



News Release



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Nominees Announced for the Indianapolis Prize, the World's Leading Award for Animal Conservation



INDIANAPOLIS – Across every continent, conservationists overcome the odds to protect species on the brink of extinction. Today, the Indianapolis Zoo announces 27 of these conservationists as nominees for the [Indianapolis Prize](#), the world's leading award for animal conservation.

Entering its third decade of impact, the Indianapolis Prize – co-chaired by Jeffrey A. Harrison, president and CEO of Citizens Energy Group, and Suzanne Fehsenfeld, founding member of the Indianapolis Zoo – recognizes the world's most extraordinary scientists and researchers by rewarding individuals who work to prevent extinction and shape the future of the planet.

Skilled deliberation committees will narrow the list of 27 conservationists down to six DeHaan Finalists. One of those Finalists will be named the Winner of the Indianapolis Prize and receive a \$300,000 award to accelerate proven, high-impact work for species survival.

"These nominees represent the best of the best in conservation efforts. They are all highly regarded in their professions, and the Indianapolis Zoo is honored to amplify their



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conservation efforts through the Indianapolis Prize,” said Jake Oakman, senior vice president of external relations at the Indianapolis Zoo.

The 2027 Winner will be announced at the Indianapolis Prize signature event on Sept. 25, 2027. [Sign up](#) to be notified about the Indianapolis Prize, DeHaan Finalists, the Emerging Conservationist award and more.

The Nominees for the 2027 Indianapolis Prize are:

Alvaro Velasco Barbieri (Universidad Central de Venezuela, Venezuela) – Researcher working on the recovery and conservation of crocodiles in Venezuela and throughout Latin America. His work supports training biologists, park rangers, national guards and personnel from local, regional and national ministries and organizations.

Reiner Beutel, Ph.D. (Fischer Maschinenbau/World Rotor, Germany) – Businessman developing mechanical/pneumatic devices to reduce insect and arthropod mortality in grass mowing equipment. The Fischer Ecocut system by Fischer Maschinenbau is manufactured and marketed as an insect-flushing system attachment for tractor-mounted flail mowers and roadside maintenance equipment designed to protect biodiversity.

Stuart Butchart, Ph.D. (BirdLife International, UK) – Scientist who led the development of the Red List Index, an indicator of biodiversity loss now used by the United Nations and governments worldwide to track progress towards global goals on biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. He also has developed innovations in methods for assessing extinction rates and research on protected areas as well as climate change impacts on biodiversity.

Einar Topiltzin Contreras-MacBeath, Ph.D. (Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos, Mexico) – Conservationist instrumental in assessing more than 1,150 freshwater fish species from Mexico and Central America for the IUCN Red List, he has spent 40 years studying the species as well as coordinating management plans and protected areas to ensure legal protections for wildlife refuges.

Lisa Dabek, Ph.D. (Woodland Park Zoo, USA) – Zoologist and founder of the Tree Kangaroo Conservation Program in Papua New Guinea, where she works with local Indigenous communities and area governments to establish conservation areas and plans for the species. She was previously recognized as a DeHaan Finalist for the Indianapolis Prize in 2025.

Sylvia A. Earle, Ph.D. (Mission Blue, USA) – Renowned oceanographer and two-time DeHaan Finalist for the Indianapolis Prize, this trailblazer for the world’s oceans continues to create a global network of marine protected areas she calls “hope spots.” She has spent more

than 7,500 hours underwater, led more than 100 global ocean expeditions and still holds the record for the deepest untethered walk on the sea floor.

Ehab Khalil Abdul Rahim Eid (Independent Senior Advisor, Biodiversity and Conservation, Jordan) – Leads conservation efforts for threatened species and ecosystems across the Middle East, including the Aqaba Marine Reserve located at the northernmost tip of the Red Sea. This reserve safeguards more than 150 species of hard coral, over 500 species of fish and 1,000 species of mollusks.

Rachel Graham, Ph.D. (MarAlliance, Panama) – Marine conservation scientist restoring populations of threatened large marine species, with a focus on sharks and rays. Her pioneering research, blending traditional fisher knowledge with low-cost standardized science, has led to new species protections, protected area designations, fisheries reforms, alternative economies for fishers and reversals of population declines.

David F. Gruber, Ph.D. (Project Cetacean Translation Initiative, USA) – Scientist, communicator and inventor working to understand the acoustic communication of sperm whales. His research also covers biofluorescent and bioluminescent ocean organisms, which led to the discovery of the first biofluorescent sea turtle.

Rosamira R. Guillen (Fundación Proyecto Tití, Colombia) – Landscape architect and environmental designer-turned-conservationist who cofounded and leads the Fundación Proyecto Tití, an organization dedicated to the protection and conservation of one of Colombia's most endangered native primate species: the cotton-top tamarin. She is a previous winner of the Whitley Award.

Axel Hochkirch, Ph.D. (Museum of Natural History, Luxembourg) – Invertebrate conservationist focused on grasshoppers both in his native Europe and around the globe. His work has resulted in 1,500 grasshopper species assessments through the IUCN Red List, the recovery of a couple of threatened species and the initiation of many new invertebrate conservation projects through the formation of IUCN SSC Specialist Groups.

Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka, DVM (Conservation Through Public Health, Uganda) – Wildlife veterinarian recognized globally for her work protecting endangered mountain gorillas in East Africa. She was previously recognized as a DeHaan Finalist for the Indianapolis Prize in 2023.

Laly L. Lichtenfeld, Ph.D. (African People & Wildlife, Tanzania) – Wildlife and social ecologist who co-founded African People & Wildlife and has spent nearly three decades developing and scaling community-led approaches to reducing human-wildlife conflict and protecting habitat. Her coexistence work has reduced livestock losses, crop raiding and retaliatory killings while protecting large carnivores, elephants and other species across 85 partner communities and more than five million acres in Tanzania.

Tania “Nena” Baltazar Lugones (Comunidad Inti Wara Yassi, Bolivia) – Pioneer for wildlife rescue and rehabilitation in Bolivia. She is transforming emergency animal confiscations – from illegal trafficking and poaching – into long-term species recovery and habitat protection.

Laurie Marker, Ph.D. (Cheetah Conservation Fund, Namibia) – Conservationist studying cheetah genetics, biology and behavioral ecology. Her community initiatives introduce livestock-guarding dogs to farmers in Namibia to reduce human-wildlife conflict. She is a two-time DeHaan Finalist for the Indianapolis Prize.

Roderic Mast (Oceanic Society, USA) – Marine biologist who serves as the Co-CEO and President of Oceanic Society and has worked for the past two decades to organize the world’s foremost network of marine turtle experts to set priorities for all seven species, which accelerated protection for Eastern Pacific leatherback and Kemp’s ridleys. The impact of his work and leadership is exemplified by the 2025 global down-listing of the green turtle from Endangered to Least Concern on the IUCN Red List.

Ronaldo Goncalves Morato, Ph.D. (Panthera, Brazil) – Conservation biologist and veterinarian working to conserve Brazil’s large-bodied mammal species with research focusing on reproductive biology, landscape ecology and applied outputs that inform policy and conservation planning. His work has led to the creation and expansion of protected areas in the Pantanal and secured wildlife corridors.

Citrakasih M. Nente, DVM (Sumatran Orangutan Conservation Program, Indonesia) – Conservation veterinarian with more than 25 years of experience in orangutan rescue, rehabilitation, veterinary management and reintroduction in Indonesia. Her work has contributed to the rescue and rehabilitation of more than 500 orangutans and supported the successful reintroduction of more than 330 individuals into protected forest ecosystems in Sumatra.

Paul Pearce-Kelly (Zoological Society of London, UK) – Invertebrate conservation leader who has brought the Partula snail back from extinction. This tropical snail species is native to French Polynesia and represents three decades of work by conservation zoos and the French Polynesian government to enable the recovery of this species.

Bulathge Vijitha Perera, Ph.D. (Noble Conservation Center, Sri Lanka) – Wildlife veterinarian conserving Asian elephants and working on human-wildlife conflict mitigation in Sri Lanka. He is the recipient of the 2022 World Veterinary Association Global Animal Welfare Award.

Ted Schmitt (Allen Institute for AI, USA) – Technologist and self-described accidental conservationist, Schmitt powers the software for modern conservation fieldwork. His survey work with the Great Elephant Census informed China’s 2016 decision to end its legal domestic

ivory trade; his EarthRanger software is used by 900 programs in 90 countries and tracks 15,000 animals and 11,000 rangers; and his Skylight software for monitoring illegal ocean fishing is used by 200 organizations in 70 countries and detects 1.3 million vessels per month.

Çağan H. Şekercioğlu, Ph.D. (KuzeyDoga Association, Turkey) – Conservationist securing wetland designations and protected wildlife corridors in his homeland, Turkey. Şekercioğlu secured Turkey's first wildlife corridor for large carnivores, protecting a forest region equal to 70,000 acres. He is a previous winner of the Whitley Award.

Ir. Jamartin Sihite, Ph.D. (Borneo Orangutan Survival Foundation, Indonesia) – Environmental scientist with more than 30 years of experience rehabilitating and reintroducing more than 550 orangutans into protected forest ecosystems in Central and East Kalimantan. The foundation employs 440 people and protects more than 420,000 acres of forest habitat.

Tara S. Stoinski, Ph.D. (Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund, USA) – Dedicated scientist advocating for mountain gorillas and other primates for nearly 30 years. She has authored more than 200 scientific publications and books and leads science-based conservation efforts in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, greatly expanding the Fossey Fund's work to study ecosystems where gorillas live.

Marlice van Vuuren (N/a'ankusê se Foundation, Namibia) – Conservationist running the N/a'ankusê Wildlife Sanctuary and Medical Clinic in central Namibia, protecting and relocating large carnivores with the goal of reducing human-wildlife conflict.

Lee James Taylor White, Ph.D. (Science Panel for the Congo Basin, UK) – Field biologist focusing on the critically endangered African forest elephant and their keystone ecological role in the countries of the Congo Basin. His work combats habitat loss, created 50 new protected areas in Nigeria and Gabon and he works to establish collaborations that result in significant funding for biodiversity. He was a DeHaan Finalist for the Indianapolis Prize in 2025.

Li (Aster) Zhang, Ph.D. (Beijing Normal University, China) – Conservation scientist and policy leader whose work connects elephant conservation, consumer behavior change and international wildlife-trade policy. He played a central role in advancing major international ivory-trade restrictions in 2016 and China's landmark closure of its domestic ivory market in 2017. His research continues to inform evidence-based strategies for reducing consumer demand, combating illegal wildlife trade and securing a future for elephants.

To date, the Indianapolis Zoo has awarded more than \$8 million to conservationists through the Indianapolis Prize, the Saving Species Challenge, Uproar Conservation Challenge, Field Conservation Grants and Wild Futures Grants.

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About the Indianapolis Prize

The [Indianapolis Prize](#) recognizes and rewards conservationists who have achieved major victories in advancing the sustainability of an animal species or group of species. The Emerging Conservationist Award, a new accolade in 2023, honors a conservationist aged 40 or younger. Since 2004, the Indianapolis Zoo has awarded more than \$8 million in monetary awards, advancing the work of conservation scientists through financial support and public awareness. The Indianapolis Prize is a conservation initiative established by the Indianapolis Zoo.

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