

NEWS from the WHITLEY FUND FOR NATURE

Thai NGO leader wins top conservation award

LONDON, UK: Jittin Ritthirat from Thailand has won one of the world's top prizes for grassroots nature conservation – a Whitley Award – for her work to reduce conflict between farmers and wild elephants, and for her efforts to encourage local communities to help to restore Salakpra, Thailand's oldest wildlife sanctuary.

Ms Jittin, development scientist and manager of the Elephant Conservation Network (ECN), based in Kanchanaburi, west Thailand, received her prize from HRH The Princess Royal (Princess Anne) on May 13 during a ceremony held at the Royal Geographical Society, London, by The Whitley Fund for Nature (WFN) – the UK-based charity which administers the international awards programme. The ceremony at which Jittin Ritthirat received her accolade was co-hosted by BBC wildlife presenter Kate Humble and held in front of a 800-strong audience that included embassy representatives, donors and leading environmentalists.

After winning this prestigious award, Jittin said “I never thought other people would think of our work as special, but this award is really encouraging and makes me realise the true value of what we are doing. It's also a great opportunity for networking, better than I had imagined.”

This Whitley Award includes a project grant of £30,000 - donated by The Friends of The WFN – as well as an engraved trophy, membership of an influential network of Whitley Award winners and international profile-raising opportunities.

The award to Ms Ritthirat recognises her efforts to ease the competition between wild elephants, farming families and cattle, including competition for water and grazing. It also recognizes her efforts to involve local people in restoring Thailand's oldest wildlife sanctuary as a national treasure, and as an example of collaborative conservation.

ECN's long-term aim is to secure the well-being of Salakpra's elephants and their ecosystem for the benefit of wildlife and local people. Its current projects include monitoring crop raiding by wild elephants, a community-based forest restoration research project, and developing alternative livelihoods for forest users. It is also developing an educational outreach project that will help raise public awareness of the sanctuary's importance to local communities in Kanchanaburi.

“But we must also study Salakpra’s elephants so we can understand their habits and needs and be able to tackle human-elephant conflict issues scientifically and sustainably. I hope this Whitley Award will help local government and the private sector appreciate the importance of our work. Their support will enable us to implement plans to improve the situation in and around Salakpra “, said Jittin.

The competition’s top prize - the £60,000 Whitley Gold Award – went to Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka, of Uganda, for a health and conservation programme in the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, which is helping local villagers and their wildlife neighbours - endangered mountain gorillas - by reducing the cross-infection risks that result from people/ape contact and their DNA similarities. Her Royal Highness also presented four other £30,000 Whitley Awards to conservation leaders from Bulgaria, India, Kenya and Sri Lanka.

Commenting on Ms Jittin’s success, Edward Whitley, who founded the fund and chaired the judging panel, said: “The aim of the Whitley Awards is to find and support conservation scientists whose vision, passion, determination and qualities of leadership mean they are achieving inspirational results in conservation. They are helping to build a future where nature and people co-exist in a way that benefits both.”

He added: “In Jittin’s case, we were especially impressed by the way this project is using understanding, education and practical action to replace long-standing local hostility towards elephants with a willingness to help solve resource challenges that are shared by people and wildlife.”

The Whitley Awards scheme is an annual competition, now in its 16th year. It exists to identify, fund and encourage inspirational conservation leaders and their teams working in developing countries. This year, almost 100 applicants competed for a place on the shortlist to win a Whitley Award.

Jittin’s colleague, Ms Belinda Stewart-Cox, director and co-founder of the Elephant Conservation Network, was a Whitley Award winner fifteen years ago. “It was thrilling to watch Jittin get her award at the Royal Geographical Society – and so gratifying to think of the progress we’ve made. I hope another Thai colleague can get one within the next five or ten years!”

This year’s Whitley Award donors include HSBC Private Bank (UK) and WWF-UK, as well as a number of family foundations. To find out more about the charity and its work please see: www.whitleyaward.org

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Awards Ceremony Photographs

Copyright-cleared photographs of HRH The Princess Royal presenting each award will be available from <http://picasaweb.google.com/irving818> from Thursday 14 May or can be emailed direct on request (see contact details above). Project images are available to download already from: http://www.whitley-award.org/press_releases.php

Other 2009 winners

The following people also won Whitley Awards and £30,000 project grants:

1. Prithviraj 'Pruthu' Fernando (Sri Lanka), head of the Centre for Conservation and Research, Colombo, who is working to safeguard wild Asian elephants by balancing their need to range outside of 'protected zones' with the needs of paddy farmers whose lives can be devastated by a single crop raid. **Whitley Award donated by The Shears Foundation.**

2. M. D. 'Madhu' Madhusudan (India), Director of the Nature Conservation Foundation, who is working to reduce conflict between people and wildlife, including tigers, in the Western Ghats, the world's most densely populated biodiversity hotspot, by showing farmers how to reduce crop raids, improve their incomes and avoid park encroachment. **Whitley Award donated by HSBC Private Bank**

3. Dino Martins (Kenya) who is working in and around the Great Rift Valley and Taita Hills to improve local understanding and awareness of the vital role insects play in crop pollination and encourage more sustainable methods of agriculture. **Whitley Award donated by The William Brake Charitable Trust International Awards for Outstanding Leaders in Conservation**

4. Emil Todorov (Bulgaria) who is leading a Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds initiative to offer greater protection to the many thousands of wild migratory and breeding birds that depend on the lower reaches of the river Danube. **Whitley Award donated by Paula and Mario Frering.**

Notes to Editors

The Whitley Awards are the flagship grants of the [Whitley Fund for Nature](#), (WFN) a UK-based registered charity. WFN's aim is to identify the world's most dynamic conservation leaders and support them in practical work that benefits both wildlife and local communities. The first Whitley Award was given in 1994 when a single winner received £15,000. Since then, the number and value of the prizes has grown so that the awards are now acknowledged internationally as one of most valuable accolades a conservationist can win.

To be considered for a Whitley Award, entrants need to display both a strong track record in science-based conservation work and a viable plan for taking their work further.

A hallmark of the scheme is that WFN seeks to remain in close contact with past winners and facilitates the sharing of best practice, lessons learned, contacts and ideas. In this way, WFN maintains links with more than 100 international conservation leaders from over 50 countries. Past award-winners are also eligible to be invited to apply for Whitley Continuation Funding.

Whitley Fund for Nature

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