despite significant setbacks, including historical intercountry tensions and border disputes.

In 2021, with the cooperation of all five countries, UNESCO officially designated the Mura-Drava-Danube region a Transboundary Biosphere Reserve, for the benefit of both its people and nature. As well as protecting species and ecosystems, the creation of the reserve safeguards recreational spaces for local people, lowers the risk of floods by protecting floodplains and boosts sustainable tourism. The area is not completely protected and pressure must be maintained against the temptations of river channelling, but Arno and his international team of WWF Austria, WWF Adria and WWF Hungary remain committed to the cause.

“Although the development of the biosphere reserve has a 30-year history, the partnership with MAVA made all the difference. With Holger as an advocate and benevolent supporter, the initiative delivered the essential results. If these rivers are allowed to keep flowing freely, and thus can continue to sustain the unique nature and life of local communities that depend on them, the biosphere reserve will truly go down in history as a European model of success.”

Arno Mohl, WWF Mura-Drava-Danube Programme Leader
UNITING TO PRESERVE SEA TURTLE POPULATIONS

MAVA created a powerful partnership of organisations across three West African countries to tackle sea turtle conservation, which succeeded in boosting nest numbers year after year.

Conservation of sea turtles requires an international approach and collaboration between a broad range of stakeholders. MAVA worked with Fundação Maio Biodiversidade (FMB), Fundação Tartaruga, the Turtle Foundation, the Institute for Biodiversity and Protected Areas (IBAP) and the Parc National du Banc d’Arguin (PNBA) across West Africa. This enabled a reduction in poaching, increased awareness among local communities and different national actors of the importance of conserving migratory species, protecting nesting sites, and strengthened the expertise of local implementing partners. As a result, the number of female turtles nesting across three West African countries (Mauritania, Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau) increased.

The foundation’s history with sea turtle conservation dates back to 2000. Its first turtle project occurred in the João Vieira e Poilão National Marine Park in the Bijagós archipelago of Guinea-Bissau, home to one of the largest green turtle populations in the world.

Talking to people living in small communities, I realised effective biodiversity conservation is essential for tackling poverty. They are two sides of the same coin.

Aissa Regalla, IBAP
The first stone used in the construction of the park’s headquarters was laid by Luc in December 2001.

It soon became evident that the turtles also required protection when they travelled to other islands in the Bijagós, and other waters, beaches and channels in West Africa like the Banc d’Arguin.

MAVA looked further afield to important nesting sites for loggerhead sea turtles, such as Boa Vista island in Cape Verde. Its team engaged with local organisations, including Fundaçào Tartaruga and its German sister Turtle Foundation, providing organisational development support and funding to help these smaller partners scale their impact.

A relationship with Fundação Maio Biodiversidade on nearby Maio island, Cape Verde, came next, extending the partnership’s protective reach further across the region. This was followed by a third phase of expansion, bringing the PNBA into the fold to protect turtles in feeding grounds across Mauritania.

Empowering local organisations was key to this conservation success. MAVA always believed that conservation is about people just as much as nature, and tackling turtle poaching requires engaging with local communities to understand and mitigate the socio-economic issues behind it as much as it needs trained rangers and protected nesting sites.

Many individuals made inspirational contributions to this cause over the years. To mention only a few: Ukie Resende from Fundaçào Tartaruga, who tirelessly worked to combat illegal turtle poaching in Cape Verde; Aïssa Regalla, who devoted herself to engaging communities to protect threatened species for IBAP; and Rocío Moreno, whose visionary leadership at FMB made its award-winning achievements possible.

“My life has changed, as has my way of looking at nature, and I’ve grown more and more passionate about turtles. As a Cape Verdian, I’m proud to be contributing to my country.”

Ukie Resende, Fundação Tartaruga
PRESERVING THE NATURE ON MAVA’S DOORSTEP

MAVA helped assemble a network of actors in the Swiss canton of Vaud to save its diverse natural heritage.

Vaud is home to many sensitive habitats, such as wetlands and meadows. Its natural heritage is stunning, including the Jura mountains, lowland Plateau and Prealps. However, MAVA recognised that impending development plans risked the health of these ecosystems and the myriad species they supported.

The existing Swiss Biodiversity Strategy was encouraging, but Vaud lacked the resources to implement it. Although other actors, such as local NGOs, research institutions and municipalities, were already working independently to preserve the canton’s biodiversity, MAVA identified the inefficiency of this siloed approach.

MAVA utilised its convening strength to unite a community of Vaudois stakeholders for the first time, including the Direction Générale de l’Environnement of the Canton of Vaud, creating the Plateforme Nature Vaudoise. It immediately became apparent that the group’s first mission had to be unlocking more federal money, which would be critical for sustainable success.

The coordination and facilitation skills of Jérôme Pellet, manager of MAVA’s Switzerland programme, were key to leveraging this large tranche of funding from the Swiss Confederation. He explained, “It takes a strong convener like MAVA to bring a group like this together, but it’s vital. We all need to sing from the same hymn sheet.” The support of board member Hubert du Plessix, who was also the president of a wetland conservation organisation in Vaud, proved invaluable, as was MAVA’s decision (after some deliberation) to take the unusual step of funding the canton directly.

Plateforme Nature Vaudoise remains a strong committee with a unified voice, shaping the canton’s biodiversity strategy while driving bigger projects, thanks to increased cantonal funding. Part of its strength lies in the participation of several committee members in the MAVA Leaders for Nature Academy. This capacity-building ensured they could make tremendous contributions to Plateforme Nature Vaudoise’s successes.

“The creation of the Plateforme Nature Vaudoise, driven by MAVA, created a new dimension to our work by integrating us within a cantonal network for the first time. The resulting strategic discussions and opportunities for consultation and self-reflection have proved essential to achieving our common mission of preserving biodiversity and the ecological infrastructure of our region.”

François Margot, Gruyère Pays-d’Enhaut Regional Nature Park
MAVA aimed to deliver sustainable change in the projects it supported, in order to achieve long-term conservation successes. This kind of conservation work often takes a long time to achieve the desired results, making patience and perseverance necessary qualities for both conservationists and funders. Some of these stories describe years of commitment paying off, while others describe testing challenges overcome by persistence and tenacity.
SAVING THE EMBLEMATIC BALKAN LYNX

With fewer than 50 individuals remaining, the Balkan lynx, a subspecies of the European lynx, is critically endangered. Scattered along the Balkan Green Belt, primarily in the border region between Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo, the lynx is threatened by poaching, unsustainable hunting resulting in a potential lack of prey, the destruction of its habitat due to deforestation, and habitat fragmentation because of infrastructure development. But the lynx is a beautiful, photogenic wildcat. This was harnessed to boost public engagement in its conservation while helping draw awareness to broader Balkan conservation issues.

Unlike many large conservation NGOs, EuroNatur puts its national partners in the driver’s seat, empowering small organisations and enabling their actions. To save the Balkan lynx, EuroNatur partnered with KORA, an organisation specialising in carnivore ecology and wildlife management, combining its community-building and conservation skills with KORA’s scientific and monitoring expertise. The project was initiated by celebrated lynx ecologists Christine Breitenmoser-Würsten and Urs Breitenmoser, experienced conservationist Annette Spangenberg and the support and passion of many others.

With the Balkan lynx as the flagship species for the forests and mountains of the Balkan region, the profile of its conservation issues was raised. Several protected areas were created and the lynx was officially added to the IUCN Red List as a critically endangered subspecies. Educational programmes in schools were an effective community engagement tactic, reaching thousands of children. Camera traps helped increase understanding of where to direct conservation efforts and funds by providing deeper insight into lynx behaviour.
It is extremely difficult to see a lynx in the wild. Most of the time we only find tracks, photos on camera traps or a sign of life, like a signal from a GPS collar, and it is exciting to know in that moment that the lynx is somewhere there, in the vastness of the Mavrovo National Park, in his original habitat, where he is supposed to be. Thanks to the support of MAVA over the last 15 years, much has been done for the protection of lynx in North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo with the scientific support of KORA and many locals. The work will continue.

Lisa Leschinski, EuroNatur

Aleksandar Pavlov of the Macedonian Ecological Society said of the project, “My biggest takeaway from MAVA’s involvement with the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme, on a personal level, is the tremendous opportunity to work on the conservation of this rare animal, which helped me grow into a wildlife researcher. However, on a wider scale, my biggest satisfaction is how our concerted conservation efforts have helped transform the Balkan lynx from a nearly mythological forest dweller to an actual flesh-and-bone animal people take pride in. It warms my heart to see more of them getting onboard to ensure this critter a fighting chance in the wild! Thank you, MAVA, for spurring this noble work!”

EuroNatur was MAVA’s eighth largest grantee. The foundation’s long-term support and sizeable funding meant it could patiently progress towards obtaining the support of local authorities and build the capacity of national NGOs, which eventually turned this short-term project into a long-term programme.

“..."It is extremely difficult to see a lynx in the wild. Most of the time we only find tracks, photos on camera traps or a sign of life, like a signal from a GPS collar, and it is exciting to know in that moment that the lynx is somewhere there, in the vastness of the Mavrovo National Park, in his original habitat, where he is supposed to be. Thanks to the support of MAVA over the last 15 years, much has been done for the protection of lynx in North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo with the scientific support of KORA and many locals. The work will continue."-

Lisa Leschinski, EuroNatur
BUILDING A COALITION FOR EFFECTIVE COASTAL CONSERVATION

Despite a rocky beginning, the Regional Partnership for Coastal and Marine Conservation developed into a powerful coalition of over 80 national and international organisations, orchestrating coastal conservation across seven countries in West Africa.

The Regional Partnership for Coastal and Marine Conservation, better known by its French initials PRCM, was born out of Luc’s determination to spur closer collaboration between big international non-government organisations (BINGOs), particularly in West Africa. He recognised the inefficiency of working separately and thereby competing for funding, rather than pooling their resources and expertise.

There was no clear candidate to manage this regional-level, multi-country and multi-stakeholder collaboration. MAVA therefore designed PRCM to fill this gap, forming a coalition to encourage a streamlined approach between BINGOs working on West African conservation.

Whilst the idea was simple, the execution was not. PRCM went through many iterations and refocusing exercises, with its future seriously in danger at its lowest point. But throughout the difficulties, MAVA remained by its side, providing core support and strategic orientation. Eventually, MAVA and PRCM found a winning formula, catalysing collaboration between a broad range of over 80 conservation actors and creating a dynamic movement for change.

I remember attending a MAVA board meeting in Switzerland where PRCM’s future was in the balance. When Luc Hoffmann said it was a pioneering initiative that could serve as a model for other parts of the world, it encouraged and inspired me enormously – knowing people wanted to help us, and that we should do the same for ourselves here in West Africa.

Ahmed Senhoury, Regional Partnership for Coastal and Marine Conservation
PRCM became an NGO in its own right, developing a reputation as the key player in West Africa for donors, other NGOs and decision-makers to engage with.

This success is largely down to the consummate leadership of Ahmed Senhoury, PRCM’s Executive Director. Praised for his diplomacy and patience, Ahmed is a passionate conservationist who has taken PRCM from strength to strength in recent years. His small team approaches conservation from many angles: mobilising funds, delivering training, working with local communities to protect vulnerable species, influencing national, regional and international policies and shaping protocols.

In addition to becoming a capable partner for MAVA in West Africa, PRCM was also recognised and funded by other donors. These donor relationships and fundraising success gradually reduced PRCM’s dependence on MAVA. Many conservation challenges remain, but PRCM is well-equipped to face them.

Under the enlightened leadership of Ahmed Senhoury, PRCM has reached an exemplary stage of maturity, with many partners and accumulated successes. Today, it represents an essential point of convergence around which most of the coastal and marine conservation initiatives in the region revolve and, as such, benefits from diversified support. The PRCM is thus facing the numerous and complex challenges of the future with all the necessary assets. In this respect, it can be said that FIBA, and later MAVA, have played a major role in accompanying the development of PRCM from its creation to its adulthood, a magnificent example of cooperation and resilience.

Pierre Campredon
FORTIFYING FARMING FOR THE FUTURE

Vision Landwirtschaft (VL) is a Swiss agricultural think tank independent from government funding. It’s a small, nimble organisation that punches well above its weight on agriculture reform, collaborating with over 30 partners, including political parties, to create a movement for change in farming. MAVA helped establish VL and remained its main funder for many years.

The Swiss Constitution contains a 1996 article on agriculture, enshrining specific commitments – to agriculture that’s diverse and healthy, produces food and value for society, and for which farmers are fairly paid – but no one was holding the industry or government accountable to these promises. Through practices like widespread use of harmful pesticides and agriculture’s dependence on billions of francs in state subsidies, the situation was leading to economic disaster. VL was the only body suggesting alternative ideas for agriculture and, eventually, the right people started to listen.

Thanks to tireless campaigning from VL, parliament ruled in 2014 to increase the proportion of Switzerland’s CHF 4 billion annual agricultural subsidy that directly supported sustainability – including crop diversification, animal welfare and healthy ecosystems – from 20 to 50 per cent. There is more work to do and VL’s mission continues, but this ruling made an enormous difference.

VL’s successes wouldn’t have been possible without many years of cooperation between committed, experienced and knowledgeable people, alongside the dedication of its founder, Andreas Bosshard. With a background in organic farming and seed producing, and a passion for sustainable agriculture, Andreas was perfectly positioned to drive change, and MAVA provided him with the funding to do so. After the departure of Andreas from the project, VL’s future is less certain than other entities or projects featured in this section of the book. However, VL has secured project funding and continues to seek core funding.

“
As a small organisation, at first we didn’t really believe we could make a difference but we’ve realised, yes, we can!
Andreas Bosshard,
Vision Landwirtschaft
REESTABLISHING AN ANCIENT SPECIES IN THE WILD

With support from the Hoffmann family and later from MAVA, Association TAKH and Khomyn Talyn Takhi ran one of three Mongolian reintroduction projects that helped take the Przewalski horse from a few survivors in zoos to a 900-strong herd in their natural habitat of the Mongol steppe. The project now appears on the list of success stories managed by IUCN partner Reverse the Red.

This is a beautiful conservation story with a clear leader – Claudia Feh, a Tour du Valat alumni who dedicated her life to reintroducing the Przewalski horse into the wild. Over several decades, TAKH and its partners used some of the few remaining members of the species in zoos to build an established population in Mongolia. The idea seemed crazy, but eventually became a reality thanks to the drive and passion of everyone involved. Before Claudia’s mission began in 1990, the last recorded sighting of a Przewalski horse in Mongolia was in 1969, at the edge of the arid Gobi desert.

To rebuild the population, TAKH started by gathering 11 individual Przewalski horses from zoos and releasing them at Le Villaret on the Causse Méjean, part of the Cévennes National Park in France, to create a semi-wild herd. The horses learned to adapt to new physical conditions and, most importantly, to a natural social environment before the truly ambitious stage of Claudia’s plan began in 2002 – transferring the horses to their ancestral home in Asia.

For speed and border-crossing practicality, TAKH transported the horses by plane. They were accompanied by Luc Hoffmann and Jean-Paul Taris, along with the TAKH team. The horses eventually reached Khar Us Nuur National Park in the Khomyn Tal community of western Mongolia.

In collaboration with local herders, TAKH protects a 14,000-hectare, partly fenced enclosure in this region, with the goal of ultimately removing the fence to allow the Przewalski horse population to roam freely. In 2020, the Mongolian government created the Khomyn Tal National Park to further support the conservation of this emblematic horse population.

TAKH helped establish Khomyn Talyn Takhi (KTT), a Mongolian NGO, to operate there. KTT worked with local communities to develop new income-generating activities outside of their traditional breeding of sheep, goats and camels, with the goal of reducing the risk of hybridisation with domestic horses.

Today, TAKH is developing Le Villaret into a scientific ecotourism centre, increasing its financial security while promoting the habitat of Causse Méjean and Przewalski horse conservation. In collaboration with local authorities, KTT will take over responsibility of the new Khomyn Tal National Park. Fundraising is likely to remain a challenge, but the Przewalski horse population in Mongolia continues to grow.

TAKH’s Sally Zalewski and Jean-Louis Perrin concluded, “There have been many people involved in this project since its inception, but it is thanks to the vision and the persistence of Luc and Maja Hoffmann, who keenly followed and supported the project throughout, that the Przewalski horse is now repopulating the Mongolian steppe. What a unique and extraordinary achievement to enable the reintroduction of a species that has become extinct in the wild. A true legacy to the natural world.”

“Bringing back a species from ‘extinct in the wild’ to some populations numbering several hundreds of individuals living a free life is not an easy task, especially for a slowly reproducing large mammal. Affinity between living beings is essential to succeed, ethologists would say. But somehow it was easy. All we needed was a bunch of happily wild, crazy people (conservationists) and not yet quite happy, wild, crazy horses (to be conserved) around the world, disagreeing all the time but gathering together like one herd against outside threats.

Claudia Feh, Board member, Khomyn Talyn Takhi
The Mediterranean monk seal is one of the most endangered marine mammals on Earth. Their numbers dwindled due to habitat loss from urban development, entanglement in fishing nets and natural causes. For the first few months of their lives, monk seals are defenceless against rough seas and stormy weather, leading to high infant mortality. These creatures were close to Luc’s heart and he personally encouraged CBD-Habitat to help them.

Their main colony lies between Mauritania and the territorially disputed Western Sahara, an overlooked region that receives little attention from conservation funders, near the fast-growing city of Nouadhibou.

Conservation issues are usually complex and this was no different. Firstly, the colony’s rest and breeding area required protecting so the birth rate could increase. In 2001, CBD-Habitat and the local authorities created the Costa de las Focas Reserve in Cabo Blanco to protect the breeding caves and their surroundings.

The next issue was survival rate. The seals required safeguarding from fishermen, so CBD–Habitat had to understand how to avoid accidental entanglement and why fishermen might illegally entrap or persecute them in the first place. In another example of people and nature’s interdependence, a programme to improve the living and working conditions of fishermen and an environmental outreach scheme in schools helped encourage community engagement in the seals’ plight.

After two decades of hard work, the annual number of births in the colony almost quadrupled and its size reached over 350 individuals. Through technology-based monitoring, each member of the colony was catalogued and tracked. CBD-Habitat has gained a reputation as the leader in monk seal conservation which will help to ensure its financial sustainability.

CBD–Habitat also empowered its local sister agency, Annajah. The two organisations work together in Mauritania; their combined efforts in the Costa de las Focas Reserve turn the spotlight towards the seals and encourage the creation of other protective bodies.

In recognition of the need for broader collaboration between the various actors investing in monk seal conservation, MAVA helped form the Monk Seal Alliance in 2019 with four other foundations. As one of the Monk Seal Alliance’s many beneficiaries, CBD–Habitat will receive funding for its ambitious plans. This will include translocating the seals to their traditional habitat of the Mediterranean region’s beaches, where their vulnerable young have a better chance of survival.
From nurturing emerging talent in the conservation field to building the capability and ambition of fledgling NGOs, these stories encapsulate MAVA’s commitment to building the capacity of people and organisations, ensuring they, in turn, are at the vanguard of tackling today’s most pressing social and environmental challenges.

MAVA AS AN EMPOWERER

From nurturing emerging talent in the conservation field to building the capability and ambition of fledgling NGOs, these stories encapsulate MAVA’s commitment to building the capacity of people and organisations, ensuring they, in turn, are at the vanguard of tackling today’s most pressing social and environmental challenges.

Left: Four days of engagement in dry grassland conservation actions with 70 international school students in the Vaud Alps, Switzerland, June 2022. Organised by Alpes Vivantes.
EMPOWERING THE CONSERVATION LEADERS OF THE FUTURE

From 2016, MAVA’s focus was ensuring its partners would continue thriving after its closure in 2022. Building a stronger conservation community was vital, but it wasn’t immediately clear how this could be achieved. The foundation identified several gaps relating to leadership development, including talent development and reinforcing connections between its partners.

MAVA learned through experience that many people enter the conservation world with a passion for the natural world and the potential to lead, but lack access to high-quality leadership development as their careers unfold, which hinders their ability to deliver change. This was because either their organisations were unfamiliar with its benefits or they lacked funding to support it. This lack of investment in people, combined with the demanding nature of conservation work, increases the risk of burnout.

Nathalie Cadot, Manager of the Impact and Sustainability Unit, who led the development and implementation of MAVA’s leadership support to its partners emphasised, “Conservation and sustainable economy actions represent much more than technical knowledge and processes; it’s about people and human relationships. The Academy’s training was much-needed, first by giving time and space so leaders who are constantly busy could reflect. Secondly, by giving them tools and approaches to test and find their own leadership style. Finally, by allowing partners to balance the focus on results with recognition of the value of people and relationships.”

MAVA promoted the opportunity for different generations to learn from and grow with one another as a core aspect of nurturing good leadership. This doesn’t only promote inclusion of voices, but develops participants’ self-awareness, self-confidence and their networks. Unable to find a programme delivering this intergenerational aspect, the foundation embarked on developing its own.

After a tender process to find organisations that would help realise its vision, MAVA set up the MAVA Leaders for Nature Academy in partnership with Common Purpose and Mowgli Mentoring. This innovative intergenerational leadership programme was designed to strengthen the ability of experienced and emerging leaders to support each other and collaborate on devising solutions to environmental challenges. In addition to traditional topics like taking responsibility and making decisions, participants also worked on their personal growth, soft skills like active listening and compassion, confidence, emotional intelligence and networking. Kathleen Bury from Mowgli Mentoring shared, “The innovation in this was also to integrate the respective skills around

The MAVA Academy gave us a new mindset and tools to work more effectively. This is MAVA’s most important project for the future of conservation. The results of the MAVA Academy will be seen in 10 to 30 years... It is creating a movement and changing the generation who are, and will be, leading conservation efforts.

Jovan Andevski, Programmes Manager at Vulture Conservation Foundation and Academy participant
mentoring and leadership, mentoring being the best way to put leadership into action.”

The leadership philosophy of the Academy is ‘Leading Beyond Authority’, which involves influencing peers, partners and players beyond one’s direct circle of control in order to deliver change. “The approach is especially important in the conservation sector, which often relies on persuasion, advocacy, networking and collaboration,” said Alison Coburn from Common Purpose. “We need leaders who can cross boundaries of all kinds, whether geographical, economic or political.”

The foundation originally planned four cohorts of 30 participants, but after the success of and demand for the first cohorts, it managed to squeeze in six, alongside a condensed French-language alternative called the MAVA Leaders for Nature Programme. In total, 201 people took part from 26 countries.

The year-long programme strengthened the capabilities of individuals, but also solidified the resilience, cooperation and results of the organisations they worked at. Additionally, it raised awareness of the need to invest in leadership development and nurture talent, with particular focus on the next generation of changemakers who will be fighting for nature and humanity’s survival.

“Sometimes, as senior professionals, we think we know because we have more experience. The intergenerational mentoring programme reminded us that it is important to feed from new ideas. We have to recognise that we sometimes forget humility.”

Blandine Melis, former Executive Director at Biosfera NGO and Academy participant
SUCCESS STORIES

“I’m very grateful for and proud of the chance I got to connect with peers from Europe and Africa thanks to the MAVA Leadership Academy. It gave me a strong feeling of having been seen and appreciated for the work I’m doing, and strengthened my capabilities in areas I had little understanding of beforehand.”
Felix Staehli, Co-founder of Impact Hub Geneva-Lausanne and Academy participant

“When I look at my colleagues who went through the MAVA Leaders for Nature Academy, their leadership skills and the way they now approach challenges – for me, their transformation was a real little miracle which inspired me to apply for the Academy too.”
Tomislav Hudina, Office Manager at Association BIOM and Academy participant

“The MAVA Leaders for Nature Academy provided a safe space for me, allowing me to remain resilient and persevere in the face of multi-faceted uncertainty.”
Jessica Villat, Head of Communication at the Luc Hoffmann Institute and Academy participant

“I discovered a brand new world, full of empathy, trust and understanding, aiming to deal with and overcome internal and external interferences. I can still see the vital changes that happened in me, making me a better person and, of course, a better and more efficient professional. Thank you MAVA for this amazing opportunity.”
Panagiota Theodorou, Conservation Coordinator at ARCHELON and Academy participant

“I am very grateful to MAVA for these investments in the development of humans who work for the conservation of nature. Its exchange spaces were a great help and incredible support for isolated people during the pandemic. MAVA’s investment in the Academy was incredible – it will shape the future of conservation in the Mediterranean.”
Houda El Alaoui, IUCN North Africa Programme Officer and Academy participant
ORCHESTRATING THE COMEBACK OF VULTURES IN EUROPE

VCF is an international NGO committed to the conservation of European vultures. With their European population reduced to only 20 breeding pairs living in the Pyrenees, the future of bearded vultures was looking bleak in the early 1980s. Engaging the public was challenging, with people put off by the birds’ carrion-feeding nature and less-than-cuddly appearance, meaning their vital role in ecosystems was disregarded.

VCF began reintroducing bearded vultures to the Alps in 1986 and the birds are now settled in the mountains. Captive breeding, reintroduction and restocking of vultures, and successfully rebuilding the species’ presence necessitates protecting and conserving vultures and their natural habitats. For example, some veterinary drugs like diclofenac are poisonous to vultures. In India, the population of vultures slumped by nearly 95 per cent between the early 1980s and 2017, with widespread diclofenac use in livestock believed to be a significant factor. In 2014, VCF partnered with other relevant organisations on a campaign to ban the drug for European livestock.

José Tavares, Director of VCF, and Dr Alex Llopis Dell, Captive Breeding Vultures Manager, deserve special recognition for their heroic roles in VCF’s successes and growth. José has grown and established VCF as the go-to organisation for vulture conservation, while Alex diligently collaborates with over 40 zoos, specialised breeding centres, recovery centres and private centres which house bearded vultures to ensure the best possible breeding results.

An emblematic conservation success, this partnership is an example of MAVA’s broad engagement beyond funding. The foundation identified the limitations of VCF’s impact, which were driven by governance challenges and interpersonal conflict. It committed to hands-on intervention to mediate these issues and build a solid operational framework for VCF’s conservation activities. With this base firmly established, MAVA provided organisational development support and funding for VCF’s core activities.

Every year, VCF and its partners release over 20 young, captive-bred bearded vultures across different European regions to reintroduce and restock the species’ population in the wild. Another donor has stepped up to replace MAVA’s funding of VCF, helping secure the future of this misjudged species.

Ours is a wonderful story in a world where hope is almost as rare as some of the animals we’re trying to save!

José Tavares, Vulture Conservation Foundation

Right: Franziska Lörcher, Scientific and Conservation Coordinator at VCF, with Wally the vulture.
REALISING THE POTENTIAL OF EMERGING NGOS IN NORTH AFRICA

In partnership with IUCN Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation and Fonds Français pour l’Environnement Mondial (FFEM), MAVA supported PPI OSCAN to empower budding organisations in North Africa working on conservation, sustainable resource use and climate mitigation.

Ever since its creation, MAVA has supported individuals and organisations to grow and develop their conservation impact. Inspired by FFEM’s existing small initiatives programme in Sub-Saharan Africa, the foundation worked with FFEM to roll out a similar solution in the North African Mediterranean, focusing on Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia.

Following this decision, PPI OSCAN was born in 2014. It offered small grants of up to 30,000 euros to finance small projects related to conservation, and support throughout the project lifecycle to build the capacity of local teams in a ‘learn through doing’ approach. Grantees were reinforced by a national or regional coordination team that provided advice, resources and the opportunity to collaborate with one another in a group dynamic.

MAVA always believed that vibrant civil society is a prerequisite for effective conservation, so building a community of engaged and effective civil society organisations in each of the target countries was a top priority. Through the PPI OSCAN programme, MAVA harnessed the energy, enthusiasm and motivation of 80 grantees, strengthening their capabilities, network and legitimacy to match their passion.

Maher Mahjoub, the PPI OSCAN coordinator for the IUCN, is one of this story’s many heroes. His previous role at Tunisia’s Ministry of the Environment was a springboard for extraordinary success, championing these emerging conservationists and nurturing North Africa’s burgeoning civil society.

At the time of MAVA’s closure, a third phase of PPI OSCAN was ongoing with a new funder onboard. This phase had a greater focus on pairing established NGOs with their newer peers so they could learn from one another. PPI OSCAN’s capacity-building efforts provided greater legitimacy to the region’s small-scale conservation groups, attracting more donors and securing their future for decades to come.

Helping people in remote rural Morocco or unstable parts of Libya is a privilege. Having never had the opportunity to shape their future before, their will to succeed against the odds is tremendous.

Maher Mahjoub, IUCN

SUCCESS STORIES

MAVA FOUNDATION: FOR PEOPLE AND NATURE
TRANSFORMING THE GREEN ECONOMY NARRATIVE

Economics for Nature significantly contributed to integrating natural capital into the green economy narrative. It started conversations about the economic value of nature in finance ministries and boardrooms around the world. As of 2022, its tracker shows that 98 per cent of countries have adopted natural capital policies.

Green Economy Coalition (GEC), led by visionary changemaker Oliver Greenfield, was one of MAVA’s first Sustainable Economy programme partners. With the foundation’s support, GEC went from strength to strength, becoming the European Union’s preferred partner for its green economy work.

But whilst green economy work blossomed and gained mainstream attention, it overlooked the vital role that natural capital plays in sustaining countries, companies and communities to focus solely on climate and renewable energy. GEC analysed national green economy plans and found that only 25 per cent mentioned natural capital. This spurred the coalition to form Economics for Nature (E4N), with MAVA’s convening support and funding.

E4N is a global partnership of business, civil society and international policy institutions working to create system-wide change that restores nature while implementing natural capital at the heart of economies. It has successfully changed the green economy narrative and broadened its reach to all corners of the world, including Africa, which had historically been neglected from the movement.

This project exemplifies how MAVA’s vision of conservation evolved with André’s leadership to include direct contributions towards the creation of a more sustainable global economic system.

The E4N project was originally planned to last six years but its mission has not been fully realised, so it will continue to evolve without MAVA. Its future plans include a social contract for green deals and continued collaboration with the European Commission.

Left and right: Sustainable açaí harvesting and processing in the Amazon. The Foundation for Amazon Sustainability (FAS) is one of the local partners of the Green Economy Coalition (GEC). FAS and GEC are working together to support the development of sustainable industries such as the açaí industry, to move towards a greener global economy.

"A life with purpose is a life well lived. Mine is taking on the failings of our economic system, manifest in a deeply unfair society and a severely degraded environment.

Oliver Greenfield, Economics for Nature"
MAVA’s commitment to being flexible and agile was in its DNA. Its partners spoke with great appreciation of the foundation’s willingness to trial unusual approaches, fund pioneering initiatives and make decisions rapidly.
DIVERSIFYING MARINE CONSERVATION FUNDING

Established to support MAVA’s projects in the Mediterranean, BlueSeeds started as a side project. It quickly grew into an independent organisation spearheading innovative new sustainable funding mechanisms for marine environments and fisheries.

BlueSeeds was set up with a simple aim: to diversify marine conservation financing. Shocked by the calculation of a €700 million yearly funding gap for marine protected areas in the Mediterranean, entrepreneur Thomas Binet realised a new approach to funding was urgently required. Having previously founded Vertigo Lab, the MAVA partner that had conducted the study, Thomas developed BlueSeeds in 2018 as an off-shoot project to meet this need.

BlueSeeds developed and piloted a range of entrepreneurial solutions designed to boost the efficiency and sustainability of marine conservation financing. Thanks to MAVA’s funding and new partnerships with a diverse range of private and public conservation stakeholders, these solutions rolled out at 10 pilot sites around the Mediterranean.

BlueSeeds’ young team soon earned a reputation for creativity and innovative thinking and it became an independent organisation.

The organisation’s solutions are based around blue economy principles, which involve sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth and improved livelihoods and jobs, while preserving the health of the ocean ecosystem. In Croatia, this involved stimulating microentrepreneurship related to marine conservation through an incubator. Reducing costs and increasing funding are equally important parts of BlueSeeds’ approach. For example, its web-based Blue Mooring project enables boaters to book mooring online, increasing efficiency for park managers and creating an income stream for the park. At the time of MAVA’s closure, BlueSeeds’ services were in demand, making the organisation’s future look bright.

We can’t meet the challenges we face if we keep doing the same things. We’re creating a new way of doing conservation that’s anchored in social enterprise.

Thomas Binet, BlueSeeds
INTEGRATING BIODIVERSITY INTO FINANCIAL DECISION-MAKING

Finance for Biodiversity influenced early thinking on nature– and biodiversity–related risk, quickly becoming a leading voice on the topic.

Rather than an organisation or non-profit, Finance for Biodiversity (F4B) is an initiative designed to bring together financial and conservation experts working towards a simple mission: increasing the materiality of biodiversity in financial decision-making, thereby aligning global finance with nature conservation and restoration.

As F4B’s reputation and reach grew, it created separate work streams and initiatives to focus its impact. One such initiative was the Taskforce on Nature Markets, assembling experts to ensure that emerging nature markets were fit for purpose. Voluntary carbon markets are the most well-known example, but they have limitations. F4B wanted to shape markets that could harness entrepreneurship in ways that deliver nature-positive and equitable outcomes.

MAVA was immediately attracted to the idea, with André Hoffmann firmly believing in F4B’s mission and approving a framework grant for F4B to draw from. The embedding of MAVA’s Sustainable Economy team members within F4B’s leadership allowed the foundation to stay up to speed with developments while providing quick approvals and grants, helping F4B to remain agile. This close relationship built a high level of trust, which was necessary for the success of the regranting component that allowed the initiative to build its network rapidly.

In 2022, F4B evolved to its next phase of impact and ambition to align global finance with nature-positive and equitable outcomes. It was established in Geneva, operating under a new name – NatureFinance.

F4B’s technical and policy papers, alongside deep engagement with key sovereign debt market actors, have achieved significant impact and laid the foundations to continue delivering greater, long-lasting impact. F4B’s call to action has been answered by a growing swell of stakeholder voices and opinions aligning with the view that radical innovation in the debt market is the key to unlocking a greener future for all.
SAVING BIRD SPECIES, NATURE, AND THE PLANET

BirdLife International is a global family of over 115 national partners with a simple but bold mission: saving bird species, nature and the planet. Established in 1922, the partnership celebrated its centenary only months before MAVA ceased grant-making. With a network of over 2.5 million birders, scientists and local volunteers, BirdLife can track and analyse every bird species in the world. As seabirds are important indicators of marine and coastal ecosystem health, studying them is a key weapon in the fight against climate change.

Despite its international status, BirdLife’s approach to conservation is deeply local. It empowers small organisations, which have an invaluable understanding of their respective regions and the issues affecting them, working towards common goals in an integrated yet autonomous manner. This aligned it closely with MAVA’s own approach, making the two organisations ideal partners to collaborate on many aspects of MAVA’s strategy and action plans.

Simon Mériaux, who was Organisational Development manager in the Impact and Sustainability programme at MAVA, explained what made BirdLife a unique ally amongst the foundation’s partners. “Usually, MAVA provides organisational development support for partners through external consultancy. What makes BirdLife’s approach special is that it can provide support from within its own network. This means it’s a relationship of equals, peers from the same world speaking the same language of conservation and NGOs, and sharing a passion for birds, irrespective of whether they’re working together on governance, bookkeeping or bird-tracking.”

One of BirdLife and MAVA’s most significant collaborations was the conservation of seabirds in Cape Verde, working with local NGOs including Biosfera and Projeto Vitó as implementing partners. Cape Verde is a seabird hotspot, home to several fascinating endemic bird species, a breeding ground for many others and a migratory stop-off for even more.

MAVA and BirdLife created an action plan based on funding research, monitoring, site protection and awareness-raising, designed to pull disconnected conservation efforts across the archipelago into a coherent plan. The foundation invested in the organisational development of local NGOs to help raise their game and work on a bigger scale. As explained by Marie Madeleine Gomez of MAVA’s West Africa Programme, “The implementation of the Cape Verde bird conservation action plan has led to the development of a national conservation plan for the birds of Cape Verde, but also to the bringing together of actors from the different islands of the archipelago involved in the conservation of these species.”

MAVA also directly funded BirdLife to help it work on a regional level rather than national, as seabirds’ migratory cycle mean conservationists must work across unusually large distances. Thanks to these efforts, the need to protect seabirds in Cape Verde and across West Africa is more competently understood.

MAVA and BirdLife International’s work to empower local NGOs and create a clear regional plan to conserve seabirds in the Cape Verde archipelago was a victory that exemplified their shared global-to-local approach.

We work with and invest in local organisations that can become conservation leaders. It may be difficult and expensive, but in the long run, it’s sustainable. It means we have a unique global network that is locally anchored.

Patricia Zurita, Chief Executive of BirdLife International
The Saloum Delta and the Senegal Lower Delta are two interlinked and interdependent wetland complexes on Senegal’s coast. As well as providing livelihoods for many local communities, the wetlands are of international importance for many bird species and designated as biosphere reserves. However, their astounding biodiversity faces multiple threats, including overfishing, poor infrastructure planning, pollution and climate change.

MAVA’s support contributed to improved wetland management and bird conservation at both sites. The foundation convened a coalition of stakeholders, including researchers, site managers, state institutions, local communities, multi-stakeholder platforms, NGOs, and civil society organisations. These stakeholders pooled their skills and resources on activities including ecological monitoring, site governance and management, technical capacity-building of staff, and community engagement. Additional research into the deltas’ delicate ecosystem and raising wider awareness of their needs helped mobilise significant further funding to consolidate their sustainable management.

MAVA programmes supported people, leading to them supporting nature in turn. This work in Senegal was no different. One scheme in the Saloum Delta reduced deforestation of trees and mangroves by empowering budding female entrepreneurs to open biogas shops, providing new livelihood opportunities while protecting biodiversity. Other programmes support fishermen and farmers to embed conservation into their everyday work in ways that will also improve their catches and harvests.

At MAVA’s closure, new funding had been secured to restore their wetlands and strengthen the Senegalese protected area network, while new projects were under development by several different partners, which MAVA hoped would have far-reaching benefits for wetlands and coastal birds beyond Senegal’s borders. The wetlands’ custodians were determined to continue protecting the land they love, with Ibrahima Gueye and Jean Malack deserving particular kudos for their passion.
STANDARDISING THE ASSESSMENT OF SPECIES AT RISK

The IUCN Red List of Ecosystems is a global standard for assessing risks to ecosystems and understanding whether they are safe or on the path to collapse. It identifies common symptoms like habitat quality and species population levels to understand the level of risk an ecosystem is facing.

MAVA recognised that the early iteration of the Red List of Threatened Species had become insufficient as a measurement tool. The outside world’s understanding of the importance of natural capital and ecosystem services had developed, so the list required updating to match. A decade of testing helped shape the list into a robust and reliable tool applied in more than 100 countries to guide policy, structure international agreements, educate the public and provide data for scientific research.

Collaboration between the IUCN, scientists, conservation actors and MAVA was critical in developing the Red List from its pilot phase in 2011 to its status as the accepted global standard today. As other actors stepped up, the foundation gradually phased out its support. Special credit goes to Jon Paul Rodríguez, Chair of the IUCN Species Survival Commission, whose role in developing the red list was invaluable.

MAVA jump-started the Red List of Ecosystems process over a decade ago and the work continues today. In 2020, IUCN published the Global Ecosystem Typology, a hierarchical classification of all freshwater, marine, subterranean and terrestrial ecosystem types. The next step is to assess the health of all ecosystem types globally. Making these data points freely available will transform species and ecosystem policy-making worldwide.

Jon Paul Rodríguez, IUCN Species Survival Commission
PIONEERING CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

MAVA’s collaboration with MedINA, a small but influential non-profit, helped the foundation put cultural landscapes – places where human activity fosters biodiversity – on the map.

MedINA is the tale of a small Greek organisation with a wide impact throughout the Mediterranean region, established in 2003 as a non-profit based in Athens by Thymio Papayannis, a leading figure in environmental and cultural heritage conservation. Thymio met Luc in the 1980s because of their joint interest in protecting the Prespa Lakes and helped create the Society for the Protection of Prespa, which Luc initially presided over before passing the baton to Thymio.

MedINA’s original focus areas were the integrated management of nature and culture in wetlands, landscapes and sacred natural sites. As an early champion of the vital link between nature and culture, the organisation worked at local, national and international levels to promote understanding of the interplay between the natural environment and human culture. This is closely aligned with MAVA’s own advocacy of harmony between people and nature.

Whilst the organisation’s scope broadened over its lifespan to simply ‘nature, culture and communities’, its contribution to international wetland conservation was one of its biggest victories. MedINA was responsible for introducing cultural aspects of wetlands in the global work of the Ramsar Convention, including its guidance on recognising the rights of Indigenous peoples and local communities.

MedINA was also instrumental in developing the Alliance for Mediterranean Nature and Culture, a regional movement strongly promoted by MAVA that focuses on issues of cultural landscapes in connection with food systems and the rights of local communities.

MAVA funded MedINA on a long-term basis but also provided support beyond funding, including organisational development assistance. MedINA developed into a promising organisation, well equipped to build a brighter future for cultural landscapes.

Deeply convinced that nature and culture are inextricably linked, Thymio founded MedINA to respond to critical issues of environmental protection. By bringing together experts from different fields and local communities, MedINA empowered a holistic approach towards the preservation of intangible heritage and the development of a sustainable future.

Ivi Nanopoulou, MedINA

Left: Luc Hoffmann and Thymio Papayannis, Prespa, 2009.