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A DECADE OF PROTECTING KENYA'S GREY CROWNED CRANES AND WETLANDS THROUGH COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT, ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION, AND SCIENTIFIC INNOVATION

2016–2025



Dora Moore/International Crane Foundation



The International Crane Foundation works worldwide to conserve cranes and the ecosystems, watersheds, and flyways on which they depend. We provide knowledge, leadership, and inspiration to engage people in resolving threats to cranes and their diverse landscapes.



The Endangered Wildlife Trust is dedicated to conserving threatened species and ecosystems in Africa to the benefit of all.



CANCO is a public interest Environmental Civil Society Organization consisting of multi-disciplinary professionals and practitioners motivated and committed in advocating for and contributing to good environmental governance, conservation and sustainable use of natural resources and responsible development.



The group aimed to raise awareness among communities in the then Trans Nzoia District about the importance of conserving wetlands for both livelihoods and biodiversity, and to protect sites critical for the persistence of Grey Crowned Cranes.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. BACKGROUND.....	05
2. PARTNERSHIP AND LAUNCH OF CONSERVATION INITIATIVE.....	05
3. EXPANSION AND TECHNICAL ENHANCEMENTS.....	06
4. THE 2019 COUNTRYWIDE CRANE CENSUS.....	07
5. DEEPENING CONSERVATION EFFORTS AND ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION.....	08
6. SUSTAINING GAINS AND GEOGRAPHIC EXPANSION.....	09
7. EDUCATION, OUTREACH, AND CULTURAL CELEBRATIONS.....	10
8. IMPROVING WATER ACCESS AND SANITATION FOR COMMUNITIES.....	11
9. CLIMATE-SMART AGRICULTURE AND FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS.....	13
10. CRANE RINGING, FIXED ROUTE SURVEYS, AND MONITORING.....	14
11. NATIONAL SINGLE SPECIES ACTION PLAN.....	15
12. VISION FOR THE FUTURE: OUR NEXT DECADE IN KENYA.....	16

LETTER FROM INTERNATIONAL CRANE FOUNDATION PRESIDENT AND CEO

I first traveled to Kenya in 1995 to see first-hand the tireless efforts of Maurice Wanjala and the Kipsaina Crane and Wetland Conservation Group (KCWCG) to save Kenya's Grey Crowned Crane. The Grey Crowned Crane is a flagship for the nation's wetlands and an emblem of cultural heritage. Yet the population was declining alarmingly across East Africa due to wetland loss, degradation of the surrounding catchments, and increasing human pressure on nests, eggs, and chicks. The KCWCG was engaging local communities in diverse activities to protect Grey Crowned Cranes and their wetland breeding grounds around Saiwa National Park. The KCWCG supported women's groups and wildlife clubs to reduce disturbance in wetlands and establish buffer strips around wetlands with indigenous plants and fruit trees. Their work benefited other wetland species too, including the threatened semi-aquatic antelope the Sitatunga.

The core lesson of this inspiring work was clear: conservation would only succeed if it was rooted in the needs and ambitions of the local communities who live with cranes. The challenge was how to expand and deepen these and other efforts to fully reverse the decline of the beloved Grey Crowned Crane and other species across the rapidly converting agricultural landscapes of western Kenya. To do so, we knew we needed long-term staffing and funding; more partners, including NGOs, communities, government agencies, and others; and a deep commitment to science-based solutions. So we established the Kenya Crane and Wetland Conservation Programme.

Today, the Kenya Crane and Wetland Conservation Programme has grown into one of the most comprehensive community-centered crane conservation efforts in Africa. This report documents how that vision took shape. Together with government agencies and local communities, and through a strong partnership among four NGOs—the International Crane Foundation, Endangered Wildlife Trust, Community Action for Nature Conservation, and the Kipsaina Crane and Wetland Conservation Group— we adopted an integrated approach, linking ecological restoration with livelihoods, education, and human wellbeing. We paired conservation agreements, wetland restoration, crane monitoring, and nationwide censuses with tangible benefits such as clean water access, climate-smart agriculture, school programs, and income-generating activities. Our approach ensured that conservation outcomes aligned with everyday community priorities.

One of the defining moments of this decade was the 2019 countrywide Grey Crowned Crane census, the first in over thirty years. It provided a sobering but essential baseline for action. The follow-up census in 2023 offered something equally powerful: evidence that sustained, community-driven conservation can stabilize and even reverse decline. These data have reshaped national conservation planning and directly informed Kenya's National Single Species Action Plan for the Grey Crowned Crane. The plan, launched in 2025, anchors local action within a national and international policy framework.

Equally important are the less quantifiable outcomes: thousands of students engaged through conservation clubs, cultural pride rekindled through the Kenya Crane Festival, and a growing network of trained Crane Custodians safeguarding wetlands far beyond protected areas. These efforts underscore the central tenet of this decade. Most cranes live among people, and their future depends on coexistence, stewardship, and shared responsibility.

As we look ahead to the next decade, we're deepening our commitment. Building on the foundation documented in this report, we will expand wetland restoration, advance scientific monitoring, strengthen climate resilience, and continue investing in communities as conservation leaders. The story told here is about cranes and wetlands. It's also about what's possible when conservation is inclusive, evidence-based, and grounded in long-term partnerships.



I extend my deepest gratitude to the communities, staff, partners, and donors who made this work possible. Together, we have shown that protecting biodiversity and improving human wellbeing are not competing goals, but mutually reinforcing ones.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard Beilfuss".

Dr. Richard Beilfuss, PhD
President & CEO
International Crane Foundation

1. BACKGROUND

Kenya's population of Grey Crowned Crane, an emblematic symbol of the country's rich wetland biodiversity, has faced drastic population declines due to habitat loss, wetland degradation, illegal trade, and human-wildlife conflicts. Recognizing the urgent need to halt and reverse this trend, the International Crane Foundation (ICF), in partnership with the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT), Community Action for Nature Conservation (CANCO) and the Kipsaina Crane and Wetland Conservation Group (KCWCG), launched an ambitious, multi-faceted conservation program in 2016.

This decade-long initiative has integrated ecological restoration, scientific research, community-led stewardship, and sustainable livelihood development to safeguard the species and its critical habitats. By engaging local communities through Conservation Agreements, protecting water springs, restoring enriched buffer zones, conducting rigorous crane monitoring –including countrywide censuses – while celebrating the species through culturally significant Crane Festivals, the program has fostered a powerful conservation ethos grounded in local ownership and scientific rigor.

Complemented by focused interventions such as the distribution of rainwater harvesting tanks, dairy goats, beehives, indigenous tree seedlings, and medium-value crops like Hass avocados, alongside strategic media campaigns, the initiative aligns biodiversity conservation with human wellbeing and climate resilience.

This report chronicles the comprehensive strategies and interventions that have bolstered Kenya's wetlands and stabilized Grey Crowned Crane populations, highlighting a replicable model for biodiversity stewardship where communities and nature thrive in tandem.

2. PARTNERSHIP AND LAUNCH OF THE CONSERVATION INITIATIVE

In 2016, the ICF/EWT Partnership embarked on a program to secure Kenya's Grey Crowned Cranes, building on the work of KCWCG. The initiative focused on engaging local communities around Saiwa and King'wal wetlands by promoting sustainable livelihoods such as modern beekeeping, fish farming, and zero-grazing dairy goat systems, designed to reduce pressure on wetland ecosystems. A hosting partnership was formalized with CANCO and a collaboration established with National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA) and Kenya Wildlife Services (KWS), while capacity-building efforts equipped local interns and community members to actively participate in wetland restoration and crane monitoring.



Image 1: A fishpond was constructed by KCWCG to enhance value attached to the Saiwa wetland.

The program expanded its beneficiary base from 45 to nearly 200 households and successfully integrated wetland conservation into school co-curricula and community activities, culminating in the national spotlight during World Wetlands Day in 2017.



Image 2: Pupils displaying Grey Crowned Crane posters after an awareness event.

3. EXPANSION AND TECHNICAL ENHANCEMENTS

Between 2018 and 2019, the conservation efforts expanded both geographically and technically. The interns that were volunteering with the program were formally hired and deployed in Trans Nzoia and Nandi counties. The program participated in national environmental campaigns, strengthened enforcement against illegal activities alongside county governments, and improved monitoring accuracy by employing GPS-based Survey 123 digital data collection tools. Community engagement increased to include more than 15 groups and schools, leading to significant reductions in livestock grazing and poaching near crane breeding sites.



Image 3: Training community members (crane custodians) in use of field equipment (binoculars) to enhance data collection.

4. THE 2019 COUNTRYWIDE CRANE CENSUS AND HABITAT PRIORITIZATION

Coordinated and organized by the National Museums of Kenya in partnership with several conservation entities including the Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union (NABU, BirdLife Germany), Cranes Conservation Volunteers, Cranes Conservation Germany, David Fox & Family (UK), the International Crane Foundation, and Endangered Wildlife Trust among others, the census represented the first countrywide systematic count of this species in three decades. Eight teams of national, regional, and international experts and volunteers conducted simultaneous surveys across 28 out of 47 counties in Kenya, covering all known strongholds for the Grey Crowned Crane in the country.

The census recorded a total population of 7,776 Grey Crowned Cranes, a critical data point filling a three-decade gap since the previous comprehensive count in 1996. This finding highlighted a stark decline from historic estimates of around 35,000 cranes done by Urban in 1985. The census informed habitat prioritization and the scaling up of the ICF/EWT/CANCO/KCWCG Partnership's interventions, as well providing a strong foundation for future countrywide censuses.



Image 4: A team participating in Kenya’s first countrywide census of Grey Crowned Crane in 2019.

5. DEEPENING CONSERVATION EFFORTS AND ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION

In 2020 and 2021, the program deepened conservation commitments through expanded agreements across Nandi, Trans Nzoia, and Uasin Gishu counties, with crane monitoring extending to more than 100 sites. Techniques like colour-banding and ringing of juvenile cranes enhanced population tracking, and rare behaviours such as nesting on top of a shrub were documented, enriching scientific understanding. Ecological restoration advanced through the planting of more than 12,000 indigenous trees, spring protection, riparian buffer zone enhancement, and tree nursery development. Livelihood support diversified via agroecology training, beekeeping, poultry farming, and tree nursery infrastructure, supported by collaborative multi-agency training workshops.



Image 5: Degraded wetland edge is targeted for restoration through planting of indigenous trees.

6. SUSTAINING GAINS AND GEOGRAPHIC EXPANSION

From 2022 to 2025, the program sustained gains with a second countrywide crane census in 2023 showing a stable or slightly increased population of approximately 8,300 cranes, indicating a positive trend compared to the 2019 census. The survey revealed that only a small proportion (4.73%) of the cranes were found within Protected Areas, with the majority occurring outside these zones, particularly concentrated in counties like Uasin Gishu, Nyandarua, and Trans Nzoia. This census helped to reaffirm critical wetland habitats and provided updated data to guide ongoing conservation efforts focused on habitat protection, community stewardship, and sustainable livelihoods. The findings highlight the importance of integrating conservation actions beyond protected areas to ensure the species' survival.

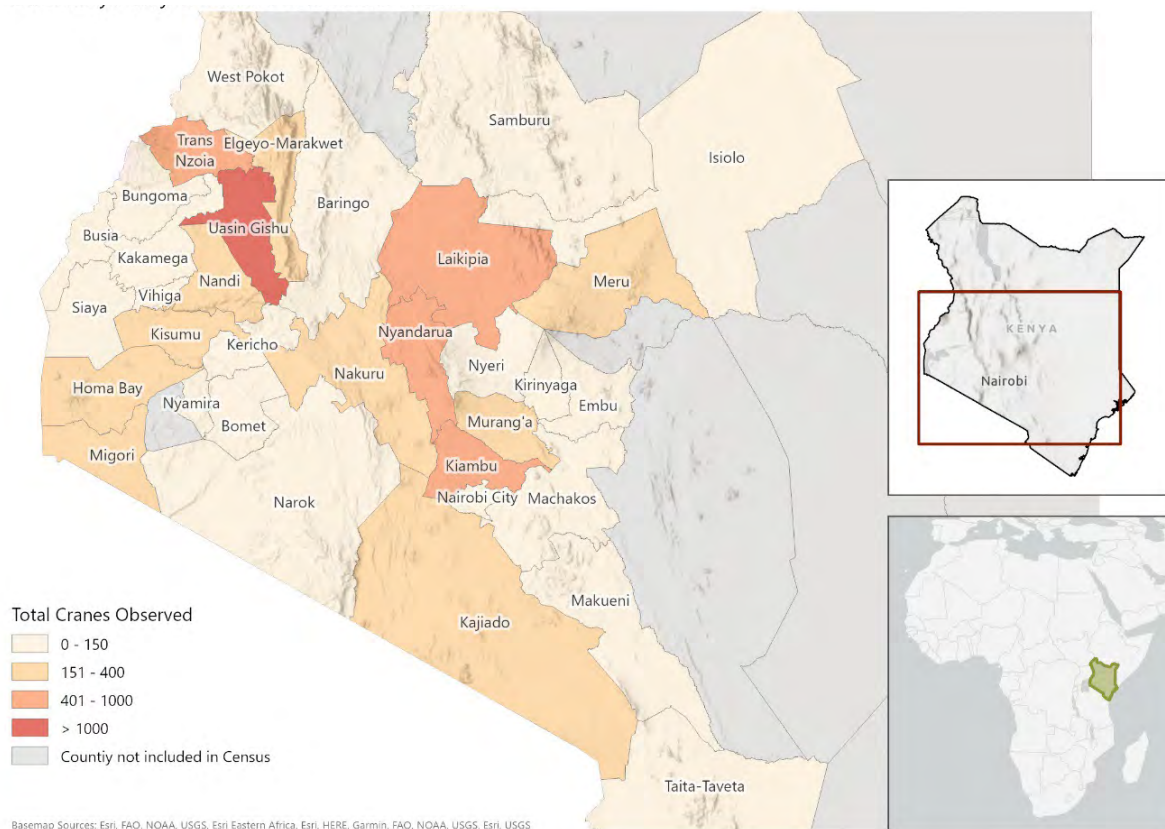


Figure 1: A map of Kenya showing the distribution and abundance of Grey Crowned Cranes during the second countrywide census in 2023.

The program extended its reach to Homa Bay, Kisumu, Nakuru, Nyandarua and Laikipia counties, strengthening local staffing and field monitoring. This expansion aimed to protect critical wetland habitats and support Grey Crowned Crane populations in these regions. Despite challenges such as wetland degradation and human activities, local conservation staff actively engaged communities to promote sustainable practices and habitat restoration. The program incorporated climate-smart agriculture, wetland protection, and community stewardship to enhance both biodiversity conservation and community livelihoods in these counties. These efforts are vital for preventing further population declines and ensuring the long-term survival of the Grey Crowned Crane in Kenya.

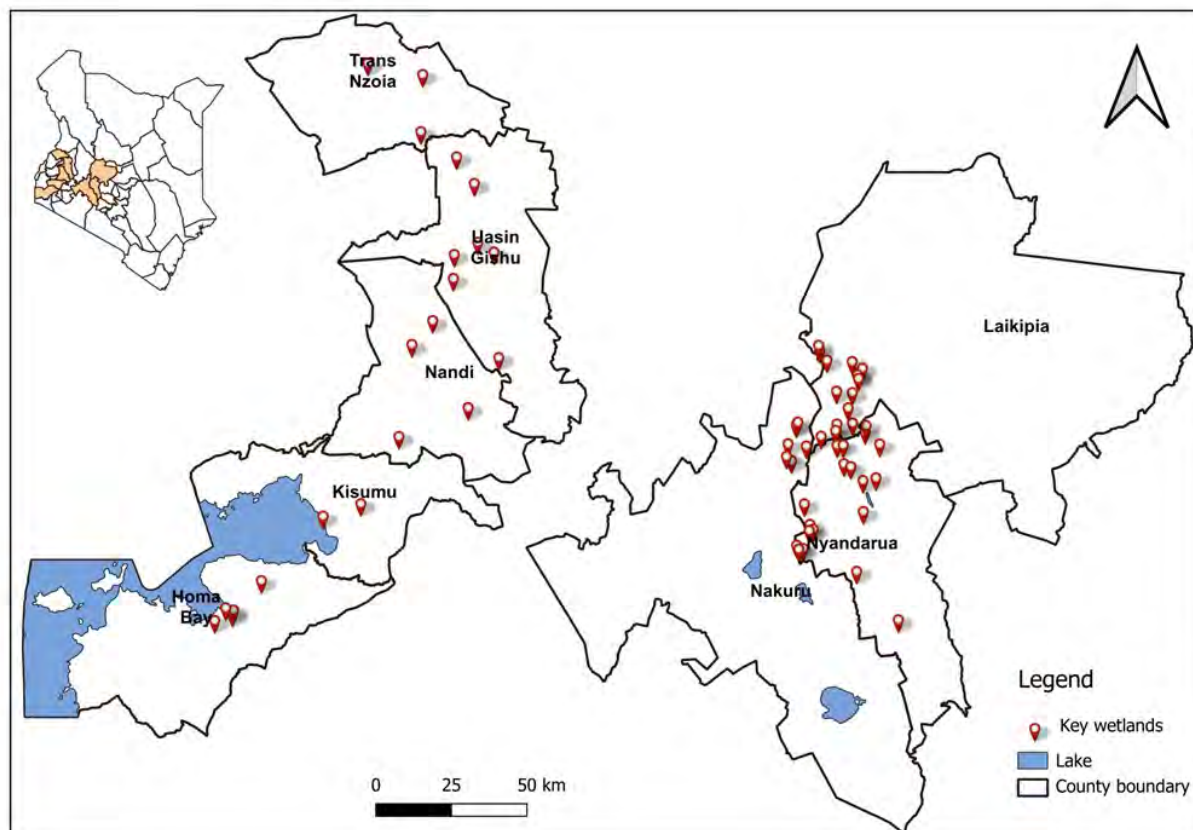


Figure 2: Map showing the counties currently in the International Crane Foundation's Kenya program.

7. EDUCATION, OUTREACH, AND CULTURAL CELEBRATIONS

The International Crane Foundation in Kenya has made significant strides in education, outreach, and cultural celebrations as critical components of its conservation efforts. ICF works closely with local schools, integrating crane conservation into curricula and supporting Conservation Clubs that engage students in monitoring and protecting wetlands. These clubs adopt nearby wetland areas, fostering hands-on environmental education and community stewardship. Through teacher training workshops, students learn about the biology and cultural significance of the Grey Crowned Crane, helping revive traditional stories and conservation ethics that had been fading among younger generations.

One of the flagship outreach initiatives is the annual Kenya Crane Festival, which has grown from a grassroots event to a national platform celebrating the endangered Grey Crowned Crane. The festival brings together more than 1,500 people including local communities, government officials, and conservation partners to raise awareness about the threats facing this iconic species and mobilize collective conservation action. Activities at the festival include traditional and modern dances, poetry, educational skits, sports tournaments, and cultural showcases by local elders, fostering a deep connection between cultural heritage and nature conservation. The festival and educational programs amplify messages through media campaigns and community events, aiming to build a lasting conservation ethos. ICF's outreach strengthens partnerships between government agencies, local organizations, and communities to support ecosystem protection, sustainable livelihoods, and environmental stewardship, ensuring that conservation gains benefit both people and cranes alike.



Image 6: A cultural dancer's group (founded in 1957) welcoming guests to the 2025 Crane Festival in Nandi County.

8. IMPROVING WATER ACCESS AND SANITATION FOR SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

The partnership, in collaboration with county governments, has actively implemented Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) projects in schools and communities to improve access to clean water and sanitation facilities. This includes the installation of water tanks at primary schools, providing thousands of learners with reliable sources of fresh water. The program also constructed protected springs, which ensure safe, uncontaminated water access while reducing pressure on nearby wetlands-critical habitats for the Grey Crowned Crane.

Moreover, the partnership helped build decent latrines in schools, significantly improving sanitation and hygiene standards for school children. These infrastructures reduce waterborne diseases and promote a healthier learning environment, encouraging regular school attendance. By providing clean water and sanitation, these interventions also alleviate the burden on women and children who traditionally spend hours collecting water, thereby creating more time for education and other productive activities besides significantly reducing their need to go to the wetlands.



Image 7: Pit latrine was constructed at a school in Kisumu.

Overall, these WASH initiatives by the partnership not only enhance human health and dignity but also contribute to the conservation of wetlands by minimizing ecosystem disturbances caused by open water collection and unsafe sanitation practices. This integrated approach supports both community wellbeing and the protection of endangered species like the Grey Crowned Crane.



Image 8: Water tank installed at Kisamba Comprehensive School in Homa Bay County.

9. CLIMATE-SMART AGRICULTURE AND FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS

The partnership has been pioneering climate-smart agriculture (CSA) initiatives as a core strategy to conserve wetlands and the endangered Grey Crowned Crane while enhancing local farmers' resilience to climate change. Through Farmer Field Schools, ICF provides hands-on training in sustainable agroecological practices such as crop diversification, organic fertilization, soil and water conservation, and eco-friendly pest control. These schools equip smallholder farmers with skills to maximize land use efficiently using techniques like vertical and pyramid gardening-and to enhance food security and family nutrition with organic produce.

The adoption of climate-smart practices reduces the pressure to convert wetlands into farmland, thus protecting the critical habitats of the Grey Crowned Crane. More than 700 farmers, particularly in counties like Nandi and Trans Nzoia, have been empowered through this approach, which fosters both ecological resilience and sustainable livelihoods. The program aligns with broader efforts to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and promote sustainable land use, placing ICF at the forefront of integrating biodiversity conservation with climate adaptation and rural development.



Image 9: Farmer Field School members visiting their gardens.



Image 10: Farmers tend to a backyard vegetable garden established with support from the international Crane Foundation.

By integrating sustainable agriculture with biodiversity conservation, the program is championing eco-friendly farming that reduces greenhouse gas emissions and preserves critical habitats for endangered species like the Grey Crowned Crane. Partnerships established with local authorities and other environmental organizations emphasize the interconnectedness of climate change solutions, food security, and ecosystem protection.

10. CRANE RINGING, FIXED ROUTE SURVEYS, AND BREEDING MONITORING

Crane monitoring is a vital scientific effort to understand the movements, population dynamics, and aspects of natural history of the Grey Crowned Crane. Using colour bands based on the European Crane Ringing Scheme, flightless chicks are marked during the breeding season. This tagging enables researchers to track dispersal patterns, survival rates, causes of mortality, habitat choice and use, and regional population interactions across what was traditionally considered separate populations.

Fixed route surveys complement ringing by providing consistent monitoring of crane abundance and spatial distribution along predetermined survey routes, enabling detection of population trends and habitat use. Breeding monitoring focuses on observing nesting behaviours, chick fledging success, and breeding site fidelity. Data from ringing and breeding surveillance have deepened scientific understanding of the species, informing conservation interventions such as mitigating powerline collisions and reducing human-wildlife conflicts.

Community involvement is integral, with trained Crane Custodians assisting in regular sightings and monitoring of ringed birds. This collaborative approach ensures robust long-term data collection critical for adaptive conservation management aimed at stabilizing and increasing Kenya's Grey Crowned Crane populations.



Image 11: A pair of sibling Grey Crowned Crane chicks being released after ringing in Nandi County.



Image 12: Crane Custodians are trained on how to use Survey 123 application during crane monitoring.

11. NATIONAL SINGLE SPECIES ACTION PLAN FOR THE CONSERVATION OF GREY CROWNED CRANE IN KENYA

A landmark achievement was the 2025 launch of Kenya’s National Single Species Action Plan for the Grey Crowned Crane, providing a strategic framework for coordinated conservation at the national level. The Action Plan was developed through a collaborative process led by the ICF/EWT/ CANCO/KCWCG Partnership, Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), National Environment Management Authority, Wildlife Research & Training Institute, and Cranes Conservation Volunteers, in alignment with the Wildlife Conservation and Management Act of 2013, and international agreements like African-Eurasian Waterbirds Agreement (AEWA). The plan, covering 2024 to 2035, was formulated

with input from national stakeholders including government agencies, conservation organizations, local communities, and international partners. It aims to conserve the endangered Grey Crowned Crane by guiding coordinated conservation efforts, habitat protection, and sustainable development. The launch event held at Kiborgoch Wildlife Conservancy in Baringo County during the national 2025 World Wildlife Day celebrations involved diverse participants reflecting broad commitment to safeguarding this iconic species and its habitats across Kenya



Image 12: Leaders from the Ministry of Tourism & Wildlife and Baringo County during the launch of the National Single Species Action Plan for the Conservation of Grey Crowned Crane in Kenya (2025-2034).

The program’s integrative model provides a scalable blueprint for wetland and species conservation that aligns with Kenya’s commitments to biodiversity conservation and climate adaptation. Continued support is recommended for technological monitoring, livelihood diversification, enforcement capacities, expanded education, and cross-sectoral collaboration to maintain and scale these impacts. This decade of work exemplifies how science, policy, community engagement, and sustainable development can synergize to safeguard Kenya’s Grey Crowned Cranes and their wetlands for the benefit of future generations.

12. VISION FOR THE FUTURE: INTERNATIONAL CRANE FOUNDATION’S NEXT DECADE IN KENYA

Building on a decade of impactful conservation work, the ICF envisions an ambitious and integrated 10-year strategy (2025–2035) to ensure the long-term survival of Kenya’s Grey Crowned Crane and the protection of its wetland habitats. This vision emphasizes scaling up community empowerment, scientific innovation, and ecological restoration while deepening partnerships with local governments, conservation organizations, and communities across the crane’s range.

Key elements of ICF’s next steps in Kenya include expanding habitat protection through restoration of degraded wetlands and water springs, strengthening climate-smart agriculture practices to mitigate habitat conversion, and promoting sustainable livelihoods that link conservation outcomes with human well-being. Rigorous scientific monitoring will continue, utilizing satellite tracking,

crane ringing, fixed route surveys, and breeding monitoring to inform adaptive management and threat mitigation.

Educational outreach and cultural celebrations will be further enhanced to build lasting conservation values, especially among youth and local communities. ICF also prioritizes strengthening the WASH infrastructure in schools and communities to support human wellbeing alongside biodiversity.

Aligned with Kenya's National Single Species Action Plan and global commitments like the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Climate Accord, ICF's vision embodies a holistic approach uniting biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, and sustainable development. This approach aims to secure thriving populations of Grey Crowned Cranes, resilient wetlands, and empowered communities, creating a legacy of coexistence and conservation for generations to come.

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We are deeply thankful to the donors who have supported or continue to support our work and believe in our mission.



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