



# **The Ebony Project**

A Program for Restoration, Use, and  
Community-based Livelihoods

**Annual Progress Report 2025**

# THE EBONY PROJECT

## A Program for Restoration, Use, and Community-based Livelihoods

### Annual Progress Report

## 2025

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Cover picture: Ebony seeds struggle to germinate when encased in fruit. Photo: V. Deblauwe

Congo Basin Institute, Yaoundé, February 2026

## Project Partners

The Ebony Project is coordinated by the Congo Basin Institute (CBI) in Yaoundé, Cameroon, and implemented by CBI and its collaborators:



International Institute of Tropical Agriculture  
Cameroon



University of California, Los Angeles  
United States



Institut Supérieur des Sciences Environnementales  
Cameroon



Taylor Guitars  
United States



Madinter  
Spain



Crelicam  
Cameroon

The Ebony Project collaborates with institutions in Cameroon, including:



Université de Yaoundé I, Yaoundé, Prof. B. Sonké



Ministry of Environment, Nature Protection, and Sustainable Development (MINEPDED),



National Forestry School Mbalmayo, N. Kingsly



Min. of Forestry & Wildlife (MINFOF), Cameroon,  
Conservation Services of the Dja Faunal Res.

The Ebony Project is supported by the following donors:

Bob and Cindy Taylor



The Global Environment  
Facility



Fondation Franklinia



International Climate  
Initiative (Germany)

Launched in 2016, the Ebony Project is a partnership that brings together business, communities, and researchers to protect a valuable timber species, plant trees in degraded forest, address local food security issues, and enhance rural livelihoods. The goal of the project is to conduct basic ecological research and develop a community-based planting program as a pilot project for larger rainforest restoration efforts.

Since its inception, the Project has been primarily supported by Bob Taylor, co-founder of Taylor Guitars, and by Taylor Guitars itself. In 2019, Fondation Franklinia began providing funds, and in 2022, the project was incorporated into the Global Environmental Facilities' GEF7 funding cycle. In 2025, the Federal Republic of Germany also began providing project funds.

Previous years' Annual Progress Reports, along with relevant scientific papers and essential project documents, are available at [Crelicam.com/resources](http://Crelicam.com/resources).

## Planting Trees

To date, Ebony Project participants have planted nearly 82,000 trees:

**47,561** Ebony trees

**34,421** Fruit trees

**81,982** Total Trees planted

## Communities

# THE EBONY PROJECT IN CAMEROON

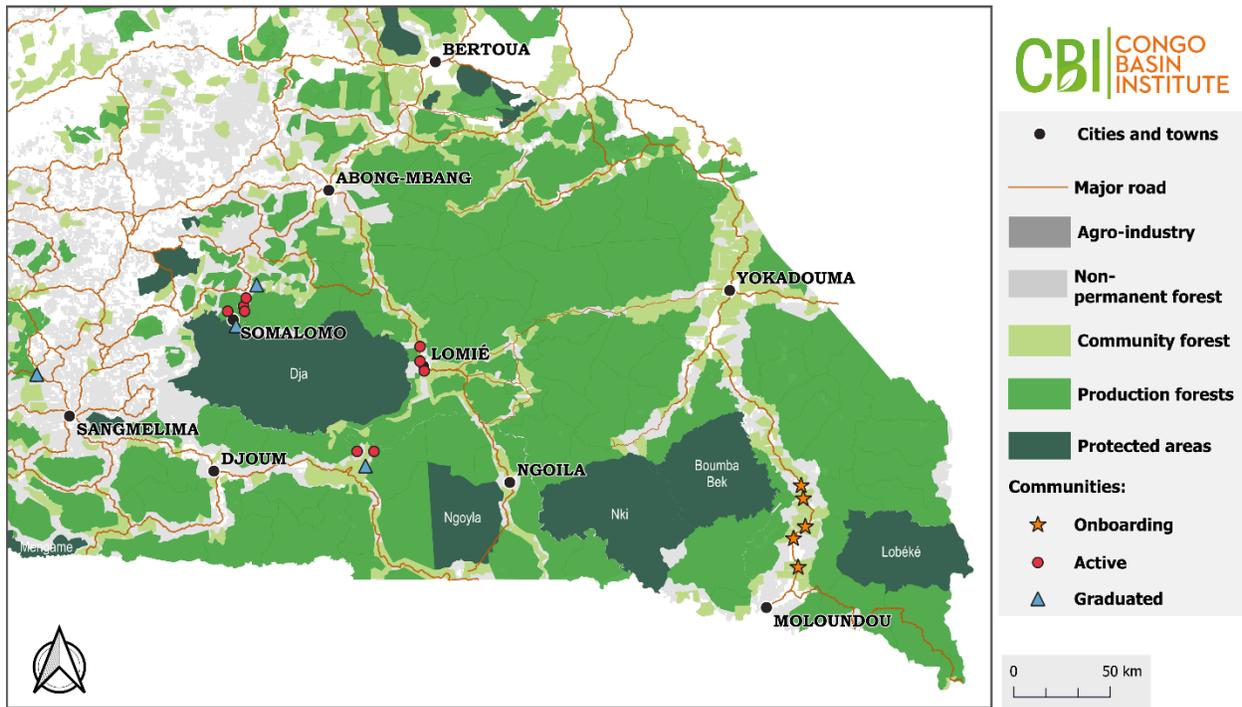


Figure 1: Map of Ebony Project communities in Cameroon

With support from the German government's International Climate Initiative (IKI), the Ebony Project expanded for the first time beyond the confines of the greater Dja Landscape, onboarding six new communities further east near Lobéké National Park. These new communities stretch the project in the following ways:

- The Lobéké landscape is more remote—a three-day drive from the capital of Yaoundé—so it is more difficult to visit these communities than those that cluster around the Dja.
- To address the distance, the project has hired an agroforestry technician based near Lobéké. The project has long aspired to increasing localization by having staff live in the project landscape.
- These new communities, located near the border with the Central African Republic and the Republic of Congo, open exciting new opportunities and challenges. They situate the Ebony Project deeper into the TRIDOM and Tri-National Sanaga (TNS) landscapes, which are considered critical conservation corridors in the Congo Basin.
- The Lobéké landscape communities are part of an ongoing and larger INFORBIO initiative funded by the German Government, which includes activities to improve agricultural production and community health provision. This creates an excellent learning opportunity for the Ebony Project to synergize its activities with other internationally funded projects.
- The six new communities are located in more remote forest areas and will have less access to regional markets to sell surplus fruit, when available. This is likely to raise questions about whether the Ebony Project model will provide sufficient value to these more remote communities, and may prompt reflection on whether to modify our approach by location, while still trying to maintain sufficient uniformity for the project to feel cohesive.

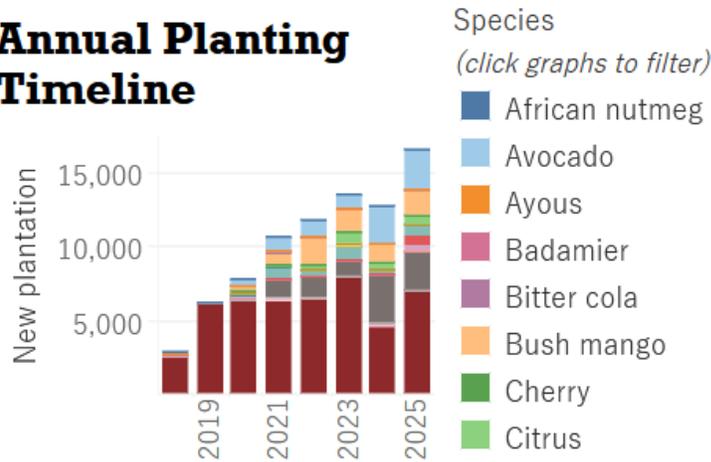
#### Understanding logistical challenges



The Ebony Project is built on regular interactions with participating communities, but it's important to appreciate how challenging it can be to visit communities. Above, a CBI car is stuck on its way to visit participants.

Stretching the project eastward away from the familiar confines of the Dja landscape will further underscore the obvious, that “communities” are not a monolith. Differences in ethnicity and economic context are obvious, but other factors, such as village leadership and dynamics between communities, are less predictable.

## Annual Planting Timeline



## Species Planted

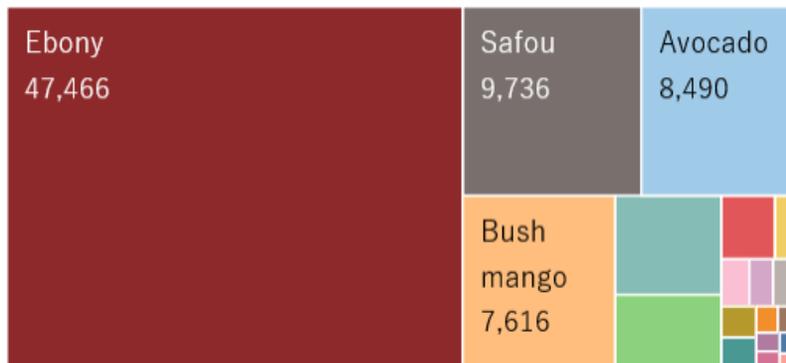


Figure 2: Screen shot of a portion of the Ebony Project Tableau dashboard with numbers through 2025

### Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)

There is often as much variation within communities as between them, so the Ebony Project undertakes Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) on two levels. The first determines whether there is sufficient interest and willingness within a community, demonstrated, for example, by the level of engagement in finding suitable land for, and construction of, a nursery. A second focuses on determining who within the village is actually interested in planting trees on their land. Experience to date illustrates that only a fraction of community members actively participate. We find that nonparticipants are often more opinionated and vocal than participants, and it is important for assessment teams to distinguish between the two groups.

Heterogeneity between and within villages results in significant differences in how many trees communities plant and how many years they plant for. Villages that planted for only a few years will be the first communities to age out of incentive payments. Accordingly, we have created a new category of community in our typology to reflect this: "Independent." In the coming year we will need to determine, trial, and refine how we help communities transition to independence.

## The evolution of Ebony Project community participation

- 1. Onboarding:** Being introduced to the project. Under assessment for interest, capacity, and consent (see Annual Report 2020 for detailed description)
- 2. Active:** Maintaining a nursery, collecting seeds, receiving training in vegetative propagation and transplanting ebony saplings annually
- 3. Graduated:** Maintaining planted trees, but no longer multiplying or planting new ones. During this five-year period, communities continue to receive incentives payments from the project for surviving trees
- 4. Independent:** No longer planting or tending plants and do not receive financial or regular technical support from the project

## Research

The Ebony Project team published seminal findings on the interdependence of ebony and critically endangered African forest elephants in *Science Advances* this year, dubbed the “Ebony and Ivory Paper.” The peer reviewed paper, which was covered extensively by media outlets globally, showed:

- Elephants play a critical role in dispersing ebony seeds away from mother trees, which is important to avoid inbreeding and increase chance of reaching suitable habitat
- Elephant dung protects ebony seeds from being eaten by other animals
- Ebony regeneration drops severely in forests without elephants, which is about a third of the ebony range

SCIENCE ADVANCES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

ECOLOGY

### Declines of ebony and ivory are inextricably linked in an African rainforest

Vincent Deblauwe<sup>1,2,3\*</sup>, Matthew Scott Luskin<sup>2,4,5</sup>, Serge Désiré Assola<sup>1,3</sup>, Olivier J. Hardy<sup>6</sup>, Simon Jansen<sup>7,8</sup>, Céline Loubières<sup>6</sup>, Gaston Guy Mempong<sup>3</sup>, Jean Mathurin Ntsihe<sup>3</sup>, Gilbert Oum Ndjock<sup>9</sup>, Eric Rostand Onguene Kwecheu<sup>1,3</sup>, Luke L. Powell<sup>10,11,12,13</sup>, Bonaventure Sonké<sup>14</sup>, Thomas B. Smith<sup>2,3,15</sup>

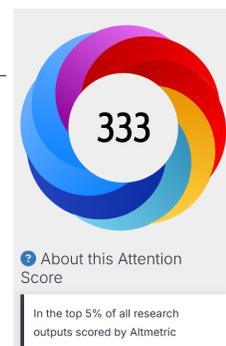


Figure 3: Ebony Project research published this year in *Science Advances* was in the top 5% of research outputs

In 2025, the project continued to set up forest monitoring plots to advance the multiplication of the endangered mukulungu and vulnerable moabi and onzabili, three tree species that are the focus of funding from Fondation Franklinia. We inventoried these species south of the Dja, and as expected the abundance of each was low, except for moabi. The project also trained local indigenous Baka residents to identify and find more trees outside of the forest inventory, allowing us to increase the number of onzabili stones collected for germination.



*Figure 4: Camera trap photo of elephants foraging on ebony fruit. Photo credit: CBI team*

## The Challenge of the Project Timeline

It takes a minimum of seven years to complete the first three project stages, a time horizon that is longer than traditional donor funding cycles. This mismatch creates an ongoing challenge for the project, since we never have a guarantee of sufficient resources when we engage a new community. To date, Bob Taylor's long-term generosity and his willingness, and that of the other donors, to support existing communities whose funding has lapsed have been vital to fulfilling our obligations to communities. As per last year's Annual Report, while Taylor Guitars is expected to provide in-kind support for the project for the foreseeable future, we cannot expect our primary benefactor, Taylor Guitars' co-founder Bob Taylor, to continue to provide such generous annual financial support for the project indefinitely. The project, celebrating its 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and going strong, was originally envisioned to last for "only a few years." The Ebony Project will need similar flexibility from donors in the future to make sure we harvest the rewards of early investments and fulfill our obligations to participating communities.

## Project Impact

Ten years ago, the Ebony Project was founded by a guitar maker who wanted to better understand and conserve an iconic tonewood species that has been used for over a century on fretboards for guitars, violins, violas, cellos, and basses. A decade later, however, it is clear that the project has accomplished much more than it originally set out to do. Funding deliverables requested by the Fondation Franklinia, the Global Environmental Facility, and the German government's International Climate Initiative, have allowed the Ebony Project to collect data that far exceeded its original scope.

Funding from GEF7 catalyzed the project to assess its impact more broadly, and the first results of that effort are now available. In 2025, a team of Cameroonian and American students spent six months building the foundation for a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) system for the Ebony Project. The team also hired a new staff member with a strong background in M&E. The students talked with participating communities and worked with Ebony Project staff to develop a Theory of Change (ToC) for the Project. Theories of Change are a well-established approach to explain how a project will lead to a long-term outcome, taking into account complexities and externalities that may impact the outcome.

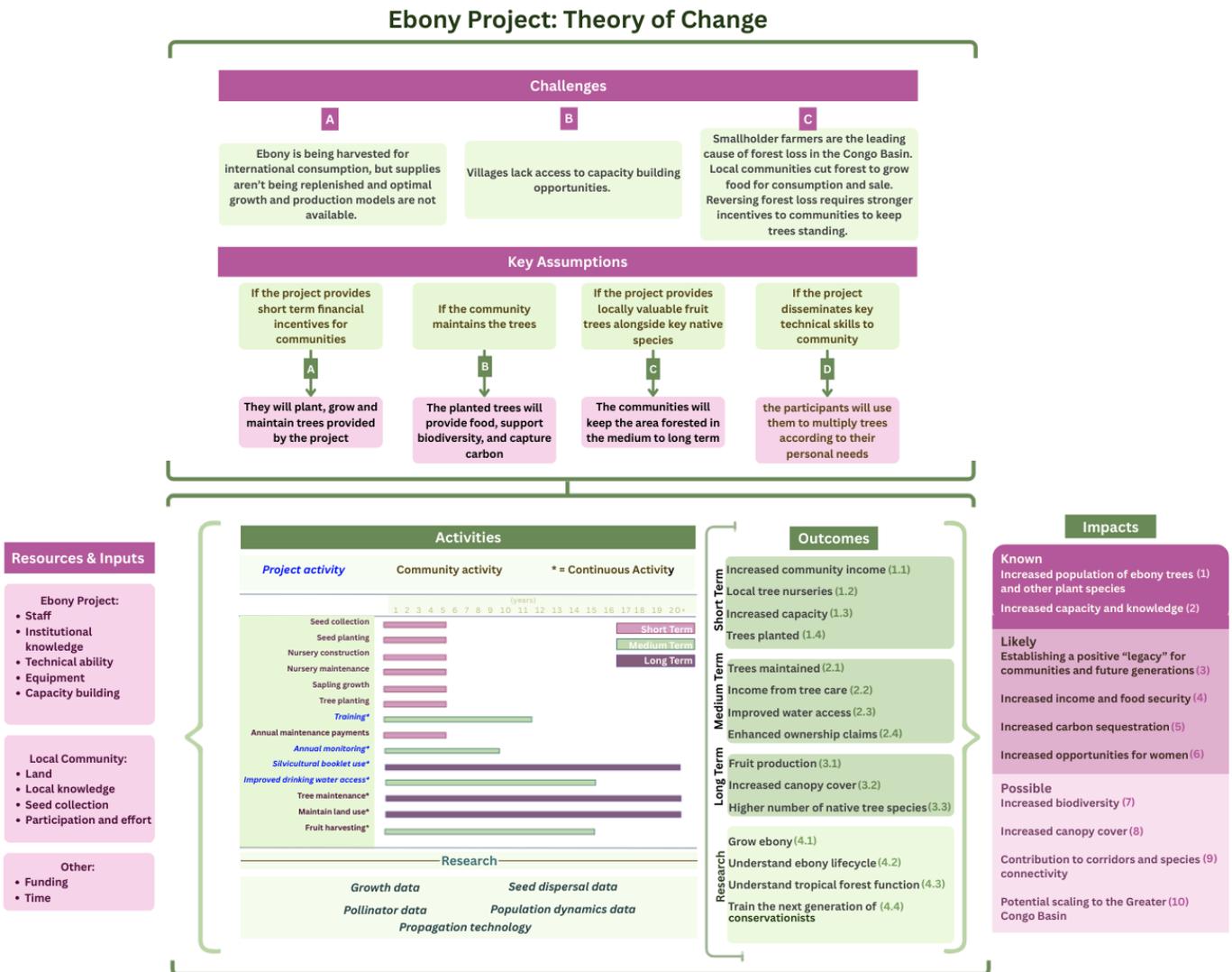


Figure 5: The Ebony Project Theory of Change

The Theory of Change (ToC) confirmed that the Ebony Project is likely to have an impact beyond its initial stated objective to plant ebony trees. Some outcomes, like trees planted and maintained, are direct outgrowths of the original goal, but others—like training the next generation of local

conservation leaders and increased canopy cover—were farther afield. Of course, proving that the Ebony Project directly caused a specific result can be challenging, so the ToC breaks impacts down into known, probable, and possible. This allows us to articulate the project’s impact without overstating it.

Based on this work, the project is expanding its key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure a broader swatch of the project’s impact (Table 1). The team designed the KPIs to help assess some of the project impacts, and to be measurable with our existing data, and is in the process of quantifying them. We hope many of these KPIs will be available on a new public facing Tableau dashboard we plan to unveil in 2026 (see Future section below for details).

**Table 1: Impacts and Key Performance Indicators of the Ebony Project. Numbers in parentheses refer to KPIs that track these impacts**

<b>Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)</b>	<b>KPI Status</b>
<b>1) Number of trees planted*</b>	Known
2) Hectares of land planted	Known
<b>3) Tree survival rate*</b>	Known
4) Median number of species per plot	Known
5) Fruit tree production	Underway
6) Number of visits per community per year	Known
7) Project infrastructure investments	Underway
8) Number of beneficiaries	Known
9) Number of person training days	Underway
10) Female participation rate	Known
<b>11) Number of peer-reviewed publications*</b>	Known
<b>Impacts</b>	
<i>Known</i>	
Increased population of ebony trees and other species (1,3)	
Increased capacity and knowledge (9,10,11)	
<i>Likely</i>	
Establishing a positive legacy for communities and future generations (1,7,8,9)	
Increased income and food security (5)	
Increased carbon sequestration (1,2,3)	
Increased opportunities for women (9,10)	
<i>Possible</i>	
Increased biodiversity (4)	
Increased canopy cover (2)	
Contribution to corridors and species connectivity (2,4)	
Potential scaling to the greater Congo Basin	

\* Denotes a founding KPI—a metric that tracks the original project goal.

The burgeoning M&E system will facilitate accurate communication about project impact. Since its implementation risks burying the original project goals, we've denoted "founding KPIs"—metrics that track the original goals, to distinguish them from newer metrics to track expanded impacts. This is an issue we will continue to grapple with over the coming years, as we stumble through the process of messaging and work to maintain accuracy in what the project was founded and what it is now.

The team is also building out new tools to help track project impact, including a Mission Report Database created this year to track visits to participating communities, trainings, and local investment that details the 325 visits the project has made to date.

## The Future

The Annual Report is as much an opportunity to look forward as it is to look back. These are some of the ideas and trends that we will be working on in the coming year.

### Transnationality

We know from project research described in the *Science Advances* Ebony and Ivory Paper that ebony is shaped by boundary-spanning natural phenomena like seed dispersal, and anthropogenic phenomena like defaunation and ebony harvesting. This raises the issue of the appropriate scale of operation of the Ebony Project. In 2019, we faced a question about whether to scale from three villages in the same area to more in another sector. Our successful controlled growth since then has been driven by the results of a "Scale up feasibility study" we conducted with support from the World Bank through Cameroon's REDD+ program. Now feels like an appropriate moment to assess the possibility of another step change—a move across one or more borders to another Congo Basin country.

### Modifying how we operate

For its first decade, the Ebony Project was implemented by a centrally located team that traveled regularly from Yaoundé to one of three clusters of communities around the Dja Funnel Reserve. Now, with new project villages in the more remote Lobéké National Park region, a staff member will be permanently based in that region.

Inclusion of agricultural improvement activities implemented by CBI co-founder the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), and health and community-based biomonitoring activities

### Meet the team: Eric Onguene



Eric joined the Ebony Project team in 2018. Since then, he's earned his Master degree by studying the natural regeneration of ebony, co-authored two papers, and learned tree climbing. Eric led much of the field work for the Ebony and Ivory Paper, and works closely with field assistants from local communities

presents an interesting opportunity to explore how the Ebony Project might join with other activities to be “greater than the sum of the parts,” and make meaningful contributions to the tricky challenge of forest conservation in the Congo Basin.

### **Making data about the Ebony Project more accessible**

The Ebony Project is a data-driven project; we have a strong research focus and maintain a Tableau database of the species, location, and year of every tree planted. Scientific data and project publications are all publicly available at [crelicam.com/resources](https://crelicam.com/resources).

Three key developments have created new opportunities to communicate the project’s impact with data:

- 1) Changes in Tableau make it feasible for the team to create and maintain a public-facing data visualization page
- 2) The development of a Theory of Change and Key Performance Indicators for the project (see Impact section above) means we have more metrics to communicate.
- 3) The growing field of indigenous data sovereignty—the right of peoples to govern the collection, ownership, and application of their own data—offers increasing guidance on the ethical sharing of data generated with local communities.

In 2026, the Ebony Project team will work with Taylor Guitars business intelligence unit and Cameroonian and American students to develop a publicly facing Tableau dashboard that shares a broader range of information about the project. The team will need to work through data collection, analysis, quality control, and transfer to the Tableau database, and will need to address privacy and sovereignty issues with field-level data. We will integrate new metrics that convey the overall project impact. We hope the resulting database will increase understanding of and confidence in the Ebony Project’s achievements by the broader public.

### **Managing natural variations in seed production**

Ebony Project research has confirmed significant natural annual variation in fruit and seed production—good production years alternate with bad production years in a predominantly biennial pattern. Over the past decade, we have mitigated this by increasing seed collection effort in low production years, like 2025. This year was especially challenging because the six new villages required seeds but

#### **Beyond Ebony**



*Expanding the threatened tropical hardwood species planted by project communities*

With the support of Fondation Franklinia, the Ebony Project has grown 2,120 Mukulungu saplings (*Austranella congolensis*), listed as “Endangered” under the IUCN Red List, and 490 Moabi saplings (*Baillonella toxisperma*), which is

didn't have experience finding fruiting ebony trees in the area, and because staff movement was curtailed for much of the month of October during the Cameroonian presidential election and peak ebony fruit season. We mitigated this low availability by promoting seed exchanges between communities that were lucky to find sizeable batches. As a result, we might see somewhat lower ebony tree planting in 2027, when the saplings from 2025's seeds will be transplanted.

## **Towards a Long-Term Funding Strategy**

The Ebony Project is at a pivotal moment. While we are increasingly seeing achievements well beyond what we originally envisioned, it's unrealistic to rely on Bob Taylor, co-founder of Taylor Guitars, for financial support forever. He has provided between \$250,000 to \$350,000 annually since the project's inception.

Thanks to the Global Environmental Facility, and the ongoing support from Fondation Franklinia, we have provisional funding that will support some participating communities through at least the end of GEF8 in 2033. However, we anticipate that eventually Bob Taylor's contributions will end, possibly necessitating a reduction in scale. To prepare for this, the Ebony Project is proactively seeking additional funding to offset Bob Taylor's annual contribution. With additional new financial inflows, the Ebony Project could continue or even significantly expand our efforts throughout Cameroon and potentially into neighboring countries.