

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

· SUMMER 2026 ·

**RIISING TO THE
CHALLENGE OF HUMAN-
WILDLIFE CONFLICT**

**TURNING TRADITIONAL
HEALERS INTO PANGOLIN
AMBASSADORS**

**20 YEARS OF ELEVATING
LOCAL LEADERSHIP**



WCN

Wildlife Conservation Network

Rising to the Challenge of Human-Wildlife Conflict

Painted dogs are highly social animals that are known to care for sick and injured pack members. But this behavior also makes them especially vulnerable to vehicle collisions, because when one dog is hit the entire pack is at risk.



A PACK OF PAINTED DOGS CROSS A ROAD AS TRAFFIC WAITS.

EDUCATIONAL ROADBLOCKS GET DRIVERS TO SLOW DOWN WHILE EXPLAINING WHY IT'S SO IMPORTANT.

It is twilight, and the painted dogs of Zimbabwe's Umkhonto pack are on the move. Nineteen animals strong, they are the surviving representatives of a species that used to range across the African continent by the hundreds of thousands. Today fewer than 7,000 painted dogs remain, and only 700 of them in Zimbabwe. On this night, their movements take the Umkhonto pack beyond the relative safety of Hwange National Park, and along the Bulawayo-Victoria Falls highway. Painted Dog Conservation (PDC), a WCN Partner, is tracking the dogs. They escort the pack across roads and back to a safer area. But before first light, the dogs return to the highway—likely disturbed by lions. There, two members of the pack are struck and killed by a vehicle. A devastating loss, especially considering how few painted dogs remain. And exactly the kind of tragedy that David Kuvawoga, PDC's Director of Operations, is working to ensure never happens again.

When we think of human-wildlife conflict, our minds go first to retaliatory killings. But something else presents a serious threat to the survival of this species—vehicle collisions. The fact that painted dogs are one of the few species to care for their sick and injured makes them especially vulnerable to this danger. When a painted dog is killed on a highway, the others will gather around, putting the entire pack at risk of a second collision.

The challenge of managing human-wildlife conflict is one that David Kuvawoga, who has worked at PDC since 2015, knows intimately. David comes from a family of conservationists, and he was still a boy when he first dressed himself in his father's ranger uniform to play-act at saving wildlife. Last year, with support from WCN's Rising Wildlife Leaders Scholarship Program, David completed a Masters of Environmental Conservation



at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His studies explored drivers of human-wildlife conflict around Hwange National Park, including the mosaic of dangers that the Umkhonto pack must navigate.

In the wake of the tragedy on the highway that killed two painted dogs, PDC partnered with regulatory authorities, police and the Traffic Safety Council of Zimbabwe to establish educational roadblocks within wildlife areas. Rather than simply put up warning signs,



police engaged motorists at these roadblocks to explain the importance of reducing speed and remaining alert—not just for the safety of wildlife, but for that of local communities as well. At the same time, PDC also strengthened their monitoring efforts, particularly when a pack moves near the highway, to reduce the danger of future collisions.

With the deep expertise in human-wildlife conflict that he developed at PDC and strengthened through WCN's Rising Wildlife Leaders program, David is better equipped than ever to lead this work. For the Umkhonto pack and the hundreds of painted dogs still navigating these roads, that vigilance may make all the difference. ■



Turning Traditional Healers into Pangolin Ambassadors

Most of the Zambian men and women gathered around the conference room table had touched a pangolin before. Or, at least they'd touched parts of them—their scales, or their meat. To Remmy Kopeka, this was hard to hear but certainly not surprising. After all, this was a gathering of local healers and village chiefs—people known to use pangolin scales in traditional medicine and other rituals. But what did surprise Remmy was the participants' answer to his next question. “How many of you have ever seen a live pangolin, even in captivity?” Fewer than a quarter of the people in the room raised their hands. The pangolin species appearing in Zambia were largely a mystery to them. Over the next few days, Remmy's work would unlock that mystery and turn it into a priority.



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DESPITE HAVING NO MEDICINAL VALUE, PANGOLIN SCALES—SEEN HERE STILL ATTACHED TO THE SKIN—ARE STILL USED IN TRADITIONAL REMEDIES.

with community engagement was essential to better tackling the problem of wildlife crime. And so in 2024, Remmy joined WCN's Rising Wildlife Leaders (RWL) Careers program to grow his community outreach skills and expand his technological proficiency.

It was Remmy's course of study with RWL that led him to design this workshop. The goal was twofold: first, Remmy aimed to gather data through focus group-style discussions that would help improve his understanding of how local influencers interact with pangolins—an animal with the grim distinction of being the world's most trafficked mammal, poached to the brink of extinction. Second, and more ambitiously, he hoped to enlist these leaders as pangolin conservation ambassadors.

It was not long after the workshop began that more surprises came. Remmy found participants to be incredibly curious about pangolins and eager to learn. These healers and leaders were anything but passive recipients of information—they were actively



REMMY PRESENTING AT THE WORKSHOP FOR TRADITIONAL HEALERS AND LOCAL LEADERS.

Remmy is a data and operations coordinator with Wildlife Crime Prevention (WCP). He was born and raised in Mumbwa, a small town at the eastern end of Kafue National Park, the oldest and largest in Zambia. A man with a head for systems, Remmy had long believed that uniting data-driven strategies

Wildlife Crime Prevention is a grantee of the Pangolin Crisis Fund. By investing in the career development of conservationists like Remmy, WCN also amplifies the impact of our conservation programs.

engaged with the discussion, asking thoughtful questions about who really benefited from the illegal wildlife trade and how pangolin conservation efforts could also support human wellbeing. And by the end of the workshop, the participants went from having little knowledge of pangolins to becoming advocates for pangolin conservation.

Together, they developed Bemba-language awareness materials, such as posters and booklets, to reduce the demand for pangolin products at the community level. By centering the voices of these traditional healers, Remmy's co-design approach ensured not only that the materials would be culturally relevant, but that these influential community leaders would feel a sense of ownership over them. Both the locally-adapted materials and the community leaders advocating for them will play an important role in protecting pangolins in Zambia. And Remmy, through his participation in RWL and his role at WCP, will continue to grow as a leader in the field. ■



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20 Years of Elevating Local Leadership

Rising Wildlife Leaders Marks 20th Anniversary

Many of the places where WCN works can seem remote to us—from the reefs of Raja Ampat to the deserts of Namibia. But for wildlife conservation to take root and thrive, we must identify and support the conservationists who come from, live in, and work to protect these places. Only local leaders have the relationships, knowledge, and deep commitment necessary to protect wildlife over the long term. The kind of commitment that comes from defending your own home. It is on this simple but powerful belief that the WCN Rising Wildlife Leaders (RWL) programs were founded.

Rising Wildlife Leaders first launched in 2006, with a Scholarship Program that has thus far supported 264 conservationists across over 50 different countries. Two decades later, that vision expanded into multiple programs, which support both established and emerging conservationists working to protect wildlife in their home countries and communities. RWL alumni have gone on to lead nationally recognized conservation organizations, win international awards, and mentor the next generation of local leaders. Many of them also work with organizations that are WCN Partners or grantees—like David Kuvogawa of Painted Dog Conservation—enhancing the impact of our conservation efforts. We are so proud of what these leaders have accomplished over the last 20 years, and look forward to supporting many more to come.



1 2021 SCHOLAR JAMAL GALVES OF BELIZE WORKS TO PROTECT THE ANTILLEAN MANATEE. **2** PANGOLIN COHORT MEMBER MONESH SINGH TOMAR RELEASING A RESCUED PANGOLIN INTO THE WILD. **3** RWL SCHOLAR AND CAREER PROGRAM PARTICIPANT JAMES WATUWA POURS WATER OVER A SEDATED ZEBRA TO COOL IT. **4** AMAZONIA PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS MAKING CONNECTIONS IN COLOMBIA. **5** AMAZONIA PROGRAM PARTICIPANT VANIA TEJEDA IN THE FIELD.



Welcoming the Pangolin Cohort

This year, the Rising Wildlife Leaders Careers program welcomes a cohort of emerging conservation leaders united around a single group of species—the pangolin. Native to Africa and Asia, pangolins are the most illegally trafficked mammals in the world. And while not all pangolin species face the same level of danger, they are all threatened with extinction. The effort to protect them is both far-reaching and complex—spanning ecosystems, cultures, international borders, and global trade routes. In recognition of that complexity, and in partnership with Save Pangolins and WCN's Pangolin Crisis Fund, we have assembled a cohort representing six countries across Africa and Asia.

As members of the Career program, these six conservationists will receive personalized professional development support. They will improve both their skills and professional networks through dedicated mentorship and access to grants to attend courses and conferences. They will also learn from and create community with each other—six conservationists focusing on six different species of pangolin, all aiding in the global push to save these unique and deeply vulnerable animals from extinction.



Celebrating a Graduation in the Rainforest

This summer also marks the graduation of the first 24 participants in WCN's Rising Wildlife Leaders Amazonia program. Made up of conservationists from vastly different backgrounds, but united by a shared devotion to protecting the Amazon rainforest and its extraordinary wildlife, this became more than a simple training program. Over two years, these participants from across the Amazon basin have built a lasting network of peers and allies—one that will strengthen their work, foster regional cooperation, and amplify conservation impact for years to come. Congratulations, conservationists! ■



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