



Press release

**Strict embargo: Not for publication or broadcast until 11:00
GMT on Wednesday 29 April 2020**

Bhutanese conservationist's mission to save Endangered alpine musk deer in trekkers' paradise

A wildlife biologist from Bhutan has won a prestigious Whitley Award for his lifelong work to preserve the rare alpine musk deer.

Phuntsho Thinley works for the Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN), the first and only wildlife conservation organisation in Bhutan. Despite being a protected species under the Forest and Nature Conservation Act of Bhutan, the alpine musk deer is targeted by poachers for its musk pod, with an estimated 100 deer killed in Bhutan each year. Only found in male deer, a musk pod is worth more than gold on the international black market for its perceived pharmaceutical properties.

The Whitley Awards, often referred to as 'Green Oscars', are awarded annually to individuals from the Global South by UK-based conservation charity the Whitley Fund for Nature (WFN) and are each worth £40,000 in project funding. Phuntsho is one of six conservationists to be recognised this year for their achievements in nature conservation.

Situated three days' walk from the capital of Thimphu, Phuntsho's project is located in the vast Lingzhi Park Range - a trekkers' paradise with jaw-dropping scenery, lush forest cover, meadows and diverse fauna and flora. It is the only place in the world where the habitat of the Endangered Royal Bengal Tiger overlaps with that of the enigmatic snow leopard. About 700 people live in the area, mainly subsisting on yak raising and medicinal plant collection. The Alpine musk deer forms an important part of the food chain and its loss would have a catastrophic effect on the area's ecological balance.

With just 16 park staff patrolling a massive 74,500 ha of park, there is an urgent need to scale up efforts and put boots on the ground. The £40,000 Whitley Award will allow Phuntsho and his team to increase anti-poaching patrols and monitoring, with a goal to reduce illegal incidents by 50% by training all park staff, as well as a quarter of residents living in the area.

This approach is coupled with education activities to help local people understand and value the importance of musk deer, engaging them with conservation when their role as conservation partners has previously been underappreciated.

Phuntsho said: "I am extremely humbled to have received this Award. From a young age, I have always felt the need to give back to nature. Bhutan has developed sound environmental policies which are globally acknowledged, and I intend to uphold this unique environmental stewardship and pass it on to future generations."

WFN Founder Edward Whitley said: "Phuntsho is a great example of what we look for in a Whitley Award winner. Engaging people in conservation is central to his approach and his dedication to conservation is evident. We look forward to following him on his journey as he works to prevent local extinction of the alpine musk deer in Western Bhutan."

Phuntsho is among six conservationists to receive 2020 Whitley Awards to support their work to conserve some of the planet's most endangered species and spectacular natural habitats. While normally presented to winners by charity Patron HRH The Princess Royal at an annual Ceremony in London, the 2020 Whitley Awards Ceremony was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst the winners will receive their funding now, they will be invited to attend a ceremony and related events in London later this year to celebrate their achievements, should circumstances allow.

This year's Whitley Gold Award honours Brazilian conservationist Patrícia Medici for her outstanding dedication to protecting South America's largest land mammal, the lowland tapir, using it as a flagship for largescale habitat preservation. Patrícia is a world expert in the science of tapir conservation and has dedicated her life to shedding light on this unusual looking, yet little-known species. Against a backdrop of political and environmental instability in Brazil, her work is more important than ever. The Whitley Gold Award enables the expansion of her work to the embattled Amazon.

Visit www.whitleyaward.org to find out more.

The 2020 Whitley Award winners are:

- **Abdullahi Hussein Ali** – A landscape-level approach to conserve the hirola antelope, Kenya
- **Gabriela Rezende** – Connecting populations of black lion tamarins in the Atlantic Forest, Brazil
- **Jeanne Tarrant** – A country-wide strategy for South African amphibians
- **Phuntsho Thinley** – Stepping up patrols to preserve the endangered alpine musk deer, Bhutan
- **Rachel Ashebofe Ikemeh** – Advancing participatory conservation action for rare chimpanzees, Nigeria
- **YokYok (Yoki) Hadiprakarsa** – Saving the last stronghold of the Helmeted Hornbill, Indonesia

The 2020 Whitley Gold Award winner is:

- **Patrícia Medici** – Tapirs as conservation flagships, Brazil

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Press materials available:

- Copyright-cleared photographs of this project will be available here: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/SAnhkdsGfKF8L4Qx9>
- Tailor-made films featuring the winner narrated by WFN Trustee, Sir David Attenborough, will be released later this year. Contact Chloe Baker e: chloe@weareliquid.com or Becky Jukes e: becky@weareliquid.com for more information.

Notes to Editors:

- The Whitley Fund for Nature (WFN) is a UK registered charity that provides funding, profile and training to grassroots conservation leaders across the Global South.
- 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.
- Whitley Awards are normally presented to winners by charity Patron, HRH The Princess Royal, at an annual Ceremony in London. In 2020, the Ceremony has been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and will be instead held in December, if the situation allows.
- 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 27 years ago, the Whitley Fund for Nature has given £17million to more than 200 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), the Durrell Institute for Conservation and Ecology (DICE) at the University of Kent and the Zoological Society of London (ZSL). This year, WFN received 112 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.
- Whitley Award winners receive professional media and communications training, network 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.
- The 2020 Whitley Awards week events are generously sponsored by Earlymarket LLP, Whitley Awards Partner.
- 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: Anne Reece; Arcus Foundation; The Frank Brake Charitable Trust; The William Brake Charitable Trust; The Badenoch Fund; The Corcoran Foundation; Earlymarket LLP; The Evolution Education Trust; Global Wildlife Conservation; The Britta & Jeremy Lloyd Family Charitable Trust; Lund Trust, a charitable fund of Peter Baldwin and Lisbet Rausing; MAVA Foundation; Charles and Ruth Plowden; The Foundation for the Promotion of Wellbeing; The Rabelais Trust; The Reed Foundation; The Rufford Foundation; The Schroder Foundation; Fondation Segré; The Shears Foundation; The Constance Travis Charitable Trust; The Waterloo Foundation; Matthew and Lucinda Webber; Garfield Weston Foundation; Whitley Animal Protection Trust; the Friends and Scottish Friends of Whitley Fund for Nature; all our partners and supporters and those donors who have chosen to give anonymously.