

LIONHEART

Fred Swaniker is developing the next generation of CONSERVATION LEADERS: Africans who are urgently needed to improve conservation efforts.

text Heather Richardson

Fred Swaniker

Born
1976

Country of origin
Ghana

Home
Mauritius

Fun Fact
His work was praised by former US President Barack Obama

Recognition
He became a TED Fellow in 2009 and a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader in 2012

“FOR TWO, three years, there was no money. I made sure I had a breakfast, lunch and dinner meeting with someone. They usually took pity on me and paid for the meal,” says Swaniker, the founder of the African Leadership University (ALU). He eventually met philanthropist Rebecca Oppenheimer, a visionary who saw what he was trying to build and helped to fund his dream...to the tune of US\$5 million.

EUREKA!
Swaniker’s story begins in South Africa’s Kruger National Park when he was 22 years old. It was the first time that he had seen lions and elephants in the wild. Having left Ghana at age four following the 1979 military coup, he lived in Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa before studying at Stanford University in the US. Now a serial entrepreneur in his early 40s, he recalls his embarrassment at admitting to his American friends that he’d only ever seen Africa’s most iconic animals in a zoo.
Swaniker’s experience is not unusual. Safaris are marketed almost exclusively to Westerners. Subsequently, most people in Africa miss out on the wildlife and

nature experiences that so often inspire a passion for conservation. How can we expect people to care about something if they don’t have a stake in its success?
Of course, there are plenty of wealthy Africans who can afford safaris, but for many, getting “back to nature” has zero appeal. According to Nigerian cofounder of Amaya Capital Phillip Ihenacho, residents of Africa’s biggest city, Lagos, associate wilderness experiences with “danger and dirtiness”. In his talk at Swaniker’s inaugural Business of Conservation Conference, Ihenacho goes on to note that most young people are interested in making a good living, and conservation is not connected to business opportunities. Swaniker agrees. “The black middle-class will not be engaged until the narrative of safari or conservation has changed,” he says.
SPREADING THE WORD
The Business of Conservation Conference is why we’re here in Kigali, Rwanda’s capital. Its aims are: to discuss problems, action solutions, create business opportunities and empower young Africans to lead the way in conservation, >



“The business of conservation is everyone’s business”

building a future that doesn’t rely on Western philanthropy. “No change in Africa will happen when it’s driven by Westerners,” says Swaniker.

The approx. 300 attendees include representatives of conservation organisations, such as African Parks; conservation tourism businesses, such as Singita; Virunga National Park; management consultants McKinsey; The World Bank; conservation students and academics; and a surprise appearance by President of Rwanda Paul Kagame. Rwanda was a fitting destination for the conference because the government has supported conservation by proactively encouraging high-end ecotourism, and by finding practical ways for tourism to benefit local communities. It’s also where Swaniker opened the ALU’s School of Wildlife Conservation to develop the next generation of conservation leaders (see box).

GENESIS

“Because our institutions are weak, African leaders have more influence than anywhere else in the world,” says Swaniker. Recognising this need for strong, moral leaders, his first venture was the African Leadership Academy (ALA), which he founded with Stanford friend Chris Bradford. Rather than return to McKinsey, where he was working at the time, he decided to leave and pursue the ALA venture. This meant paying back his US\$120,000 Stanford tuition to McKinsey. This was his “first big practice in fundraising”.

Since opening in 2008, the ALA has developed over 1,000 leaders, attracting top talent. The Johannesburg-based, pan-African high school’s mission is to transform Africa by developing a powerful network of leaders who will collaborate to deal with Africa’s greatest challenges. One such leader is a former student named Eddy Oketch. “Twelve years ago, he was a street kid; he just ran for Senate in Migori County, in Kenya and got 40



The School of Wildlife Conservation

Dedicated to developing world-class African leaders for conservation, the school delivers its mission through three main pillars: developing current conservation leaders, educating the next generation of conservation leaders and engaging senior executives and decision-makers through short courses and conferences, such as the Business of Conservation Conference. Rather than choose an academic major, students at ALU pick a mission for their lives. For example, Nancy Nthiga is promoting the use of bamboo for charcoal in Kenya, something that could reduce deforestation by 60 percent, and Terence Chambati has developed “pollen maps” that help farmers ensure higher yields by providing them with data about why bees move further from their hive, slowing honey production. Chambati will graduate in March 2019.

percent of the vote,” says Swaniker.

Swaniker realised that the solution to Africa’s leadership gap required an even larger intervention, so he launched the ALU to develop the next generation of leaders for Africa at the tertiary education level and beyond. Founded in Mauritius, ALU expanded to Kigali in 2016 and 2017. The Nairobi campus followed in 2018, and more will open in African cities – including Cape Town, Lagos and Casablanca – in the coming years. The goal is to develop three million leaders for Africa by 2035.

If Swaniker seems like a man on a mission, it’s for good reason. By 2035, Africa will have the world’s largest workforce (1.1 billion people). And by the end of the century, Africa will be home to 40 percent of the world’s population. Swaniker says that Africa needs ethical and entrepreneurial leaders in politics and across industry sectors to create jobs and harness the opportunity of this population boom.

“We want these leaders to tackle Africa’s biggest challenges and capture its greatest opportunities,” says Swaniker. “One of the low-hanging fruit is our natural environment. We’re blessed with some of the most iconic landscapes and

most unique wildlife in the world.” The issue is rebranding conservation from a Western philanthropic venture to a lucrative, sustainable business. For this, Swaniker is creating an “army of entrepreneurial problem-solvers” at the ALU.

MONEY TALKS

Here at the Business of Conservation Conference, Swaniker has announced a series of major commitments from attendees: US\$600 million investment across 23 African countries and the founding of over 10 new projects, whose progress will be tracked and presented at next year’s conference.

This group of like-minded people could spell the start of a shift in the conservation industry, because they’re convening, sharing ideas and supporting each other’s ventures with an innovative spirit. The future of wildlife conservation will be further energised by the passion and drive of the young leaders at the ALU’s School of Wildlife Conservation, who will bring fresh perspectives and entrepreneurial leadership to the sector.

It’s time for Africans to take the reins. As President Kagame said in his address earlier, “The business of conservation is everyone’s business.”