



## **Press release**

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### **Conservationist honoured for efforts to save world's rarest antelope**

**April 2020**

A Kenyan conservationist has been honoured with a prestigious Whitley Award for his dedication to protecting the Critically Endangered hirola antelope.

Hirola numbers have declined by more than 95% in the last four decades. With fewer than 500 individuals remaining, the antelope is currently among the top 10 focal species at risk of imminent extinction. Abdullahi Hussein Ali (Ali), who founded the Hirola Conservation Programme, is fighting to prevent the species from becoming the first extinct mammal since the Tasmanian tiger was wiped out in 1936.

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

The project is based near the Kenya-Somalia border; an extremely remote and volatile region. While previous conservation attempts by foreigners in this challenging place have been largely unsuccessful, Ali's local understanding of the area he grew up in, conservation knowledge and passion for the work made him a prime candidate to lead the country's hirola conservation effort, and was identified for the role by the Kenya Wildlife Service.

Ali and his team have carried out vital research to understand the continuous decline of the species – which has sunglasses-like markings on its face - pinpointing habitat degradation as a key threat. Worsening droughts and livestock overgrazing has resulted in grasslands becoming overgrown by trees. While these wooded areas are good for some wildlife, they are strictly avoided by the hirola who need the safety of open land.

Their research also revealed that the population decline of elephants in the area was exacerbating the situation. Elephants historically maintained the grasslands by herds moving through the area, preventing too many trees from growing. These "Mega herbivores" were poached for their ivory in the early 1980's but recolonised the area

in 2011. Ali and his team now run an anti-poaching programme to help protect them so they in turn can protect the habitat – allowing the hirola to thrive.

Ali said: “I think of the hirola antelope as a relative. We have shared a home our whole lives and I have a strong obligation to get them back into Noah’s Ark. As the story goes, a combination of all species is needed to retain the careful balance of the ecosystem. Our aim is to provide locals with the knowledge and skills to restore the grasslands and save this species whilst building a sustainable future for the community.”

Garissa County is considered to be one of the most disadvantaged in Kenya, with poverty rates estimated to be over 80%. With support from his Whitley Award, Ali will work with communities to restore grasslands for the benefit of the hirola and at the same time teach herders to use the land more sustainably to prevent overgrazing and support their livelihoods. In addition, Ali and his team will provide training to a network of Somali pastoralists to track sightings of hirola, and work with schools teaching young students the importance of wildlife. The £40,000 funding from WFN will also allow Ali to strengthen institutional frameworks needed to better govern protected areas.

Edward Whitley, Founder of WFN, said: “Ali’s commitment to his country and its wildlife has provided a powerful formula to deliver lasting change. He shows us a wonderful example of the benefits of a grassroots approach in conservation, and we are thrilled to highlight his achievements and support the scale up of the Hirola Conservation Programme.”

Ali 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](http://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

**ENDS**

**Press materials available:**

- Copyright-cleared photographs of this project will be available here: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/gXjfD6AYNinwNfVR7>
- 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](mailto:chloe@weareliquid.com) or Becky Jukes e: [becky@weareliquid.com](mailto: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.