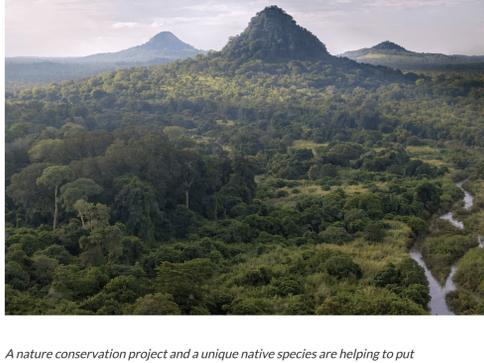


Origin

# Native potential in Mozambique

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A nature conservation project and a unique native species are helping to put Mozambique on the coffee map.

While the story of the coffee industry in Mozambique is not unlike coffee's story in other developing countries – that is, often characterised by poverty, conflict, climate change, volatile prices, outside influence – it is one of the more unique stories largely because Mozambique is not actually known on a global scale as a coffee-growing country. In fact, the International Coffee Organisation (ICO) doesn't even report Mozambique's negligible production and export volumes in its annual origin country statistics. Unlike its East African neighbours with noteworthy volumes, Mozambique's production consists of a few small-scale [projects](#) scattered throughout the country and random households with coffee trees dating back to the Portuguese occupation of Mozambique.

Although Portuguese colonists cultivated coffee on a small scale in the early days, they ultimately designated Portuguese-controlled Angola for coffee production and Mozambique for tea. Mozambique's coffee sector contracted even further when the Portuguese left in 1975 and as civil war and political conflict heated up in subsequent decades. Conflict has ravished Mozambique's agriculture sector, destroying farms and displacing more than 700,000 people in the past four years alone, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency. And forests that may otherwise have hosted coffee have also been destroyed in slash-and-burn agriculture as farmers have switched to maize.

Meanwhile, Mozambique's location on the coast exposes it to increasingly severe weather patterns, particularly tropical storms and cyclones. Since March 2019, Mozambique has suffered from four tropical cyclones and one tropical storm. These storms have been particularly detrimental to the small-scale coffee project on Ibo Island that was dedicated to coffee racemosa, a naturally low-caffeine coffee species that's native to Mozambique.



Coffea racemosa is a naturally low-caffeine coffee species that's native to Mozambique.

Although representatives from the Ibo Island Racemosa project did not respond to requests for comment, other coffee actors in Mozambique have speculated that the industry there is in dire straights. In addition to the coastal storms, much of the recent civil unrest has been focused in the Cabo Delgado Province, which encompasses Ibo Island. COVID-19 was also hard on the region.

"I think it really could have been something special there, so we're trying to lend some competencies and other [resources]," says Matthew Jordan, CEO of Our Gorongosa Coffee in central Mozambique. "But when things are super hot, all you can do is emergency work and try to stay afloat until things calm down. We're all waiting to see what happens."

Although Racemosa coffee work on Ibo Island has likely stalled, coffee grower and certified Q grader Charles Denison and his small team are charging along with the unique varietal in the south near South Africa and Zimbabwe. Coffea racemosa is indigenous to a small section along those borders, not far from where Denison grew up. With a passion for agronomy and agriculture and an education in the business side of coffee, Denison saw the untapped potential in Racemosa and purchased as many seeds as he could find.

"When I started getting into Racemosa, it was unheard of and no one was interested in it," he says. "But there's been a huge amount of interest in different species of coffee recently, particularly because of climate change."

Often found growing in the low-altitude sand forests of the region, racemosa is extremely resistant to drought and pests. Although it's not an equal substitute for climate- and pest-threatened Arabica and Robusta, the varietal is seen as an alternative for consumers avoiding caffeine. Additionally, scientists have explored a Racemosa-Arabica hybrid that combines the resistant properties of racemosa with the caffeine and high quality of Arabica.



Our Gorongosa Coffee has a 10-year goal of producing 500 tonnes of green coffee.

It's early days for Racemosa, though, including on Denison's 1.5-hectare plantation. His company, Cultivar, has about 1500 to 2000 trees in the ground that only recently started producing, and about 2000 seedlings in a nursery that are not yet big enough to put into the ground.

Cultivar harvests the small purple-black coffee cherries in November and December and brings them to central processing facilities. In this year's harvest, the team has been focused on exploratory post-processing techniques to see what flavours they can bring out of the smaller bean. Racemosa's flavour profiles and cupping scores have varied widely thus far.

"There's so much optimism and excitement [about Racemosa], but we don't know the potential of it yet and there's lots of research to be done," Denison says, "so we don't want to overpromise."

Although Gorongosa coffee is also in its infancy, production is further along and larger in scale than Cultivar's. The coffee, sold under the Our Gorongosa brand, is part of the greater Gorongosa Project, a nature conservation and human rights project started between the Mozambican government and the Carr Foundation nearly two decades ago. In an effort to save his country's national parks, then-President Joaquim Chissano invited American entrepreneur and philanthropist Greg Carr to help. Gorongosa National Park was in particularly bad shape due to the opposition party's military base on Mount Gorongosa and slash-and-burn farming practices occurring throughout the park and surrounding buffer zone.

"There was a big opportunity in Gorongosa almost unlike anywhere else for both conservation and human rights work, because you had this area that had been totally removed from forests and animals and you had people living in abject poverty," explains Jordan, who is also the Gorongosa Project's Director of Sustainable Development. So the two parties signed a 20-year commitment and agreed on the overarching mission: "Save the national park, uplift the people."

From the beginning, current park warden Pedro Muagura has been coffee's chief advocate in the project's reforestation efforts. Drawing from his education in agriculture, forestry, and wildlife management, he proposed the idea of coffee and intercropping to reforest the park. Replanting native trees and coffee together would mean a restored forest, shade-grown coffee, and a new income stream for local communities. Despite some initial scepticism, Muagura got some seeds and started a small nursery on Mount Gorongosa.

Ever since, he has been hard at work educating the surrounding communities about coffee growing and its benefits over slash-and-burn agriculture. "I've never met anyone so passionate about trees and nature," Jordan says. "He has been working with the local people to help them discover their own love for nature." Muagura has personally planted more than one million trees in his lifetime, and in 2020 he was recognised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature for his innovation and significant efforts in conservation. Today, the communities involved in the Gorongosa Project are planting about 200,000 coffee trees and 50,000 rainforest trees per year.



Mozambique production consists of a few small-scale projects scattered throughout the country.

The project and its team also expanded exponentially over the years, adding world-renowned coffee agronomist Quentin Haahrhoff in 2013, who has worked throughout Africa on coffee revitalisation projects. "He had the chops to work in a warzone in the middle of nowhere, with coffee in a rainforest that was impossible to get to," Jordan says.

Haahrhoff started training local Mozambicans in agronomy, including the project's current Lead Field Agronomist Sional Moiane, who Jordan touts as "the best Mozambican coffee agronomist today". Jordan joined at about the same time, bringing experience as a water engineer and in project management. From 2014 to 2018, Haahrhoff took Moiane and Jordan under his mentorship to further build out the coffee portion of the project.

However, "because of the conflict we had two serious stoppages because of the high risk factor to the local communities," Jordan explains. "So what was probably a three-year rollout became a five-year pilot project."

The conflict is also why the group took on the full value chain, from coffee production to retail product. "We would always be a nature conservation and human rights organisation first, but we added the social enterprise piece because there wasn't really an opening for a private-sector company to work there," Jordan says. They were able to leverage Carr's visionary entrepreneurship in this aspect of the project, creating Our Gorongosa Coffee.

Owning every step in the value chain meant not only more jobs for Mozambicans, but also less vulnerability among farmers amid fluctuating green coffee prices. It's also an opportunity to tell the multifaceted story of Mozambican and Gorongosa coffee.

The first harvest came in 2018, producing just a few bags. Today, more than 200 hectares are planted with coffee, out of about 2000 hectares of suitable coffee-growing land; 8000 hectares of the 15,000-hectare rainforest had been destroyed.

The final product has been doing well thus far, with cupping scores in the 80s. Shade, high altitudes, and the particular geography and climate of the region have all contributed to the coffee's high quality. The region also has incredible endemism and biodiversity, which play a role in the coffee, says Jordan. "Gorongosa has the highest diversity of endemic species anywhere in that entire ecosystem, so we're using science to figure out how those things interact with coffee. It's an amazing opportunity for advancing biodiversity and coffee science."

Replanting native trees and coffee together provide a new source of income for local communities.

Although production volumes are still small and difficult to forecast, Our Gorongosa has a 10-year goal of producing 500 tonnes of green coffee. Combined with Cultivar's Racemosa efforts and a possible revival on Ibo Island, it just might be enough to make ICO's annual report and put Mozambique officially on the coffee map.

*This article was first published in the September/October edition of Global Coffee Report. Read more [HERE](#).*

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