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## New reforestation project in southern Madagascar to prevent the extinction of local endemic species

Madagascar harbours numerous endemic plant and animal species and is one of the most important biodiversity hotspots in this respect. Although conservation organizations have tended to focus on the better known national parks of Madagascar, there are forest fragments that still hold locally endemic biodiversity. One of these is a group of forest fragments within the south-east Lavasoa–Ambatotsirongorongo mountains. This area is a predominantly humid, transitional forest as a result of the position of these mountains on the steep ecological gradient between the dry spiny forest to the west and the humid forest to the north. Because of the gradient, this area is one of only a few known locations in the country where species from both dry and humid forests are sympatric. Although some of the lemur species present also occur elsewhere, the Critically Endangered Bemanasy mouse lemur *Microcebus manitatra* is only known from this area, and the Endangered Lavasoa dwarf lemur *Cheirogaleus lava-soensis* is known only from this site and Kalambatritra–Sahalava, 170 km to the north. The latter species was included in the list of the World's 25 Most Endangered Primates in 2014–2016, and the former was included in the most recently published list (2018–2020), making Ambatotsirongorongo one of the top priorities for lemur conservation. The remaining forest also holds one of the last populations of the Critically Endangered gecko *Phelsuma antanosy*.

We are pleased to announce the launch of a new reforestation programme to respond to the urgent restoration and conservation needs in this area. The project will be led by a consortium that include a Malagasy enterprise (Tropical Biodiversity and Social Enterprise) with 2 decades of experience in restoring the local flora, and two academic institutions, Oxford Brookes University and Hamburg University, which play a major role in studying lemurs and the endemic biodiversity of Madagascar. The project, launched in July 2021, includes a plan to plant 4 million native trees over the next 4 years to restore the endemic species within the protected area of Ambatotsirongorongo. This will include the establishment of 300 ha of fast-growing trees as fire-breaks, to demonstrate dynamic agroforestry to villagers

living outside the protected area and thus to relieve pressure on the remaining native forest. An additional aim is to revitalize community management of the protected area. Ecosia, a Berlin-based not-for-profit search engine that channels 80% of its revenue to finance tree planting projects, has agreed to fund this ambitious plan, and the non-profit association Naturefund will support the agroforestry component. Field studies on the biota and of the socio-economic situation and its development over time will accompany the reforestation programme.

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## Mysterious death of 18 wild elephants in Nagaon District, Assam, India

On 13 May 2021, a number of wild Asiatic elephants *Elephas maximus* in Bamuni Reserve Forest, Nagaon District, Assam, India, were reported dead. Large herds of elephants frequently traverse one of two corridors originating from Kaziranga National Park: (1) south-westwards to Doboka, via Swang Reserve Forest, and (2) southwards to North Karbi Anglong Wildlife Sanctuary. Local people discovered the dead elephants in the Bamuni Hills and, as we were nearby working in these corridors, we visited the location, where we observed 18 dead elephants on a hilltop: five males, and 13 females, of which four were juveniles. The area had received incessant rain for several days preceding the incident, along with heavy thunderstorms and lightning. Local people suggested lightning as the possible cause of the deaths. On 14 May, forest officials of the Assam government visited to gather evidence, assisted by veterinary officials who conducted post-mortems. Preliminary reports, based on evidence of burns on the trunks and fur of two of the elephants, along with a few burnt teak trees, support the hypothesis that the deaths were a result of lightning.

Although the cause of these deaths has not yet been definitively determined, the simultaneous deaths of a number of animals in a single location has occurred elsewhere. In 2016, 323 reindeer were killed by lightning in the Hardangervidda National Park, Norway ([theverge.com/2016/8/29/12690402/lightning-strike-kills-norway-reindeer-death-why-science](https://theverge.com/2016/8/29/12690402/lightning-strike-kills-norway-reindeer-death-why-science)). Lightning can strike an animal directly from above or indirectly through tall trees via side flashes. When lightning strikes an animal directly, or the ground nearby, the energy can subsequently spread along the ground by up to 80 m, subjecting any other animal within this range to an electric shock. In the case of a side flash, lightning strikes an animal's body sideways from a tree hit directly. Fatalities from side flashes are fewer than from direct hits.

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## The Whitley Awards 2021

After a challenging year, the Whitley Fund for Nature (WFN) announced the six conservation leaders from six different countries receiving the 2021 Whitley Awards, worth GBP 40,000 each in project funding over 1 year, in support of their work. In addition, the Whitley Gold Award worth GBP 100,000 was presented to 2014 Whitley Award winner Paula Kahumbu of WildlifeDirect, Kenya, for her work strengthening environmental law to secure justice for people and wildlife, with a focus on elephant conservation in the Kenyan landscape. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Whitley Awards Ceremony, the flagship event of the UK-based charity, was broadcast virtually.

The 2021 Whitley Award Winners are Pedro Fruet, Brazil (Building bridges to encourage co-existence with the Lahille's bottlenose dolphin); Lucy Kemp, South Africa (Community-based approach to conserve the southern ground hornbill); Nuklu Phom, India (Establishing a

Biodiversity Peace Corridor in Nagaland); Kini Roesler, Argentina (Hooded grebe—guardian of the Patagonian steppe); Sammy Safari, Kenya (Transforming the future of sea turtles through coastal stewardship); and Iroto Tanshi, Nigeria (Bats from the brink—participatory action to save the short-tailed roundleaf bat).

To date, the charity has given GBP 18 million in conservation funding to more than 200 conservation leaders in over 80 countries. The Whitley Award was one of the first awards to be given in recognition of effective conservation leadership in the Global South. As the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, the need to preserve the natural world has never been stronger, and WFN supports emerging country nationals working in regions where biodiversity is rich but resources are poor. They lead on projects that are deeply rooted in community involvement and are pragmatic, science-based and impactful.

With WFN's long-term commitment to conservation leaders, winners have access to the Continuation Funding programme to further fund and scale up their work on species and communities. In recognition of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, WFN launched a new Nature-based Solutions scheme under the Continuation Funding programme last year, supporting projects that tackle climate change and biodiversity loss in consultation with communities and Indigenous people. Winners are also part of a lifelong membership of the global network of Whitley Award alumni, giving them access to like-minded leaders and opportunities to foster collaborations worldwide. Over half of Whitley Award winners go on to win Continuation Funding grants, worth up to GBP 100,000 over up to 2 years. In 2020, WFN awarded a record-breaking GBP 1,000,000 in Continuation Funding, including GBP 500,000 in Nature-based Solutions projects. Many winners become some of the most influential conservationists in their field, with projects making an impact from the grassroots through to national and international levels.

For more information on the Whitley Fund for Nature, the Whitley Awards and the projects, visit [whitleyaward.org](https://whitleyaward.org).

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