



Season 2, Episode 4: Argentina's El Rincón Stream Frog Finds its Biggest Champion

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.

Edward: Welcome back and welcome back, Kate.

In this episode we will take you to Argentina, to the wilds of Patagonia, far far from city life, to a volcanic plateau, windswept grassland plains are grazed by cattle, and there are few people to be seen. It is an other worldly landscape. It is here that our next winner, Dr Federico Kacolis has been working for over a decade.

Kate: The Valcheta stream runs through Somuncura, and though temperatures on the plateau can dip below zero, hot springs keep the stream warmer all year round. This temperature has led to the evolution of endemic species, and it's these species and this ecosystem that Federico is striving to protect.

Federico: It's kind of a desert full of rocks, you will see this small stream and you will hear the sound of the water but also the sound of the wind, because Somuncura means in Indigenous language, rock that speaks, and it's because of the sound of the wind when crossing the rocks so you will have this sounds in the landscape but also some birds... it's an incredible place.

Kate: He explains his childhood fascination with what he calls the "uglier" species of animal....

Federico: Unlike most people, I was drawn to those often see as ugly or feared – frogs, snakes, lizards, but also many insects. I like them. I don't know why but I love that - so I did my studies at university but with this clear focus on this species, this special species because they matter.

In the case of amphibians as you know they are among the most threatened invertebrates today with almost 40 percent of species within a threat category which makes them really important in terms of conservation priority.

I made my PhD with a lizard after gathering all this experience I decided to start my own project so I was able to select an endangered frog in my country and at that time there were just three species in the higher threat category of the IUCN, I mean critically endangered which means they were at high risk of extinction in the short term and among these three species I chose the El Rincon frog because it was the species of the Somuncura Plateau and I had a friend living near this area so he invited me on a trip and I discovered this species living there. And I became amazed.

Kate: So what is special about Somuncura ...

Federico: Patagonia is an incredible place with extreme weather and you have the Somuncura Plateau which is a kind of rocky island in the middle of the Patagonia steppe. It rises like a continental island, very isolated. It's a very large region. It was shaped by volcanic activity – it's a kind of desert full of rocks. In one of the edges of the plateau you have this small stream, the Valcheta Stream, which is the main water course in the region and starts at a bunch of hot springs so you can see the water flowing from the rocks and because they are hot springs the water is warm all the year which is really uncommon for a Patagonia stream. And



this condition, the isolation and the warm waters allowed the evolution of not only the El Rincon frog but also other endemic species like the Naked Characin, some freshwater snails.. it's an oasis in the middle of the desert.

Kate: Federico and his NGO Fundación Somuncura are working to protect the endemic and critically endangered stream frog, and the Naked Characin fish.

Federico: Because they are really small you have a few thousands of frogs living but in a really small area of almost 10 km² but they are really isolated without contact among the local populations. Some of these populations have only, like I don't know, two or three hundred individuals which is really low for a small species.

Kate: But these aren't just a fascination for Federico.... He actually discovered the frogs as he explains

Federico: It was amazing for me, it was incredible. Like you are walking in a desert and you find this small water course and in this oasis you find this little frogs struggling to thrive. It's a very fragile situation.

Kate: And the fish?

Federico: This fish is incredible, they share the habitat with the frogs and it's a very important fish, the southernmost Characin species of fish in the world. They are sharing the same threats. For this reason, efforts to conserve one of them is like conserving both. So it's like pay one, take two. They are in the top threat category of the IUCN. They are critically endangered.

Kate: What are the threats facing the frog and the fish?

Federico: The introduction in the stream of rainbow trout which is an invasive species its an aggressive predator. They were introduced there a century ago. And rapidly became a top predator in the entire ecosystem but even in this isolated and small habitat where you expect them to thrive, they are declining because of the livestock. Because the cattle feed on native vegetation and this species need full vegetated habitat for reproduction and as shelter. So the livestock feed on this vegetation and trample on the stream and defecate there causing putrifecation of the water

Kate: Federico explains the multi-pronged approach he and his team are taking to protect the stream and its inhabitants.

Federico: We first started creating sanctuaries to protect this last population, basically creating enclosures to avoid access of livestock there and by restoring native vegetation but because some of these populations were already extinct – we created sanctuaries and restored vegetation but also created ex-situ facilities to breed the frog outside the habitat and after that we reintroduced the frogs there. So we achieved the establishment of some local populations inside where the species went extinct. Of course, after that we are now managing the trout in the stream by removing them. We have created some new waterfalls by increasing some natural ones to avoid the access of new trout to the system. And from this point to upstream we are working on removing the trout. With these combined actions. we these actions we achieved an increase of 15 percent of both populations which is incredible for a critically endangered species.

Kate: What about relations with local communities and farmers?

Federico: it wasn't easy at the first stages of the project but now we are neighbours because as part of our project we are acquiring some properties that were empty - we created a biological station in one of these properties but we work together with them because some of these local populations are in their properties. So we have to sign agreements to create these enclosures. The problem with the cattle is that is was not the original activity in the region. Most of the people were originally sheep ranchers. They are changing from sheep to cattle and the cattle have a bigger impact on the ecosystem. So we are trying to return these land activities to sheep farming by offering the local people guardian dogs and this is working really well. We have reduced the loss of sheep by a high percentage and also the number of predators killed each year. Yes - they are really happy about that.

Kate: They are also creating a natural reserve on 20,000 hectares of land. But it doesn't stop there.... Tourism is also on the agenda

Federico: But this is not all we are more ambitious of course.



We want to offer them other alternatives, so we work in collaboration with them trying to find new economic alternatives to improve in the long term and middle term at least, their wellbeing by generating higher incomes through other activities not just with the management of sheep or cattle. We are starting an eco-touristic project in the area, creating facilities for tourists, training local guides to see the frogs, Characin, and other fauna in the region. It's a kinda dream working in this area with this species and with these results is something for me that's amazing. I'm really happy about that. We already know we can escalate these actions because we know they work.

Edward: So a tiny frog and a tiny fish yet with a really big impact. Federico and his team are a wonderful example of how thinking strategically about the landscape the wildlife, and the community can yield the best results.

Kate: That's all from 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.