Conservation News

Conservation Leadership Programme celebrates 40th anniversary

This year, the Conservation Leadership Programme (CLP) celebrates 40 years of equipping early-career conservationists with essential leadership skills, support and resources needed to conserve biodiversity and promote sustainable development locally, while contributing globally. Over the last 4 decades, the CLP partnership of Fauna & Flora, BirdLife International and the Wildlife Conservation Society has supported c. 4,400 early-career conservationists leading 955 projects in 109 countries around the world, all focused on protecting globally threatened biodiversity through locally-led endeavours.

The flagship annual small-grants scheme, the CLP Team Awards, has supported 746 teams of emerging leaders working to address priority conservation issues in low- and middle-income biodiverse countries, through project funding, specialized training and continuous mentorship. Many of these projects have been instrumental in rescuing species from the brink of extinction. For example, several globally threatened species, including the grey-breasted parakeet *Pyrrhura griseipectus*, Fiji ground frog *Cornufer vitianus* and the greater adjutant stork *Leptoptilos dubius*, have been recategorized to a lower threat status on the IUCN Red List as a result of CLP-supported conservation efforts, and 75 new protected areas and 130 NGOs have been established through CLP support. Through targeted research and outreach, CLP projects have uncovered vital new information to guide conservation efforts—including the discovery or rediscovery of 130 species—and rallied local communities, and even whole societies, to preserve biodiversity.

The Programme has provided hundreds of early-career leaders with professional development opportunities. For example, the CLP Career Placements scheme (formerly referred to as internships) has placed 164 emerging conservationists (CLP mentees) in regional offices of CLP partner organizations, where they have contributed to ongoing projects and gained on-the-ground work experience. Subsequently, most mentees have secured permanent positions within their host organizations and led successful conservation careers. The CLP Alumni Grants scheme has awarded 487 grants totalling USD 546,446 to CLP alumni, enabling them to attend international conferences and training courses. The Programme has also overseen c. 70 international and regional training courses, which has equipped hundreds of early-career leaders with essential skills in topics not usually covered in formal education, such as Project Planning & Fundraising, Conservation Leadership, Communications, Behaviour Change, and Writing for Conservation (co-organized with the *Oryx* editorial team).

Over 40 years, CLP has played a key role in the career progression of thousands of conservationists. A 5-year survey of 700 CLP alumni revealed that 98% of respondents considered CLP support as important for their subsequent career, and 91% reported they were still working in conservation 10 years after receiving their first CLP award. By giving these early-career conservation leaders the full suite of support, they have mobilized actions, shaped policies and fostered sustainable development, and many CLP alumni are now world-renowned for their ground-breaking accomplishments.

To view a full list of the projects supported by CLP since it was established, visit conservationleadershipprogramme.org/our-projects.

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The Whitley Awards 2025

On 30 April, the Whitley Fund for Nature announced the six conservation leaders receiving the Whitley Awards 2025. The Whitley Awards ceremony—the flagship event of the UK-based charity—was held at the Royal Geographical Society and was also broadcast online.

The awards are worth GBP 50,000 each in project funding over 1 year. The 2025 Whitley Award Winners are Yara Barros, Brazil (Big cat coexistence: Conserving jaguars in Iguaçu National Park); Reshu Bashyal, Nepal (Healing Forests: Safeguarding medicinal plants in Nepal); Andrés Link, Colombia (Canopy corridors: Reconnecting brown spider monkeys in Colombia); Rahayu Oktaviani, Indonesia (Calling for community: Saving the song of the Javan gibbon); Nurzhafarina Othman, Malaysia (Connecting landscapes for Bornean elephants in Sabah); and Federico Pablo Kacoliris, Argentina (The Guardians of Somuncurá Plateau's Biodiversity).

In addition, a Whitley Award alumnus is chosen to receive the Whitley Gold Award in recognition of their outstanding contribution to conservation. Worth GBP 100,000, this top prize was presented to 2018 Whitley Award winner Olivier Nsengimana and his team at the Rwanda Wildlife Conservation Association. They have led work to rebuild the grey crowned crane population and protect its wetland habitat in Rwanda. This award will support Olivier and his team to expand their community-led efforts and secure protection for this iconic species across East Africa. In just 1 decade, the Association has

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halted illegal trade of this species in Rwanda and has returned every captive bird to the wild. They have overseen growth in the grey crowned crane population from an estimated 300 in the wild in 2015 to 1,293 in 2025. Habitat loss is now the key threat to the species, mainly a result of agricultural encroachment. The Association's expansion will be modelled on Rwanda's successful protection of mountain gorillas via transboundary cooperation, and aims to create a political framework for wetland conservation in Tanzania and Uganda. With the Whitley Gold Award, Olivier's team will also boost training for the 75 community rangers at Rugezi Marsh (home to one quarter of Rwanda's population of grey crowned cranes), increase awareness to promote the wise use of wetlands, and bolster training for community conservation champions safeguarding the crane populations. This will provide climate resilience for communities in Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania.

The Whitley Fund for Nature was established to accelerate the work of grassroots conservationists and has funded more than 220 conservationists in Latin America, Africa, Europe and Asia since it was founded by Edward Whitley OBE over 30 years ago. It has awarded over GBP 24 million in conservation grants. By including local people as stakeholders in protecting ecosystems, today's conservationists are helping the most vulnerable people tackle climate change, land grabs, food insecurity and water scarcity.

Whitley Fund for Nature has a long-term commitment to conservation leaders. Winners can apply for Continuation Funding grants worth up to GBP 100,000 over 2 years to scale up their work or respond to new threats. Winners also gain lifelong membership to the global alumni network, giving them access to like-minded leaders, training opportunities and further support.

For more information on the Whitley Awards or how to apply, visit whitleyaward.org.

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XPRIZE rainforests: providing breakthrough advances for wildlife monitoring

Identifying taxa to species within a reasonable timeframe, especially in the biodiverse tropics, remains difficult. Until recently, species identification relied upon countless hours in the field to record and collect samples, and an even greater amount of time identifying and processing specimens. Importantly, these tasks require the help of taxonomists and other biodiversity experts. Recent technological advances, however, have shifted perspectives on identifying and monitoring wildlife. Environmental DNA enables detection of species presence; artificial intelligence facilitates the processing of vast amounts of image, video and acoustic data, and the identification of taxa with minimum human supervision; and drones have made it possible to access previously inaccessible locations. Nevertheless, there have been few attempts to combine these technologies to record and monitor biological diversity in an automated manner.

The XPRIZE Rainforest Competition was a 5-year competition that started in 2019, initially with 300 teams from over 70 countries, with the aim of advancing measurement and monitoring methods for biodiversity, and thus helping to achieve the goals of the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework by 2030. According to the rules of the competition, the teams needed to remotely sample a 100 ha plot of tropical forest within 24 h, without entering the plot, and deliver a final report within the subsequent 48 h. The Limelight Rainforest team, of which we are part, won the competition on 15 November 2024, identifying c. 250 species.

Limelight Rainforest won the competition with a creative combination of emerging technologies that promises to advance the monitoring of biodiversity. Although the process requires the work of biological experts to build local and regional biodiversity databases, the autonomous nature of these technologies facilitates inventory and biodiversity monitoring by any trained user. Limelight Rainforest recorded organisms within the plot using a combination of approaches: drones collected water, air and surface samples for sequencing environmental DNA; audio recordings of bird and bat vocalizations and images of insects were analysed with machine learning algorithms; red-green-blue camera images of tree crowns were processed with artificial intelligence; and drone-delivered canopy rafts collected insect samples that were sequenced for bar-coding and species identification. We believe that the winning solution is highly scalable, will increase the speed and reduce the costs of monitoring biological diversity, not only in tropical rainforests but in other habitats. This, in turn, will augment our understanding of the patterns and causes of global biodiversity loss, empowering policy-makers and conservationists to ameliorate this loss at local, regional and global scales.

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