



Press release

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Conservation leader from Venezuela wins 2017 Whitley Award

Prize awarded for conserving Venezuela's magnificent harpy eagles as a rainforest flagship

London, UK: 17 May 2017 – HRH The Princess Royal will tomorrow present a Whitley Award, a prestigious international nature conservation prize worth £35,000 in project funding, to Alexander Blanco at a ceremony at the Royal Geographical Society, London, in honour of his work to conserve the Venezuelan harpy eagle.

Wildlife scientist and veterinarian Alexander Blanco has been working with harpy eagles since 1996. Some may remember him from the BBC wildlife documentary "The Hunt" where he was filmed climbing 40 metre high trees to tag eagle chicks - a hazardous occupation as the episode highlights when Alexander's equipment fails and he falls from a great height. Alexander has helped to conserve these iconic birds in Brazil and Ecuador as well as in his native Venezuela, where he is President of the Esfera Foundation and leads a national programme to protect these raptors.

Harpy eagles have become rare in many parts of their range where poverty, hunting, the country's political instability and a resulting lack of law enforcement have led to a sharp increase in illegal deforestation. In Venezuela, an area of forest bigger than central London is lost every week. Alexander's long term vision is to develop protection strategies delivered by local people so that conservation is more resilient to economic and political turbulence. His Whitley Award will cement the harpy eagle as a flagship species. In doing so, Alexander hopes to protect a greater number of nesting sites, recruiting local people as nest guardians and limit deforestation by supporting livelihoods in shade-coffee and through forest restoration.

Edward Whitley, Founder of the Whitley Fund for Nature, said: “WFN focus on conservation success stories which give us a reason for optimism. The Awards Ceremony is about recognising progress – winning those small battles which cumulatively equate to change at the national level. In addition to the financial benefit of winning an Award, winners receive professional communications training to turn scientists into ambassadors, so they are able to communicate effectively with the public and inform change at the political level.”

Alexander is one of six individuals to have been awarded a share of the prize money worth £210,000, winning the Whitley Award donated by the William Brake Charitable Trust in memory of William Brake. Other winners in the 2017 Whitley Awards are:

Sanjay Gubbi – India

Reducing deforestation in Karnataka's tiger corridors, India

The Whitley Award donated by WWF-UK

Indira Lacerna-Widmann – Philippines

Partnering with prisoners to safeguard the Critically Endangered Philippine cockatoo

The Whitley Award donated by Notting Hill Preparatory School

Ian Little – South Africa

Custodians of South Africa's threatened grassland biodiversity

The Whitley Award donated by the Garfield Weston Foundation

Purnima Barman – India

Inspiring women to protect Assam's greater adjutant and its wetland habitat, India

The Whitley Award donated by The Shears Foundation in memory of Trevor Shears

Ximena Velez-Liendo – Bolivia

An uphill climb: enabling coexistence of Andean bears and farmers in the Bolivian mountains

The Whitley Award donated by the Savitri Waney Charitable Trust

Sir David Attenborough, a Trustee of the Whitley Fund for Nature, added:

“It is now more important than ever to invest in those working to protect our planet. The Whitley Fund for Nature is at the forefront of supporting these heroic individuals”

HRH The Princess Royal will also present the **2017 Whitley Gold Award** - a prestigious profile and funding prize awarded to a previous Whitley Award winner in recognition of their outstanding contribution to conservation. The Whitley Gold Award is donated by The Friends and Scottish Friends of the Whitley Fund for Nature and is worth £50,000.

This year's recipient is 2013 Whitley Award winner, **Zafer Kizilkaya** for his project – 'Guardians of the sea: securing and expanding marine reserves along the Turkish coastline'. Zafer is President of the Mediterranean Conservation Society, an NGO which aims to conserve Turkey's marine and coastal ecosystems.

He leads a series of projects in the area working with local fishing communities, coastguards and government to promote ocean conservation and sustainable fishing practices that benefit wildlife such as monk seals, sand bar sharks and loggerhead turtles, and boost fisher income. With his Whitley Gold Award Zafer will consolidate his efforts in Gökova Bay and scale up his successful approach in nearby Fethiye Bay. His long term vision is to replicate his work throughout the Mediterranean.

Visit www.whitleyaward.org to find out more.

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Press materials available:

- Video footage of the Awards Ceremony, individual films featuring the award winner and copyright-cleared photographs will be available upon arrangement with Firebird PR: contact Jane Bevan or Jana Fickerova at Firebird PR on +00 44 01235 835297 or via email to jb@firebirdpr.co.uk

Notes to Editors:

- Contact Firebird PR for further information: Jane Bevan or Jana Fickerova at Firebird PR on +00 44 01235 835297 or via email to jb@firebirdpr.co.uk
- The Whitley Fund for Nature (WFN) is a UK registered charity that champions outstanding grassroots leaders in nature conservation across the developing world.
- 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 £35,000 in project funding over one year. The charity's patron, HRH The Princess Royal, presents the Awards each year at a special ceremony in London.
- The Whitley Awards have been presented annually since 1994. Since then, the Whitley Fund for Nature has given over £13.5 million to conservation and recognised more than 185 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 and the World Land Trust. This year, WFN received 166 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 developing countries. Further eligibility criteria are available from Firebird PR.

- During their trip to London for the Awards week finalists have the opportunity to meet the judges, WFN trustees, including Sir David Attenborough and WFN's patron HRH The Princess Royal. In addition they are able to network with the other finalists, attend receptions with leading conservation organisations and academics, meet Whitley Fund for Nature donors and participate in professional media and speech training. Meeting the media is also a significant event since publicity both in the UK and their home countries helps raise the profile of their work.
- Whitley Award winners join an international network of Whitley Award 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 1-2 years.
- The Whitley Gold Award 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 mentor to Whitley Award winners receiving their Awards in the same year.
- WFN is generously supported by: The Arcus Foundation; The William Brake Charitable Trust; The Byford Trust; Sarah Chenevix-Trench; The Constance Travis Charitable Trust; Notting Hill Preparatory School; The G D Charitable Trust; HSBC Holdings Plc; Icon Films; Interconnect IT; Jeremy & Britta Lloyd; Lund Trust: a charitable fund of Peter Baldwin and Lisbet Rausing; The Thomson Reuters Foundation; The Rufford Foundation; The Savitri Waney Charitable Trust; The Schroder Foundation; Fondation Segré; The Shears Foundation; The Garfield Weston Foundation; HDH Wills 1965 Charitable Trust; The Whitley Animal Protection Trust; WWF-UK; The Friends and Scottish Friends of the Whitley Fund for Nature; and many individual and anonymous donors to whom we are grateful.