

NEWS from the WHITLEY FUND FOR NATURE

## Princess presents top conservation accolade to Thailand's Jittin Ritthirat

**EMBARGO: Not for publication, please, before 20:30hrs GMT on Wednesday 13 May 2009**

**LONDON, UK: 13 MAY 2009** - HRH The Princess Royal (Princess Anne) tonight presented one of the world's top prizes for grassroots nature conservation – a Whitley Award – to Jittin Ritthirat of Thailand for her work to reduce conflicts between wild elephants and farmers and encourage local communities to help to restore Salakpra, Thailand's oldest national park.

Ms Ritthirat, the community co-ordinator for the Elephant Conservation Network (ECN), based in western Thailand, received her prize 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 accolade includes a Whitley Award project grant of £30,000 - donated by The Friends of The WFN - 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 their livestock cattle, including over water supplies and grazing, and involve the families in restoring Thailand's oldest nature reserve as a national treasure, eco-tourist attraction and example to others.

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.

*For more details about other finalists and their projects, please see the Notes overleaf.*

Commenting on Ms Ritthirat'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."

### International Awards for Outstanding Leaders in Conservation

**Patron** HRH The Princess Royal **Vice Patron** John Laing **Trustees** Sir David Attenborough Tim Dye Catherine Faulks Edward Whitley **Director** Georgina Domberger

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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 ceremony at which Jittin Ritthirat received her accolade was co-hosted by BBC wildlife presenter Kate Humble and held in front of a 400-strong audience that included embassy representatives, donors and leading environmentalists.

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

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](http://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.whitleyaward.org/press\\_releases.php](http://www.whitleyaward.org/press_releases.php)

**Other 2009 winners**

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

**Prithiviraj '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.**

**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**

**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**

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**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.

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