

**Press release**

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**Turkish marine researcher and conservationist wins the 2017  
Whitley Gold Award for his innovative work to protect Turkey's  
coastline**

**London, UK: 17 May 2017** – HRH The Princess Royal will tomorrow present the prestigious Whitley Gold Award worth £50,000, to Zafer Kizilkaya; a 2013 Whitley Award winner, engineer, underwater photographer and marine conservationist from Turkey. The Gold Award is donated by The Friends and Scottish Friends of the Whitley Fund for Nature, and given in recognition of Zafer's outstanding work to protect Turkey's marine environment. This work is taking place against the backdrop of mass immigration of over four million refugees from Syria and Iraq and under challenging political and economic circumstances.

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 working with local fishing communities, coastguards and government to promote conservation and sustainable fishing practices. Gökova Bay is one of the most spectacular marine-scapes in the Aegean Sea. Over 200 small scale fishermen depend on the Bay for their livelihood, but the depletion of fish stocks had imposed a serious impact on the local economy. In 2010, following a successful community conservation project led by Zafer and his team, the Turkish government declared six No Fishing Zones (NFZs) to protect fish breeding and nursery grounds. These no-take zones represented the country's first network of community-managed marine reserves; however, due to the size of the area proper enforcement by the coastguard was difficult and illegal activities commonplace.

Since Zafer won a Whitley Award in 2013, the project has had a profound effect on biodiversity and the local people in the Bay. The coastguard and the Ministry are now actively cooperating and effectively patrolling the reserves. New technology is at the heart of Gökova's transformation. Zafer and his team have employed a new monitoring system – the first of its kind used in the marine environment. Patrol boats are equipped with specialist police cameras and GPS, allowing illegal activity to be live streamed to the coastguard so they can respond immediately. The community now keep detailed reports on numbers and species of fish caught – the only Bay to do so in Turkey. They even have a mobile app for recording data!

Zafer has partnered with fishermen to implement more sustainable fishing practices and trawling has been banned in sensitive sites. As a result, fish stocks have

recovered and biomass has risen by 800%. Following a campaign promoting the consumption of invasive species, demand and subsequent fisher income has risen by 400%! Critically Endangered monk seals have recently returned the Bay and sandbar sharks and loggerhead turtles are being regularly sighted – a sign that this once damaged ecosystem is on the road to recovery. With his Whitley Gold Award Zafer will consolidate efforts in Gökova Bay and scale up his successful approach in nearby Fethiye Bay with his project 'Guardians of the sea: securing and expanding marine reserves along the Turkish coastline'. Zafer's long term vision is to replicate his work throughout the Mediterranean.

Edward Whitley, Founder of the Whitley Fund for Nature, said: "Zafer is spearheading novel approaches to marine conservation in Turkey that if brought to scale could deliver benefits across the Mediterranean. It is this vision, Zafer's application of the best available science, and implementation of practical conservation methods rooted in community and political engagement that make him deserving of the Gold Award."

Zafer joins an elite group of conservationists that have won the coveted Whitley Gold Award for grassroots conservationists working against tremendous odds in developing countries. After winning a Whitley Award in 2013, Zafer went on to receive additional WFN funding in 2015. The Gold Award celebrates outstanding people achieving significant conservation impact and recognises them with WFN's top profile and PR prize. Zafer will join the Whitley Award Judging Panel to assist in winner selection and act as mentor to the new Whitley Award winners.

The 2017 Whitley Award winners will be announced at the Ceremony and each receive £35,000 in project funding. The six finalists are:

- **Sanjay Gubbi** – Reducing deforestation in Karnataka's tiger corridors, India
- **Indira Lacerna-Widmann** - Partnering with prisoners to safeguard the Critically Endangered Philippine cockatoo
- **Ian Little** - Custodians of South Africa's threatened grassland biodiversity
- **Purnima Barman** – Inspiring women to protect Assam's greater adjutant and its wetland habitat, India
- **Alexander Blanco** – Nest protectors: conserving Venezuela's magnificent harpy eagles as a rainforest flagship
- **Ximena Velez-Liendo** - An uphill climb: enabling coexistence Andean bears and farmers in the Bolivian mountains

Visit [www.whitleyaward.org](http://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](mailto:jb@firebirdpr.co.uk)

## Notes to Editors:

- Contact Firebird PR for further information: Jane Bevan or Jan Fickerova at Firebird PR on +00 44 01235 835297 or via email to [jb@firebirdpr.co.uk](mailto: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.