

THE SAVANNA CODE

Wisdom from the African Wild for Women Leading
on a Warming Planet

Pam Yako

SAMPLE CHAPTER

Chapter 1: I Belong Here

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Chapter 1

I Belong Here

"The African woman working in the wild does not wait to be told she belongs. She stands in the dust, the storm, and the sun, knowing this land has always recognised her strength, her wisdom, and her right to lead."
(Pam Yako)

Your lived experience is your first leadership credential. This chapter explores how to dismantle imposter syndrome in male-dominated spaces, trust your lived experience, and strengthen your confidence through practical tools, reflection, and affirmations designed for the realities of conservation, tourism, and climate leadership.

Opening Scene: The Moment Before You Speak

You're in a room. Or perhaps it is a dusty tent in the field, a Zoom gallery of serious faces, or a community meeting beneath a baobab tree. Someone has just asked a question, and you know the answer, not just the textbook answer, but the informed, lived answer. It is the answer that accounts for the ranger who has not slept, the tourism operator who is bleeding cash, and the village woman watching her well dry up.

Yet somehow, you feel ill-equipped.

Before you open your mouth, a familiar whisper begins to stir: Who am I to speak? They have titles. They have decades of experience. They

have researched, published, and authored books in this field. They have people who nod when they speak.

This chapter is about retiring that whisper. It invites you to trust your inner wisdom, honour your lived experience, and bring both forward when the moment calls for your voice. No one has the perfect time to begin. There is only now.

The Myth of the Perfect Leader

Most leadership books hand you a playbook: be decisive, stoic, endlessly energetic, and preferably not emotional. More often than not, the image of the ideal leader has historically been male.

That silhouette does not fit most women, and it especially does not fit women working at the complex intersection of conservation, tourism, and climate, where every decision carries both a human face and an ecological consequence.

The perfect leader might exist in a textbook somewhere, but predictability rarely exists in your reality.

You know that an elephant can charge a field vehicle without warning. You have witnessed floods reshape ecosystems and push vulnerable species closer to extinction. You have seen a pandemic bring tourism to a standstill, close facilities, and threaten livelihoods overnight.

Your world demands adaptability rather than perfection.

You belong here not despite your complexity, but because of it. The fact that you have had to fight for a seat at the table, defend your expertise, or prove that you are serious enough about science while still caring deeply about people is not a weakness. It is a leadership asset and your first leadership credential.

So go ahead and find excellence amid the imperfection. Trust your instincts, trust your ability to adapt, and trust the wisdom you have earned through experience.

The question, of course, is why this remains so difficult.

Your blood pressure is rising, your palms are sweating, and the whisper about not making a fool of yourself has become louder. What began as uncertainty now feels like a reprimand that only you can hear. You are convinced that everyone can see how overwhelmed you feel.

They probably cannot.

But the feeling is real.

And before we can learn how to respond to that feeling, we first need to understand where it comes from.

Understanding Imposter Syndrome

Let us be precise.

Imposter syndrome is not a personal failing. It is a predictable response to environments that were never designed with you in mind.

When you are the only woman in the room, the youngest at the table, the local professional among international experts, or the one without a PhD in a room full of them, it is not unusual to question whether you belong. Feeling like a fraud in those moments is not irrational. It is a natural response to standing at the edge of systems that have historically excluded voices like yours.

Look at it another way.

The very fact that you notice the dynamics in the room may be evidence of your awareness rather than your inadequacy. You are paying attention. You see what others miss. You notice the unspoken assumptions, the power dynamics, the gaps, and the perspectives that have not yet been considered.

But staying trapped in self-doubt is costly.

Women working in conservation, tourism, and climate leadership already carry a significant mental load. We navigate complex relationships, anticipate resistance, manage competing expectations, and often over prepare to avoid being labelled emotional, difficult, or unprofessional. Imposter syndrome adds yet another layer of weight to an already demanding role.

Here is the reframe.

Imposter syndrome may simply be your mind's attempt to keep you safe in a system that never promised you safety. You do not need to eliminate it. You do not need to wait for it to disappear before you act.

You need to recognise it, understand it, and learn to dance with it.

Then you need to lead anyway.

And before you tell me that you are not ready, let us take a closer look at the credentials you already possess.

FROM THE FIELD

Competence Made Belonging Visible

Dr Nkabeng Mzileni

During a buffalo tuberculosis testing operation, Dr Nkabeng Mzileni found herself in an all-woman technical leadership team. The work was demanding, and the responsibility was real. In that moment, belonging was no longer something to request from the room. It was visible in competence, preparation and the team's ability to do the work.

Her experience does not suggest that bias disappears when women perform well. It offers a more grounded source of confidence: evidence. When doubt rises, return to the moments in which your knowledge, judgement and action already carried responsibility.

Source: interview research summary prepared from Pam Yako's recorded interview.

Tool 1: The Credentials You Already Have

Before we talk about confidence, let us talk about evidence.

Many women spend years waiting for external validation before recognising their own expertise. They assume their credentials live in certificates, qualifications, job titles, or professional recognition. While those things have value, they are not the only forms of expertise.

Some of your most valuable leadership lessons were learnt in moments that no classroom could have replicated.

Take out a notebook and write down the following:

A time when you accurately read a situation despite having incomplete information.

A moment when you successfully held two competing truths at the same time, for example, protecting a forest while recognising a community's need for livelihoods.

An instance when you kept showing up and contributing after being dismissed, labelled, overlooked, or underestimated.

As you write, pay attention to what these experiences reveal about your judgement, resilience, adaptability, and leadership.

These are not secondary credentials.

They are real credentials.

You will return to them throughout this journey.

Tool 2: The 10 Second Field Test

When imposter syndrome shows up, it often demands immediate attention. The challenge is that self-doubt feels true in the moment, even when it is not.

This simple field test is designed to interrupt that pattern and help you return to evidence rather than fear.

The next time the whisper appears, pause and ask yourself:

Does anyone in this room have more direct experience of this specific issue than I do?

Would a man with my experience, qualifications, and track record hesitate to contribute in this moment?

What is the worst, realistic outcome if I speak?

Answer honestly.

You may discover that the risk is smaller than you imagined and that your perspective is more valuable than you realised.

Then speak.

Not because you are fearless.

Because you are prepared.

Believing in Yourself Is a Practice, not a Feeling

Many of us wait to believe in ourselves until we feel confident. That is rarely how confidence works.

Confidence often comes from action; it is not a prerequisite for action. We gain experience by stepping into the arena, not by standing on the sidelines waiting to feel ready. A runner becomes a runner by putting one foot in front of the other. Leadership is no different.

This brings us to an important principle of The Savanna Code.

Roots grow in the dark long before the first shoot breaks through the soil and reaches for the sun. In much the same way, belief in yourself will often emerge before there is visible evidence to support it. That is not foolishness. It is faith, and it is intentional.

In conservation, tourism, and climate work, meaningful results often take years to materialise. You cannot wait for the trophy, the promotion, the funding approval, or the signed agreement before deciding that you are worthy. You must cultivate belief in yourself the same way you would tend a seedling, patiently, consistently, and often without applause.

Belief is not a feeling that arrives one day and stays forever.

It is a practice.

And like any practice, it grows stronger through repetition.

Tool 3: Daily Belief Ritual (90 Seconds)

Belief is not something you wait for. It is something you practise.

Most of us assume confidence arrives first and action follows. More often, the opposite is true. We act, we learn, we grow, and confidence gradually catches up.

This simple daily ritual is designed to strengthen your belief in yourself, day by day.

Every morning, before checking your email, scrolling through the news, or responding to someone else's priorities:

Stand up. Literally change your posture.

Say aloud: "I have everything I need for what today requires." Not forever. Not for every challenge that may come. Just for today.

Name one past success that came from your unique perspective, judgement, or lived experience rather than from a manual, qualification, or title.

Repeat this practice for 21 days.

You are teaching your mind to look for evidence of capability rather than evidence of inadequacy. Over time, that small shift can become a powerful antidote to self-doubt.

Tool 4: Affirmations for the Field (Not Fluffy, Fierce)

Many affirmations fail because they ignore reality.

They ask people to pretend that obstacles do not exist, that systems are fair, or that confidence appears on demand. Women working in conservation, tourism, and climate know better.

You navigate real constraints: limited funding, burnout, systemic sexism, performance anxiety, competing priorities, and the loneliness that often comes with being the first, the only, or the youngest in the room.

These affirmations are not designed to help you escape reality.

They are designed to help you stand firmly within it.

Repeat them before entering difficult rooms, after being interrupted, following a setback, or whenever you catch yourself shrinking to make others comfortable.

I belong here because I possess the gift of seeing what others miss.

My care is not a vulnerability. It is intelligence about people, systems, and consequences.

I do not need to be the loudest voice in the room to make a meaningful contribution.

Every leader I admire started before they felt ready.

No one can give me permission to take up space. I already have it.

Choose the affirmation that speaks most strongly to your current season and carry it with you throughout the day.

Sister, Stop

Sister, stop waiting for an invitation.

The conservation, tourism, and climate sectors are filled with well-meaning people, but even well-meaning people can create barriers without realising it. Some will overlook you. Some will underestimate you. Some will assume that leadership belongs more naturally to them than it does to you.

And some will never hand you the microphone because, consciously or unconsciously, they believe they deserve it more.

Do not wait.

Walk towards it.

Claim your place in the conversation.

Claim your place at the table.

Claim your place in the field.

This chapter is your permission slip.

Tuck it into your pocket and carry it with you.

Then go.

Continue the practice in The Savanna Code Companion: Chapter 1. The Companion Exercise develops the reflection into a fuller written or shared practice.