



Press release

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Nigerian female conservationist earns Whitley Award for protecting newly discovered chimpanzee group

Leading conservationist Rachel Ashegbofe Ikemeh has won a prestigious Whitley Award worth £40,000 for her work with chimpanzees in her home country of Nigeria.

The Director and Founder of the SW/Niger Delta Forest Project, Rachel's research and conservation work addresses the decline of chimpanzees and their habitat. With 80% of forests lost to uncontrolled farming and logging, chimpanzee habitat has been disappearing at an alarming rate. Chimps are also under threat from poachers, hunted for their body parts.

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). Rachel is one of six conservationists to be recognised this year for their achievements in nature conservation.

Rachel fell into the conservation world after accepting an internship at the Nigerian Conservation Foundation, and soon realised she had found her calling. After the Nigerian-Cameroon chimpanzee was declared the most endangered of all chimpanzee groups in 2012, Rachel launched her project in the Idanre Forest cluster and Ise Forest Reserve; refusing to stand by and watch these great apes continue to decline.

Over the past eight years, she and her team have led a genetic study amongst other relevant activities, which in 2018 found that whilst chimpanzee populations in the South West and Niger Delta of Nigeria share ancestry with the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee, they are in fact a distinct group. This exciting discovery reinforced the urgent need to protect this group of chimpanzees, helping Rachel to gain support for her cause.

Rachel's approach combines patrolling, education, research and policy reform to protect this newly discovered primate. With her Whitley Award, Rachel aims to work with government to establish about 40,000 ha of conservation areas, and to advocate for revised laws to protect the area's wildlife. With most wildlife preservation laws in the state created in the 70s, many have become obsolete and are in need of reform.

Rachel's team also works closely with communities in and around forest areas, using public awareness campaigns to educate people about the importance of endangered animals and to discourage poaching.

Working against gender stereotypes as a Nigerian woman, Rachel has amazed many people with her choice of career. Her family feared the work was dangerous but they have since come to admire her strength.

Rachel said: "In a country where women's voices are not being heard and are often discounted, I am determined to make a difference and be an inspiration to others. Having a daughter has been like a driving force for me. There are so many obstacles for women and I want to use my resilience to show her and many young Nigerian women that they can make the sort of impact that is distinguishable, constructive and timeless despite the obstacles we face.

"I am extremely proud to have been recognised by the Whitley Fund for Nature. The funding will help me and my team to conserve chimpanzees and other wildlife in this fast disappearing forest ecosystem."

Edward Whitley, WFN Founder, said: "Rachel's strength of character and determination should be admired. The work of SW/Niger Delta Forest Project has made important gains for chimpanzee research and conservation, and we look forward to watching Rachel's career progress as she scales up her work in the years to come."

Rachel 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/DxwmpgA6svs2RCXP9>
- 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.

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