



Press release

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Vulture biologist works to counter poisoning of endangered scavengers and tackle human-wildlife conflict

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A raptor biologist devoted to conserving one of the most threatened groups of birds on the planet was yesterday (Wednesday 25 April) presented with a prestigious Whitley Award by HRH The Princess Royal.

Munir Virani, Vice President at The Peregrine Fund is working to preserve Kenya's endangered vultures in Africa's Serengeti-Mara ecosystem.

Munir swapped a promising cricketing career for a lifetime commitment to conservation. He first began his project in 2003 following the Asian Vulture Crisis which saw 40 million vultures poisoned across South Asia, as a result of a now banned painkiller and anti-inflammatory drug used in cattle.

The Masai Mara is home to abundant wildlife, with vast grassland plains, spanning over 200 sq miles. Each year the Mara welcomes 1.3 million Wildebeest that migrate from the Serengeti and mass together on the banks of the River Mara.

The area is home to various tribal groups and Munir works closely with the Masai people who have tremendous respect for vultures and use their feathers for head gear or arrows.

Referred to locally as "Serengeti soap," these scavengers are vital to the health and hygiene of the plains and swiftly consume rotting carcasses, preventing the spread of disease.

Vultures are collateral damage in the war between livestock herders and predators. In retaliation for the loss of livestock to big cats, farmers resort to poisoning carcasses in the hope of reducing predator numbers. The subsequent incidental killing of vultures is catastrophic, with numbers falling by over 70% in the past 30 years.

Munir's Whitley Award will expand his successful anti-poisoning programme - which saw cases drop in the Masai Mara by nearly 50% in 2016 – to Kenya's Southern Rift Valley. He will work with pastoralists and NGOs to reduce livestock predation using predator deterrents and fortified livestock enclosures. Thirty conservation leaders will be trained to champion the cause in their communities and to respond to incidents, while GPS tagging will monitor vultures and target future conservation interventions.

Edward Whitley, Founder of the Whitley Fund for Nature, said: "Munir truly is a voice for these overlooked scavenger birds. His work with communities will allow vultures to thrive in this dynamic ecosystem and counter human-wildlife conflict. We are especially pleased to be working with Munir during our 25th anniversary year and look forward to following him on his journey."

Munir said: "Vultures are often associated as the 'ugly betty' of the world, yet they are a vital part of our ecosystem and prevent the spread of deadly disease. Supporting the Masai people to become the next generation of conservationists has been especially rewarding. Our project will continue to develop practical solutions on the ground, develop champions and tackle a landscape level threat that is unprecedented for any other species."

An annual event, often referred to as the 'Green Oscars', the 2018 Whitley Awards, are part of Whitley Fund for Nature's 25th Anniversary celebrations.

The winners will each receive £40,000 in funding to support their work to conserve some of the planet's most endangered species and spectacular places.

This year's Whitley Gold Award honours Pablo (Popi) Borboroglu, who is spearheading a campaign to protect endangered penguins across the globe. Pablo has already achieved dramatic conservation success, helping to protect more than 3.1 million hectares of marine and coastal habitats. The Gold Award, worth £60,000, will enable Pablo to justify ocean protection and underpin management for different species of penguins across Argentina, Chile and New Zealand.

The 2018 Whitley Award winners are:

Dominique Bikaba - DRC

Ensuring the survival of DRC's eastern lowland gorillas

Receiving the Whitley Award donated by Arcus Foundation

Kerstin Forsberg – Peru

Majestic giants: safe passage for manta rays in Peru

Receiving the Whitley Award donated by The Corcoran Foundation

Olivier Nsengimana – Rwanda

Conserving Rwanda's emblematic grey crowned crane

Receiving the Whitley Award donated by The Savitri Waney Charitable Trust

Shahriar Caesar Rahman - Bangladesh

Tortoises in trouble: Community conservation of Asia's largest tortoise

Receiving the Whitley Award donated by The William Brake Charitable Trust in memory of William Brake

Munir Virani – Kenya

Game of poisons: a strategy to save Kenya's threatened vultures

Receiving the Whitley Award donated by WWF-UK

Anjali Chandraraj Watson – Sri Lanka

Leopards as a flagship for wildlife corridors

Receiving the Whitley Award donated by Garfield Weston Foundation

Visit www.whitleyaward.org to find out more.

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Press materials available:

- Copyright-cleared photographs of this project are available here: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/OMvWgrjkvEAnuGZn1>
- Video footage of the Awards Ceremony and individual films featuring the award winner narrated by WFN trustee, **Sir David Attenborough** will be available upon arrangement with Liquid: contact Madeline Arnold, t:+44 (0) 121 285 3760, e: madeline@weareliquid.com or Chloe Baker, t:+44 (0) 121 285 3760, e: chloe@weareliquid.com

Notes to Editors:

- The Whitley Fund for Nature (WFN) is a UK registered charity that champions outstanding grassroots leaders in nature conservation across the Global South. This year the charity is marking its 25th anniversary.
- The Whitley Awards are prestigious international prizes presented to individuals in recognition of their achievements in nature conservation. Each Award winner receives a prize worth £40,000 in project funding over one year. The charity's patron, HRH The Princess Royal, presents the Awards annually at a special ceremony in London.
- The Whitley Gold Award is worth £60,000 and recognises an outstanding past recipient of a Whitley Award who has gone on to make a significant contribution to conservation. Joining the Judging Panel to assist in selection, the Gold winner also acts as a mentor to Whitley Award winners receiving their Awards in the same year.
- Since its beginnings 25 years ago, the Whitley Fund for Nature has given nearly £15 million to conservation and recognised more than 190 conservation leaders in over 80 countries.

- WFN operates a rigorous application process involving expert panel representation from international NGOs including WWF-UK, Fauna and Flora International (FFI) and the Zoological Society of London (ZSL). This year, WFN received 136 applications which passed through four stages of assessment, reviewed at every step by expert screeners and panellists who kindly offer their expertise voluntarily.
- The Whitley Awards are open to individuals working on wildlife conservation issues in biodiversity-rich, resource poor countries. Further eligibility criteria are available from Liquid.
- During their trip to London for the Awards week finalists have the opportunity to meet the judges, WFN's trustees including Sir David Attenborough, and patron HRH The Princess Royal. In addition they participate in professional media and speech training, attend networking receptions with leading conservation organisations, meet WFN donors and are interviewed by the media. The associated publicity of winning a Whitley Award puts a spotlight on their important work, boosting profile both in the UK and winner's home countries.
- Whitley Award winners join an international network of Whitley alumni eligible to apply for Continuation Funding grants. These follow-on grants are awarded competitively to winners seeking to scale up their effective conservation results on the ground over multiple years.

WFN is generously supported by: Arcus Foundation; The Balcombe Trust; The William Brake Charitable Trust; The Byford Trust; The Corcoran Foundation; Earlymarket; The G D Charitable Trust; The LJC Fund; Britta & Jeremy Lloyd Family Charitable Trust; Lund Trust, a charitable fund of Peter Baldwin and Lisbet Rausing; The Foundation for the Promotion of Wellbeing; The Rufford Foundation; The Schroder Foundation; Fondation Segré; The Shears Foundation; The Constance Travis Charitable Trust; Savitri Waney Charitable Trust; Garfield Weston Foundation; Whitley Animal Protection Trust; WWF-UK; the Friends and Scottish Friends of Whitley Fund for Nature; all our partners and supporters and those donors who have chosen to give anonymously.