

In Zambia, Hammerskjoeld Simwinga replaced wildlife poaching with sustainable local enterprise. This year his work won him a “green Nobel.”

By Laura Svienty  
Photograph: John Antonelli

## Hammer Time

**ZAMBIA'S NORTH LUANGWA VALLEY** became an elephant graveyard in the 1980s, a decade in which half of Africa's 1.2 million wild elephants were killed by ivory poachers. North Luangwa's elephant population plunged from 17,000 to 1,300, and the local people who had been destroying their natural environment in order to feed their families were left impoverished.

Then came Hammerskjoeld “Hammer” Simwinga, winner of the 2007 Goldman Environmental Prize for Africa for his role in supplanting a poaching-based economy with a wildlife-protecting one.

Since Hammer began his work in the region in 1994, his and the community's efforts have resulted in a doubling of family food stocks and a hundred-fold increase in income. Elephant poaching is 98 percent controlled and bush meat poaching is rare. Elephants, hippos, Cape buffalos, and puku have returned. North Luangwa National Park is attracting grateful safari-goers from around the globe.

Hammer is one of six “environmental rock stars” honored at this year's Goldman Environmental Prize ceremony, each presented with \$125,000 and their very own Ouroboros, a bronze sculpture of a snake biting its tail—symbolizing nature's powers of renewal.

Selected by an international jury of environmental organizations and experts, the 2007 Goldman Prize winners hail from Zambia, Mongolia, Ireland, Iceland, Canada, and Peru.

Created by San Francisco philanthropists Richard and Rhoda Goldman in 1990 as the world's largest award for grassroots environmentalists, the Prize recognizes ordinary people who have done extraordinary things to protect and improve the environment.

“A lot of what these people do is very controversial in their countries,” says Henry Richardson, a Marin high school senior who derives inspiration from the annual Prize ceremony held at the San Francisco Opera House. “They're actually doing something—something productive for the world—by trying to protect the environment and people's rights in relation to the environment.”

Announced every April on Earth Day, the Goldman Prize provides “local hero” activists from six continental regions with international press and credibility, visibility for their causes, and financial support to help sustain their environmental pursuits.

“It further empowers an individual to do even more,” Hammer says of the Prize. “It confirms what people have seen and heard about the contribution this project has made to the betterment of the environment.”

Working with the U.S.-funded North Luangwa Conservation Project (NLCP), Hammer helped form “wildlife clubs” that gave start-up loans to impoverished villagers who needed an alternative to working for the poachers.

These clubs enabled locals to open sustainable businesses such as general stores and



grinding mills that offered new job opportunities. They helped subsistence farmers grow higher-yielding, protein-rich crops instead of depending on wild animal meat.

“Conservation of wildlife communities is not possible in the long term without simultaneously meeting the basic needs of the local human communities,” says Hammer. “The community should see direct benefits from their efforts.”

Hammer’s success has not been seamless. In 1996, Zambian government officials, who had grown accustomed to accruing tidy profits from the poaching trade, shut down the NLCP. It reopened within weeks, but a year later found itself under new management and unable to fund the community development programs.

“Without a salary, outside funding, or transport for almost a year, [Hammer] kept his programs alive by visiting remote villages on foot, by bicycle, or by catching lifts. He has helped locals realize the precious nature of their wildlife heritage and the fragile balance that can so easily be destroyed,” says Mark Owens, co-founder of the North Luangwa Conservation Project.

“People are best motivated when they feel the warmth of the fire,” says Hammer. “What keeps people listening to you is the amount of warmth they are receiving as they are seated around the communal fire in the ‘insaka’ (a village meeting shelter made of a simple grass thatched roof supported by three or four poles).”

The indefatigable Hammer managed to keep enough people listening to him to create and attract basic funding for the non-governmental NLWCCDP (North Luangwa Wildlife Conservation and Community Development Programme).

As head of the NLWCCDP, Hammer works to protect the natural environment of North Luangwa National Park while improving the lives of more than 35,000 village people living near the park. These improvements come in the form of business loans, schools, rural health programs, beekeeping support, women’s sewing groups, and training for cottage industries such as the making of peanut butter and cooking oil.

Refusing to rest on his laurels, Hammer longs to use North Luangwa as a model for the transformation of another park in Zambia: Lavushi Manda. “It’s almost sterilized by heavy poaching that has been going on without much control by the law officers,” explains Hammer. “Animals are being threatened with extinction and the young generation is being imprisoned for criminal activities. We are looking for supporters so that small business enterprises and conservation education programs can be introduced to the community. There is a chance to rehabilitate the national park’s biodiversity and its people.”

All potential supporters are welcome to contact Hammer via his laptop, a treasured gift from two Americans on safari for all that he has done to help the people living around North Luangwa National Park. “A laptop! If I was to save half of my monthly income, it would take me close to three and a half years to own one,” says Hammer, who spends so much time working on it that “on a few occasions, my wife has pulled the cable and hidden it to make me go to bed earlier.”

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## The Rest of the Best

### The Other 2007 Environmental Prize Winners

**ASIA** Ts. Munkhbayar of Mongolia is a herdsman-turned-statesman who helped shut down destructive, unregulated mining operations along Mongolia’s precious waterways. Munkhbayar conducts seminars to educate herdsmen about environmental protection, citizens’ rights, and the dire consequences of the corruption of established water sources.

*“We cannot let bottomless human consumption shape nature’s fate. It is our fate, after all.”* —Ts. Munkhbayar

**EUROPE** Willie Corduff, an Irish farmer who lives on a farm passed down to him by his father, was one of the “Rosspport Five” who spent 94 days in jail for impeding Shell Oil’s efforts to run a five-mile-long pipeline through their land.

*“The bottom line is we will not lie down. We cannot. There is too much at stake. We’d have to leave our homes if we were to accept this. We have to protect ourselves, because no one else will.”* —Willie Corduff

**ISLANDS & ISLAND NATIONS** Orri Vigfússon of Iceland is passionate about reversing the near-extinction of wild North Atlantic salmon. He brokered buyouts with governments and commercial interests, helping to end destructive commercial salmon fishing in the region.

*“If the great salmon ever rose up and asked ‘Why are we still here?’ it has to be because of Orri Vigfússon. He is tireless. He really is unrivaled. He has focused on one species, and he’s chosen this animal that he loves. And he represents that creature in the world. He stands up for its survival and is making a huge difference.”* —Bill McDonough, author of *Cradle to Cradle*

**NORTH AMERICA** Sophia Rabliauska, of Canada’s Poplar River First Nation, secured “interim protected status” for two million acres of boreal forest in Manitoba.

*“In Sophia’s way of day-to-day living, she embodies the spirit of our culture. This includes a sense of rightful ownership of the land. Sophia walks the talk. She isn’t one to just talk about something—she goes out and gets it done.”* —Vera Mitchell, director of education and former chief, Poplar River First Nation

**SOUTH & CENTRAL AMERICA** Julio Cusurichi Palacios of Peru helped create a national reserve in one of the least-touched areas of the Amazon in order to protect “uncontacted” indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation from the deleterious effects of logging and mining.

*“Cusurichi was instrumental in the creation of the reserve for the indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation and to this day he continues to defend their rights. He didn’t just dedicate himself to the creation of the reserve and then walk away once it was on paper; he recognized the continuing threat from illegal loggers, oil companies, and gold miners who all wanted access to the reserve.”* —Ari Hershowitz, director of the Latin American BioGems campaign, Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC)