Project Results

1. *Overview of Initial Goals and Results*

The main objective of the project was to assess the ecological condition and restoration potential of a degraded buffer zone adjacent to the Black River Gorges National Park in Mauritius. The project aimed to improve understanding of vegetation composition, identify major ecological pressures affecting the site, and evaluate opportunities for future restoration using native and endemic plant species.

The project successfully achieved its primary objectives through preliminary ecological assessments, vegetation observations, and restoration planning activities. Field observations confirmed that the project area retains important ecological value. The level of degradation by invasive species varied between 10% to 60%. The area still supports a number of native and endemic plant species characteristic of upland and transitional forest ecosystems in south-west Mauritius. Importantly, at least 4km (out of 10km) of the mountain ridge is covered in dense dwarf native forest reaching about 1.5m tall. The invasive species in this forest (10-20%) are easy to remove and unlikely to come back since the closed canopy would not allow any pioneer species to grow.

One of the major findings of the project was (apparently) the biggest population of *Distephanus populifolius* in Mauritius- critically endangered endemic species. The species is described as a bush and present in the opening of the forest often in dry areas. However, the population we found was present in a dense forest with its branches growing up to 10m high to reach the sun. For us (ERA) it was extraordinary as we were told the species does not survives in forest condition and dies out when covered by other trees.

The assessments identified several native and endemic species persisting within the site, indicating that natural regeneration processes are still occurring and that the area maintains strong restoration potential.

The project also contributed to the development of a preliminary restoration framework for the buffer zone. Recommendations were prepared regarding invasive species management, assisted natural regeneration, and the prioritisation of native species suitable for degraded upland habitats. However, in the majority of the area the forest is of a very good quality and only needs the removal/eradication of invasive plant species. That can be achieved within a moderate timeframe and cost. Thus, the importance of maintaining ecological connectivity between the project site and the Black River Gorges National Park is more than achievable.

Overall, the project demonstrated that despite some degradation, the buffer zone adjacent to the National Park remains highly valuable from a conservation perspective and presents significant opportunities for long-term ecological restoration and biodiversity recovery. The invasion is generally low and only requires the removal of invasive species- there is no need to plant native and endemic species.

2. *Numerical Goals Achieved*

During the implementation of the project, several important conservation and restoration targets were achieved despite the relatively short project duration.

Preliminary ecological assessments and vegetation observations were conducted within the proposed buffer zone adjacent to the Black River Gorges National Park.

More than 100 native and endemic plant species characteristic of upland and transitional forest ecosystems were identified within the project area and surrounding habitats.

At least 5 major invasive alien plant species were recorded within degraded sections of the proposed restoration corridor.

Eleven private landowners of the proposed restoration corridor were contacted and engaged regarding future restoration initiatives. They are the owners of the mountain reserve areas within an approximately 10 km proposed ecological corridor. They have expressed interest in participating in long-term conservation and restoration activities.

Preliminary permission and support for future restoration activities were obtained from the landowners associated with mountain reserve areas adjacent to the Black River Gorges National Park.

Initial restoration recommendations were developed, including priority native species for future planting, invasive species management approaches, and strategies to improve ecological connectivity between fragmented forest habitats.

The project contributed toward establishing the foundation for a future landscape-scale restoration corridor linking private mountain reserves with the Black River Gorges National Park.

3. *Status of social impact achievement and contribution*

The project contributed positively toward strengthening collaboration between conservation stakeholders, private landowners, and local communities in south-west Mauritius. One of the key social outcomes of the project was the successful initiation of dialogue with landowners and stakeholders regarding the importance of ecological restoration and long-term conservation within private mountain reserves adjacent to the Black River Gorges National Park.

Through direct engagement and discussions, the project helped increase awareness of the ecological and socio-economic importance of healthy forest ecosystems, including their role in biodiversity conservation, erosion control, water regulation, and climate resilience. Stakeholders demonstrated growing interest in ecosystem restoration and expressed willingness to collaborate on future conservation initiatives within the proposed restoration corridor.

The project also contributed to building trust and cooperation between the conservation sector and private landowners, which is particularly important in Mauritius where a significant proportion of remaining forested habitats are located on private land. Preliminary support and permission provided by several stakeholders for future restoration activities represent an important step toward establishing long-term collaborative conservation efforts at the landscape scale.

In addition, the project helped promote the concept of ecosystem-based restoration and adaptation as a practical approach to improving environmental resilience while simultaneously supporting long-term benefits for surrounding communities and landowners. The initiative encouraged greater stakeholder participation in conservation planning and laid the foundation for future restoration projects that may generate additional educational, ecological, and socio-economic benefits.

Overall, the project successfully contributed toward improving stakeholder engagement, increasing awareness of forest restoration needs, and fostering collaborative approaches to biodiversity conservation and ecosystem recovery in Mauritius.

4. *Media Exposure, Including Online*

The project and its broader conservation objectives received visibility through stakeholder communication, direct engagement activities, and online outreach associated with the Ecosystem Restoration Alliance Indian Ocean (ERA). Information related to forest restoration, ecosystem-based adaptation, and the proposed restoration corridor adjacent to the Black River Gorges National Park was shared with stakeholders during meetings, discussions, and conservation outreach activities.

The initiative also contributed to increased online visibility of restoration efforts in south-west Mauritius through ERA, including social media updates highlighting ecosystem restoration activities, stakeholder collaboration, and the importance of preserving native forest ecosystems in Mauritius.

In addition, the project supported broader awareness regarding the ecological importance of private mountain reserves and the need for collaborative conservation efforts involving landowners, NGOs, and local stakeholders. Discussions and engagement surrounding the project helped strengthen public interest in ecological restoration and landscape-scale conservation initiatives within Mauritius.

The project further contributed to the promotion of ecosystem restoration concepts and the importance of ecological corridors connecting fragmented habitats to the Black River Gorges National Park. These communication efforts helped raise awareness of the role of native forest restoration in biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, and long-term environmental sustainability.

5. *Status of Strengthening the Foundation of the Organization*

The project contributed positively toward strengthening the operational and strategic foundation of the Ecosystem Restoration Alliance Indian Ocean (ERA). Through the implementation of field assessments, stakeholder engagement, and restoration planning activities, the organisation further expanded its experience in ecosystem restoration, project coordination, and landscape-scale conservation planning in Mauritius.

The project also strengthened ERA's relationships with private landowners, conservation stakeholders, and local partners, helping establish new opportunities for long-term collaboration in forest restoration and ecosystem-based adaptation initiatives. Building these relationships is particularly important for future conservation efforts in Mauritius, where much of the remaining forest habitat occurs on private land.

In addition, the project contributed to improving ERA's technical knowledge regarding restoration planning within degraded upland forest ecosystems adjacent to protected areas. The assessments and stakeholder consultations conducted during the project provided valuable information that will support future restoration projects, corridor development, and funding applications.

The initiative further reinforced ERA's role as an active conservation organisation working on ecosystem restoration, biodiversity conservation, and stakeholder engagement within Mauritius. The successful implementation of the project and the positive response from stakeholders contributed to strengthening the organisation's credibility and capacity to develop future collaborative restoration initiatives at larger spatial scales.

Overall, the project helped enhance ERA's technical capacity, stakeholder network, and long-term strategic position in relation to ecological restoration and conservation planning in Mauritius.

6. *Issues and Points of Reflection*

An important challenge relates to the complexity of implementing restoration activities across privately owned lands. While several stakeholders expressed strong interest in conservation and provided preliminary support for restoration activities, long-term restoration success will require continued communication, trust-building, and coordination between landowners, conservation organisations, and government authorities.

The project also highlighted the importance of establishing clear and efficient conservation permitting processes in Mauritius. Restoration initiatives involving private mountain reserves may require collaboration with multiple institutions, and administrative procedures can slow down implementation timelines. Strengthening cooperation between stakeholders and regulatory authorities will be important for scaling up future restoration efforts.

A key point of reflection from the project is the significant potential of landscape-scale restoration in Mauritius when private landowners are actively involved. The positive response received from stakeholders demonstrated that there is growing awareness of the importance of ecological restoration and ecosystem resilience. This suggests that collaborative restoration corridors connecting fragmented habitats to protected areas may represent a realistic and effective long-term conservation strategy for Mauritius.

The project additionally reinforced the importance of combining ecological assessments with stakeholder engagement from the early stages of conservation planning. Building strong relationships with local stakeholders appears essential for ensuring long-term sustainability and practical implementation of restoration activities.

Overall, the project demonstrated both the ecological challenges and the strong opportunities associated with restoring degraded forest landscapes adjacent to the Black River Gorges National Park. Continued collaboration, long-term management, and sustained restoration support will be critical for achieving meaningful ecological recovery within the proposed corridor.

7. *Way Forward*

The fact that all stakeholders are willing to allow us to work to restore the forest, and the fact that it in general just need the removal of the invasive species, we would be more than happy to initiate the restoration.