



Season 2, Episode 3: Walking with World's Smallest Elephants in Malaysian Borneo

Kate: This is How to Save It from the Whitley Fund for Nature, the podcast where you'll find a healthy dose of optimism and inspiration. I'm Kate Humble.

And I'm **Edward Whitley**, founder of the Whitley Fund for Nature.

<Medley of 2025 winners saying

Olivier.....To a young person, to an old person, all of us, it's our role to protect

Andres... How can we create solutions that are both positive for people, but also for wildlife?

Yara.....They just want to hunt, raise their cubs, live in peace in the forest, just that

Farina.... You always have to make sure whatever you promise, you must fulfil

Ayu.....And spread the words about how beautiful, how wonderful they are to the world.

Welcome back and welcome back, Kate.

On this episode, we'll be taking you on a journey to another amazing location to hear the story of a pioneering conservationist working tirelessly to make the world a better place. We're heading to the lower Kinabatangan, Malaysian Borneo.

It's a lush tropical place with forests and mangroves supporting a biodiverse ecosystem. It's **ALSO** crisscrossed with palm oil plantations. It's **ALSO** home to one of the world's last populations of Bornean elephants.

Kate: These elephants, **sometimes known as pygmy elephants**, are frankly adorable to look at. They are the smallest of elephant subspecies with a rotund middle, large ears and a straight trunk. They're also an endangered species. There are only 1,500 left in the wild, with 250 in the Lower Kinabatangan. Let's hear now from Dr Farina Othman.

Farina: So if you come with me to Lower Kinabatangan, You obviously expect - Borneo is so well known for its rainforest. And it is true, like maybe 40 years ago. because of structural economic development, we changed a lot of our forests to, you know, first logging and then agriculture, like oil palm plantation. So if you come with me nowadays in Kinabatangan, you will see what we call a secondary rainforest. It's really, really open forest, but it's also the haven of wildlife. You will go on the boat with me.

From there, you get to see the proboscis monkey, you know, hanging on the tree by the river bank. And if you're lucky, then you get to see orangutan resting, you know, trying to build nest.. You will listen in the boat, try to find a sound of ear flapping - and then wait, and then if you're lucky then you might see one foot, you know, coming out from the forest with their short trunk and try to cool down in the river.

Kate: It sounds magical, and in many ways it is. But the lower Kinabatangan is not always peaceful, and oil palm plantations account for around 90 percent of the original forest. These plantations are the main source of income for the local communities. Farina remembers the first time she saw the elephants up close.



Farina: We were at that time in one of the Oxbow lakes. The elephants were, it's a female herd, so you can see babies, juveniles, and males and females. They were feeding, really enjoying the day, so we were quite a bit distance from them. But however, this little forest is surrounded with oil palm plantation and they are taking like a precaution. So they were making a lot of noise using noise cannon to make sure that the elephants doesn't go into the plantation.

Hearing this, the baby start to get very anxious and nervous and then it affect the female elephants and they were making a lot of noise like, and they're getting closer and closer to us, this herd of females, and suddenly we were surrounded by them, but they don't really care that we were there, it's because they were so anxious. And it was a lovely evening and they were feeding, you know, resting, and suddenly without any... it's chaotic. So then I realised that, hey, they live in their own home. It's a forest. And even there, they are disturbed and harassed. So I need to do something.

Kate: It was love at first sight. And she describes the features that make the Bornean elephant so special.

Farina: So for many people, they just look like an elephant so you know they still have trunk you know their ears and and big big body but if you put them side by side with like Indian elephant or Thai elephant they I would say, I would describe their body as being like more rounded and it's so obvious that their trunk is like straighter - because i saw the indian elephants when they're resting they're very relaxed their trunk muscle will curl on the ground But for ours, it's just like hanging. And also, we have a very short tail. So it's very cute to see that when they're playing, like pulling the tail and things like that. So yeah, if you see them on their own, it feels still like they are just like a normal Asian elephants. But if you put them side by side, they look more rounded.

I think that's why. look smaller and more cute.

Kate: And how do local communities tend to interact with the elephants?

Farina: So we did a survey in 2019 to see like what are the perception of people towards elephants and not only in Kinabatangan, it's like the whole elephant range in Sabah. A lot of people respect elephants, they understand the importance of elephants, they feel they understand why conflicts happen, but they still have this thinking... as long as it's not you know, in my land, I'm okay to have them. Maybe they feel that elephant are here. First, I don't know what to do because, you know, they are big. I'm scared of them.

they feel that the government put elephants as fully protected species, but how about us? Who's going to help us?

So they feel helpless. And this is what makes them feel that, OK, I love elephants, but I don't want to help them. And also they feel that this elephant does not belong to me, it belongs to the scientists, to NGOs, to the government.

Kate: Farina explains how she's working to alter the way elephants are perceived, and to try and ensure co-existence.

So one of our missions for Seratu Atai is to give people skills to be able to live with elephants. We want them to be willing. We don't want to force them.



0:09:51

So we, we always now, you know, try to build the trust, try to really put ourselves in their shoes using different kinds of methods. And then, for example, they feel insecure. So we try to create like a group of, young people in each of the communities, so they are kind of the frontliners, they are the messengers. So people look, when people look at me, they feel like Farina, she only speaks elephant language. So she only wants to, you know, like stand for the elephants, but not for us.

But I'm hoping that having their own community members that can understand better how the dynamics of the community will help to send the message better. And then we also try to tell them that there is no one solution. For example, if I work in village A, that doesn't mean I can apply the same method in village B. So we want them to understand that.

So nowadays I start to see people will say hey come and let's divert the elephant instead of like like pushing the elephants away.

Kate: And what are some of the personality traits the elephants display?

Farina: So, I started with the female group and females, they are behave. So, they will avoid risky area, you know, it's very easy to manage them, so we just, we don't have to kind of use different methods, we just like maybe even clap, they will cooperate with us when they even hear like clapping from us. But male elephants, because they have this very unique, you know, like our boys, high risk, high gain behaviour. So I don't mind to face a bit of risk as long as I can eat a lot and, you know, like build my body so that I can reproduce more.

Each of the elephant have their own personality. I remember one of our male called Acho. He's a very nice boy. When he's in one of the plantations that we're working with, which is very like, their practice is more elephant friendly. He's very calm.

Whenever we go to him, he will just look and he will continue eating. But then he moved out for four months. We don't know where he was. Maybe he's ready to reproduce. Four months, we never seen him. He come back, even a slight sound now, he will start to react. Whatever we're doing right now, we have to make sure that we don't change their behaviour.

Kate: So what's next for Farina?

Farina: We have to work with the oil palm industry because their land, their landscape is so crucial to help the movement of elephants. Their role is to produce oil palm, not to do conservation, especially elephant conservation. So they don't know how to do it, where to start, they can be overwhelmed because their performance is being assessed through the oil palm, not through help saving elephants. So we need to be there to again walk this journey with them.

I think there are more and more people that are very open-minded and also open their hearts to experiment new ways to try to reduce conflict and at the same time conserve the elephants in the oil palm landscape. So they're willing to try, willing to give part of their land to create this connectivity. So I'm working with one single plantation, but without the neighbours, we will never get to continue the corridor up to the forest. So we want to create this consortium. I get a lot of positive feedback and hopefully also from that we can start looking at the specification of the



corridor, how big, where to continue, do we need to plant food for elephants so that it can attract elephants.

All of these questions, we want to do it together as a team. Moving forward, we want to make Kinabatangan as a model, hopefully that it can be also an example for other landscapes.

Edward: Farina's work is so important, especially given the tiny area of forest that she's working in, and the even smaller population of Bornean elephants who live there.

Kate: When you listen to Farina talking about those elephants, you just think they could not have a better champion. She's remarkable, and we wish her all the best. As someone who has been very, very lucky to see a Bornean elephant, I really recommend going and searching online for a picture of one because they are utterly charming.

That's all for this episode of How to Save It from the Whitley Fund for Nature.

We'll be back next time for another inspirational story. So do like and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.