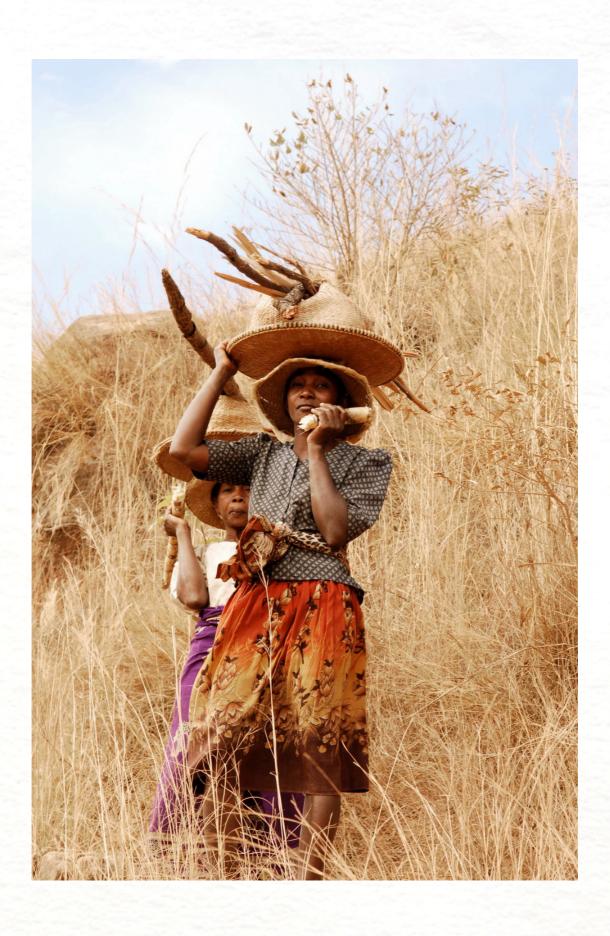
THE VOICES OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES & LOCAL COMMUNITIES

A collection of stories from WCS conservation heroes





When you think of wildlife conservation, what do you think of? Or rather, who do you think of? For thousands of years, Indigenous Peoples and local communities have been stewards of the environment and all its inhabitants. These are the stories of six conservation heroes, working with WCS to protect the places they call home.

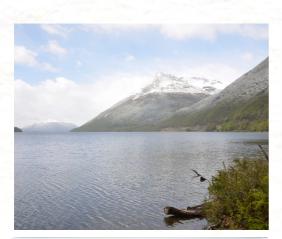


Growing up, Rodrigo Munzenmayer thought nature was something that happened in places other than Tierra del Fuego. His eyes were not yet opened to the beautiful birds that inhabited his home or the lush landscapes that bordered the island. So when his mother housed Daniela Droguett at her bed and breakfast in 2011, Rodrigo says he felt "lucky."

Daniela, former WCS Chile Regional Director of Magallanes, described Karukinka Natural Park to Rodrigo's amazement. He had never heard of Karukinka, or any park in Tierra del Fuego for that matter. When Rodrigo mentioned he wanted to visit, Daniela said she and another conservationist, Carlos Silva, would take him.

During their time in Karukinka, Carlos and Daniela patiently taught Rodrigo the fundamentals of bird watching, of how to go slow and observe this wholly-new place and its wildlife. "I started watching, seeing the details [and] behaviors," says Rodrigo. "It was really a mindblower, these two people."

Rodrigo excitedly returned to the park as a volunteer a few months later. He was reminded of his grandfather's house in the countryside of Chiloé and remembered a particularly special moment he had there as a child. "I was inside the forest, alone with a little camera. I was photographing Chucao, which is a native bird of Chile. I was so happy at that moment," he says. "And I felt that again, in Karukinka, inside the forest. I was happy because I realized there was forest in Tierra del Fuego. I had never had the opportunity to go that far in the island. There were mountains, rivers, lakes, green grass, and green forests with big trees."





Rodrigo holding Cantaría (Flying deer). Behind him is his father, Juan Carlos Munzenmayer and sister, Cathirey Guineo Muñoz



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Rodrigo at his grandfather's country house in Chiloé

Karukinka helped Rodrigo discover his drive for conservation. After volunteering as a park ranger for just a month, he was hired. "The people that have worked with me all these years have shown and taught me a lot of things that I really, really enjoy...Now I have to say it's a passion for me, and I really love what I do. And I keep learning, which is the most enjoyable thing about everything," he says.

Rodrigo has worked as a park ranger for nearly eleven years and now manages Karukinka's research and public use. In addition to doing patrols and conducting wildlife censuses, he is in charge of sending data from the park to the researchers, biologists, and veterinarians his team works with, as well as giving talks to schools and park visitors.





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Since first stepping foot in the forests of Karukinka, Rodrigo has witnessed the implications of climate change – dried lagoons, little to no snowfall, a decrease in fauna, and frigid winters. According to Rodrigo, "There are not many places in the world that have peatlands, [but] Tierra del Fuego is one of them, and Karukinka protects [them]. When you walk on this kind of moss, water comes up – a lot of water. In the past years, it doesn't happen anymore. You can feel it...so that is also an indicator of how temperatures are rising."

Rodrigo feels that empathy is the start to addressing the consequences of climate change: "I think people have forgotten that home is our whole planet, and whatever you do in your own space, in your house and your town, it affects the whole house that we all share." Before working in Karukinka, Rodrigo says he did not really know what it meant to be empathetic with Mother Earth. However, he quickly found that putting himself in nature's shoes was not difficult. "I have compared my attitudes with birds a lot of times, and we are not so different...we all need the same things."



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Preety Sharma was born in Kolkata – the bustling capital of West Bengal, India. While the city is her birthplace, she found her home in Nagaland. Growing up, she frequently visited the mountainous state where her maternal family resides.



The flourishing forests of Nagaland planted a seed in young Preety's mind. Like roots to trees, conservation is a part of her. "I think conservation for me is very personal because I am more adapted towards my mother's side of the family, who have been Jibo, or 'tribals', living in the motherland. I've spent much more time with them, and so conservation, for me, started at a very early age – before even knowing what conservation meant," she says.

Preety's passion for preserving Indigenous knowledge grew as she witnessed lifestyle changes in her village, Yikhum, over the years. Most notably, traditional agricultural practices core to the culture and lifestyle of Nagaland tribes, such as swidden cultivation, had all but stopped in most villages. "There was no more delicious wild rice," Preety recalls. These observations led her to wonder: why? So, she jumped at the opportunity to work in Nagaland with WCS-India earlier this year. "It's very difficult to find conservation initiatives in Nagaland. I applied, and the profile fit – right time and opportunity, and my heart was set on it," she says.



Preety with her maternal grandparents (Atyo, Amotsu) & brother (Ngongo) at their ancestral home

Preety had always been wary about starting conversations about conservation in her community because she often left for occupations outside of Nagaland. However, working with WCS-India allowed her to be based out of her home. She could now search for her answers: "I went and spoke about some of these issues and the questions I had since I was a child. I spoke about the [monoculture white] rice and about the plantations that had taken over the fields, so [that people] were no longer self-sufficient."

Locals shared their concerns about a dependence on rationing, reaffirming Preety's conviction that conservation work was needed in Yikhum. "The communities in Nagaland are forest dependent, [and] have gone through so much change, which inadvertently means that there is a change in the environment that they're surrounded by."



Today, Preety works with WCS-India in Ntangki National Park of Nagaland's Peren District – a critical area that connects tiger populations between India and Myanmar. WCS-India has taken a community-based approach to this project, and for Preety, that's her chance to shine. "I know the landscape and language. I understand some of the sentiments of the people here and [those] of people who are coming from outside...so I'm able to bridge that gap," she says. According to Preety, one of the most important parts of her work with WCS-India is her environmental and social safeguards manager role: "That means the community has a lot of agency and that it cannot be a top-down approach."

Preety plans to continue acting as that vital bridge between Nagaland and the outside world, and to keep advocating for her village. However, she also urges Naga people to know and feel their power. "I won't say they are not empowered; communities in Nagaland are very empowered...[some villages] have no idea of the Indigenous Peoples movement in the world, and I think they don't know the kind of power they have, the knowledge they have. I don't think they're aware that there is a movement, and they could be a part of it. [They could] give that movement power and also take power from that movement," says Preety.









Shabani Mkwavila is a personable person. Fittingly, he landed a tourism job at Mafia Island Marine Park right out of college. At the time, a staff shortage in the Tanzanian marine protected area allowed Shabani to work as an honorary park ranger. This was his first opportunity to get his feet wet in marine conservation. "Slowly, I started learning how to conserve coral...[and] understanding the marine species," he says. After being assigned to several research projects and leading community workshops on marine protection, Shabani decided it was time for him to master underwater monitoring – which requires skilled swimming. Only, he did not know how to swim.

Following three years at Mafia Island, Shabani shifted north to Tanga in 2017, determined to learn more about marine conservation. During this transition, he met Dr. Jennifer O'Leary, now a marine scientist at WCS. "Dr. Jennifer encouraged me a lot. [She] told me, 'one day you will become the champion of this ocean." Her philosophy was learning by doing, which motivated Shabani. He told himself, "Okay, you need to continue, you need to learn, and you need to do it" – and he did just that.

With perseverance and Dr. O'Leary's help, Shabani learned first how to swim and then to dive. Along the way, he practiced identifying coral, fish, and seagrass. His dedication was evident: "I took my time, and I mean, I took extra time training myself."









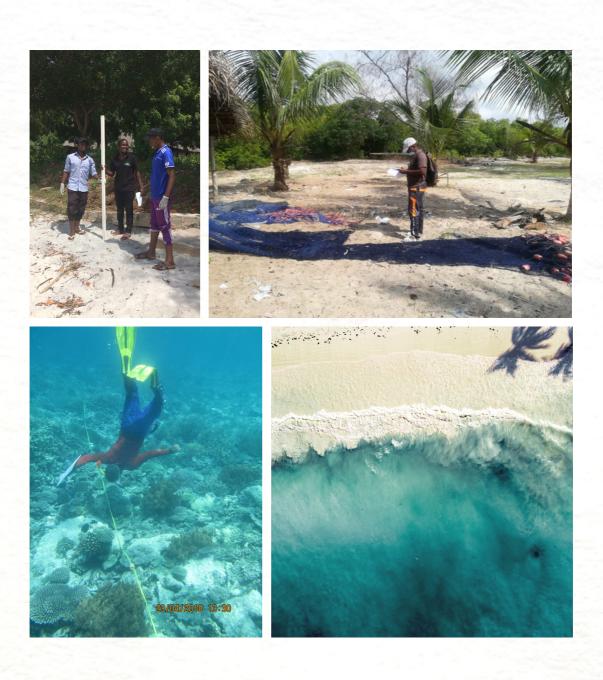




WCS Tanzania's Marine Program welcomed Shabani in 2020. From the start, he was asked to share his knowledge and expertise: "Based on my motivation, creativity, and effort, I was leading other staff on marine ecology." He trained new marine team members in underwater monitoring and even taught some how to swim – sharing the 'learning by doing' ideology he adopted from Dr. O'Leary.

Shabani is currently a field officer for the WCS Tanzania Marine Program and is based out of Tanga. He is in charge of conducting most local social surveys, continues to teach and mentor fellow staff, and is a crucial part of many of the program's marine conservation projects. "WCS, they told me, 'You are the champion. You know a lot about marine conservation'...They rely on me," says Shabani.

WCS Tanzania and Kenyan authorities co-facilitate marine protected areas all along coastal East Africa. As part of this initiative, Shabani closely communicates with Tanga Coelacanth Marine Park, named after the coelacanth, an iconic and nearly extinct prehistoric fish. He also collaborates with Tanga Marine Reserves Systems and three Tanga communities, Jasini, Ndumbani, and Moa, helping local families learn how to monitor their underwater ecosystems and steward their resources.













In such a short period of time, Shabani has excelled in all things marine conservation. He pours passion into every one of his efforts to preserve the marine biodiversity of Tanga and, as Dr. O'Leary's predicted, has become a champion of the ocean. The Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association certified Shabani as a marine field professional in July 2022. However, his positive impact on Tanga's coastal communities and marine environment speaks louder than any certificate could.

Just like when he was learning to swim, Shabani plans on pushing forward with his marine science studies. He hopes to one day pursue a master's in marine conservation. "Shifting from tourism [to] research and conservation has motivated me to study a lot about the ocean...

I'm very proud to be one of [the] marine team'," says Shabani.



















Dorje Jyal was born and raised in a rural Tibetan community. "All the memories I have about my childhood are the stories between nature, humans, and wildlife. I still remember when I was around five, my grandparents showed me all these wild animals and taught me math foundations. Like, 'that's one animal, two birds, three birds'...So since I was a kid, my mind has been hardwired with wildlife," he says.

In 2007, after being away for nearly six years, Dorje returned home to visit his grandparents. He was shocked to discover it had drastically changed due to urbanization. Dorje became increasingly interested in what was happening and who was in charge of these modern developments: "Because I had all these curious questions in my mind, I wanted to learn about conservation when I was applying for universities. [However], it is challenging for Tibetan students to get into science universities, so I thought learning English might give me a better chance to study in this field."





After obtaining an associates degree in English, Dorje applied to be a research assistant on a grassland degradation project. His proficiency in English, Mandarin, and Tibetan gave him an edge and landed the job.

Four years of grassland conservation work stirred up more curiosity in Dorje. He was eager to learn more about the interplay between policy, wildlife conservation, and human behavior. "All these questions came to me...so I tried to seek more opportunities with scientists from overseas and from China, and try to learn from [them]," he says. That's when Dorje met George Schaller. The field biologist and WCS senior conservationist was conducting a research project on snow leopards in Qaidam Basin. Dorje became his assistant and interpreter. After just one month of field work, George recommended him to WCS and in 2016, Dorje became the senior program officer of WCS on the Tibetan Plateau.





During Dorje's time with WCS, he played a vital role in protecting the area's management, research, and human and wildlife conflicts. He also trained rangers in wildlife monitoring and data collections. Dorje recalls an especially exceptional training experience he had: "I saw the power of capacity building after our team trained six community rangers. They expanded our 500 square kilometers of snow leopard research site into 2,500 square kilometers within a week...It was so impressive to see their skills and abilities. These rangers received the sixth Wildlife Defenders award from the National Forestry Bureau. How amazing is that? Local people are able to collect data by themselves if given the opportunity."

While Dorje has many more amazing stories of his time working with WCS, he valued all parts of his position. "Every single moment that I spent and enjoyed with my coworkers, observing the beauty of wildlife, or interactions with local communities, these are sources of my knowledge, and forces of my conservation career," he says.





According to Dorje, it's always easier to advise others what to do and what not to do in the context of conservation. But when it comes to coexisting with wildlife, he believes that Indigenous Peoples and local communities are the experts. "As a Tibetan, I would say local Tibetans found [a] sustainable way to live for thousands of years, not only in terms of land and resource management, but also sharing one's habitat with surrounding beings," he says. Like local Tibetans, Dorje recommends that all people consider implementing traditional lifestyle and conservation practices. "It doesn't mean to keep ancient hunting and gathering lifestyles, but lead a life that includes positive traditional practices."





On December 26th, 2004, a deadly tsunami hit Indonesia – ravaging Aceh and sparking Ina Nisrina's conservation journey. "Since that time, I always thought that one day, I'll grow up to do something useful for Aceh because I have seen [with] my own eyes the impact of disaster – something that can happen anywhere, anytime again," she says.

Ina wanted to ensure that the small archipelago would be prepared for another natural disaster, which becomes a growing concern as the climate changes. She moved to Jakarta, where she studied disaster management and worked for a disaster and climate change program with Mercy Corps Indonesia. Along the way, Ina told herself, "I will be back to Aceh, to work for Aceh, to do something for Aceh that is connected to climate change, disaster, and [the] environment."

Ina returned to Aceh in 2018, just as she promised. She was working in disaster management for <u>UNDP</u> when she saw a job opening with WCS's Marine Program in Aceh – Ina knew right away she wanted to apply. She quickly got the job as senior coordinator before being promoted to program manager. Only two years later, she now supervises both the forest and marine programs of Aceh and North Sumatra. "Once I joined WCS, I tried to expand the partnership with the national team in Bogor, [and] find any opportunities [to] promote the Aceh program…because I want something big for Aceh," she says.

Once again, Ina achieved exactly what she set out to do. In her short time working for WCS, she has significantly strengthened the team in Aceh – and she's not the only one who recognizes the impact of their work. Many community members have shared their appreciation with Ina. "They told me about how thankful they are for WCS as we assist them to improve their economic income." Through business, safeguards, and gender equality workshops, the Aceh community has learned to come together as partners and improve its prospects. "They now can produce a beautiful package of salt fish [and] sell it to a modern market," says Ina.



Ina working with schools in Aceh to reduce earthquake and tsunami risks

Aceh has received substantial humanitarian aid since the tsunami. However, individuals of the Indonesian province feel that WCS's support stands out. "The communities and partners are happy with the WCS team and our approach," says Nisrina. The Acehnese people know they have a seat at the table and feel "they could come to a meeting with their baby and husband and join together."

One of the most positive changes the Aceh community has felt is a shift away from compressor fishing. Under this extremely dangerous yet popular practice, fishers dive deep into the ocean to catch fish with large nets. Air, along with toxic fumes from the compressor, is pumped to them through thin, plastic hoses. Compressor fishing is lifethreatening, bad for divers' long-term health, and destructive to marine ecosystems. Ina says that family members of the fishermen that WCS has assisted are relieved that they now have alternative livelihoods. They no longer have to rely on a fatal fishing method to provide for their families.



While Ina now works farther afield at the provincial level, she knows the influence of her team's work in Aceh. "I feel that all the energy we have spent [on] all the things we have done day and night has paid off," she says. Just as Ina witnessed the tragedy of the 2004 tsunami, she has seen the resilience of the Aceh community. They have shown that conservation is not something to limit life. Rather, "it's more about protect[ing] their source of life, livelihood[s], and income."



Ina with her husband



Sulemani Mohamed loves sharks. While most people fear the apex predators, they are a "keystone species" – an animal that helps define and maintain entire marine ecosystems. Perhaps that's why Sulemani feels such a connection to these aquatic animals, as he too works hard to keep a healthy reef in his native state of Zanzibar, Tanzania.

In 2020, after attaining a bachelor's degree in aquaculture science, Sulemani began volunteering in Zanzibar for the WCS Tanzania Marine Program. He went above and beyond in fieldwork and was recognized for his dedication. Only one year later, he was taken on as a marine field research assistant. "They liked what I was doing, and I started working on the shark and rays project," he says.

Sulemani currently oversees the work of other data collectors on the marine team in addition to collecting shark and ray data himself. These efforts are contributing to the development of an ambitious roadmap to protect Tanzania's sharks and rays, called a national plan of action – an urgent initiative as the majority of the shark and ray species caught in the southwest Indian Ocean are threatened.

Being in the field and working closely with the fishers of Zanzibar has been wonderfully enlightening for Sulemani: "One thing that I was not aware of [is] that the place where they go to fish, the fishing grounds, they know them by specific names." He was blown away by this traditional ecological knowledge and how it has been passed down through generations of fishing families. "We were able to draw maps showing all the fishing grounds they use to conduct their fishing activities; that's very interesting," he adds.





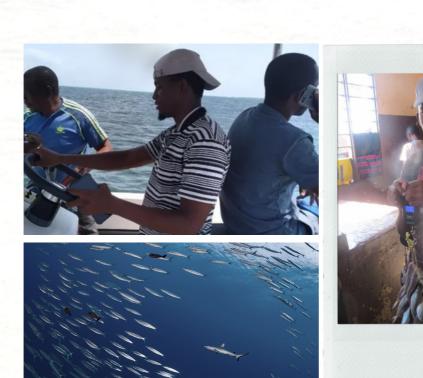
To Sulemani, the relationship between the fishing communities of northern Zanzibar and the marine ecosystem that hugs their home is astonishing. He knows many of the local fishers and often stays with them for periods of time. "They said clearly that 'The ocean is our mother. It's where we get everything."

But among the amazement is a concern. "Most small fishers conduct their activities in coral reef areas, so these areas have felt much pressure."

Sulemani is particularly worried about shark biodiversity, and the fact that fishers unknowingly catch endangered species: "In my community, it's normal to catch sharks of all species without regard [for the] critically endangered, [and] eat them...Although WCS has done great work in shark conservation, including conducting shark and rays research, education is still needed for local fishers to help conserve these species." As education initiatives in the communities continue, recognition for endangered marine species is growing.



Sulemani is hopeful that he can help shift the fishing culture of Zanzibar. By sharing knowledge about threats to sharks, working with communities to create sustainable fisheries, and helping to diversify local incomes to take pressure off of existing fisheries, he believes it is possible. "My dream is to make aquaculture a major alternative income for coastal communities to produce seafood in a sustainable way, and to initiate conservation of marine resources. Thus I call myself an aqua-dreamer."



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