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Back from the brink: a stakeholder analysis of the Mauritius Kestrel

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Abstract

Purpose – This study addresses the critical need to understand stakeholder dynamics in rewilding initiatives within the context of the global nature crisis, particularly in the Global South, where species and habitats face significant pressures. By bridging a gap in longitudinal evidence, it examines the Mauritius Kestrel (Falco punctatus), a species rescued from near extinction, as a case study, offering valuable insights into sustainable rewilding practices. The research identifies key factors that drive the effectiveness of conservation efforts and provides actionable guidance for future species protection.

Design/methodology/approach – This study employs a qualitative longitudinal case study approach, focusing on the Mauritian Kestrel rewilding project from 1973 to 2024. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholder groups, supplemented by stakeholder mapping.

Findings – The study identifies four critical factors for effective rewilding initiatives: Resources, focusing on the sustainable management of financial and non-financial assets; trust, stakeholder dynamics, addressing conflicts, collaboration, cultural considerations and community engagement; and time, highlighting the necessity of a long-term perspective to ensure the success of species reintroduction and prevent extinction.

Research limitations/implications – A limitation of our study is its focus on a single species-specific conservation project within a small island developing state.

Practical implications – This research provides valuable insights into the factors that contribute to the success of rewilding projects, offering guidance for future organisations such as private sector companies, NGOs, funders, policymakers and local communities.

Social implications – This study underscores the critical role of guardianship in conservation, advocating for a shift from passive stewardship to active, personal responsibility for protecting nature. This call to action emphasises the need for humans to reconnect with nature, cultivating a shared commitment to biodiversity and ecosystem resilience in the face of global challenges.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this paper is among the first to explore multi-stakeholder perspectives on the factors contributing to the success of rewilding projects, drawing on insights from one of the world's longest-running rewilding initiatives. It re-evaluates stewardship theory by introducing the notion of guardianship as a more holistic and adaptive framework. The research provides unique insights into effective conservation strategies, presenting novel evidence of the critical role guardianship plays in fostering successful rewilding initiatives.

Keywords Biodiversity, Rewilding, Stewardship theory, Guardianship, Species restoration, Conservation, Global south, Extinction

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

> Instead of saying what are we going to do for the next three years we say what are we going to do for the next 100 years [Interviewee 1].

Rewilding [1] has emerged as a leading strategy to tackle climate change, biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation, evolving beyond conservation into an ambitious, optimistic

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philosophy (Jepson and Blythe, 2020; Lorimer *et al.*, 2015; Tree and Burrell, 2023). It seeks not only to protect existing natural environments but to restore ecosystems to original or enhanced states. IPBES (2019) highlights that contributions to habitat restoration, species recovery, climate stabilisation and reduced extinction risk, aligning it with the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a nature-based solution (United Nations, 2024). The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework further underscores the necessity for large-scale restoration and conservation. Yet academic attention has largely concentrated on biodiversity reporting, often superficial, with vague and minimal disclosures (e.g. Azizi *et al.*, 2025; Lamont *et al.*, 2023; Panwar, 2023). Much of this work assesses organisational reporting practices, compliance and disclosure quality rather than meaningful ecological action (Adler *et al.*, 2018; Hassan *et al.*, 2020; Mansoor and Maroun, 2016; Usher and Maroun, 2018).

A growing scholarly consensus indicates that organisational biodiversity efforts often fall short, serving impression management rather than demonstrating genuine commitment to nature (Boiral, 2016; Roberts *et al.*, 2021). Humanity's anthropocentric behaviour is the primary driver of biodiversity loss and species extinctions, prompting that "*for species to have any reasonable chance of survival, humanity must retain integrity and rediscover its covenant with nature*" (Gray and Milne, 2018, p. 839). Rewilding and species reintroductions offer a proactive response to these challenges, positioning an opportunity for humanity to engage in ecological restoration as an act of moral obligation (Carnegie *et al.*, 2020). As Hayes and Moses (2024) note, the human-wounded natural world requires a gradual, healing process that reconnects humanity with nature.

Moving beyond symbolic rewilding requires dynamic stakeholder collaboration and diverse perspectives (Baumgarten *et al.*, 2024; Koch *et al.*, 2023). Nature restoration is increasingly seen as a viable pathway, supported by biodiversity credits and nature-positive investments (Atkins and Macpherson, 2022; WEF, 2024). Although organisational participation in conservation and restoration projects is growing (e.g. Panwar, 2023), research by Lamont *et al.* (2023) reveals that few of the top 100 global companies engage in restoration activities. Against this backdrop, accounting has substantial, yet underused potential to address this gap, through analysis of real conservation cases (Feger *et al.*, 2018), with longitudinal studies particularly valuable for grasping ecological challenges and stakeholder accountability (Russell *et al.*, 2017).

Cross-disciplinary conservation literature shows that rewilding and restoration initiatives are long-term endeavours, not quick fixes, requiring sustained monitoring and adaptive practices (e.g. Carver *et al.*, 2021; Jepson and Blythe, 2020; Torres *et al.*, 2018). By reintroducing keystone species, rewilding can catalyse ecosystem recovery at the landscape scale, support climate mitigation and align with evidence-based global targets (IUCN, 2021). Yet the collaborative dynamics that shape outcomes remain underexplored (Lécuyer *et al.*, 2024). Atkins *et al.* (2023a) highlight that successful rewilding initiatives are resource-intensive, relying on financial investment and human capital. Stakeholder involvement is critical for effective biodiversity management and organisational conservation objectives (Boiral and Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2017). Accordingly, mobilising rewilding for current biodiversity challenges requires examining stakeholder dynamics and how accountability shapes successful projects.

This paper examines how stakeholder dynamics and accountability shape long-term rewilding success, using the Mauritian Kestrel (*Falco punctatus*) conservation project as a prominent illustration of rewilding's transformative potential. Initiated in the 1970s and widely recognised as a major conservation success, the project revived the species from near-extinction and has informed restorations of other endangered species globally (The Peregrine Fund, 2022). The IUCN's Green Status of Species, a global standard for assessing species recovery and the effectiveness of conservation actions (IUCN, 2025), classifies the kestrel as having a high conservation legacy, indicating that interventions have averted extinction and remain essential to maintaining its status. Young *et al.* (2025) similarly show that sustained

conservation efforts across Mauritian species, including the kestrel, have been vital in preventing extinction. This case exemplifies the effectiveness of collaborative action, ecological reconnection, resilience and guardianship-based conservation. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, we provide unique insights into the accountability relations underpinning such collaboration, which are central to the sustainability of rewilding initiatives (Baumgarten *et al.*, 2024).

We build on the discussion and challenge the boundaries of stewardship theory, which emphasises reconceptualising accountability to meet the urgent challenges of the Anthropocene (Bebbington *et al.*, 2020). We argue that stewardship should evolve to integrate a *guardianship* perspective. Jones (2010) asserts that humans hold a moral duty to move beyond mere reporting to a stewardship role that actively protects and enhances nature. The essence of stewardship thinking lies in its emphasis on accountability and the commitment to nurturing resources for the benefit of future generations, driving economic and organisational changes (Contrafatto, 2014). Whereas guardianship in rewilding efforts fosters a deeper cultural shift towards protection and renewal, surpassing traditional stewardship's scope (Powlesland, 2024). This approach transforms from passive stewards into active guardians of nature, essential for addressing the biodiversity crisis and preventing further species extinction. By integrating guardianship into stewardship, this ensures that organisational practices embody a proactive commitment to sustained ecological protection.

This paper makes several contributions to the current body of literature. Firstly, it offers novel insights into a successful rewilding project by incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives, addressing the gap identified by Nogués-Bravo *et al.* (2016) on the limited understanding of rewilding initiatives. Uniquely, we examine a 50-year project with insights from founding stakeholders, providing rare longitudinal perspectives. Secondly, we contribute to the sparse literature on conservation in the Global South (e.g. Atkins *et al.*, 2018; Mansoor and Maroun, 2016; Roberts *et al.*, 2022) by focusing on Mauritius, a small island developing state (SIDS) with rich biodiversity yet limited scholarly attention despite severe climate and biodiversity risks (UNDP, 2024). Thirdly, we complement single-species, longitudinal case studies in the biodiversity literature (e.g., Adler *et al.*, 2021; McBride *et al.*, 2023) by extending analysis through semi-structured interviews that surface accountability dynamics across actors. We highlight the dearth of accounting scholarship in SIDS contexts, constraining insights on reporting, and accountability for biodiversity, and begin to address this gap (Finau, 2020). In line with calls for accounting to engage more actively in biodiversity and natural-capital protection through real-world conservation cases to advance accountability and practice, this study provides such an application (Feger *et al.*, 2018; Feger and Mermet, 2022).

We advance a stewardship framework that integrates guardianship to better capture the actor dynamics of rewilding and biodiversity protection. While guardianship in social theory traditionally concerns care for vulnerable individuals, emphasising responsibility and protective roles, routine activity theory shows how capable guardians prevent harm, reducing vulnerabilities (Barnum *et al.*, 2024; Cohen and Felson, 1979). We extend this logic ecologically, consistent with Bebbington *et al.* (2020), that stewardship in the Anthropocene can be reconceptualised as organisational accountability for living systems. A holistic guardianship engages governments, NGOs, communities and firms in collaborative, proactive care, foregrounding the intrinsic value of species and ecosystems. This shifts emphasis from individual or property-centric care to conservation and restoration. Finally, we contribute to the biodiversity and extinction accounting literature more broadly (e.g. Atkins and Maroun, 2018; McBride *et al.*, 2023; Roberts and Elamer, 2025) by deriving practical insights for designing and implementing rewilding projects and integrating them within nature-based solutions aligned to global sustainability goals.

The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 provides background information on the case study, focusing on the Mauritian Kestrel. Section 3 reviews the relevant literature. Section 4 outlines the theoretical framework, while Section 5 details the research design. Section 6 presents the results, and Section 7 concludes the study with recommendations and directions for future research.

2. Back from the brink – the Mauritian kestrel

The Mauritian kestrel has undergone a dramatic conservation journey over the past 50 years, and one that continues today. In the early 1970s, this endemic species from Mauritius, a biodiversity hotspot in the Indian Ocean, was considered the world's rarest bird (Cade and Jones, 1993; Nicoll *et al.*, 2021). Mauritius, famously known as the former home of the extinct dodo (*Raphus cucullatus*), which disappeared in 1681 and became an international symbol of extinction (Jepson and Blythe, 2020), was on the verge of losing yet another iconic species. By this time, the kestrel population had dwindled to just four individuals: two in the wild and two in captivity, with only one breeding female remaining. Habitat loss and widespread insecticide use, meant to protect crops and control malaria, had severely impacted the kestrel population by contaminating its food chain and reducing the abundance of key prey species such as small reptiles and insects. The chemicals also reduced breeding success, compounding the rapid population decline (Safford and Jones, 1997). The ecological significance of the Mauritian kestrel is distinctive, as a native raptor, it regulates small vertebrate and large insect populations (e.g., lizards, small mammals), sustaining trophic balance and limiting pest outbreaks and over-browsing of sensitive flora. Its loss would allow prey and pests to increase unchecked, destabilising food webs, degrading native vegetation and weakening the island ecosystem's resilience (Jones *et al.*, 1995).

Amateur ornithologists, known as "*early guardians*", were the first to notice the species' decline. In 1973, a pioneering conservation project was initiated by NGOs BirdLife International, Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust and The Peregrine Fund to reverse this trend, leading to a remarkable recovery through rewilding efforts that combined captive breeding, habitat restoration and strategic interventions (Jones *et al.*, 1995; Nicoll *et al.*, 2021). These NGOs provided critical expertise and supported breeding seasons during its formative years. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) contributed financial support and promoted the project internationally (Temple, 1986). Conservationists collected eggs from the last wild pairs, incubated them artificially and employed falconry techniques, including the use of hand puppets, to raise chicks. Over 300 captive-bred kestrels were reintroduced into the Black River Gorges and Bambou Mountains, trained to respond to whistles and closely monitored.

The project faced criticism for being overly species-focused. Myers (1979) argued that resources might be better allocated to other threatened bird species with higher survival prospects. Nonetheless, conservationists conducted extensive monitoring, often camping near nests to observe kestrel behaviour and threats. Support from institutions like the Zoological Society of London, and international universities provided essential resources for captive breeding projects and field research (Jones and Temple, 1986). These efforts illustrate the early stages of what we conceptualise in this paper as guardianship, and a long-term, multi-stakeholder accountability relationship between humans and species.

In 1984, the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation (MWF) assumed management of the project, playing a crucial role in shaping its historical and operational framework. Working closely with the Ministry of Environment of Mauritius, the MWF fostered a collaborative approach central to the project's success. The establishment of the Black River Gorges National Park in 1994, inspired in part by the kestrel's recovery, marked a milestone in Mauritius' conservation history. The park's creation facilitated large-scale forest restoration, benefitting the kestrel and other species. As an umbrella species, the kestrel's protection also contributed to broader ecosystem preservation. By the early 2000s, the population had grown to 500–600 individuals, leading to a reclassification as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List (Hurrell, 2023).

Despite this success, the kestrel remains classified as Endangered as of 2024, with an estimated 350 wild falcons today, representing both a conservation success story and an ongoing challenge (The Peregrine Fund, 2022). The recovery project is widely recognised as one of the most effective of its kind. Celebrating this remarkable resurgence, Mauritius designated the kestrel as its national bird in 2022 and is now legally protected under national legislation. The kestrel's resurgence illustrates the potential of coordinated strategies, effective management and interdisciplinary research in reversing the decline of critically endangered species, offering valuable lessons for global conservation practices.

3. Literature discussion

In line with Jones and Solomon (2013), the study draws on multidisciplinary literature, spanning conservation, anthropology, philosophy and accounting, to shape the conceptual framework and motivate the discussion. Rewilding has emerged as an innovative and transformative approach to addressing the critical challenges of ecological disruption and biodiversity loss while restoring ecological functions (Dunn-Capper *et al.*, 2023; Johns, 2019; Kopnina *et al.*, 2019). This strategy aligns with global frameworks such as the SDGs, the Global Biodiversity Framework and broader nature-based solutions, providing a comprehensive response to the crises of climate change and biodiversity degradation. Employing techniques such as captive breeding, taxon replacement, species reintroductions and the release of captive-bred animals, rewilding seeks to reduce human control over natural processes, fostering autonomous ecosystem functionality (Carver *et al.*, 2021; Pereira and Navarro, 2015; Pettorelli *et al.*, 2018).

Beyond ecological restoration, rewilding also aims to inspire a cultural and ethical reconnection between societies and the natural world. The scientific foundation of rewilding rests on the "3Cs" model, core protected areas, ecological connectivity and keystone species, carnivores, as proposed by Soulé and Noss (1998). This model underscores the importance of interconnected ecosystems, predator-inclusive strategies and ecological resilience as essential elements for restoring degraded landscapes and enhancing biodiversity. Species reintroduction is one of the rewilding's cornerstone practices, with the potential to reshape both ecological landscapes and societal perspectives on conservation. Jepson and Blythe (2020) highlight that such reintroductions, whether through traditional methods or emerging technologies like de-extinction, offer ecological benefits and encourage a profound cultural and ethical reconnection with nature. Similarly, Glentworth *et al.* (2024) emphasise that a fundamental transformation in the human–nature relationship is crucial for successful environmental restoration, advocating for initiatives that not only restore ecosystems but also reframe humanity's role within them.

Case studies provide tangible evidence of rewilding's ecological impact. The reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park in the 1990s exemplifies the trophic cascade effects of predator rewilding, demonstrating how apex predators regulate prey populations, restore vegetation and support broader ecosystem stability (Jepson and Blythe, 2020). In the UK, the Knepp Estate project emphasises a long-term, minimum intervention approach, highlighting debates among conservationists regarding the extent of human management, predator inclusion and intervention levels (Tree and Burrell, 2023). These projects reveal both the ecological benefits of rewilding and the complexity of aligning diverse stakeholder priorities.

The success of rewilding initiatives depends significantly on interdisciplinary collaboration and sustained stakeholder engagement. Biodiversity restoration on a landscape level requires people with different backgrounds to connect and collaborate over an extended period (Baumgarten *et al.*, 2024; Bouamrane *et al.*, 2016). Atkins *et al.* (2023a) note that rewilding projects require substantial financial investment, sourced from governmental organisations, NGOs, universities and private stakeholders. Such projects also necessitate partnerships that bridge scientific research, policy support and community involvement to ensure legitimacy and resilience. Sterling *et al.* (2017) and Young *et al.* (2013) highlight that trust and inclusive decision-making are critical for fostering active participation among local communities, policymakers and scientists, thereby enhancing conservation outcomes. The long-term success of rewilding initiatives requires adaptability and continuous stakeholder engagement. Underwood *et al.* (2022), in their review of 10 UK rewilding projects, stress that sustained collaboration with local communities is vital for rewilding to thrive in the face of changing circumstances. Their findings reinforce the idea that ecological restoration must go hand in hand with addressing socio-economic considerations, as stakeholder relationships directly influence project outcomes. Consequently, accountability, roles and responsibilities become central to how rewilding performance is documented and reported.

Rewilding represents a dynamic and integrative approach to restoring ecosystems, conserving biodiversity and mitigating the impacts of climate change. By engaging diverse stakeholders, including NGOs, researchers, conservationists, funders, governments and private organisations, rewilding initiatives can enhance their effectiveness and resilience against socio-ecological challenges. Through its combination of ecological restoration, cultural transformation and collaborative governance, rewilding offers a promising pathway towards a more sustainable coexistence between humans and nature. Yet, despite this promise, the relational dynamics between stakeholders and the ways in which accountability is negotiated and enacted within these collaborations remain insufficiently understood.

The Global South, particularly SIDS, has received limited academic attention despite being among the most ecologically affected (Finau, 2020; Florens, 2013). In the mainstream accounting literature, so far, existing studies examine rhinoceros' conservation in South Africa, illustrating the complexities and opportunities of species protection, stressing the importance of integrated strategies that combine habitat restoration, anti-poaching measures and community engagement (Atkins *et al.*, 2018). Similarly, Büchling and Maroun (2019, 2021) emphasise the socio-political dimensions of managing protected areas, arguing that effective conservation requires balancing ecological goals with the needs and expectations of local communities. Other studies have examined biodiversity accounting in developing economies, including Bangladesh (Siddiqui, 2013); in Mauritius, Ramdhony (2023) analyses the evolution and determinants of corporate social responsibility disclosure, while Techera (2023) outlines the island's environmental challenges and policy needs as the island's biodiversity underpins key industries such as agriculture, fisheries and tourism, making conservation economically material.

Within the accounting literature, SIDS remain under-researched and examinations of organisational accountability to nature are limited (McBride *et al.*, 2023; Reill, 2025). Feger *et al.* (2018) call on accounting scholars to examine real-world cases of conservation through an accounting lens to better understand accountability, as businesses are increasingly asked to contribute to the protection of biodiversity and natural capital, heightening the salience of accountability mechanisms in reporting (Feger and Mermet, 2022). Related work examines how varying forms of accounting shape relations between organisations and biodiversity, including ecological accounts, such as those developed for rivers (Dey and Russell, 2014). Beyond corporate reporting, Adler *et al.* (2021) show through a media-based case of the Houbara bustard in Pakistan, how corruption, cultural factors and weak protection can undermine accountability. In addition, McBride *et al.* (2023) document successful extinction management and related reporting through a historical examination of a fur-trading organisation, further illustrating the diversity of accountability practices in conservation contexts.

4. Evolving the stewardship theoretical perspective towards guardianship

Stewardship theory, which is salient with organisational responsibility, advocates for organisations to safeguard and sustain natural, social and economic assets for the benefit of their stakeholders (Contrafatto, 2014; Contrafatto and Bebbington, 2013). In this framework, stewardship is motivated by a normative duty, where managers and organisations act as caretakers accountable for the long-term welfare of resources, often driven by ethical considerations, accountability and responsible management (Gaia and Jones, 2017; Jones, 2010). It has long been acknowledged that society holds a responsibility to safeguard the environment for future generations (Cousins and Sikka, 1993). However, with biodiversity loss accelerating and ecosystems nearing collapse (Tree and Burrell, 2023), traditional stewardship may no longer suffice to address the urgent demands of ecological conservation. This prompts a re-evaluation of stewardship in the environmental context, where mere maintenance and accountability may not suffice for robust biodiversity preservation. This is in line with Bebbington *et al.* (2020) that normative stewardship may be required to be reconceptualised, particularly in response to the Anthropocene.

Conventional stewardship assumes that individuals or organisations inherently act responsibly towards nature, given a moral obligation to maintain ecological integrity (Nelson and Callicott, 2008). However, stewardship initiatives often lack the depth of engagement needed for substantial ecological impact. Instead, stewardship must evolve from a passive, maintenance-focused role to a more proactive, interventionist model that engages directly with biodiversity restoration efforts. This limitation invites the integration of a guardianship model, inspired by radical, critical culture such as Hayes and Moses (2024) and Shrubsole (2024), which can offer a more dynamic and engaged approach to ecological care and responsibility.

The concept of guardianship, drawn from other social science fields like healthcare, law and criminology, emphasises a duty of care and responsibility over vulnerable or valuable entities, focusing on active protection rather than mere oversight. Guardianship, as seen in routine activity theory in criminology (Barnum *et al.*, 2024; Cohen and Felson, 1979), suggests that guardians act as protective forces capable of safeguarding against harm by overseeing and directly intervening in matters (e.g. Hollis-Peel *et al.*, 2011). Translated to an ecological context, guardianship would imply an active role for individuals or organisations to preserve and rehabilitate ecosystems, which is particularly suited to rewilding initiatives.

In conservation and rewilding contexts, the concept of guardianship transcends traditional notions of ownership, encouraging individuals and organisations to adopt protective roles over nature. Guardianship establishes a direct, ongoing relationship with species and ecosystems, fostering a sense of personal connection and responsibility. Unlike conventional stewardship, which often implies a more passive caretaking role, guardianship invites active engagement with ecosystems and endangered species. It emphasises understanding their needs and working proactively towards their well-being (Moses, 2024). This shift towards guardianship aligns with the recognition of indigenous philosophies, which have long preserved threads of traditional cultural connections with nature. Indigenous practices exemplify a model for fostering a deeper relationship with the natural world, underscoring the need for modern societies to rekindle such connections. Advocates for this mindset argue that humans must move from being mere users of resources to becoming protectors and restorers of the environment, grounded in ethical and cultural values (Moses, 2024).

Local communities often embody guardianship by implementing sustainable practices that actively protect their land and habitat from destruction. These communities serve as front-line protectors of natural resources, offering a living example of how cultural traditions and ecological responsibility can converge to support biodiversity conservation (Hayes, 2024). Such practices demonstrate the importance of reconnecting with nature and involving diverse communities in conservation efforts, reinforcing the broader cultural and ecological significance of guardianship.

Rooted in stewardship, a guardianship model within rewilding initiatives provides a theoretical framework that merges proactive care, responsibility and protective action. By focusing on active guardianship rather than passive stewardship, this framework addresses urgent biodiversity needs more directly and supports the goals of rewilding to restore ecosystems effectively. This approach aligns with more critical culture perspectives where guardianship is reframed as a relational responsibility rather than property ownership, allowing stakeholders to form connections with nature without needing legal ownership (Hayes, 2024; Hayes and Moses, 2024; Powlesland, 2024). The focus shifts from a simple duty to preserve resources to a deeper commitment to actively foster ecological health and resilience.

This proposed framework draws from legal and healthcare models of guardianship, where guardians assume comprehensive responsibility for the well-being of vulnerable populations. In environmental rewilding, this translates to a commitment to restore species and habitats, with genuine care. Such a model acknowledges the critical role of ongoing, hands-on involvement in ensuring the success of conservation initiatives.

5. Research design

This study adopts a longitudinal case study approach (Yin, 2009) to examine the Mauritius kestrel conservation project from its inception in 1973–2024. Mauritius, the site of this study, hosts significant biological diversity, yet its island ecosystems are acutely vulnerable to degradation (Sunkur *et al.*, 2025). Long-term isolation has produced exceptional endemism, but small habitat extent and population sizes heighten extinction risk amid habitat loss, invasive species and escalating climate impacts (Techera, 2023). Unlike larger, diversified contexts, SIDS are both biodiversity-rich and disproportionately at risk. While prior research has examined biodiversity challenges elsewhere, such as South Africa (Atkins *et al.*, 2018; Büchling and Maroun, 2019), SIDS like Mauritius remain underexplored despite their combined ecological value and socio-economic vulnerability. With many of the world's biodiversity hotspots located in the Global South, achieving international biodiversity goals hinges disproportionately on results from these regions. We extend existing literature by focusing on a SIDS context and by building on extinction-focused studies such as McBride *et al.* (2023), who analyse extinction reporting through a historical case study.

Data collection followed a systematic, multi-stage qualitative case study design (Yin, 2009). Because the Mauritian kestrel conservation project spans over five decades, we adopted a phased strategy to capture its longevity, key interventions, outcomes and evolving challenges. Firstly, we mapped the project's historical trajectory to identify major development phases and contextual factors affecting the kestrel project. We assembled archival documents provided by the managing NGO and supplemented them with publicly available materials to build the historical record. The inclusion criteria were: (1) direct reference to the Mauritian kestrel project or its managing NGO; (2) coverage of interventions, outcomes, governance and stakeholder roles; and (3) authorship by partner NGOs involved in the project or government agencies. Using these sources, the research team constructed a chronology of phases and milestones, which we then corroborated through discussions with the managing NGO (see Table 1). Given that interviewees reflected on events spanning more

Table 1. Evolution of the Mauritius kestrel project

Year	Event
Early 1970s	Population collapse
1973	Four known individuals including one single breeding female
1973	Start of intensive conservation efforts initiated by Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, The Peregrine Fund and The World Wildlife Fund
1974	IUCN listed Critically Endangered
1974–76	First successful reintroduction of captive bred birds into the wild
1980	Captive breeding success 50 kestrels
1984	Management of the project transitions from The Peregrine Fund to MWF
1990–91	Kestrels reintroduced into Moka Mountain range and other areas
1994	IUCN downlisted to Endangered
1994	Around 500 recorded kestrels
2000	Dip in population – 350–450
2000	IUCN downlisted to Vulnerable
2001	Research begins on genetic diversity
2010	Advanced ecological studies and policy advocacy
2014	IUCN uplisted to Endangered
2016	Hand-rearing and 84 releases
2022	Became the National Bird of Mauritius
2023	IUCN remains Endangered
2024	Current population around 248

Source(s): Authors' own work

than five decades, interview accounts were triangulated with these archival documents and NGO records, and compared across stakeholders and project phases, to reduce the risk of recall and hindsight bias.

Initial discussions with the managing NGO were used to identify and map key stakeholder groups involved since the kestrel project's inception. Stakeholders were classified by their roles, influence and responsibilities in the project. This mapping informed the interview guide and identified six primary stakeholder groups (see Figure 1), from which key individuals were subsequently approached for interview. Early exploratory conversations with these groups helped refine the list of interviewees, prioritising those with substantial involvement in the project. Given the project's extensive timeline, some key individuals were either retired or deceased accordingly, the mapping was adapted to participant availability and expertise.

Consistent with Deegan and Blomquist (2006), interviewees were selected from the identified groups. All identifiable stakeholders who were still active or traceable were contacted. In consultation with the managing NGO, fifteen potential participants were identified, representing all stakeholder groups, including NGOs, conservationists, policymakers, academics, funders and community representatives. Ethical approval was obtained in June 2024. Participants were contacted via email and interviews commenced from July 2024. Of the 15 contacted, thirteen agreed to participate (87% response rate). All interviewees provided informed consent and were informed of confidentiality and data-handling arrangements. We conducted thirteen interviews and achieved data saturation (Legard *et al.*, 2003), with all NGO-verified stakeholder groups represented. All data were anonymised, securely stored password-protected devices and were accessible only to the authors. One exception to anonymisation was a chief conservationist, founding member of the kestrel project and 2016 Indianapolis Prize recipient, who has been involved for five decades, from inception to the present provided unique historical insights, and who consented to being identified. Interviews lasted 45–75 minutes and followed protocol, ensuring consistency and comparability (Talbot and Boiral, 2021). One national government official did not respond, and one NGO, The Peregrine Fund, was unable to participate as no current staff had worked on the project since its involvement ended in 1984. Full interviewee details appear in Appendix 1.

Semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions were conducted online with participants to explore stakeholder perceptions, roles and experiences, in line with prior studies on stakeholder engagement and accountability (Atkins *et al.*, 2023b; Talbot and Boiral, 2021; Tregidga, 2013). Guided by our conceptual progression from stewardship to guardianship, the interview design centred on care-oriented accountability, shared

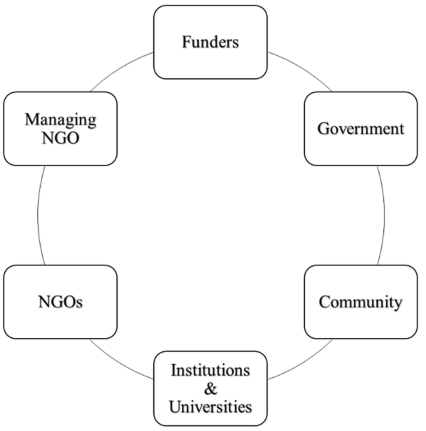

Figure 1. Stakeholder mapping. Source: Authors' own work

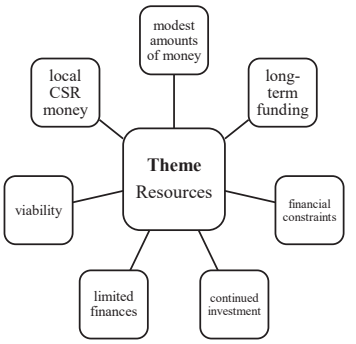

Figure 2. Thematic map for the theme "Resources". Source: Authors' own work

custodianship and culturally embedded practices of long-term care. A common semi-structured interview protocol and sequencing were applied across all interviews, covering participants' roles and involvement in the project, governance and accountability arrangements, collaboration and stakeholder dynamics, challenges encountered and issues of financing and long-term sustainability, with open-ended questions and follow-up probes used to ensure depth and comparability. The questions were designed to capture how stakeholders collaborate, navigate challenges, maintain accountability and contribute to the longevity of the kestrel restoration project, directly addressing the study's core aim of understanding the factors driving conservation outcomes.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, with transcripts carefully checked against the original recordings and corrected where necessary to ensure accuracy. Following the approach of Deegan and Blomquist (2006), this case study is based on a relatively small number of in-depth interviews, appropriate for an interpretive and qualitative analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyse and interpret patterns of meaning within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This method is particularly suitable for developing theoretically informed interpretations of the research context, enabling both explicit and implicit meanings to be explored. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes and (6) producing the report.

Coding was conducted iteratively through repeated readings of the anonymised transcripts, with key phrases, sentences and paragraphs treated as the primary units of analysis, consistent with (Patton, 2015). The initial codes were grouped into broader themes that captured central ideas and recurring patterns within the data. The challenges encountered in the project were categorised into four interconnected themes: resources; time and resilience; trust; and stakeholder dynamics, including the navigation of conflict, collaboration, culture and community engagement as sub-themes. This process enabled the researchers to interpret stakeholder reflections through the theoretical lens of stewardship and guardianship, examining how accountability and collaboration contributed to the kestrel project's long-term success. Themes were cross-checked to ensure rigour, transparency and alignment between empirical findings and the theoretical framework (Patton, 2015). Following Braun and Clarke (2006), Figure 2 illustrates the progression from selected initial codes to the theme of *Resources*. Using this theme as an example, Figure 2 shows how first-order codes were grouped and interpreted.

6. Findings section

6.1 Challenges as critical success factors

Rewilding and restoration initiatives face multifaceted challenges that can hinder their implementation and success. However, these very challenges can become critical success

factors when addressed with innovative strategies and adaptive practices. Long-term restoration projects like the kestrel exemplifies how resilience and long-term commitment can overcome those challenges to achieve effective restoration (Suding, 2011). As Interviewee 5 explains, "*You've got financial challenges . . . logistical challenges, and relationships with all the different stakeholders involved . . . and then you've got political challenges too.*" The challenges encountered in the project have been categorised into four interconnected themes: resources, time and resilience, trust and stakeholder dynamics (navigating conflict, collaboration, culture and community engagement). Ensuring the project's continuity required both financial and non-financial resources. Time emerged as another critical factor, highlighting the importance of sustained efforts and resilience over the long term. Trust-building played a crucial role in fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders. Navigating stakeholder dynamics involved carefully handling conflicts, promoting collaboration, bridging cultural differences and engaging with the community, all integral to the initiative's success. Addressing these challenges through a proactive and adaptive approach contributed to the successful restoration of the kestrel and underscores the potential for overcoming barriers in rewilding projects.

6.2 Resources

6.2.1 Financial resources. One of the most significant challenges faced by the project was the limited availability of resources, particularly in the early stages when the project was on the verge of failure, and "*pulling the plug*" [Interviewee1] appeared to be the only practical option. Long-term restoration projects like the kestrel require significant investment over time. Evidenced by this case, which spans over 50 years, required sustained investment to ensure its perennity. As Interviewee 5 explained, "*as the conservation project evolves, either successfully or the situation gets worse. That as that landscape changes. Your stakeholders and partnerships may need to change to reflect that.*" It is evident that reliance on short-term funding cycles often conflicted with the long-term nature of conservation efforts. Interviewee 1 criticised this disconnect, explaining, "*Financial cycles or funding cycles for these projects are all three or five years . . . but of course that's meaningless when you're talking about the recovery of critically endangered species.*" This tension highlights the challenge of aligning financial support with the extended timeframes required for population recovery of the kestrel. Ensuring the project's continuity over the long term required sustained financial and non-financial effort, continual adaptation and the repeated identification and securing of new funding partners. The innovative, flexible and dynamic approach allowed the project to navigate shifting landscapes and stay afloat by ensuring that the necessary funding and support remained in place throughout its extensive timeline. This effective use of limited resources was also highlighted by participants. As interviewee 5 noted: "*The success of the kestrel project . . . provides a very good example of what you can do with relatively modest amounts of money.*" This highlights a form of guardianship, illustrating how the project is carefully nurtured, protected and sustained over time despite limited resources. Currently, the project's funding relies predominantly on local sources, marking a significant shift from international dependence to more support from government, corporate and NGO efforts. The National Social Inclusion Foundation has made a substantial contribution to the administrative costs of the managing NGO, allocating approximately 12 million rupees (£200,000) annually since 2017. Furthermore, local companies continue to play a vital role, partnering through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives to ensure the project's continuity. Interviewee 2, highlighted this shift, noting that:

> There are no international institutions supporting the program today. It's the NGO that's running the program together with corporate social responsibility, money from Mauritius.

These funds provide a stable foundation for core operations, ensuring the long-term viability of the project. This transition to diverse, locally anchored funding sources underscores the adaptability and resourcefulness required to sustain long-term conservation projects.

Local funders [Interviewee 9 and 13] supporting rewilding initiatives, including the kestrel project, acknowledged the challenges of financing projects on an annual basis with a short-term focus. They emphasised the importance of aligning financial commitments with the long-term nature of such initiatives. As Interviewee 13 explained, they are "*moving progressively towards having long-term partnerships. Three years . . . five years.*" This shift reflects a growing recognition that sustained funding is critical to the success and continuity of rewilding efforts.

6.2.2 Non-financial resources and volunteer contributions. The financial constraints, particularly during the early years of the project, necessitated the adoption of alternative strategies to ensure that the restoration goals were achieved. One such strategy was the extensive reliance on volunteers, who not only filled critical roles but also contributed diverse skills and expertise to the project. As Interviewee 1 explained:

> We didn't have any money or we had very little money, and we used lots of volunteers . . . you train them and work with them, and you'd find, my God, these people are better than I ever was . . . so we got people, some really talented people from various countries that stayed initially for around six months then several years, we'd find some grants for them and some of them did higher degrees, and eventually PhD positions.

Over time, the reliance on volunteers evolved into a significant strength, as many chose to remain involved for extended periods, contributing not only to research and fieldwork but also to securing additional grants. This pattern exemplifies guardianship, protective care, relational responsibility and long-horizon commitment to the kestrel, where prolonged engagement constitutes active custodianship for species survival (Hayes and Moses, 2024; Powlesland, 2024).

Interviewee 5 exemplified the long-term commitment of volunteers, narrating their journey from volunteer falconer to supervisor and ultimately to a 30-year involvement that included scientific contributions. This highlights the genuine care for the species, moving beyond stewardship, with a prolonged relationship with the species resonating with a guardian approach (Hayes and Moses, 2024; Tree and Burrell, 2023). This approach of combining volunteer support with capacity building extended to collaborations with academic institutions. The project formed strategic partnerships with local and international academic institutions. For instance, between 1997 and 2014, a UK university enabled an annual influx of students and staff, promoting technical capacity and scientific research. These collaborations demonstrated how financial limitations drove innovation and created support networks that extended beyond monetary contributions.

Financial constraints prompted the team to think creatively and adapt to resource limitations, ultimately transforming these challenges into a catalyst for resilience and the long-term sustainability of the project. However, reliance on foreign volunteers and experts initially created a perception that conservation efforts were dominated by external actors, leading to criticisms from local communities and hindered community participation and engagement. According to Interviewee 6, *"There was a bit of anti-party against these people to some extent . . . the foreigners, the experts, they were called expats."* This highlighted the need to balance foreign support with local capacity-building efforts, ensuring that expertise remained within Mauritius to foster long-term sustainability of conservation and rewilding efforts.

Furthermore, according to Interviewee 5, it was difficult to quantify the non-financial contributions by stating that:

> I think in the success of the project, the largest missing financial component that isn't recognised is the value of the science that was done that steered the project in the right direction, and that's very hard to quantify because many people gave their time.

While financial constraints presented challenges, the integration of volunteer contributions and academic partnerships proved to be an invaluable asset. These resources not only filled critical gaps but also enhanced the project's overall impact, showcasing how innovative approaches and strategies can contribute to conservation success.

6.3 Time and resilience

Time is intrinsically linked to the sustained resources and commitments needed to achieve effective restoration. The project exemplifies that time indeed is a critical factor in successful restoration. Contrary to the short-lived species-focused restoration projects of the 1960s and 70s, such as "Year of the Tiger", the kestrel project emphasised the need for extensive longitudinal investment, unwavering efforts and sustained engagement. As Interviewee 1 explained, *"You can't save these species overnight."* They further noted that effective conservation takes decades to show any meaningful results:

> I started to look at it and as a rule of thumb, it took about 10 times the age of first breeding. So, a species that breed at one year old, it's usually about a decade of involvement before you can actually see. You usually see positive growth, but for species that don't breed until they're eight or nine years old, and there are several species like that worldwide.

Reflecting on the kestrel success, Interviewee 1 added that the time invested extended beyond merely achieving population recovery. It encompassed restoring associated ecosystems, developing local expertise, building capacity and generating broader societal impact. They elaborated, "*And we've taken on the role of being long term mentors, working very closely, trying to develop capacity.*"

Interviewee 5 reinforced this perspective, stating*: "Even when things are really bad, you can still save a species . . . but it's not a five-year, ten-year, or even twenty-year program. It's 40–50 years"*. This observation underscores not only the pivotal role of time in restoration efforts but also the pertinence of resilience and adaptive strategies to sustain restoration efforts amidst evolving challenges. The project's ability to persist and adapt over decades was key to ensuring the species' survival and the broader success of the restoration initiative.

Ultimately, the project's stakeholders demonstrate how time and resilience transcend operational considerations to become critical success factors for effective restoration. As Interviewee 1 noted, "*We need a 100-year vision,*" emphasising proactive care, responsibility and protective action. This perspective reframes guardianship as a relational responsibility, evolving beyond passive stewardship to foster active engagement with species (Hayes and Moses, 2024; Powlesland, 2024). Unlike conventional stewardship, which often focuses on maintaining resources (Contrafatto, 2014), guardianship prioritises fostering ecological health and resilience by cultivating deeper connections between stakeholders and nature.

6.4 Trust

Trust was key to fostering successful collaborations and cultivating enduring partnerships with the stakeholders involved in the project. Throughout the interviews, what transpired was how mutual trust and collective commitment were pivotal in guiding the project through its highs and lows, showcasing a shift from simple stewardship to a deeper purpose of guardianship. The managing NGO prioritised accountability by maintaining transparent communication with funders with detailed annual reports, expense summaries and immersive engagement and experiences. Funders were invited to observe the project firsthand, allowing them to see the outcomes directly, which built confidence in the project's integrity.

> I would say, manage the donor's happiness, make sure that he's happy with the money that he's been giving. He's happy the way we're using it, and he's also involved in the project because many aspects also is about also showing the donor what we're doing, bringing [them] in the field so that [they] can visually see what's happening. You know, sometimes it's much better to bring him on rather than get into a PowerPoint presentation or trying to explain things via photos and videos, etcetera. Experiencing the nest access and having the kestrel attack you, this is something that you cannot experiment when you're not in the field [Interviewee 3].

However, some modern funders increasingly demanded structured evaluations, including performance indicators, adherence to deadlines and budget clarity. The managing NGO addressed these expectations by balancing transparency with diligent vetting of funders'

motivations to mitigate risks like greenwashing. And to ensure alignment with ethical conservation goals. As Interviewee 3 highlighted:

> This is something that we're very, very, very careful [about] . . . as a conservation organisation, we need to show that those with us are along our side . . . We try as much as we can to make some kind of diligence and try to check what are their real motivations, you know?

Furthermore, regular reporting, both formal and informal, was a cornerstone of the managing NGO's operations. Legal requirements mandated an annual report, but funders often expected more frequent updates. One of the main local funders reiterated how they ensured control and monitoring of the funds disbursed to the managing NGO:

> We can state that we don't have any issue with the NGO . . . we have control, financial control, regular financial control, and regular visits [Interviewee 4].

Trust was further strengthened by the NGO's willingness to share both successes and challenges openly, which underscored the NGO's credibility and ensured sustained relationships with the other stakeholders. According to one of the corporate funders,

> If they [NGO] found that something didn't work as well, they [NGO] let us know. Because they are transparent, we keep trusting them [Interviewee 9].

The managing NGO acknowledged the complexities and costs involved in meeting the diverse reporting and accountability requirements of its funders. While some funders were satisfied with annual or seasonal reports, others demanded more detailed and granular metrics, adding to the administrative burden. The NGO also faced challenges in securing international attention for the kestrel, particularly when competing against iconic and prolific species like rhinos and tigers. However, this competition spurred self-reflection and growth, enabling the NGO to refine its strategies and improve its approach. At the local level, increasing environmental awareness among the community has led to the rapid emergence of numerous NGOs addressing various environmental and biodiversity concerns. While this development is encouraging, it has also intensified competition for funding, compelling the managing NGO to demonstrate greater transparency and accountability to maintain its credibility and secure necessary resources.

6.5 Stakeholder dynamics

Stakeholder dynamics serve as a cornerstone of successful restoration, requiring the alignment of diverse perspectives to achieve shared goals. In the context of the kestrel project, this critical aspect unfolds across four interconnected sub-themes: conflicts, collaboration, culture and community engagement. Each subtheme highlights the complexities and opportunities inherent in navigating relationships among stakeholders to foster effective and sustainable restoration efforts.

6.5.1 Conflicts. Interviewee 1 highlighted early, often philosophical, tensions centred on whether to prioritise saving the kestrel as a single species or restoring the broader ecosystem. Species-oriented work became a major point of debate, and the kestrel project drew heavy criticism. Yet Cade and Jones (1993) note that species-focused interventions can catalyse wider ecological restoration; indeed, as a direct consequence of the kestrel initiative, 6,574 hectares of native forest in southern Mauritius were designated as the island's first national park.

> There was a lot of criticism about species orientated work. People said we shouldn't be working on a species, that it would be more effective if we worked on systems. So instead of putting money into saving the Mauritius kestrel, let's save the forest or set up a National Park or look at it more holistically . . . Do we put resources into species? Or do we put resources into systems? But species are actually the building blocks of systems and can invariably drive whole ecosystem restoration . . . So one could argue that saving species is a powerful way of rebuilding and saving whole systems [Interviewee 1].

Achieving sustained governmental commitment to conservation was hindered by weak land and habitat protection. Conflicts with some private landowners also emerged, reflecting competing incentives between development and habitat conservation. However, these challenges opened pathways to stronger collaboration and improved processes. Although bureaucratic procedures and permit approvals sometimes slowed progress, they underscored the need to engage all stakeholders and to formalise collaborative arrangements. The power dynamics around project approvals highlighted the critical role of cooperation and open dialogue in streamlining conservation activities and advancing the shared mission to protect and restore biodiversity. As Interviewee 12 explained:

> There can be a power struggle . . . the authorities have to give you permits to work with this or this species, or this in this area . . . so if they want to delay a project, they could do so you know, and if they want to fast track something they would do that as well.

Persistent tensions with some private landowners may jeopardise kestrel habitats. As Interviewee 2 remarked:

> Well, there's conflict . . . but what we're trying to do is to enter dialogue with those private sectors, we're not going into conflict with them, but we're trying to have dialogue with them and it's difficult. The dialogue is not easy because it's not that they're not convinced about what needs to be done. It's just selling the land and making a residential estate is far more interesting than saving a few kestrels.

6.5.2 Collaboration. Despite conflicts, collaboration was an overriding factor that led to the success of the project. Interviewee 5 underscored the importance of partnerships in conservation:

> You need the right people, the right partners and everybody has to be in it for the long haul, 40–50 years depending on the generation time of your species, bring in expertise, develop quality long term collaborations . . . collaboration is key.

The dedication of numerous field workers and the genuine care exhibited by all stakeholders highlighted a shared passion for conservation and the protection of the species. Collaboration between stakeholder groups was evident, extending beyond traditional notions of stewardship to adopt a custodial approach. This guardian role went beyond the conventional expectations of stewardship (Contrafatto, 2014; Jones, 2010), aligning with the more holistic guardian approach proposed in recent popular culture literature (Hayes and Moses, 2024).

Project leadership transferred seamlessly from the initiating NGO to the current managing NGO in the 1980s, reflecting a positive and enduring partnership. Informal collaborations also thrived, with private landowners providing access for nest box placements and fieldwork. Government cooperation was essential, particularly for securing land-use permits, though maintaining these relationships required significant effort.

> Maintaining good relations with government has always been a major, major part of the job . . . we've had huge support from higher up in, in government, from prime ministers and presidents and certainly historically I knew them all and they all appreciate what we were doing [Interviewee 1].

This highlights the collective role of guardians and custodians collaboratively caring for the species. On the ground, trust and mutual support were foundational to these collaborations. Interviewee 7 described an informal arrangement with MWF for maintaining a field station: *"It's basically two containers . . . the NGO staff can come and sleep, cook, everything . . . We maintain this field station for their use."* This cooperative spirit also extended to engaging students and international teams, who benefited from shared facilities and resources. It also aligns with prior studies that emphasise the importance of sustained collaboration among networks of stakeholders over extended periods as essential for successful biodiversity restoration (Baumgarten *et al.*, 2024).

The disconnect between academic research and its practical application by companies and stakeholders was also noted, underscoring the importance of translating academic knowledge into practical, user-friendly formats to enhance its impact on real-world conservation efforts. This highlights the importance of expertise, transparency and cooperative efforts in ensuring the success of rewilding initiatives:

> There is a need to bridge the gap and to make research findings more accessible, understandable, and actionable, as other stakeholders often find academic publications too technical or inaccessible. This in turn will help the development of more evidence-based biodiversity led initiatives [Interviewee 10].

Overall, collaboration among the various stakeholders emerged as a critical factor for success. This aligns with Bouamrane *et al.* (2016), who emphasise that stakeholder engagement in biodiversity conservation must be grounded in ecological solidarity to foster meaningful dialogue and cooperation. As Interviewee 7 summarised:

> I think the key takeaway is that we work with people who have expertise, who have the right expertise to monitor the population, to maintain nest boxes, for example, because without those, the population would probably collapse … Transparency in what they are doing and, yeah, just having this collaboration.

6.5.3 Culture. Cultural tensions emerged during the early years of the project, primarily due to perceptions of foreign dominance. Many local stakeholders felt uneasy with the significant involvement of European workers. As Interviewee 2 remarked, *"There was an image problem that we certainly had in the 1980s and early 90s."* These tensions were fuelled by differences in perception and priorities among local communities. The project became associated with wealthy Europeans and elite endeavours, which alienated local communities. This perception distorted local views of conservation, framing it as interventionist and unnatural. As interviewee 6 explained, *"Conservation became completely distorted in people's minds … defining conservation as highly interventionist work done in gardens, zoos, and aquaria."*

Further complicating these dynamics was the fact that foreign workers often received training while funding primarily came from external sources, as interviewee one noted, *"We were training foreigners rather than training Mauritians, but the money was coming from outside."* This reinforced cultural barriers, limiting community awareness and involvement in the project more broadly. However, the need to outsource expertise was also acknowledged:

> These external experts were well versed in the subject; they not only had to protect the animal but also build capacity in the country. For example, when the kestrel restoration project started, we didn't have many experts who could manage captive breeding or hand-rearing these birds. So now we have the capacity … the country was still developing, and mobilising resources for conservation was more difficult [Interviewee 8].

This highlights the necessity of external expertise in the early stages of the project to address capacity gaps and support long-term skill-building within the country. Over time, efforts were made to address these tensions and engage the local public through cultural and educational experiences, such as the guided kestrel feeding tours. These activities helped foster a greater appreciation for conservation efforts and strengthened community ties to the project. As a result, the kestrel evolved into a symbol of national pride for many Mauritians. This trajectory exemplifies a guardianship approach, and this transformation highlights the importance of cultural integration in building local support for rewilding initiatives. Interviewee 7 summarised this shift, stating, *"We are now proud of that bird [Kestrel] … and many people have the right idea of what conservation should be."* This transformation highlights the importance of cultural integration in building local support for rewilding initiatives.

6.5.4 Community engagement. Community engagement emerged as a vital component of the project, fostering local support and active participation. Residents were invited to observe key activities, such as hand-feeding the kestrels, creating a personal and emotional connection

with the birds. Informal agreements with private landowners played a pivotal role in facilitating conservation efforts, embedding the project more deeply within the community. Together, these grassroots initiatives underscore proactive, adaptive strategies that prioritise community involvement and emphasise long-term care.

Private landowners were instrumental in supporting on-the-ground conservation. As Interviewee 5 noted, "*Sugar estates helped with logistics, providing buildings, generators, and access to land.*" This support extended to the use of facilities, including short-term living arrangements for conservation workers. These informal partnerships underscored the collaborative nature of the project, where local people became genuine custodians of the kestrel. The bird grew to symbolise national pride, with many viewing it as a representation of their cultural and natural heritage, reinforcing a sense of guardianship and connection to the species (Shrubsole, 2024; Tree and Burrell, 2023).

The designation of the kestrel as Mauritius's national bird in 2022 marked a significant milestone in conservation. It reflected the cumulative efforts of all stakeholders involved in the project and stood as a testament to the commitment and pride of the Mauritian community in safeguarding their natural heritage. This recognition symbolised the successful collaboration and shared dedication to restoring and protecting the species, solidifying its place as a national emblem of resilience and ecological guardianship.

> The kestrel has become the national bird. The government has come with the law called the national symbols and flags. So, it's a law now to protect national symbols and flag [Interviewee 2].

> Many people became proud of the kestrel, saved it from extinction . . . but at the same time it's a starting point for many people who get very passionate about conservation [Interviewee 6].

Community involvement also took the form of schools building nest boxes, particularly in the Black River and Tamarin areas. Interviewee 2 emphasised the broader impact of these activities, noting, *"That had greater community engagement, particularly in and around the Black River Tamarin area."*

Overall, the findings align with research highlighting the importance of trust in co-managing biodiversity approaches (e.g., Baumgarten *et al.*, 2024; Koch *et al.*, 2023; Lécuyer *et al.*, 2024) and emphasise the multiple dimensions of stakeholder participation in rewilding, which have been largely overlooked (Dunn-Capper *et al.*, 2023). Increased stakeholder involvement, particularly through building trust, was associated with an enhanced likelihood of positive biodiversity outcomes (Young *et al.*, 2013). The identified themes also provide insights into which can inform the relationship between business and biodiversity (Panwar, 2023), underscoring the importance of sustained collaboration. In parallel, the biodiversity literature shows that collaboration enhances organisational biodiversity disclosures and transparency (Roberts *et al.*, 2022; Atkins *et al.*, 2018; Zhang *et al.*, 2025), while culture is a significant determinant of biodiversity and sustainability outcomes (e.g. Adler *et al.*, 2021; Roberts and Elamer, 2025). Thus, consistent with our theoretical framing, in practice, active guardianship (Cohen and Felson, 1979; Moses, 2024; Shrubsole, 2024), a more dynamic, engaged approach to ecological responsibility, rather than passive stewardship, centres care, accountability and long-term commitment, translating trust and collaboration into conservation. This also builds on the findings of Siddiqui (2013), whose analysis of Bangladesh, similarly, a context particularly vulnerable to climate change, calls for stronger environmental stewardship in the region. As the global community advances through the United Nations' Decade of Restoration, achieving restoration goals will require a more nuanced understanding of the factors that underpin success and the development of strategies that integrate trust, stakeholder engagement and long-term collaboration into effective conservation and rewilding practice.

6.6 Practical guidance and stakeholder implications

Prior work links accounting to biodiversity through ecological accounts (e.g., Dey and Russell, 2014) and highlights the value of collaboration and persistence in conservation (e.g., Adler

et al., 2021; Atkins *et al.*, 2018; Reill, 2025). This study extends this by showing how stakeholder collaboration is operationalised into verifiable practices and how guardianship reframes accountability relations beyond stewardship.

To render the findings actionable, we present the four factors, resources, time, trust and stakeholder dynamics, into a framework that progresses from diagnostic checks to context-specific actions and straightforward indicators of progress (see Table 2). For the accounting community, this framework provides a platform to apply core skills to real conservation cases, translating ecological practice into credible accounts. As Feger *et al.* (2018) argue, accounting is increasingly called upon to contribute to protecting biodiversity and natural capital through such engagement. While each rewilding or conservation project is unique, shaped by species biology and habitat conditions, the core principles are transferrable. Actions and indicators should be locally tailored (e.g., species regeneration needs, seasonality, etc.) and accounting can mobilise this process by standardising evidence collection, documenting and assurance across contexts.

The framework carries distinct implications across stakeholder groups. For NGOs and practitioners, it serves as a pre-implementation and monitoring scaffold, recommending budgeting for operations, maintenance, monitoring, localise expertise and document roles and benefit-sharing early. For funders, it supports longer grant horizons aligned to ecological timelines, coverage of overheads and monitoring and use of the completed framework in due diligence and reporting, treating transparent disclosure of setbacks as a positive signal. For policymakers and regulators, it points to publishing clear permitting steps and contacts, offering pre-application consultations and recognising co-designed benefit-sharing in approvals. For private-sector organisations, it guides identification of pilot sites, resourcing of operations and maintenance, disclosure of in-kind support and tracking a small set of shared indicators linking ecological outcomes to risk reduction and reputation. For communities and landowners, it emphasises formalising access, participating in field days and light monitoring and contributing local ecological knowledge to build guardianship and shared pride. More broadly, partnerships with rewilding or restoration initiatives provide credible, place-based evidence for organisational biodiversity reporting, enhancing authenticity and enabling assurance. This approach yields verifiable, transparent disclosures that can reduce boilerplate and strengthen biodiversity reporting credibility. Together, these roles support collaborative guardianship of species in rewilding and conservation efforts.

The guardianship model, as illustrated through the Mauritian kestrel project, offers a culturally embedded and proactive framework for accountability that extends beyond traditional stewardship norms (Jones, 2010; Shrubsole, 2024). For accounting scholarship, this model invites a rethinking of how accountability is conceptualised and operationalised, particularly in ecological and long-term sustainability contexts. Guardianship emphasises relational, ethical and inter-temporal responsibilities rather than transactional oversight, challenging accountability's conventional focus on short-term performance. Stewardship primarily focuses on annual responsibility for resources; guardianship embodies inter-temporal accountability, caring for ecosystems in ways that sustain their integrity decades into the future.

For practice, this suggests that accounting must approach conservation and biodiversity initiatives with a guardianship mindset, recognising that financial, ecological and community outcomes are intertwined and that accountability extends across time and species boundaries. Within such a frame, NGOs and community organisations act as relational stewards who build trust and local legitimacy; governments provide the regulatory and policy guardianship that secures continuity; and private-sector entities integrate ecological care into governance, budgeting and disclosure systems. Accordingly, the guardianship model offers accounting the potential to ensure that organisations nurture, sustain and restore ecological relationships. It mobilises accounting as a practice that verifies commitment, trust and long-term custodianship.

Table 2. Framework for operationalising stakeholder accountability in rewilding projects

Factor	Diagnose (what to check)	Practical actions (apply)	Indicators to track (simple measures)	Common risks	Mitigation
Resources	Longevity of funding; coverage of operations, monitoring, maintenance and administration; gaps in skills and data; balance of local and external support	Combine local, government and sustainability funding; set aside money for monitoring, operations and maintenance; build local skills; formalise partnerships with various stakeholders; recognise and value volunteers, in-kind support and scientific work	Number of years of confirmed funding; percentage of budget reserved for operations and maintenance; number of trained local staff and volunteers; estimated value of in-kind and scientific contributions	Short grants (mismatch); administration and monitoring not funded; dependence on external experts	Multi-year written agreements; include administration and monitoring in budgets; step-by-step local capacity plan; succession plan to transfer expertise locally; ensure accountability through reporting
Time	Seasonal work windows; time needed to obtain permits; species breeding and generation time; donor deadlines	Create a combined calendar for seasons and permits; set staged goals (species recovery, then habitat, then local capacity); plan on long-term horizons	Milestones completed within the correct season; percentage of permits obtained on time; progress against capacity-building milestones	Severe weather events; missed deadlines; donor cycles that do not match ecological timelines	Meet regulators before applying; add time buffers; keep a rolling work plan; set clear contingency triggers
Trust	Expectations for transparency; preferred reporting frequency; due diligence of funders; how the community views the project	Share both successes and challenges; organise field visits for funders and partners; agree on a small set of shared performance indicators; check funders' motivations to avoid reputational risk	Reports delivered on schedule; repeat funding rate; satisfaction checks with stakeholders; number of field visits or open days held	Heavy reporting burden; incentives that pull in the wrong direction; reputational risk from misaligned partners	Use light, common indicators; keep a shared audit trail; screen funders; set a clear communication protocol
Stakeholder dynamics	Who decides, who benefits and who may lose; access to private land; government control points; cultural identity and perceptions	Make an early map of roles and responsibilities; agree on how benefits are shared; sign access agreements with landowners; run cultural outreach and education	Roles and responsibilities documented; number of land access agreements; participation rates in meetings and activities; record of conflicts or grievances	Permit bottlenecks; capture of benefits by powerful actors; negative sentiment towards foreign experts	Name a government liaison; use an independent facilitator when needed; develop local leaders; hold regular coordination meetings

Source(s): Authors' own work

7. Concluding discussions

The Mauritian kestrel project provides a powerful example of the transformative potential of rewilding initiatives. Spanning over five decades, it demonstrates how resilience, collaboration and guardianship can revive species on the brink of extinction and foster profound ecological benefits. The success of this initiative highlights the importance of long-term commitment, stakeholder dynamics and adaptive strategies in overcoming challenges and achieving restoration goals. Moreover, the project's integration of local and international efforts underscores the replicable value of coordinated rewilding models in addressing broader environmental and biodiversity challenges. By aligning with global pressures such as the SDGs and the evolution of financial markets prioritising conservation funding, the project offers critical insights into how organisations can navigate these external influences to support effective rewilding. This case serves as a testament to the enduring impact of collaborative and innovative approaches in global conservation efforts, offering a blueprint for the restoration of other endangered species.

This paper makes several significant contributions to the current body of literature. Firstly, it demonstrates that successful rewilding depends on sustained, multi-stakeholder collaboration over extended periods, offering rare longitudinal insights into how accountability evolves in practice. By focusing on Mauritius, an SIDS, with rich biodiversity yet limited research attention, we address a major gap in Global South conservation and accounting studies (e.g., Atkins *et al.*, 2018; Mansoor and Maroun, 2016), particularly in regions facing severe vulnerabilities to climate change and biodiversity loss (Siddiqui, 2013; UNDP, 2024). Theoretically, we extend existing current stewardship framings (e.g., Contrafatto, 2014; Jones, 2010) by proposing a more holistic stewardship framework that integrates guardianship, as reflected in popular culture narratives, emphasising proactive care, relational accountability and the intrinsic value of ecosystems. This reframes conservation from a property-centric to a collaborative and relational model of restoration, capturing the dynamic role of actors in biodiversity protection (Hayes, 2024; Hayes and Moses, 2024; Powlesland, 2024). Further, we contribute to the biodiversity and extinction accounting literature (e.g., Atkins and Maroun, 2018; Azizi *et al.*, 2025; Roberts *et al.*, 2022), by providing evidence from a rewilding initiative that exemplifies the transformative potential of collaboration. Furthermore, we complement existing case-study research (e.g., Adler *et al.*, 2021; McBride *et al.*, 2023) and extend this literature by providing new primary qualitative evidence from semi-structured interviews. As Feger *et al.* (2018) argue, accounting has significant yet underused potential to advance conservation science; our longitudinal case answers this call by illustrating how accountability, understood as a moral practice of care and responsibility to human and non-human stakeholders, can be enacted and strengthened over time in ecological recovery (Carnegie *et al.*, 2020; Russell *et al.*, 2017).

The findings have practical implications for designing and implementing future rewilding projects. A holistic approach ensures that rewilding efforts not only achieve ecological restoration but also address wider environmental and socio-economic challenges. Efforts to save species and ecosystems must be intensified, demonstrating that, through collective action, even the most challenging circumstances can yield remarkable success stories. The story of the Mauritian kestrel serves as a compelling narrative of resilience and revival, showcasing how human intervention can bring species back from the brink of extinction. The IUCN Green Status assessment provides robust, independent evidence of this success, offering organisations a clear, data-driven justification for supporting rewilding by demonstrating that long-term, targeted interventions can produce measurable ecological gains (IUCN, 2025). This study underscores that such successes require decades of dedicated work, a reality that stakeholders, investors, funders and policymakers must carefully consider. As species continue to decline at alarming rates, future conservation efforts will demand even greater time and resources to repair the damage inflicted today. The kestrel success is a poignant reminder that time is a critical factor in conservation. As one interviewee emphasises, a plan to save a species should be a 100-year plan. This highlights the critical need for humans to reconnect

with nature, not merely as stewards tasked with maintaining resources, but as *guardians* who actively protect, nurture and restore species and ecosystems. Such a shift in perspective is essential for ensuring long-term biodiversity conservation and fostering resilience in the face of ongoing environmental challenges.

For the accounting community, the study highlights how accountability mechanisms can make these commitments visible and credible, linking ecological outcomes to governance and reporting practices. By embedding guardianship, an ethic of care, reciprocity and shared responsibility, accounting can evolve from passive stewardship to an active role in enabling ecological restoration and biodiversity protection. Socially, the study underscores the need to reframe conservation from management to moral connection. Humans must reconnect with nature not merely as stewards maintaining resources but as guardians who protect, nurture and restore ecosystems. The responses from interviewees reveal that guardianship, fuelled by a deep sense of responsibility for the species' survival, remains a critical driver of conservation success. Finally, the interviews reveal ongoing challenges, as evidenced by the recent decline in species numbers. Although the kestrel continues to be carefully monitored and the project's longevity remains intact, there is significant concern about the persistent external pressures of climate change and habitat degradation. While numerical population increases are important, the broader objective must focus on fostering resilience to external pressures, raising awareness and encouraging active community involvement.

7.1 Limitations and future research directions

Although our study offers novel insights into one of the world's longest-running conservation projects, we acknowledge certain limitations. A primary limitation is that our findings derive from a single, long-running conservation project centred on one species in an SIDS context. While this case study provides valuable lessons, its specificity may limit the generalisability of our findings to other conservation and rewilding efforts. Future research could address this by examining a broader range of projects involving multiple species, ecosystems or NGOs. Comparative studies across diverse conservation contexts would help identify universal principles and strategies while highlighting unique challenges and solutions specific to species or regions. Finally, all invited participants accepted the interview invitation, except for a representative from the government office. However, a local authority policymaker participated, ensuring comprehensive stakeholder perspectives.

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(The Appendix follows overleaf)

Appendix

Table A1. Interviewees of study

Stakeholder group	Description	Interviewees
Chief conservationist	Chief conservationist responsible for design and implemented the kestrel restoration project, academic researcher	Interviewee 1
Managing NGO representative	Representative from a wildlife and conservation NGO in Mauritius	Interviewee 2
Financial representative of managing NGO	Financial representative from a wildlife and conservation NGO in Mauritius	Interviewee 3
Fund provider	Government body responsible for receiving and allocating public funds to NGOs for environmental and conservation projects	Interviewee 4
Conservationist	International conservationist and project supervisor for the kestrel project	Interviewee 5
Academic	National academic researcher specialising in conservation and restoration ecology, policy and scientific publication	Interviewee 6
Representative of private landowner	Representative of private landowners who provide access for the kestrel project	Interviewee 7
Local government authority	Government body with the mandate to manage state forests	Interviewee 8
Corporate funder	Large corporate funder that has financially supported the kestrel project	Interviewee 9
Conservationist	Local ecologist and academic involved in restoration activities	Interviewee 10
NGO representative	Representative from a Mauritian NGO involved in local restoration projects	Interviewee 11
Community representative	Community representative with long-term knowledge of the kestrel project	Interviewee 12
Corporate funder	Local funder from the financial services sector supporting the kestrel project	Interviewee 13

Source(s): Authors' own work

Note

1. In this study, rewilding is defined as a transformative concept that extends beyond traditional restoration and conservation efforts. While the terms are used interchangeably in certain contexts, rewilding emphasises broader ecological, social and systemic transformations.

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