

Sonam Lama Wins Whitley Award for Protecting Red Pandas in Nepal

Sir David Attenborough (WFN Trustee) narrates a new film about Sonam Lama: <https://youtu.be/RYvfs38byDE>

High res images: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/1camDWQJ8hYyMYDu9>

Sonam Lama receiving his Whitley Award from WFN Patron, HRH The Princess Royal:



“Future generations should have the right to see this charismatic species. I would love my daughter to know about red pandas, wouldn’t you?”

Nepalese conservationist, Sonam Lama, has won a Whitley Award worth £40,000 from UK conservation charity, the Whitley Fund for Nature (WFN). He has trained 100 citizen scientists to help restore red panda habitat and invested in red panda eco-tourism to provide income for local people.

2021 saw record numbers of illegal red panda pelts seized, with habitat for the Critically Endangered species fragmented into over 400 isolated patches. Lama, living and working in the foothills of the world’s third largest mountain, will use his Whitley Award to turn red panda poachers into protectors and diversify sustainable income for communities, especially socially and economically at-risk women and young people.

Whitley Awards are world-leading prizes for wildlife conservation. On Wednesday, 27 April they were presented by WFN Patron, HRH The Princess Royal, to six grassroots conservationists pioneering solutions to the biodiversity crisis, [live streamed to YouTube](#).

With one million species at risk of extinction and warnings of inextricable links between biodiversity loss and climate change, Whitley Award winners will use the funding to accelerate their breakthrough work to reverse declines in species from Sumatran rhinos to sea turtles.

This shy species was discovered 50 years before the giant panda and is considered a living fossil. Endemic to eastern Himalayan broadleaf forests, with thick bamboo understories and consistently cool temperatures, red pandas are indicators of ecosystem health.

However, COVID-19 caused a surge in poaching with 37 pelts confiscated from the black market in 2021. Estimates suggest that 1 red panda is poached [every 10 days in Nepal](#). Habitat loss is compounding conditions for the 10,000 adult individuals that remain, with rates of deforestation over double the national average and forest now so severely fragmented that genetic inbreeding is likely.

Lama works with the [Red Panda Network](#), an NGO dedicated to conservation of wild red pandas. They are leading the longest-running monitoring project in the world, with 10 wild red pandas successfully GPS-collared and studied. They have restored 400 hectares of habitat around Mt. Kangchenjunga, trained over 100 citizen scientists, and supported 100 school students with Red Panda Conservation Scholarships.

Scaling up this success into new areas, Lama will use his Whitley Award to diversify income sources for communities, particularly women and young people, through forest conservation nurseries and restoration to create a wildlife corridor that connects habitat for red pandas. He will also establish community-led anti-poaching patrols and awareness-raising campaigns. Poised to expand, Lama's project has great potential for replication in other range countries.

“The goal of the project is red panda conservation but it is equally important to address the livelihood needs of communities.”



Danni Parks, WFN Director, said: “As we emerge from COVID-19 and take stock of its impact on planetary health as well as our own, this Whitley Award will enable Sonam to address issues that have arisen including the increased poaching of an already Critically Endangered species. The charismatic red panda is a much-loved local emblem as well as an international star, and importantly, this holistic project will also benefit the people with whom it shares its home in the forested foothills of the Himalayas.”

WFN also recognised Whitley Award alumnus, Dr Charudutt Mishra, with its top prize – the Whitley Gold Award worth £100,000. A snow leopard conservationist working across the big cat’s range of 12 countries including India, Afghanistan, China and Russia, Mishra’s pioneering approach to community-led conservation has been named an outstanding global practice by the UN Biodiversity Conference. With ‘fortress conservation’ having displaced an estimated 130 million people worldwide, community-based conservation that champions the co-existence of people and wildlife offers a transformative solution to the biodiversity crisis. The Whitley Gold Award will enable Mishra to train conservationists on every continent in equitable approaches.

NOTES TO EDITORS

- [Whitley Fund for Nature](#) (WFN) is a UK registered charity supporting grassroots conservation leaders in the Global South. Over 29 years it has channelled £19 million to more than 200 conservationists in 80 countries.
- A pioneer in the sector, WFN was one of the first charities to direct funding to locally-led projects. Its rigorous application process identifies inspiring individuals who combine the latest science with community-based action, to benefit wildlife, landscapes, and people.
- WFN’s flagship prizes – [Whitley Awards](#) – are presented by Patron, [HRH The Princess Royal](#), at a prestigious annual ceremony in London. Winners receive funding, training and media profile including films narrated by charity Trustee, [Sir David Attenborough](#). The [2022 Whitley Awards were on Wednesday 27 April](#) at the Royal Geographical Society, [live streamed to YouTube](#). The 2022 Whitley Award winners are:
 1. **Emmanuel Amoah, Ghana**
Tales from the riverbank: safeguarding the last stronghold of West African slender-snouted crocodile
 2. **Micaela Camino, Argentina**
Empowering communities to defend their human rights and conserve Argentina’s Dry Chaco
 3. **Pablo Hoffmann, Brazil**
Rooting for the future: nurturing wild plant diversity in the Araucaria Forest region
 4. **Sonam Lama, Nepal**
People and red pandas: mutually beneficial conservation in the Himalayas
 5. **Estrela Matilde, São Tomé and Príncipe**
Stemming the tide of plastic pollution: an island-wide effort to save sea turtles
 6. **Dedy Yansyah, Indonesia**
Last stand for the Sumatran rhino: looking out for Leuser’s ecosystem engineers
- Whitley Award winners join an [international alumni network](#) eligible for [WFN Continuation Funding](#), allowing successful conservation solutions to be scaled up. Projects receive up to £100,000 over two years and include [nature-based solutions](#) that jointly address the climate and biodiversity crises.
- Every year, a Whitley Award alumnus is chosen to receive the [Whitley Gold Award](#), worth £100,000, in recognition of their outstanding contribution to the conservation sector. Joining the [Judging Panel](#) and mentoring the Whitley Award winners, the 2022 Whitley Gold Award recipient is world-leading snow leopard conservationist, Charudutt Mishra.
- [www.whitleyaward.org](#), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [YouTube](#), [LinkedIn](#)
- Sonam Lama has a Masters in International Nature Conservation from Lincoln University, New Zealand and Gottingen University, Germany with scholarship support from WWF and [Wildlife Conservation Network](#).

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Images: 2022 Whitley Award winner Sonam Lama, landscape and women forest guardians © Rashik Maharjan/Red Panda Network, pair of red pandas and the red panda top right © Ashley Bowen/Red Panda Network, red panda bottom right © Damber Bista/Red Panda Network