

Women fighting for wildlife: Meet conservation heroes breaking the mold

Woodland Park Zoo celebrates International Women's Day

We *all* have the power to help save wildlife. This **#InternationalWomensDay**, Woodland Park Zoo shines the spotlight on women around the world who are breaking down barriers to shape a new future of conservation.



From the all-female team of reforesters who are planting a forest from the ground up, to a brave woman trekking through lush landscapes to help stop poachers in their tracks, to the story of two women living an ocean apart and working together to help save one of the most biodiverse habitats on planet Earth; these women are paving the way for future female conservationists everywhere.

From Seattle to the forests of Papua New Guinea

"When I first went to Papua New Guinea, people doubted I had the physical strength and wherewithal to do the work. I took that as a challenge."

-Lisa Dabek, PhD, Founder of Tree Kangaroo Conservation Program

SEATTLE — Twenty-five years ago, Lisa Dabek, PhD, made it her mission to save the endangered Matschie's tree kangaroo and the habitat where it lives. It was a complicated task: the rural community that is home to the tree kangaroos is more than 6,700 miles from Seattle *and* requires a challenging days-long hike to reach.

Getting there is just one of the many challenges Dabek faced: she would also need to create meaningful relationships with both the local government and the people living there. Dabek knew that focusing on a community-based approach was the only way to build trust and create change.

"I never saw *myself* as the answer, I saw us working together as a team. It was not about me saving the tree kangaroos, it was about us and the communities finding solutions," said Dabek.

With teamwork and collaboration in mind, the Tree Kangaroo Conservation Program (TKCP) established Papua New Guinea's first and only nationally-recognized Conservation Area (Yopno Uruwa Som, or YUS) and now works with communities and government to address local needs including livelihoods, health and education.

In 2021, the program now employs more than 30 people from Papua New Guinea and two in Seattle. Modi Pontio, TKCP's Associate Director in Papua New Guinea, oversees TKCP's field operations and providing leadership for the local team. She also works very closely with the team at Woodland Park Zoo, including Dr. Dabek.

"Many people that know me tell me I am a role model in the field of conservation for breaking barriers to be involved in men's issues, but I have always seen myself as another person first and then a female," said Pontio. "I actually see more impact in my own village. I am proving to my own people that a woman can, just like a man, travel out of the village, get educated, and provide for family needs back in the village."

Moving forward, Dabek, Pontio, and everyone working for TKCP is focusing on the future, with the hope that in another 25 years, TKCP will be a fully community-run program. Until then, they'll continue to work together to protect the 390,000 acres of rain forest in YUS, the rich and diverse culture of the 50 villages that call it home, and of course, the endangered Matschie's tree kangaroo.

To learn more about TKCP, visit zoo.org/tkcp.

To get in contact with Dr. Lisa Dabek or Modi Pontio, contact woodlandparkzoopr@zoo.org.

Off the beaten path: Boots on the ground

"Trust in yourself. You have something special to bring to the world of conservation. Don't let being a woman stop you."

-Wai Yee Lam, Chief Operations Officer, Rimba's Harimau Selamanya project

MALAYSIA — The path to finding one's passion can often be a windy one, and Wai Yee Lam is living proof. The former flight attendant initially trained in the psychology field, but now she's part of a team of conservation heroes working on the frontlines to save wildlife.

Their work is dangerous, but so important: Lam manages a team of rangers, all men, trekking miles into the Malaysian jungle to stop poachers. These treacherous treks to save endangered species like tigers and clouded leopards require exceptional physical and mental strength, something she explained can be intimidating to a woman entering a job currently dominated by men.

"I first started working with the Wildlife Conservation Society and saw a lot of other young women doing long distance trekking, which inspired me," said Lam. "When I joined Rimba, my mindset was 'it's not a competition; we have a mission, we complete it.' I don't have to compete for physical strength. Everyone has different skills, and everyone has different strengths that we should celebrate."

Lam says one strength that shines for women working in conservation is empathy. She says it's almost like a hidden superpower.

"Maybe it's ingrained in us, or maybe because we are a minority in this kind of work setting, we have to train ourselves to read more social cues and manage various kinds of social environments," said Lam. "Having women on the team means having balance — it creates a safer space to have different people and colleagues to talk to."

That balance is important when it comes to conservation: Lam and her colleagues from Rimba's Harimau Selamanya project must work together with government agencies like the Department of Wildlife and National Parks, Royal Malaysian Police and Terengganu State Parks to reduce poaching and protect forest habitats.

Saving species takes all of us, and Lam wants anyone who dreams of working in conservation to know that there's no one right way to get there.

"Conservation isn't just for biologists or people trained in conservation science. Each individual that has the passion for conservation is unique, you always have something in you that you can offer. Just be you."

To learn more about Rimba, visit: <https://rimba.ngo/>

To get in contact with Wai Yee Lam, contact woodlandparkzoo@zoo.org

From the ground up: The rebirth of a forest

How 12 women from a small village in Borneo are stepping up to build a forest, saving the home of orangutans, elephants, and so many other endangered animals

BORNEO — It's a race against the clock. In the Malaysian state of Sabah in Borneo, the Kinabatangan floodplain is home to endangered species such as Asian elephants, Bornean orangutans and wrinkled hornbills; but after years of deforestation, a highly degraded landscape remains. But hope remains in Kinabatangan, where an all-women team of reforesters is fighting back: rebuilding forests from the ground up.

For the past 23 years, Woodland Park Zoo's conservation partner HUTAN has been working to restore critical habitat corridors for all these endangered species and to help meet the needs of people who live in the region. And since 2008, HUTAN's all-local, all-women team of reforesters has been transforming old logging sites and even palm oil plantations. With each sapling planted, a future forest is one step closer.

This isn't the first team that has taken on the grueling task of rebuilding a forest, explains Isabelle Lackman, cofounder of HUTAN.

"Our initial team found the job physically exhausting and said that the responsibility of keeping so many fragile seedlings alive was nerve-racking," explained Lackman. "I was delighted when a first group of village women volunteered for the job, assuring me that they had been planting stuff all their lives and that they possessed the required physical and mental resilience to carry out the work."

And they do: armed with machetes and weed whackers, the women start every reforestation project by clearing out the overgrowth to make room for new trees. They painstakingly measure off where each sapling will go, leaving enough space for Borneo's pygmy elephants to weave through growing trees.

The team has now planted more than 150,000 trees across eight reforestation sites. Some of the team's plots have been growing for nearly 10 years, now able to provide fruit, shade and safe passage to local wildlife. Day by day, tree by tree, hope grows.

To learn more about HUTAN, visit zoo.org/hutan.

To get in contact with those featured in this story, email woodlandparkzoo@zoo.org.

Conservation Partners

Woodland Park Zoo partners with more than 35 wildlife conservation projects in the Pacific Northwest and around the world, including TKCP, HUTAN, and Rimba, to help support the critical work necessary to preserve wildlife and habitat.

Working with conservationists and researchers, Woodland Park Zoo focuses on a conservation strategy that includes: habitat and species conservation, research, education, local capacity building and community support.

To learn more about these projects, visit zoo.org/conservation.

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