

Conservation news

Tusk Conservation Awards 2021 winners

In November 2021, the Tusk Trust announced the winners of its 2021 Conservation Awards. Now in their 9th year, these awards were devised with the input of Tusk Royal Patron, HRH Prince William, The Duke of Cambridge. The Tusk Conservation Awards comprise three awards, each focused on recognizing and supporting the work of leading conservationists in Africa: The Prince William Award for Conservation in Africa, the Tusk Award for Conservation in Africa and the Tusk Wildlife Ranger Award. The winners were presented with their awards by HRH The Duke of Cambridge at a ceremony in London on 22 November 2021, hosted by broadcaster Kate Silverton.

Simson !Uri-≠Khob, CEO of Save the Rhino Trust in Namibia, won the Prince William Award for Conservation in Africa. This lifetime achievement award (GBP 100,000 over 3 years) recognizes the 30 years that Simson has worked with Save the Rhino Trust to conserve Namibia's Critically Endangered black rhinoceros *Diceros bicornis*, a species on the brink of extinction when he first joined the organization.

Three emerging conservationists were shortlisted for the Tusk Award for Conservation in Africa (GBP 75,000 over 3 years): Rachel Ikemeh (founder and Director of the SW/Niger Delta Forest Project, Nigeria), Caleb Ofori-Boateng (founder and Director of Herp-Conservation Ghana) and Julie Razafimanahaka (Director of Madagasikara Voakajy, Madagascar) all received commendations in recognition of their outstanding successes, with Julie chosen as the overall winner. Both Julie and Caleb are alumni of the Conservation Leadership Programme, a partnership between Fauna & Flora International, BirdLife International and the Wildlife Conservation Society that provides project funding, training and mentoring to early-career leaders tackling priority conservation challenges. The Conservation Leadership Programme nominated both Julie and Caleb for the award.

The award celebrates Julie's 16 years working in conservation. Among her many accomplishments, she has led the formation of seven protected areas in eastern Madagascar and ensured the survival of threatened amphibians, bats and lemurs. In particular, she spearheaded the first conservation strategy for the country's iconic baobab trees, securing the management rights of over 10,000 ha of baobab forest that were previously unprotected.

The Tusk Wildlife Ranger Award (GBP 30,000 over 3 years) was given to Suleiman Saidu, a senior game guard ranger at Yankari Game Reserve in Nigeria, in appreciation of his efforts in reducing elephant poaching to only one case since 2015.

More information, including videos of the ceremony and award winners, are at tuskawards.com.

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Rediscovery of *Staurogyne repens* (Acanthaceae) in the wild after 115 years

Staurogyne repens (family Acanthaceae), informally known as creeping staurogyne, is popular for aquascaping, the aesthetic arrangement of plants, rocks and driftwood in an aquarium. This aquatic plant species, described by Nees in *Flora Brasiliensis* in 1847, is native to Brazil and Guyana, with records from the states of Amazonas, Mato Grosso and Pará in Brazil. Despite being widely cultivated and commercialized, *S. repens* is underrepresented in herbaria, with only c. 10 specimens including duplicates, the most recent collected in 1907, in Pará.

Brazil's *Official National List of Threatened Flora Species* categorizes seven of 28 native species of *Staurogyne* as Vulnerable or Endangered but *S. repens* is not included and has not yet been assessed on the IUCN Red List. In the latest revision of *Staurogyne*, Braz & Monteiro (2017, *Phytotaxa*, 296, 1–40) argued that the lack of recent collections of *S. repens* indicates it is either rare or extinct in the wild. The abundance of clones of *S. repens* available commercially suggested to us that this species could fall into Schrödinger's cat extinction paradox (Roberts & Fisher, 2020, *Oryx*, 54, 143–144), being considered simultaneously both extant and extinct, with lack of knowledge of occurrence in the wild hindering conservation of the species.

In August 2021, however, during an expedition to the Parque Nacional da Chapada das Mesas in the Cerrado of Maranhão, Brazil, we collected two small specimens of *Staurogyne* growing on rocky banks of the Farinha River. Concurrently, photographs of a similar plant on rocky banks of the Teles Pires river in Mato Grosso were posted by Milton Cordova Neyra on DetWeb, a Facebook group for Brazilian taxonomists and plant enthusiasts. Following examination of the specimens and photographs, we have been able to confirm they are *S. repens*. These are the first records of this species in the wild for 115 years and expand its known distribution to the Brazilian Cerrado. We will monitor known populations and aim to provide a Red List assessment for *S. repens*.

We thank FAPEMA (PDCTR-00123/20) and CNPq (301691/2021-5) for financial support, and Lucas Marinho for helpful insights. Our collections were the minimum required for validating the occurrence of *S. repens* and were made with permission of ICMBio (number 77388-1).

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Failing badger protection

Despite legal protection (Protection of Badgers Act 1992), 105,960 badgers were culled in the UK during 2018–2020 as part of bovine tuberculosis control measures, with licences currently issued to remove up to a further 75,930 badgers commencing 1 June 2021. Nevertheless, developments interfering with badger setts still require licence from Natural England, often necessitating that ecological consultancies mitigate any destructive effects. When a sett impedes intended development, ecological consultancies are contracted to assess the feasibility of replacement with an artificial substitute. There is, however, no legal requirement stipulating that such setts should be adopted, beyond proof the badgers have investigated their new accommodation. In response to our data request of 8 February 2021, Natural England was unable to confirm how many of 1,471 licences granted during 2019–2020 required the construction of artificial setts to replace those closed down or whether any replacement setts subsequently supported breeding.

Surveying ecological consultancies via the British Ecologists Facebook Group during 19 May–15 June 2021, we established that only 10 of 29 respondents were required by Natural England to conduct follow-up monitoring of the artificial setts they constructed; eight additional artificial setts were monitored of the consultant's own volition. Of these 18 setts, breeding was detected at only eight. The success rate is likely to be lower among consultants involved in artificial sett construction who did not respond to our survey. Many artificial setts fail either because the sett is not located within the territorial range of the disenfranchised badger group, as a result of a lack of territorial baitmarking surveying, or because the sett is not sited and constructed in the correct soil substrate to achieve the underground complexity and thermal stability badgers require, especially for breeding success (Tsunoda et al., 2018, *Journal of Thermal Biology*, 74, 226–233). With culling, traffic accidents and direct persecution already exerting a c. 20% additional mortality burden on the UK's c. 485,000 badgers (Judge et al., 2017, *Scientific Reports*, 7, 276), this is an underappreciated issue that needs urgent attention. Every effort should be made to ensure that investments in conservation mitigation are effective; simply demonstrating compliance with minimal

criteria does not serve intended welfare or conservation goals.

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Habitats of the Endangered Caspian seal identified as Important Marine Mammal Areas

The Caspian seal *Pusa caspica* lives only in the landlocked Caspian Sea in western Asia. Since 2008 it has been categorized as Endangered on the IUCN Red List, having declined by > 70% in the 20th century, primarily as a result of unsustainable hunting for the species' fur and blubber. On 6 December 2021, the IUCN Task Force on Marine Mammal Protected Areas, a joint task force of the IUCN Species Survival Commission and the World Commission on Protected Areas, announced that three Important Marine Mammal Areas have been identified for the Caspian seal as part of 14 new such areas for the marine mammals of the Black Sea, Turkish Straits and Caspian Sea (see marinemammalhabitat.org/imma-eatlas for further details).

The main threats to Caspian seals stem from human activities, including high rates of seal mortality in fishing gear set for sturgeon poaching, and habitat degradation arising from coastal development. The newly identified Caspian Sea Important Marine Mammal Areas are not protected but are essential habitat for the species. Currently, there are no protected areas designated specifically for the conservation of the Caspian seal that prohibit all forms of economic or industrial activity. It is hoped that this new initiative will stimulate the development of stronger protection for key Caspian seal habitat, including winter breeding ice, migration routes, foraging areas and sites used for haul out on land for resting and moulting. Increasing levels of disturbance have caused Caspian seals to abandon most of their traditional haul-out sites. The formerly large aggregations of the species are now rarely seen.

The Caspian seal was added to the national Red Book of Russia and the List of Rare and Endangered Species of Plants and Animals of Kazakhstan in 2020, making it Red Listed in all five Caspian countries. Following a proposal initiated by the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Caspian seal was added to Appendices I and II of the United Nations Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals in 2017.