



Fall 2026

CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL

WHERE ELEPHANTS ROAM FREE

A Maasai leader's promise
to the next generation

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Reviving Earth's
largest organism

Proof that nature is
worth investing in

Red pandas: Elusive
guardians of the Himalayas

Conservation International envisions a healthy, prosperous world in which societies are forever committed to caring for and valuing nature, for the long-term benefit of people and all life on Earth.



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Cover photo:
Benson Leyian, CEO of Big Life Foundation, photographed in Kenya's Amboseli National Park. For Leyian, protecting wildlife corridors is about more than conservation. It's about ensuring that his children, and their children, can experience a world where elephants still roam free. Turn to page 6 to learn more about Conservation International's partnership to protect southern Kenya's grasslands and wildlife corridors.

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FALL 2026

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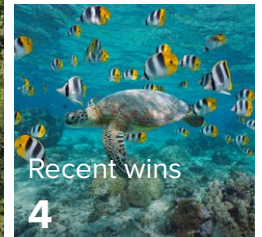
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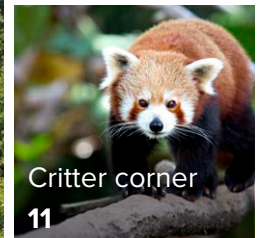
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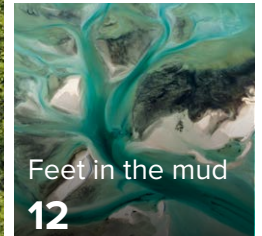
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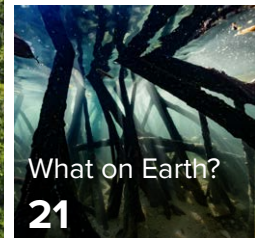
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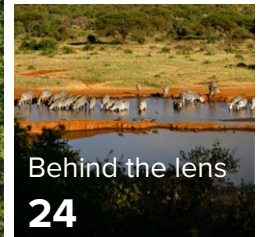
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“Why we give”

MAGGIE AND DAN COHEN

The Cohen family on a hike in Fall Run Park in Glenshaw, Pa., just north of Pittsburgh.

For Maggie and Dan Cohen, protecting nature means safeguarding the living systems that support human life. As medical professionals in Pittsburgh – Maggie is a nurse and Dan is an addiction recovery physician – they understand human well-being cannot be separated from the health of the planet. Just as powerfully, the wonder of wild places inspires them.

“We want nature’s spectacular landscapes to remain available for us, our kids, our grandchildren and for every human being.”

As parents to Maya (7), David (4) and Paul (2), Maggie and Dan strive to instill a love for nature by enjoying Pittsburgh’s sprawling greenspaces – their favorites are Schenley and Frick Parks – and sharing stories from their travels as a couple. “We’ve been lucky to have visited some really beautiful places together.” A trip to the Kīpahulu District of Haleakalā National Park in Hawai‘i remains one of their favorite memories. There, black sand beaches and crystal blue water meet lush, untamed landscapes, which inspired in them a deep appreciation for the planet’s extraordinary diversity and their commitment to protecting it.

Motivated by that sense of stewardship, Maggie and Dan have supported Conservation International for 13 years and are members of the Emerald Circle, a community of donors committed to protecting nature and improving lives.

“We love how Conservation International uses strong scientific evidence to make efficient use of our donations. Hearing about the discoveries their experts are making around the world – whether it’s studies on mangrove carbon capture or research on how nature helps prevent the spread of diseases such as malaria – gives us hope that our support is making a difference for nature.”

Looking ahead, Maggie and Dan are hopeful for a future where the ecosystems that sustain life remain resilient, and where people everywhere can continue to experience the beauty and wonder of the natural world. [🌍](#)

First gift to Conservation International:
2013

Favorite things to do in nature:

- Visit U.S. national parks, including Zion and Haleakalā
- Enjoy Pittsburgh’s wonderful public parks with their three children, Maya, David and Paul

Bucket list travel:

- See the Northern Lights in their full glory
- Snorkel as a family among coral reefs and turtles

Our “why”:

We have a strong emotional connection to wild places, but the biggest reason we want to conserve nature is because of how crucial it is to humanity’s future.

Recent wins

Together, we're making a difference for nature and people. Here are a few recent wins that your support made possible.



© Diego Pérez - SPDA / Conservación Internacional

Technology uncovers the hidden life of a rainforest

Yaguas National Park, a protected area in the Peruvian Amazon roughly the size of Connecticut, is a haven for biodiversity – a labyrinth of unbroken rainforest supporting endangered wildlife like giant otters, pink dolphins and woolly monkeys.

But for all its richness, Yaguas has been a mystery. “We didn’t really know what was there,” said Ali Swanson, Conservation International’s nature technology lead. Monitoring a place this vast and remote is prohibitively expensive – and without rigorous data, even

the most extraordinary forests are difficult to fund and defend.

That all changed when a Conservation International-led expedition flew into Yaguas armed with advanced drones, tools to collect genetic materials left behind by animals and cutting-edge insect monitoring technology – and for the first time, began to build a reliable, repeatable picture of what lives inside one of Earth’s last uncharted ecosystems.

“Know what’s there, and be able to measure change,” Swanson said. “That’s what keeps a park like this alive.”



© Conservation International

The cat that came back

Under cover of night, in the flooded forests of Cambodia, a camera trap recorded a ghost. In the monochrome glow of infrared light, a fishing cat padded along the water’s edge before slipping back into the darkness. The species is so rare it borders on myth in Southeast Asia.

Its sighting marks a turning point in the restoration of Tonle Sap, the region’s largest freshwater lake. For 15 years, Conservation International, the Cambodian government and 16 local fishing communities have worked to restore the wetlands – planting native trees, preventing pollution and overfishing, and removing invasive species.

“The cat’s return suggests fish are abundant and the flooded forests have regained the underbrush predators need,” said Sony Oum, who leads Conservation International’s work in Cambodia. “At least here, the wetlands are recovering.”



© Damocean

French Polynesia raises the bar for ocean protection

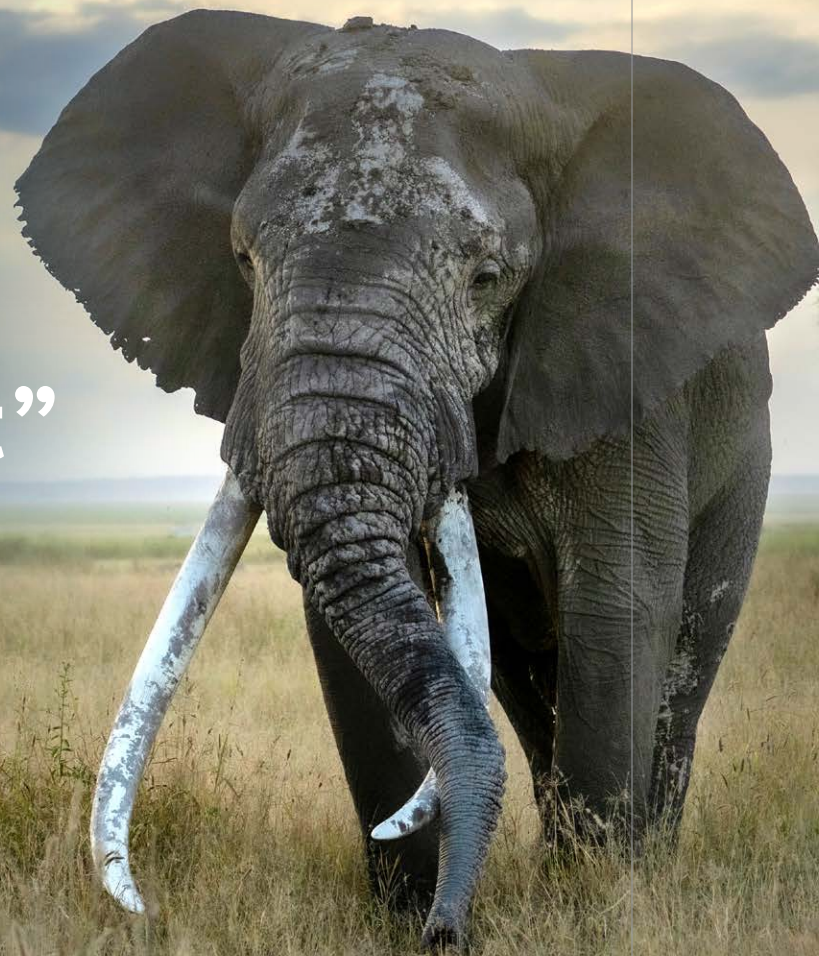
French Polynesia’s 118 islands make up one of the most biodiverse stretches of ocean on Earth. Now, the country is protecting it.

The French Polynesian government announced that 520,000 square kilometers (200,000 square miles) of ocean surrounding the Austral and Marquesas Islands – two of the ocean’s most biologically rich archipelagos – will receive the highest level of protection, where no mining, trawling or industrial fishing is permitted.

Alongside the government and local fishers, Conservation International worked to make this possible through the Blue Nature Alliance and in partnership with the Pew Bertarelli Ocean Legacy.

“This cements French Polynesia’s place as the global leader in marine conservation,” said Maël Imirizaldu of the Blue Nature Alliance. “The ocean is not simply a commodity – it’s the matrix that sustains all of us.”

“My son’s
son will
see this
elephant”



Q&A with Benson Leyian,
CEO of Big Life Foundation

BY WILL MCCARRY

Benson Leyian grew up in a Maasai community in the shadow of Kenya’s Kilimanjaro, roaming the same grasslands he now works to protect as CEO of Big Life Foundation.

Conservation International’s Senior Editorial Director, Will McCarry, caught up with Leyian outside the world-famous Amboseli National Park, with a herd of elephants grazing just behind him – part of a landscape that Conservation International and Big Life Foundation are working together to protect. He asked how a boy who once ran from a lion hunt became the man working today to save the savanna.

How does it feel to stand in this spot with elephants grazing behind you?

There is a story here that speaks right to my heart. This is a corridor where elephants and lions and other wildlife have sanctuary to move into the Chyulu Hills and beyond, into Tanzania. Animals don’t stay inside park boundaries. They follow the rain, the grass, whatever the season is asking of them. And for them to do that, this space has to stay open. That is what Big Life and Conservation International are doing, together.

© Ami Vitale



Are wildlife corridors disappearing here?

The corridor where we are standing is 45 meters (150 feet) wide at its narrowest point. If a few fences go up, or a few decisions by a handful of landowners change, it will be gone. That pressure is not from bad people. It is from a system that is changing very fast. These lands were once held communally by Maasai people – one title, shared decision-making, no fences. That is now being broken into thousands of individual parcels through a process called subdivision. Each person now owns their piece and has the right to do with it what they want. You can understand why. People need income. People need a future for their children. But if that land gets fenced, if it gets converted

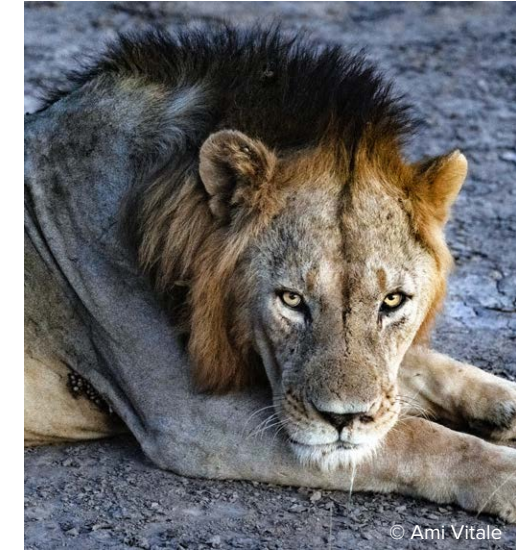


to agriculture, the corridor disappears and with it the entire ecosystem. We must ensure that keeping this land open is worth more to people than closing it. That happens through tourism; through herding that keeps the land open for wildlife and exploring the potential income from the carbon stored in these grasslands.

You were expected to become a Moran – a warrior – before you chose a different path. How does that story connect to what you do now?

I see a great deal of hope in my work.

As a young man, I lived a double life – going to school but also practicing everything that came with being a Moran. One day, I followed a group of Moran into the Chyulus on a lion hunt. When I got there, the lion had already attacked one of the men and opened up his collarbone. I left my belongings right there, and I walked home. In the eyes of my community, I had failed the test that makes a boy a man. A Moran faces the lion. That is what the years of initiation, the red ochre, the long hair, all of it is building toward – that moment of courage. And I ran.



But here is what I understood even then, and what I understand more deeply now: the Moran's entire purpose was to protect. The community, the cattle, the land. If you can face a lion, you can face anything that comes. That has not changed. What has changed is the nature of the threat and the nature of the tools. People are no longer talking about spears, we're talking about climate change; about the loss of the land that we need to thrive. So, the lion – the lion is no longer something we hunt. The lion is something we protect, because the lion, the elephant, this open grassland, they are what give this place its future. That shift, from hunting to protecting the very thing you once hunted, is the story of how this landscape survives.

What do you hope for the future of this landscape?

I hope my son, and his son, will be able to see this elephant. Not only my son, but children everywhere. Elephants cannot become fiction. That is why I am here. [🌍](#)

Nature will thank you.

A generous gift of \$1,000 or more connects you to a passionate community protecting our planet. Like the life-supporting forests at Earth's equator, Emerald Circle members power Conservation International's work all around the world.



EMERALD CIRCLE

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© Robin Moore/iLCP

Critter corner

Red pandas

With their rust-colored fur, masked faces and fluffy tails, red pandas may be the most charming residents of the Eastern Himalayas. These tree-dwelling mammals depend on healthy mountain forests that shelter extraordinary wildlife and help secure fresh water for more than 1 billion people across the region. Through our Mountains to Mangroves initiative, Conservation International and our partner Red Panda Network are reviving critical red panda habitat in eastern Nepal by planting native trees, restoring degraded forests and protecting essential water sources. [🌿](#)

DID YOU KNOW?

- 1** Red pandas aren't related to giant pandas or raccoons. They belong to their own unique family, Ailuridae.
- 2** They squeal, grunt, hiss and even make a sound described as a "huff-quack."
- 3** Their bushy tails double as cozy winter blankets.
- 4** They can climb down trees headfirst thanks to their unusually flexible ankles.
- 5** Despite being classified as carnivores, bamboo makes up most of their diet.
- 6** They spend up to 17 hours a day sleeping.
- 7** Other names for the red panda include firefox, red bear-cat and the lesser panda.



© iStock.com/MarieHolding

Feet in the mud

How Indigenous Australians are restoring Earth's largest organism

BY WILL MCCARRY

The seagrass meadows of Shark Bay can be seen from space.

From orbit, the shallow shoals of westernmost Australia appear almost bioluminescent – a sweep of teal in a sea of royal blue. This living band of color is so expansive that, until recently, scientists didn't realize it was all one plant.

When scientists sequenced samples from across the bay in 2022, they found identical DNA. What looked like a patchwork of plants was actually one clone – possibly the largest organism on Earth, which has been expanding over an area the size of Paris for more than 4,500 years.

Michael Wear, an Indigenous Australian of Malgana descent, whose family has lived in Shark Bay for millennia, saw the meadow start to collapse in real time.

“In 2011, the water got so hot so fast that the seagrass couldn’t cope,” Wear said. “It happened in stages – patches disappearing, then bigger sections. By the third year, you could see the full impact.”

In total, about 25 percent of the meadow was lost – an area about the size of Manhattan – the largest die-back of seagrass ever recorded anywhere in the world. That loss carries consequences far beyond Shark Bay. Seagrass meadows are among the planet’s most efficient natural carbon sinks, storing vast amounts of carbon in their roots and sediments.

“I remember thinking, okay. What do we do now? When Country changes, you ask why, and you act,” Wear said, using the Aboriginal idea of Country – a living relationship with place.

In response, he founded Tidal Moon, a start-up supported by Conservation International, that is restoring degraded sections of the seagrass meadow. The effort hinges on rebuilding a centuries-old trade of an unlikely creature: the humble sea cucumber.

The extraordinary sea cucumber

In the months after the heat wave, Wear watched. He walked the shoreline, talked with family, and returned to the same places again and again, looking for what had changed – and what hadn’t.



© Michael Wear

As more seagrass died, he could see the marine wildlife begin to suffer. Shark Bay is among the last strongholds for dugongs – endangered cousins of the manatee that rely almost entirely on seagrass for food. The scale of the dieback put them at real risk.

But one detail kept pulling at Wear: Almost every creature in the bay was under stress – except the sea cucumbers.

“They’re kind of slug-like,” Wear said. “But don’t be fooled. Sea cucumbers are extraordinary.”

Beneath the seabed, the sea cucumbers were doing quiet work: as bottom feeders, they turn over

the sediment and recycle nutrients, enriching the seafloor in ways that help seagrass grow back faster.

An idea began to take shape: More sea cucumbers meant that the meadow had a better chance at rebounding. And sea cucumbers happen to be very valuable. For centuries, these marine invertebrates have been harvested, dried and traded as an edible delicacy across the Asia-Pacific region – part of a long, cross-cultural economic exchange that has shaped coastal trade over vast distances.

“The trade, the culture and the commodity have been around for roughly 700 years in my community,” Wear said. “It’s the perfect commodity because it’s always in demand. And it

“

It’s the perfect commodity because it’s always in demand. And it was the perfect way to build an ocean conservation effort at scale.”

– MICHAEL WEAR

Sea cucumber harvesting connects cultural heritage, conservation and economic development in the waters of Western Australia’s Shark Bay.

was the perfect way to build an ocean conservation effort at scale.”

Today, with early support from Conservation International, that vision is moving from concept to practice – with Indigenous divers planting seagrass by hand and helping build a sea cucumber fishery designed to sustain the restoration.

As human hands begin to slowly knit back together a plant that can be seen from space, Wear looks to the sea and land itself – and to the many generations who have cared for it before him.

“I reckon if Country could speak,” Wear said, “it would say: don’t stop. Keep going.” 🐡

Feet in the mud

The unlikely partnership bringing back Brazil's woodlands

BY WILL MCCARRY

Bruno Coutinho stood on a dusty road, quietly weeping.

As a biologist and a geographer at Conservation International, Coutinho has spent a career designing and mapping landscapes on screens.

The road beneath his feet, once pixels on a monitor, was now a steep bend, following the river. Around him, the Cerrado – a mix of savanna and woodlands in southwestern Brazil – was returning. The canopy slowly closed, as tenacious, blooming layers of trees and shrubs pushed up through old pasture grass.

Standing nearby, Mark Wishnie of BTG Pactual – the Brazilian investment firm that had helped build this – was visibly moved. “We’ve all worked on projects where you have a beautiful idea,” Wishnie said later. “But it doesn’t necessarily ever come to fruition exactly as you think.”

This one had.

“They took what we planned in our little office,” Coutinho said, “and put it in the field.”

Three years ago, Conservation International made a bet on an audacious idea: that working with a commercial timber operator could save one of Brazil’s most threatened ecosystems.

“There was some risk in this relationship for both sides at the start,” Wishnie said.

What emerged instead was trust.

Fifty-fifty

The Cerrado, the vast mosaic of grasslands and woodlands that sprawls across a quarter of Brazil, harbors five percent of the world’s species. More than half of this system is already gone. Native forests and savannas have been systematically cleared for cattle and soy, overrun with invasive grasses and exhausted by decades of severe overgrazing.

Restoration of this landscape requires operating across an entire landscape and over decades: planting the right trees in the right place, working with local communities and monitoring conditions to ensure saplings survive.

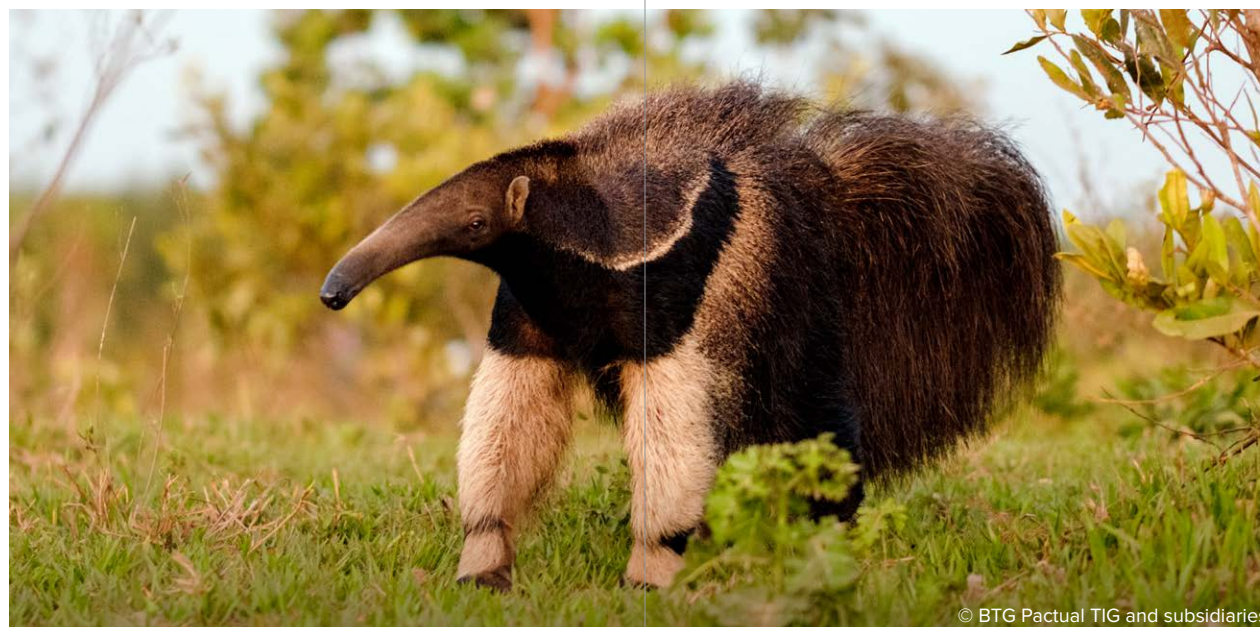
In the vast stretches of eroded, worn-out soil, Conservation International saw an opportunity – but it meant working with a timberland investor called BTG Pactual TIG. The plan was simple: replace degraded cattle pasture with 50 percent sustainably certified eucalyptus

for timber production, and 50 percent native Cerrado.

“It’s easy to form a snap judgment about planting non-native plantations anywhere outside their range,” said Will Turner, a scientist at Conservation International. “But we need to test what really works to solve climate change and save biodiversity. This is a serious commitment to improve the way we manage nature within private properties.”



The presence of tapirs, South America’s largest land mammal, indicates ecological recovery is underway across former cattle pastures.



A giant anteater traverses restored Cerrado habitat.

Both the timber and the restored ecosystem will generate carbon credits – tradeable certificates that companies purchase to offset a portion of their carbon emissions. Credits from restored native woodlands command a higher price than those from a timber plantation, because the carbon stored in an ancient, biodiverse forest is considered more permanent and more ecologically valuable than carbon stored in a single-species crop.

“The tree farms grow more quickly and provide the long-term economic activity that maintains and protects the restored forest into the future,” said Wishnie.

By combining the two, BTG Pactual TIG built a system where restoring nature makes the whole portfolio more valuable, attracting the kind of large institutional investors who can fund real scale – at breakneck speed.

“We are helping them restore 33 farms in Brazil totaling 80,000 hectares



Allowing native vegetation to recover helps reconnect habitat for wildlife, like this blue-and-yellow macaw.

(200,000 acres) – roughly the size of New York City,” Coutinho said. “And half of that is conservation and restoration. That is an enormous amount of habitat to be bringing back.”

As the woodland has returned, so has the wildlife.

Camera traps have recorded jaguars moving through the savanna, padding silently through a riverside corridor that was cattle pasture just three years ago. Maned wolves have appeared, too, foraging through grassland edges at dusk. Researchers have identified more than 1,000 species across the properties so far – including three that are globally threatened: a freshwater catfish, a Chaco eagle and an endangered cottontail rabbit, an elusive species that requires intact forest cover.

That last sighting stopped Wishnie mid-sentence when he described it. “What was inhospitable habitat for this species,” he said, almost to himself, “is now home.” 🌿

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FALL 2026

What on Earth is ‘blue carbon’?

What if some of the world’s most effective climate allies were hiding in plain sight?

From tangled mangrove roots to underwater seagrass meadows, coastal ecosystems quietly capture and store vast amounts of carbon while protecting shorelines, supporting fisheries and sustaining livelihoods. This natural phenomenon is known as “blue carbon.”

Scientists call this carbon “blue” because it’s stored in watery habitats.

Something special happens to carbon in these places. In waterlogged, oxygen-starved soils, decomposition almost stops. Carbon that would otherwise escape gets buried – locked away for thousands of years. These ecosystems are carbon vaults. And despite covering only a small portion of Earth’s surface, they store carbon at a higher rate than tropical rainforests.



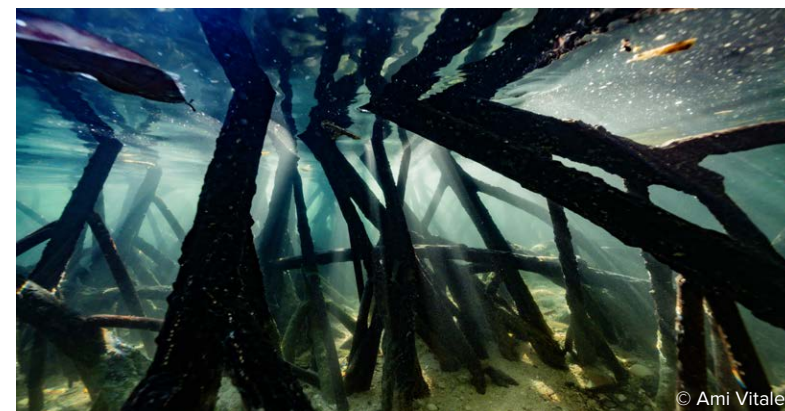
© Jafet Potenzo Lopes

Coastal, mangrove-lined landscapes like this one in Timor-Leste are working harder for the climate than most people realize.

Yet the world is losing blue carbon at an alarming rate. Scientists predict that 30 to 40 percent of tidal marshes and seagrasses and nearly all the world’s unprotected mangroves could be lost in the next century.

Conservation International is working all over the world alongside communities

whose lives have been woven into the fabric of coastal ecosystems for millennia. At the heart of every effort to protect and restore blue carbon is a community who refuses to give up their coastlines. 



© Ami Vitale

These tangled roots protect shorelines, support fisheries and help keep carbon stored underground.

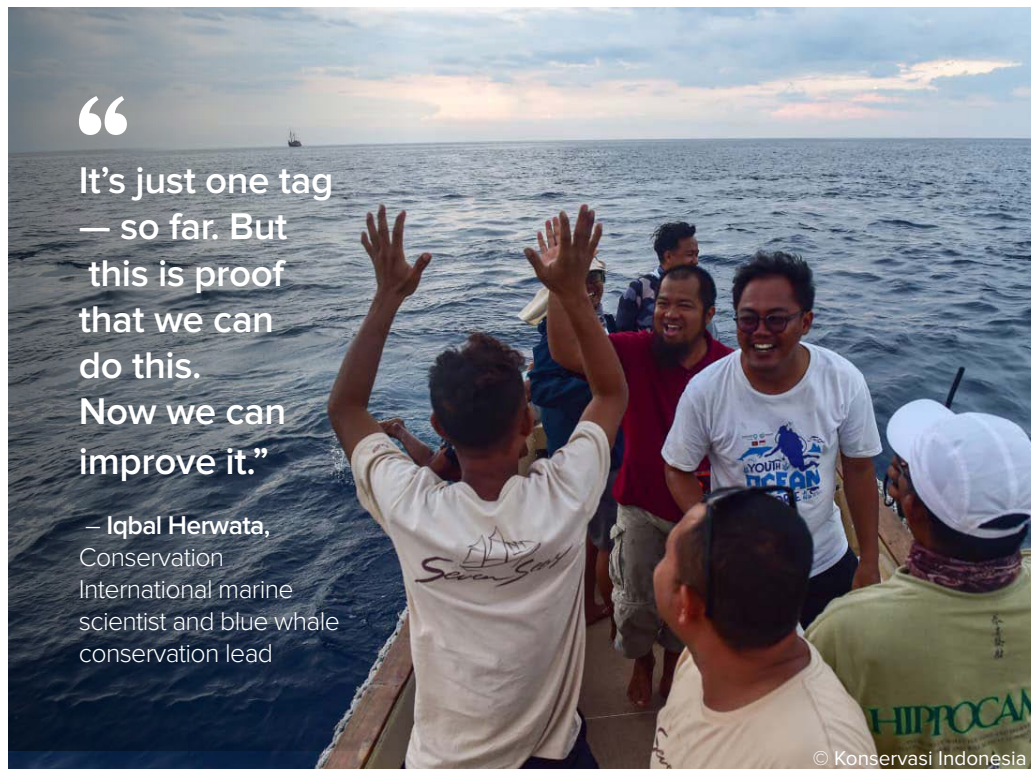
A breakthrough for blue whale conservation

For days, a small research team had watched plumes of breath rise and vanish in the waters off eastern Indonesia – blue whales surfacing, diving and then slipping away again. The team was attempting something that had never been done before – tagging the largest animal on Earth by drone.

Eight times, they missed. On the ninth attempt, Conservation International marine scientist Iqbal Herwata stood

on deck, controller in hand. The whale surfaced. He fired. The crew erupted in a chorus of cheers.

The success marks a new, less invasive way to tag the largest animal on Earth: from the air, without air guns or chasing it by boat. The tagged whale has since traveled more than 2,000 kilometers (1,200 miles), offering rare insight into a migration that scientists are only beginning to understand. [🌐](#)



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By including Conservation International in your will, you honor the deep connection between people and nature, nurturing the well-being of communities around the world far into the future. A gift in your will, trust or by beneficiary designation on a retirement or donor-advised fund creates a legacy that protects our planet and carries on your values.

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Behind the lens

Community resilience in southern Kenya

BY SARAH MARSTELLER



A world renowned photographer, filmmaker and National Geographic Explorer at Large, Ami Vitale served as a 2023-24 Conservation International Lui Walton Innovators Fellow. She is also a Royal Photographic Society Honorary Fellow and a six-time recipient of World Press Photo awards. The founder of Vital Impacts, Vitale uses visual storytelling to reveal the extraordinary people working on the front lines of war, climate change and extinction, people who refuse to let disaster define their futures. Recently, Vitale traveled to southern Kenya, where communities and iconic wildlife live side by side beneath stunning Mount Kilimanjaro, to document a powerful story of courage, coexistence and resilience.

Where was this photo taken?

This portrait [of Benson Leyian, the CEO of Big Life Foundation] was taken near Amboseli National Park in southern Kenya.

What inspires you about this place?

Communities here are at the forefront of both conservation and climate



change; they have endured years of increasingly severe and prolonged droughts that have devastated livestock, wildlife and livelihoods.

What inspires me is that these communities are not waiting for outside solutions. They are drawing on generations of knowledge while adapting to a rapidly changing climate. Their work demonstrates that conservation is not only about protecting wildlife but also about strengthening communities, restoring landscapes and building resilience in places experiencing some of the most profound impacts of a warming planet.



An interview with Ami Vitale, who captured the cover photo

© Bryan Liscinsky



You create stunning portraits. What do you enjoy most about photographing people?

I think making a portrait is really an invitation to slow down and connect. What I love most is spending time with people I might never otherwise meet, listening to their stories and discovering what we have in common. I'm fascinated by people. Everyone has a story, and usually there is so much more beneath the surface than we see at first. The camera gives me an excuse to sit with someone, ask questions and really pay attention.

The best portraits rarely happen in a few minutes. They come from spending time together and earning trust. And every once in a while, something shifts. The camera disappears, people let their guard down, and they reveal something deeply human and universal.

What do you do to ensure you're set up for a successful shot?

Preparation begins long before

I pick up a camera. I spend time understanding the story, learning about the people I'm photographing and observing the environment. I think about the moment, the light and how the setting itself contributes to the narrative.

I also try to stay open to the unexpected. Some of the strongest images happen when plans fall away and you remain attentive to moments that cannot be scripted. Patience is often the most important piece of equipment I carry.

What's one thing you want people to take away from the cover photo of Benson Leyian?

I hope people see resilience. We often hear stories about climate change through the lens of crisis, but there are also powerful stories of ingenuity, adaptation and hope. Communities are shaping a future in which conservation and human well-being are inseparable. [Q](#)

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“I love giraffes. A world without giraffes is unthinkable.”

Bryelle Broome, Ohio

“We **MUST save this planet because there is no planet B!”**

Gary Nosti, California

“Having a healthy ecosystem is vital to our health and we must make it a priority.”

Christina Faulk, South Carolina

“I am 10 years old and **LOVE elephants. I want to save them.”**

Dakota Lepinski, Florida

“Because my grandchildren and future generations deserve to enjoy the beauty of this world.”

Jacquelyn Deal, Washington

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