

Notes from the Field

SUMMER 2020

**COVID-19 AND
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RHINO RECOVERY FUND

**HERO RATS SAVE
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**EMPOWERING YOUNG
CONSERVATIONISTS**



WCN

Wildlife Conservation Network

We know that disappearing habitat, which forces wildlife and people to overlap more frequently, and the global wildlife trade escalate the possibility for wildlife-related disease transmission.

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COVID-19 and Wildlife Conservation

TO ALL WILDLIFE SUPPORTERS

It is hard to wholly describe how deeply we have all been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We have been simultaneously heartbroken by the struggles this has caused around the world and uplifted by the efforts people have taken to help one another.

This pandemic hits particularly close to home for WCN, our Conservation Partners, and Wildlife Funds grantees because of its connection to wildlife consumption and the unfettered loss of wild spaces. We know that the virus originated from wild animals—possibly transferring from bats to pangolins to people via a wet market in China. We know that disappearing habitat, which forces wildlife and people to overlap more frequently, and the global wildlife trade escalate the possibility for wildlife-related disease transmission. These two precarious circumstances occurring in an interconnected world has brought us to this watershed moment. It has never been more important to stop the illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade and to protect our wild landscapes.

It has never been more important to work together to solve the enormous challenges we are facing and to invest in a better future for our planet.

In the spirit of building that future, we hope to bring you stories of innovation, hope, and resilience in this newsletter. Our stories highlight a unique approach to protecting pangolins, the animal so closely tied to the COVID-19 pandemic, and introduces a new generation of conservationists who are taking up the mantle of conservation leadership. We also bring you a story about protecting the largest population of free ranging black rhinos, an example of work supported by WCN's newly established Rhino Recovery Fund. With increasing urgency to safeguard our natural world, WCN is thrilled to be expanding our efforts to protect even more species than before.

We are deeply proud of these accomplishments and of the conservationists we support, who do so much to protect our planet's irreplaceable wildlife species, and subsequently, to protect ourselves. ■





A WCN Partner Update

For WCN and our Conservation Partners, conservation is as much about helping people as it is about helping wildlife. Our Partners have worked for years with local communities to understand their needs, build trust, and jointly develop solutions for people and wildlife to coexist and thrive. Now, in the face of COVID-19, our Partners are doubling down on humanitarian efforts to make sure that local people, many of whom are their colleagues, friends, and family members, receive the resources to get through this crisis safely. These are just some examples of their leadership and generosity during this unprecedented time.

It is tough to be concerned about wildlife if you are going hungry. In Colombia, Proyecto Tití (PT) saw that rural families, who help set aside land as habitat for cotton-top tamarins, were struggling to feed their families due to the economic impacts of

COVID-19. PT stepped up to deliver enough food to feed 130 local families for a week.

Although many of us at home have been washing our hands vigorously after trips to the grocery store, many rural communities do not have running water in their homes. In Kenya, Mozambique, and Botswana, the teams at Ewaso Lions, Save the Elephants, Niassa Lion Project, and Cheetah Conservation Botswana are installing hand washing stations.

Grevy's Zebra Trust (GZT) has adapted their work producing sanitary pads with Samburu women to also producing reusable, cloth masks. They produce about 700-1,000 masks per week. GZT and Ewaso Lions are also working with a mobile clinic to distribute healthcare information and supplies to communities in northern Kenya.

These humanitarian efforts are being done in conjunction with our Partners' ongoing work to protect wildlife. Throughout this pandemic, conservationists continue to monitor wildlife populations through camera traps and satellite tagging. Wildlife patrol and anti-poaching units remain active to ensure any increased pressure on natural resources does not negatively impact endangered species. And our Partners have adapted to social distancing by using remote-learning formats in their education programs to keep children and communities engaged with conservation safely.

On nearly every continent, our Partners are evolving, improving, and guiding efforts to keep people and wildlife safe and thriving. We encourage you to learn more and support their work in protecting our natural world at [wildnet.org](https://www.wildnet.org). ■



Top left: Proyecto Tití delivers boxes of food to local families in Colombia. Top right: Okapi Conservation Project installs hand washing stations in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Right: Working with Grevy's Zebra Trust, a Samburu woman produces free Nkirreten face masks for her community.

Tracking Rhinos on the Road to Recovery

The ground was broken up into rust-colored rocks, giving a rough cobblestone appearance to the Namibian desert. Simon Kangombe crouched down, nudged aside a baseball-sized stone with his boot, and reached for his camera. About 100 yards ahead was a male black rhinoceros, sturdy as a tank. Simon, a tracker with Save the Rhino Trust Namibia (SRT), took the animal's photo, recorded its GPS coordinates, and with binoculars, checked



SRT trackers take care to positively identify specific rhino individuals before entering data.

the rhino's ears for identifying marks. Every day, trackers like Simon are monitoring and protecting the largest population of free roaming, Critically Endangered black rhinos in Africa.

Their work is vital for conserving this ancient and irreplaceable species, making SRT a natural fit for one of the first grants issued by WCN's newly established Rhino Recovery Fund.

Despite their powerful physical presence, rhinos are incredibly vulnerable to human-induced threats. Asia's three rhino species have dwindled to distressingly small populations due to habitat loss. In Africa, white and black rhino populations also struggle with habitat loss and are brutally poached for their horns, which can fetch hundreds of thousands of dollars on the black market. This year, WCN created the Rhino Recovery Fund (RRF) to help protect all rhino species from wildlife crime and restore their landscapes, focusing on improving the health of rhino populations while also benefiting local people. The RRF uses the same model as WCN's other Wildlife Funds, channeling 100% of donations directly to the best projects that are safeguarding rhinos—projects that range from eliminating rhino horn demand, restoring habitat, and, like SRT, protecting rhinos from poaching.

SRT was established in the early 1980s in response to rampant rhino poaching during the South African Border War. They have continued to monitor black rhinos across a wilderness area



SRT staff spend weeks on patrol to gather accurate distribution data on black rhinos.

the size of Vermont. Trackers like Simon go on 21-day patrols, accompanied by a police officer should they encounter poachers. They spend each day, often on foot, tracking rhinos and reporting on their numbers and distribution; they also document any incidents of human-wildlife conflict. Trackers are paid wages, but are also given incentive bonuses to encourage them

to locate as many rhinos as possible while on patrol. The more rhinos that rangers find, identify, and log in to SRT's database, the greater their bonuses.

The Rhino Recovery Fund's grant to SRT has paid for the trackers' incentive bonuses for the entire year. This support is especially important now; in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, SRT is understandably concerned about funding and with fears that poaching may increase in reaction to economic hardship, patrols are more important than ever.

Ensuring SRT's trackers are well compensated keeps them in the field monitoring and protecting Namibia's black rhinos. At a time when the world truly needs optimism, the RRF is proud to invest in projects like this that are giving rhinos and their wild habitats a chance to survive and thrive. ■

Below: A black rhino mother and calf monitored by SRT in the Namibian desert.



rhinorecoveryfund.org

Launching in 2020, the Rhino Recovery Fund is WCN's latest Wildlife Fund and will protect rhinos in Africa and Asia.

Hero Rats Learn to Save Pangolins

Arwen's whiskers fluttered vigorously as she gobbled down a mouthful of banana—her reward for a job well done. To accommodate her misshapen left ear, she was fitted with a new candy apple red vest and was now showing real promise in her training. Like all African giant pouched rats, Arwen's highly developed sense of smell can rival even a bloodhound; she is learning to use her powerful nose to distinguish specific scents. If successful, Arwen will join a new cohort of APOPO's aptly named "HeroRATs," who are using their olfactory super powers to fight wildlife crime.

The title of HeroRAT is no exaggeration. For years, these animals have saved lives by detecting landmines and tuberculosis. By distinguishing the scent of TNT from metal, HeroRATs zero in on buried landmines in a fraction of the time it takes metal detectors, and they are too light to trigger detonations. Similarly, HeroRATs are trained to detect tuberculosis in patient sputum samples dramatically faster than lab technicians, thus accelerating diagnoses and treatment. Now, the nonprofit APOPO is training HeroRATs to save endangered wildlife. They are starting with pangolins, the world's most trafficked mammals.

Each year, hundreds of thousands of pangolins are poached and trafficked for their meat and scales. Relentless poaching has not only put pangolins on the precipice of extinction, it threatens human health; researchers have evidence that suggests it was through pangolin consumption that COVID-19 transferred to people. Ending the wildlife crime that is decimating pangolins requires shutting down the trafficking networks that move pangolins into the black market.



Lawrence Weitz



APOPO



APOPO



Paul Hilton/WildAid

In early 2020, the Pangolin Crisis Fund (PCF) made a grant to APOPO in partnership with the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) to help advance this program towards real-world deployment, specifically in Tanzania's ports, including the Dar es-Salaam seaport—a major hub for wildlife products going from Africa to Asia. With PCF funding, EWT and APOPO have also been developing relationships with port authorities, to hopefully introduce the rats and acclimate them to these new environments.

Arwen and her fellow HeroRATs are getting more efficient at identifying wildlife products and APOPO is planning to deploy them to ports and parks in the next year. Early results from this program have been truly encouraging, and if any animal needs a hero right now, it's the pangolin. ■

Left, clockwise: Pangolins are the most illegally trafficked mammal in the world. APOPO trains African giant pouched rats to detect smuggled pangolin scales. Pangolin scales are trafficked for use in some traditional Asian medicines. Arwen at work.

Below: At the smell of pangolin scales, APOPO's HeroRATs alert their handlers by pulling on a ball attached to their red vests.

If HeroRATs can detect smuggled pangolin parts, they can be deployed to shipping ports, airports, national parks, and along country borders to help thwart traffickers. Because HeroRATs are small and light, they can climb up high stacks of crates and maneuver between tight containers, covering far more ground than dogs, who have more commonly been deployed to sniff out contraband moving across borders.

APOPO is training ten HeroRATs, including Arwen, to explore shipping containers and alert their handler if they smell pangolin scales. The rats wear a special vest equipped with a small ball; when they smell pangolin, they pull on the ball, which flips a microswitch alerting the handler. The next step is to get the rats out of the lab and into the field.

APOPO



The Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin is easily identified by its distinctive pink skin.

Empowering Young Conservationists

The dolphin's pink snout breached the surface as it leapt into the sky. As a part of MareCet's research team, Sandra Teoh is no stranger to long days at sea searching for the Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin. Pointing her camera at the rose-colored dolphin soaring over the waves, Sandra knew her patience had paid off.

This pink coloration is what makes the Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin so distinctive. Juveniles are gray, but the pink pigmentation blooms as they mature. Its radiant appearance is what attracted Sandra to the species. It was the first wild dolphin she ever encountered in her early days at MareCet; when she locked eyes with one swimming close to their research vessel, she was spellbound. Five years later, her admiration for this species is motivating her to obtain the knowledge and credentials to help her defend them.



Sandra is one of 14 WCN 2020 Scholarship Program recipients. She is pursuing a Ph.D. at the University of Malaya, focusing on the social ecology of humpback dolphins. WCN scholars are earning their degrees to fill conservation leadership roles in their home countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. By furthering their research, scholars like Sandra not only become authorities on endangered species, they reflect the identity of their local culture. WCN's Scholarship Program helps empower local

conservationists to take charge of wildlife protection in their countries without needing outside influence; their success is an investment in a hopeful future for both people and wildlife.

For Sandra, this means finding a path forward that benefits both Malaysians and the roughly 400 dolphins in Malaysia's Langkawi waters. Langkawi is one of Malaysia's top tourism destinations; tourism drives deforestation and development, which leads to increased pollution from improper waste management. Malaysians are also the largest consumers of seafood in Southeast Asia, and commercial fishing pressures deplete the dolphins' food supply and increase the risk of entanglement in nets. Stronger government protections would help alleviate these threats.

Sandra's team used their research to get the waters of Langkawi, Perlis, and Kedah declared as IUCN Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMA). They are currently lobbying the Malaysian government to recognize this IMMA status and instate much-needed protections. MareCet is also involved in coastline development planning, and Sandra helps promote marine conservation through local outreach initiatives with schools, fishermen, and tourist businesses. She enjoys teaching children about environmental issues and hopes to inspire the next generation of conservationists in Malaysia. With help from her WCN scholarship, Sandra is securing a safer home for humpback dolphins and showing other young conservationists how they can shape their own future protecting wildlife. ■

The MareCet Research Organization



Dr. Shaleen Angwenyi - KENYA
MS - University of Bristol
WCN Veterinary Scholarship
African wild dog

Gabriel Antwi-Boasiako - GHANA
MS - University of Cambridge
Pat J Miller Scholarship
African elephants, slender-snouted & dwarf crocodiles, pangolins, sturgeons

Dr. Kambwiri Banda - ZAMBIA
MS - Swedish Agricultural University
WCN Veterinary Scholarship
African lion, leopard, African wild dog, spotted hyena, and cheetah



Charles Emogor - NIGERIA
PhD - University of Cambridge
WCN-WCS Joint Scholarship
White-bellied pangolin, black-bellied pangolin, and Cross River gorilla

Paul Mukiza Hatanga - UGANDA
MS - Yale University
Sydney Byers Scholarship
Chimpanzee

Mario Jimenez Segura - COSTA RICA
MS - University of Kent
Pat J Miller Scholarship
Great green macaw



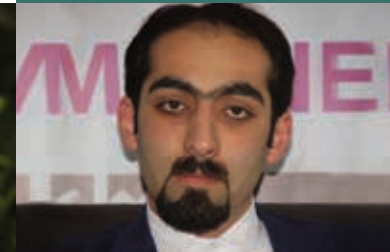
Md Tarik Kabir - BANGLADESH
PhD - Universiti Sains Malaysia
Sydney Byers Scholarship
Western Hoolock gibbon



Herbert Kasozi - UGANDA
PhD - Michigan State University
Handsel Scholarship
Rothschild's giraffe



Ambika Khatiwada - NEPAL
PhD - University of Oviedo
Sydney Byers Scholarship
Chinese pangolin



Masud Lahut - IRAN
PhD - Arak University
Sydney Byers Scholarship
Asiatic black bear (Baluchi subspecies)



Dr. Patrick Okello - UGANDA
MS - University of Edinburgh
WCN Veterinary Scholarship
African lion, leopard, and cheetah



Ando Rabearisoa - MADAGASCAR
PhD - University of California, Santa Cruz
Handsel Scholarship
Hawksbill sea turtle



Tapologo Connie Sebati - BOTSWANA
MA - University of South Africa
Sydney Byers Scholarship
Cheetahs



Sandra Teoh - MALAYSIA
PhD - University of Malaya
Steven K. Beckendorf Scholarship
Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin and other small coastal cetaceans



WCN protects endangered wildlife by supporting conservationists who ensure wildlife and people coexist and thrive.

Invest In Wildlife Conservation

We greatly appreciate your dedication to protecting wildlife. Your kind support is vital to our Partners' heroic and enduring work in conservation.

WAYS TO GIVE

- ▶ Donate by mail, phone, fax, or online
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- ▶ Include WCN in your estate plans
- ▶ Donate stock or other securities

WCN maintains Charity Navigator's highest possible 4-star rating. Charity Navigator is America's leading independent charity evaluator, and rates over 8,000 charities on their Financial Health and Accountability & Transparency.



EIN # 30-0108469 • CFC # 63038

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on October 10-11

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