

Speech at the presentation ceremony of the BBVA Foundation Awards for Biodiversity Conservation

Paul Barnes, EDGE of Existence Programme Manager

Ladies and gentlemen, it is with a profound sense of gratitude and responsibility that I stand before you tonight, representing the ZSL EDGE of Existence Programme, to accept the Worldwide Award for Biodiversity Conservation. This accolade is not just a recognition of 15 years of dedicated work by hundreds of passionate individuals; I believe it affirms two critical points of importance.

First, it acknowledges the severe environmental crisis we all face —climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss— these are the defining challenges of our time, challenges that I'm sure have touched many of you personally.

Second, and most importantly, this award affirms a vital truth: conservation works. In a world often clouded by despair over environmental degradation, our programme, and this award, stand as a beacon of hope and success. The model of conservation championed by the EDGE of Existence programme is having a profound impact around the world. It demonstrates that with the right approach, dedication, and support, we can bend the curve on environmental crises and set a path toward a more desirable future. Tonight, I will share just a little of the philosophy and achievements of our work and why I believe it has such an impact.

The EDGE of Existence Programme is an exemplar of innovation in conservation. It has achieved that surprisingly rare yet acutely needed combination of science and action. Something owing to ZSL's unique position as a conservation zoo, having research and applied conservation and policy directorates under one organisation. This arrangement fosters the innovation needed to address the environmental crises we face.

Our programme's mission is clear: We are igniting a global movement to protect Earth's most unique and overlooked species. Species like the obscure and cryptic Pyrenean desman or the two subspecies of Egyptian vulture that can be

seen soaring over Spain. EDGE species like these are often neglected by conventional conservation programmes, yet represent entire branches of evolutionary history. They are the underdogs, the unsung heroes of our natural world, the critical threads supporting the intricate web of life. Indeed, if they are lost, there is nothing else like them left on Earth. They embody the diversity that enriches our lives, and they provide innumerable benefits to people and cultures worldwide.

The true innovation, however, lies not only in *what* we target but in *how* we target it. We seek to remedy two significant problems as we see them in conservation. First, that funding doesn't reach the best people for the job. Those with a long-term stake in the areas where they work. The conservationists of the future. And second, funding isn't directed efficiently to the species and regions that need it most. Large charismatic animals monopolise the funding while thousands of lesser-known species representing large portions of the tree of life slip closer to extinction.

In many respects, we are an intermediary; we channel resources to the people and places most critical for conserving these irreplaceable species. We champion approaches that embody equity and justice, supporting locally led initiatives and promoting diversity in conservation leadership.

Through our efforts, we have seen first-hand the power of science-driven conservation. By supporting local conservation leaders —EDGE Fellows— we are not only investing in the present but also sowing the seeds for sustainable conservation and a sustainable future. These passionate individuals are the custodians of biodiversity in their respective regions, working tirelessly to ensure that the species under their care can thrive.

Receiving the Worldwide Award for Biodiversity Conservation is a momentous honour. It is a testament to the dedication of our team, the resilience of the EDGE Fellows, and the generosity of our partners and supporters. This award is not a finish line but a milestone in our ongoing journey. It is a reminder of the work that lies ahead and the collective effort required to navigate the path forward.

As we accept this award, we are reminded of the urgency of our mission. We are inspired to push the boundaries of conservation further, to innovate, to adapt, and to forge new alliances. The environmental crisis we face is a call to action for all of us, and the EDGE of Existence Programme is committed to answering that call.

In conclusion, I extend our heartfelt gratitude to the award committee for this incredible honour. To our tireless team, past and present, our dedicated EDGE Fellows and Alums, and to every individual and organisation that has supported us—this award belongs to you. Together, we will continue to form the sharp EDGE of conservation; innovating, pushing boundaries, and supporting the conservationists of the future.

Thank you.