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Media Contacts

Emily Garrett
Director of Public Relations
317-630-2010
egarrett@indyzoo.com

Alliy Moyer
Conservation PR Specialist
317-630-3265
amoyer@indyzoo.com

Chastin Irwin
VOX Global
765-543-4886
tirwin@voxglobal.com

Indianapolis Prize Unveils Top Ten Finalists for Emerging Conservationist Award

INDIANAPOLIS, Ind. – Officials from the Indianapolis Prize—the world’s leading award for animal conservation—have named ten Finalists for the 2025 Emerging Conservationist Award.

The Emerging Conservationist Award, made possible by the Kobe Foundation, is given to a conservationist under the age of 40 who is making a clear impact saving a species or group of species. The Winner will receive \$50,000 to further their efforts.

The Indianapolis Prize is a signature conservation initiative of the Indianapolis Zoo. At a critical time for our planet, the Indianapolis Prize brings the world’s attention to the cause of animal conservation and the brave, talented and dedicated people who spend their lives saving the Earth’s endangered animal species.

“It is an honor to recognize these extraordinary conservationists who represent the next generation in our profession. Their passion and dedication to protecting the planet’s most vulnerable species gives us hope for the future of life on Earth,” noted Dr. Rob Shumaker, president and CEO of the Indianapolis Zoological Society, Inc.

The Winner of the Emerging Conservationist Award will be honored at the 2025 Indianapolis Prize Gala presented by Cummins Inc. on Saturday, Sept. 27, 2025.

The Finalists for the 2025 Emerging Conservationist Award:

Arely Ramírez-García, Ph.D. (Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, Mexico) – Accomplished conservationist in freshwater fish ecology of central Mexico, Dr. Ramírez-García has been instrumental in the reintroduction of two ‘extinct in the wild’ species to the Teuchitlán River. Ramírez-García is involved in numerous reintroduction programs and focuses on the control and eradication of invasive species such as animals, plants and other organisms introduced outside of their natural range.

Aristide Takoukam Kamla, Ph.D. (African Marine Mammal Conservation Organization, Cameroon) – Marine wildlife ecologist dedicated to African manatee conservation, Dr. Kamla founded the African Marine Manatee Conservation Organization in 2024. The non-profit’s vision is to make Africa’s coastal and aquatic environment a safe home for marine species, while considering the best interests of local people. Kamla created the SIREN mobile app to help fishers report opportunistic sightings, bycatch and strandings of aquatic megafauna along the coast of Cameroon.

Mwezi Badru Mugerwa (Embaka, Uganda) – Researcher and conservation community leader working to protect the African golden cat, Mugerwa established the first community-based anti-poaching project at Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park in Uganda. Under his leadership, the non-profit has developed into a formally registered local conservation organization called Embaka with 1,900 members. Through Embaka, he has pioneered creative solutions to tackle poaching and human-wildlife conflict.

David Pavlik (W.K. Kellogg Biological Station, Michigan State University, USA) – Conservation biologist with expertise in the recovery and reintroduction of North America's most endangered butterfly species, Pavlik lends his knowledge on captive rearing to conservation programs throughout North America. Through his expert advice, these programs have successfully prevented extinction, namely saving the federally endangered Poweshiek skipperling butterfly, growing the highly imperiled pollinator species population to nearly 2,000 individuals.

Elisa Panjang (Pangolin Aware, Malaysia) – Dedicated conservation biologist with more than a decade of experience, Panjang leads conservation efforts for Sunda pangolins in Malaysia as the founder and director of Pangolin Aware. Panjang's groundbreaking research has greatly enhanced the understanding of this elusive species. Her scientific and technical advice has been a key piece in strengthening legal frameworks that protect the future of pangolins.

Hollie Booth, Ph.D. (Yayasan Kebersamaan Untuk Lautan, Indonesia) – Marine conservation researcher Dr. Booth has dedicated her career to designing and implementing effective programs to protect Indonesia's shark and ray populations. As the founder and chair of the NGO, Yayasan Kebersamaan Untuk Lautan, Booth has worked with local government, researchers and small-scale fisheries to establish the world's first randomized trial of pay-to-release program for critically endangered sharks and rays. Dr. Booth applies her research to advocate for both governmental policy and practical applications such as private-sector funding.

Iroko Tanshi, Ph.D. (University of Washington, Seattle, USA, and Small Mammal Conservation Organization, Nigeria) – Leading bat conservationist, Dr. Tanshi aims to create a future for African bat species. In 2016, Tanshi discovered a small population of the rare short-tailed roundleaf bat, a species that had not been seen in 40 years. She founded the Small Mammal Conservation Organization after this discovery to draw attention to their silent extinction and amplify research findings regarding the unique habitat needs of small-sized mammals that are often neglected by conservation and ecology programs.

Kumar Paudel (Greenhood Nepal, Nepal) – Conservation practitioner focused on protecting Nepal's critically endangered pangolins. Paudel created the Nepal Pangolin Roundtable in 2015 through an organization he founded, Greenhood Nepal. Because pangolins were a relatively misunderstood species, he gathered key stakeholders to scale efforts to protect

them. The event catalyzed a species action plan and resulted in policy frameworks aimed at saving pangolins from poaching and illegal trade.

Sergio A. Balaguera-Reina, Ph.D. (University of Florida, USA, and ProCAT, Colombia) – Pioneering conservation biologist focused on understanding the roles that crocodile species play in aquatic and coastal systems. Dr. Balaguera-Reina develops conservation plans that provide support for crocodiles and other species as well as the habitats and landscapes that they inhabit. Two years ago, he was named a 2023 Indianapolis Prize Emerging Conservationist Finalist. His accomplishments also include co-founding an NGO, ProCAT, in his native Colombia. ProCAT engages with local communities to advance practical conservation measures.

Yik-Hei Sung, Ph.D. (Lingnan University, Hong Kong, and University of Suffolk, England) – Ecologist and conservationist striving to protect endangered freshwater turtles and tortoises in Asia due to illegal trafficking and poaching. Prof. Sung's research has been pivotal in informing conservation actions locally and globally. Sung's technique using infrared cameras aids in successfully detecting illegal hunting and trade.

For additional media assets related to the 2025 Emerging Conservationist Finalists, [click here](#). To learn more about the Emerging Conservationist Award, visit the [Indianapolis Prize](#) website.

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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. Since 2006, the Indianapolis Prize has awarded more than \$7 million in unrestricted cash awards, advancing the work of conservation scientists through financial support and public awareness. The Indianapolis Prize is a signature conservation initiative of the Indianapolis Zoological Society, Inc.

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