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STORY BY

ripple



effect

ILLUSTRATION BY

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For 30 years, WWF's Russell E. Train Education for Nature Program has supported conservation leaders from around the world.



WHEN SUZANA PADUA left behind a budding career as an interior designer to retrain as a conservationist, she moved into Brazil's Atlantic Forest and, by 1992, had founded the Instituto de Pesquisas Ecológicas (Institute for Ecological Research, or IPÊ). Her friends back in Rio de Janeiro thought she was crazy, she said.

The NGO, which she founded with her husband Claudio, launched with 10 employees to protect the rarest of New World monkeys—the endangered black lion tamarin, which is found almost exclusively in the Atlantic Forest's Morro do Diabolo State Park. “That was a very precious time for me,” she recalled. “I began to work on educational projects with children, and I realized how people had to be touched on a personal level for nature to survive.”

Three decades later, IPÊ has 120 employees, works across four of Brazil's biomes, and runs a conservation-focused education center that's unleashed 215 master's students into the world and trained about 7,000 other students in short-term environmental courses.

A few years ago, Padua gathered alumni of the master's program for a summit to learn about the impact IPÊ had on their lives. “I got back to the hotel that night and told Claudio, ‘If we die today, we have contributed somehow,’ she recalled. “I saw then that we had made a difference.”

Introducing EFN

To get to this point, Padua needed a little help. In 2000, IPÊ sought formal accreditation from Brazil's Education Ministry, and Padua realized they would require additional doctorates on staff to receive it. She applied for a grant with WWF's Russell E. Train Education for Nature Program (EFN), which provides financial support to conservation leaders in Africa, Asia, and Latin America—including the Caribbean. The funds helped Padua conduct field research, obtain a doctoral



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Suzana Padua • EFN Alum
Founder of Instituto De Pesquisas Ecológicas



degree from the University of Brasilia, and launch the master's program in 2008.

This past April, Padua found herself once again at an alumni summit, where she shared the impact EFN had had on her work. "Education is the most powerful way for you to change realities," Padua said, giving the presentation in a stylish toucan-inspired pantsuit. "For me, I can tell you it was a turning point."

Joining Padua at a conference room in the historic town of Antigua, Guatemala, were 48 other EFN alumni. They flew in from across the world to mark the program's 30th anniversary.

Over the years, EFN has assisted over 600 institutions in implementing training programs to further skills in stewarding natural resources. The program funds educational institutions like IPÊ in biodiversity-rich areas so they can continue to sustain the pipeline of early-career conservation

leaders. EFN has also supported over 3,700 individuals from 60 nations—like Padua—in their pursuit of undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degrees.

"Three decades ago, our founder, Russell E. Train, envisioned that we needed a world where there were local leaders stewarding their own natural resources," Nelly Kadagi, EFN's director, told the crowd at the summit in Guatemala. Though the program was created 30 years ago, she added, "EFN represents the future of conservation."

The event in Guatemala was a space for alumni to compare past experiences and brainstorm more inclusive ways of ensuring that plans to save biodiverse places are made by the people who live in them. It was also a chance to look at the exponential impact of each grantee, like Padua, exploring the ripple effects their training has had on others in their home countries.

“You cannot just develop an individual; you have to develop a community, and you have to develop institutions,” explained Kadagi. “And it’s inspiring, because EFN allows many of us to bring our visions to fruition.”

Kadagi would know. Born in Kenya and trained as a marine fisheries scientist, she’s an EFN alum herself. Since 2020, she’s steered the program forward, helping expand and deepen the pool of conservation leaders, including many who flew into Guatemala to connect and activate the global community of alumni, so that it may identify and steward solutions to biodiversity and climate challenges at different scales.

“It’s not every day that you get to be inspired by colleagues from all over the world,” Johanna Prüssmann, a biologist from Colombia, shared with other alumni. “Being here,” added Fransiska Kangombe, a plant ecologist from Namibia, “feels like finding your tribe.”

Bowdy Train, the son of EFN’s founder, is pleased by the program’s impact. “My dad believed education was an investment in human infrastructure and a powerful force for the future,” he said. “The success of EFN, and its remarkable impacts on people, communities, and conservation over the past 30 years, prove just how right he was.”

Global Connections

Kuenzang Dorji, a conservationist and primatologist, saw the event in Guatemala as an important milestone. Not only was it the 30th anniversary of EFN, which had supported his professional development and overseas education, but it was also the 20th anniversary of Dorji’s conservation journey.

His story began back in Lhuntse, in rural eastern Bhutan, where he grew up with nine siblings in a farming family. His father chose him as the only child to get a modern education, while his five brothers became monks and his sisters became farmers. “He knew that if I was enrolled in school, I could go beyond our village,” Dorji said.

That education only lasted until 10th grade, but with some additional training, Dorji was able to become a park ranger at Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park, where he developed a passion for tiger research. It was a job he held for 12 years, until he saved up enough money to go to Bhutan’s College of Natural Resources. “I realized the power of education, the power of knowledge, and the power of skills to do conservation and contribute to community development,” he recalled.

“EFN grantees are united by a common purpose—to make a difference for their communities and the planet. That congruence makes durable change not just possible, but probable.”

— AILEEN LEE, chief of programs for the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, which provided seed funding for EFN in the early 2000s

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Kuenzang Dorji • Train Faculty Fellow
Conservationist and primatologist, Bhutan

“So, I didn’t stop there.”

Dorji went on to get a master’s from Central Washington University in the US in 2021, and he’s currently a doctoral student at the University of Calgary in Canada. Over the years, he’s switched his primary focus away from attention-grabbing tigers to Bhutan’s primates and overlooked smaller mammals. Through an EFN grant, Dorji was able to train 30 people in Bhutan to conduct conservation research on rodents and bats. “No one had done it before,” he explained at the conference in Guatemala. “Having people trained on how to collect data allows the biodiversity survey to be more complete.”

Dorji has supervised eight students back in Bhutan who, after joining him in the field, are researching primates or small mammals for their undergraduate degrees. “When I come back, I make sure that I transfer my knowledge and skills to other people,” he said. “Otherwise, the skill ends with me when I retire.”

Other EFN alumni have gone on to discover new species, create new protected areas, or enact environmental legislation vital to their countries. In fact, more than 90% of EFN alumni are now working to advance conservation in their regions, helping to nurture conservation leaders, and tackling the most pressing challenges to nature and people in the places where WWF works.

Of course, biodiversity-rich countries like Bhutan are where the need—and opportunity—for local leadership is greatest. Two Bhutanese researchers flew to Guatemala for the EFN alumni summit. Yet, remarkably, this was the first time they’d met face-to-face. Dorji sees this as an obvious example of the importance of using EFN alumni to build a network. The program, after all, is not merely about the replication of individual grants over time; it’s about the amplification of that investment when grant recipients work together as leaders in their fields.



Grounded Solutions

On the final day of the summit, the alumni group took a field trip to a forest restoration project in Totonicapán, an Indigenous community three hours northwest of Antigua. They toured 13 greenhouses, each packed with some 16,000 plantlings thanks in part to funds provided by EFN's Forest Restoration Grant. In good years, up to 125,000 plants will reach maturity, allowing community members to reforest up to 247 acres of degraded lands.

The educational adventure to Totonicapán was particularly eye-opening for Julie Hanta Razafimanahaka, who leads a kindred project in Madagascar through her biodiversity conservation organization, Madagasikara Voakajy. Razafimanahaka has an ambitious goal of restoring almost 20,000 acres of degraded areas across Madagascar. "Now, I have a vision for what the nurseries could look like," she said.

Born in the capital city of Antananarivo, Razafimanahaka said her conservation journey started rather intuitively when she was on a camping trip at 13. It was the first time that she—a city girl—saw an indri lemur in the wild. "I remember the guide said that this species might disappear in a few more years because of habitat destruction," she recalled. "I thought that when I went to university maybe I could do something about it."

Leaving a legacy is important for Razafimanahaka—and it starts right at home. "It's quite incredible that a person from Madagascar wouldn't see a lemur until they were 13," she said. "So, I took my daughter to see indris when she was just six months old. She now asks to go to the forest for all her holidays."

Like the indris, more than 90% of Madagascar's species are found nowhere else on Earth. One of the drivers of their decline is habitat destruction, making forest restoration key to any solution. That's why Razafimanahaka's organization, Madagasikara Voakajy, has been a three-time recipient of EFN's forest restoration grant. It's one of several hundred grassroots organizations to have received such funding over the years, with the goal of ensuring that educational opportunities reach the community level.

EFN community-based grant recipients have planted over 2 million trees and restored almost 2,500 acres of native ecosystems. WWF estimates that more than 17,000 community members have benefited from these forest restoration programs.

The grant Madagasikara Voakajy received allowed it to hire a full-time botanist, who trained nursery professionals in 10 communities near the Mangabe protected area to collect seeds from the forest and set up nurseries of fast-growing trees favored by lemurs. "Before EFN, we would have reforestation as a side project, but with EFN we were able to plan it well," Razafimanahaka said.


The nurseries not only restore vital habitat for endemic creatures; they also help communities create sustainable incomes through agroforestry. As the leader of a team of 72 people, Razafimanahaka works to balance biodiversity protection with human development, ensuring that the people living in this area are considered in any decisions.



Exponential Impact

It's a message echoed in EFN's new strategic plan, which is a departure from the top-down approach of the past. "It allows us to be more collaborative, more inclusive, and more targeted in terms of understanding cultural relevancy when it comes to collectively supporting the next generation of conservation leaders," Kadagi said, unveiling the plan at the conference in Guatemala.

"What is different," she added, "is that we are tapping into the power of our alumni community to co-create interventions that speak to what is needed on the ground, and to be much more intentional in how we do it."

That, in a nutshell, is what has been learned over the past three decades. It's also the ethos that will carry the EFN program into the future so its impact continues to ripple around the world. 



opening doors

EFN is not the only way WWF is helping to foster the next generation of conservation leaders. The **BRIDGE Internship program**—short for Building Relationships, Inclusivity, Diversity, Growth, and Excellence—was launched in 2021 to introduce students from underrepresented backgrounds to career paths in the environmental sector.

“At WWF, we see our vision as having a staff that’s as diverse as the natural world we’re seeking to protect,” explains Jessica Leung, program manager for Early Talent Diversity Programs. “We know that everyone’s unique backgrounds and views can help us in solving extremely complicated conservation problems.”

BRIDGE offers 10-week paid internships to about 40 undergrad and grad-level students each year, targeting people of color, people with disabilities, and veterans, among other underrepresented communities. Those accepted receive market-based compensation. Leung says the guaranteed paycheck helps break one of the historical barriers that’s prevented many students from attaining career-aligned summer jobs. Interns can also work virtually if a 10-week stay in Washington, DC, is unfeasible, removing another barrier.

BRIDGE is aimed at individuals breaking into the conservation space who may have never seen themselves reflected in the sphere. “If there is already a lack of diversity within a sector, you don’t even have a role model to show you that conservation is an option,” Leung explains. The program—made possible through generous support from donors like Rebecca Eisen, Anne B. Keiser, Donald and Karen Wagoner, and others—is about “turning that light switch on” for everyone, from budding biologists to accountants, who may not have realized that work

in conservation takes many forms.

WWF has also recently launched a new leadership program aimed at mid-career conservation professionals from across the Americas.

The Boundless Fellowship supports diverse cohorts of emerging conservation leaders with about 10 years of work experience under their belts. “These are folks who are right at that point in their careers where they would benefit from a community and some mentorship to help them solve big, thorny challenges,” explains Ben Wilcox, the program’s executive director.

Over the course of two years, fellows participate in monthly seminars and receive direct mentorship from a distinguished group of conservation leaders, including WWF-US CEO Carter Roberts, scientist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer, and former President of the Inter-American Development Bank Luis Alberto Moreno. They also build cross-regional networks on trips to conservation projects located in critical landscapes and seascapes. These journeys are the heart and soul of the program, Wilcox says.

“We’re focused on giving our fellows moments of inspiration and insight, providing them access to ideas and collaboration that will motivate new solutions to persistent challenges in their work,” he explains.

At press time, the first fellows were set to convene in the Peruvian Amazon, where they will travel the eastern slope of the Andes, traversing a series of biodiverse biomes. This cohort will represent eight countries and 10 different ecosystems. Moreover, each member will bring different skills to the table, allowing scientists to mingle with journalists and policymakers to chat with entrepreneurs.

“Our goal,” says Wilcox, “is to give Boundless fellows an experience that marks an inflection point in their careers that ignites new possibilities.”

“With EFN we were able to plan [the reforestation project] well.”

Julie Hanta
Razafimanahaka • EFN Alum
Founder of Madagasikara Voakajy



To learn more about these three programs, visit:

wwf.is/EFN2024

wwf.is/BRIDGE2024

wwf.is/Boundless2024