Summary

Wildlife Conservation Network's Rising Wildlife Leaders (RWL) - Career Program is transforming conservation by empowering dedicated local conservationists with the skills, networks, and opportunities needed for long-term success in the field. The program reduces barriers to professional growth and ensures that conservation leadership remains rooted locally in the landscapes and communities where it is needed most. By investing in the next generation of conservation leaders, we are strengthening local expertise, enhancing decision-making, and securing a sustainable future for wildlife.

Established in 2021, the Career Program supports emerging conservation leaders in Africa and Asia working across diverse species, landscapes, and conservation priorities. Through both species-focused and thematic cohorts, the program addresses critical conservation challenges by investing in the people working directly to protect wildlife, engage communities, and advance locally led conservation solutions.

The program recognizes that long-term conservation success depends not only on protecting wildlife but also on strengthening the leadership, professional capacity, and connections of conservationists who understand the ecological, social, and cultural contexts in which they work.

Program Support

To support participants' professional growth, the Career Program will provide up to three years of tailored support through:

Individualized Capacity Building

Each participant develops a Professional Development Plan (PDP) tailored to their career trajectory, professional-development needs, and leadership aspirations. Participants receive up to $4,000 annually to attend selected trainings, workshops, and convenings that directly support their PDP goals. Training support is not available for academic degrees.

Professional Mentorship

Each participant is paired with an experienced conservation professional who serves as their mentor throughout the program. Mentors are selected based on their professional experience and alignment with the participant's development goals, geographical context, and areas of interest. Mentors and participants work together, with WCN's support, to advance the participant's professional goals and meet at least quarterly.

Community Building and Networking

WCN provides facilitated virtual and/or in-person opportunities for participants to connect, exchange knowledge, and learn from fellow Rising Wildlife Leaders and a broader network of conservation professionals. The program encourages collaboration across organizations, countries, and conservation landscapes, strengthening professional relationships that can continue beyond the program.

Financial Support

Participants may be eligible to apply for mini-grants to alleviate barriers to career development and receive select project support aligned with their PDP, subject to program guidelines and approval.

Qualifying Criteria

The Rising Wildlife Leaders Career Program supports early- to mid-career local conservation professionals who have had limited opportunities for career advancement and are actively engaged in applied community-based conservation.

Applicants should meet the following criteria:

- Be a local national working in their home country or region in Africa or Asia. Individuals from groups historically underrepresented in conservation leadership are strongly encouraged to apply.
- Be actively engaged in wildlife conservation, including field-based, community-based, species-focused, or other applied conservation initiatives relevant to the cohort's focus.
- Have 3–10 years of paid conservation experience and be at an early- to mid-career stage.
- Be currently employed in a role that directly contributes to wildlife conservation, whether as a staff member, program lead, or organizational director.
- Hold a bachelor's degree or have equivalent professional experience in a field relevant to conservation.
- Demonstrate a commitment to practical, locally grounded conservation solutions that contribute to meaningful and lasting conservation outcomes, rather than purely academic research without an applied component.
- Demonstrate initiative, commitment, collaboration, self-motivation, and a willingness to learn and grow professionally.
- Show leadership potential and a desire to apply new skills and knowledge to strengthen their organizations, communities, and conservation initiatives.
- Be nominated by an eligible conservation professional or organization in accordance with the nomination requirements for the relevant cohort.

Participant Requirements

- **Actively engage in all program offerings:** Participants are expected to actively utilize all key program offerings, including capacity building, mentorship, and networking.
- **Complete onboarding:** Selected participants must be available for virtual onboarding, mentor matching, and the development of a Professional Development Plan with WCN's program manager during the first three months.
- **Pursue ongoing capacity building:** Participants must commit to at least two capacity-building opportunities each year, which may be virtual or in-person. Participants working predominantly in remote field locations with limited connectivity will be required to develop a realistic plan for accessing professional-development opportunities.
- **Maintain mentorship engagement:** Participants must engage actively with their mentor and meet with their mentor and WCN's program manager at least quarterly to discuss progress, professional goals, and career-development needs.
- **Contribute to peer learning:** Participants are expected to participate in peer-learning, leadership-development, and networking opportunities, and to share relevant knowledge and experience with colleagues and other emerging conservation professionals.
- **Submit required reporting:** Participants must submit annual progress reports, participate in pre- and post-program surveys, and meet financial reporting requirements where applicable.

Application Requirements

The Rising Wildlife Leaders Career Program recruits participants through a nomination-based application process, with opportunities announced for specific cohorts according to program priorities and available funding. Nominations are invited from eligible conservation professionals and organizations within WCN's partner networks and other designated conservation networks relevant to each cohort. An approved nominator should have sufficient knowledge of the candidate's professional experience, conservation contributions, leadership potential, and development needs to provide a meaningful recommendation.

The nomination and application process generally includes:

- Submission of a nomination by an eligible conservation professional or organization.
- Completion of the required application information demonstrating the candidate's eligibility, professional experience, conservation contributions, and career aspirations.
- Review and selection based on program eligibility, demonstrated potential, professional development needs, and alignment with the relevant cohort's objectives.

Application forms and nomination instructions are shared directly with eligible nominators and are not publicly listed.

Please note, each call for nominations may have specific eligibility criteria, geographic or thematic priorities, nomination limits, and application deadlines. These details will be communicated when applications open for the relevant cohort.

If you have any questions about the Career Program, please visit our Frequently Asked Questions.
If you don't see your question there, email career-program@wildnet.org.