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UCT alum presented with prestigious Whitley Award



Lucy Kemp

Photo: Beautiful News

South African conservationist and University of Cape Town (UCT) alum Lucy Kemp has received a prestigious Whitley Award worth over R790 000 to align traditional beliefs with new conservation action that will protect the Southern Ground-hornbill and its habitat.

The Whitley Awards are presented annually to individuals from the Global South by the [Whitley Fund for Nature](#), a charity based in the United Kingdom. This year's awards took place during a virtual celebration on Wednesday, 12 May.

Six conservationists were recognised for their commitment to conserving some of the planet's most endangered species and natural habitats. During the celebration, they received messages of support from charity patron Her Royal Highness, The Princess Royal and charity trustee Sir David Attenborough.

“Whitley Award winners are local environmental heroes, harnessing the best available science and leading projects with passion. I admire their courage, their commitment, and their ability to affect change. There are few jobs more important,” said Sir Attenborough.

More about Kemp

Kemp, who is one of the six conservationists, graduated from UCT with BSc, BSc (Hons) and MSc in Zoology.

As the child of hornbill research pioneers, Kemp was taken on trips to breeding sites across Africa and Asia from just a few months old and spent her childhood surrounded by wildlife. Her successful early career in conservation led her to work on programmes to protect black rhinos, wild dogs and cheetahs before she returned to her roots and became project manager of the [Mabula Ground Hornbill Project](#) in 2010.

With her Whitley Award, Kemp will implement local custodianship outside of protected areas in South Africa. Custodians are trained to protect natural nests and install artificial nests where needed, which will improve breeding success. In addition, a network of citizen scientists, led by regional champions, will support an intensive national monitoring programme.

Kemp will also document cultural beliefs, so that indigenous knowledge can be fully incorporated into conservation activities, as well as producing national roadmaps to recovery for Namibia and Botswana where the species is most threatened beyond South Africa.

“A magically wild childhood, filled with travel and exploration, instilled the belief in me that the careful balance of nature is truly precious. Most threats to species are caused by humans so it’s important that we educate ourselves and learn how we can adapt our actions in order to better protect them. My work with schools and young people provides me with hope that the next generation will use their knowledge to live in harmony with our area’s remarkable creatures,” said Kemp.

About Africa's thunderbird

With its striking red-black-white colouring and rhythmic, drum-like call, the Southern Ground-hornbill is a long-lived and large-bodied bird. Valued culturally as the bringer of rain, the hornbill is said to have the ability to predict, signal and even command the summer rains and are believed to be so powerful that they can avert lightning strikes. Many farmers rely on sightings of the bird for a signal of when to prepare their land for crops and are growing increasingly concerned with their decline.

Now endangered in southern Africa, the Southern Ground-hornbill has disappeared from 70% of its historical range. Cultural protection has kept some populations safe but downward trends continue – mostly on commercial farmland and some communal grazing areas where western influence trumps traditional beliefs.

Nest availability is a major factor in breeding success. The Southern Ground-hornbill is a territorial creature that needs its own space. If ideal nest sites are scarce, it will choose a sub-optimal site rather than leave its territory, which increases vulnerability to predation or flooding and limits chick survival.

Of Kemp's work and her community-based approach to conserving the Southern Ground-hornbill, founder of the Whitley Fund for Nature, Edward Whitley, said: "Lucy's passion continues to inspire so many people. Her work with communities to conserve the Southern Ground-hornbill – a cultural icon – is an example of the impact we can make collectively. Her family must be proud that she is able to carry on their pioneering research so this species survives. We are delighted to welcome Lucy into our network of Whitley Award winners."

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