



## Season 2, Episode 4: Saving the Tigers of the Plant World in Nepal

**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. Welcome back and welcome back Kate.

<Medley of conservationists 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:** Think of Nepal and what springs to mind? Possibly you're picturing soaring ice capped mountains, iconic animals such as the Bengal Tiger, possibly the elusive snow leopard? Maybe the Asian elephant or the one-horned rhinoceros?

But you're probably not thinking about orchids and yew trees. But these native plants have been used by the people of Nepal for centuries for medicine, and they are highly prized for their properties.

**Kate:** But it's not just Nepalese healers using the fauna.

There's a big global demand for the plants, both for traditional and Chinese medicines, and for the Western market. While harvesting and trading wild orchids is illegal in Nepal, it is still happening.

**Edward:** And that's where Reshu Bashyal comes in. She and the local charity Greenhood Nepal are building and formalizing sustainable harvesting and plant trading, and fighting to preserve the fragile plants.... Let's here more

**Kate:** Reshu grew up understanding that plants are special, maybe even magical..

**Reshu:** I grew up in a village, it is a small village in the western part of Nepal, Barandi. It was typical like everyone's village life in the rural area. I spent a lot of time with my grandparents who knew a lot about medicinal plants. That's how I kindof thought that plants are really magical and can heal everything.

**Kate:** Her grandparents used traditional medicine to cure ailments, which in turn sparked Reshu's love of the healing power of plants.

**Reshu:** We used plants for almost everything – we see them using and we try to learn what they are using it for and we try to replicate that in our daily lives.

**Kate:** She describes her idyllic sounding childhood home

**Reshu:** It was midhill so we had to climb some small hills. Not very high hills but small hills. There were forests everywhere, plants everywhere. When there are plants, that also means that there are birds, especially birds – we used to hear, always birds chirping here and there. Also, the plants were not just one or two species. There were many of them. Full of wildflowers, everything.... It was so nice back then. And also because our village was one and a half hour walking distance from the main town and back then there were no roads to connect to my village so we had to kindof walk from the town to my village so it was less polluted and less degraded I would say, which is not the case at the moment. It was really nice, green... also the houses were really traditional small houses.

**Kate:** But plants, Reshu says, weren't really a priority for most people in the world of conservation.



**Reshu:** When I joined environmental science, everyone would talk about wildlife conservation but none of them would include plants, I would not say none - but there was less talk about plants. I never thought that plant conservation can be a profession.

Plants face threats like animals do. There are also the cases of unsustainable harvest of species that are in high demand for several uses, ornamental use, medicinal use and different other uses. Unsustainable harvests, there are very few plant species whose harvest guidelines are in place so there is still a lot to be done in fact to prepare harvest guidelines to support local livelihood and to actually be able to harvest forest products in a sustainable manner so that is one challenge and illegal poaching is definitely a challenge which is very less spoken (about) but it does exist there.

Let's take the example of orchids.

We need a management plan to actually be able to harvest and trade that (orchids) in a sustainable manner and we don't have a management plan for any orchid species at the moment so that means whatever we are harvesting and trading – it is all illegal.

**Kate:** Reshu describes the emotion she feels when she sees mounds of orchids drying in the sun after being illegally harvested.

**Reshu:** When I was in one of the fields, I saw so many orchids being sun dried in one of the traders' houses. I was kind of shocked to see that. To collect that amount of orchids, it requires a big forest patch to be cleared and if one person can have that big amount, imagine if there are 10 traders or 15 traders then what will be the situation in the next 15 years? Next 10 years? It was crazy. I knew that I had to ask a lot of questions to that person and he also knew I was doing that for research – I'm very grateful. They are not the enemy.

**Kate:** Working with local communities and harvesters, Reshu is building task forces to identify species and signs of poaching. She and Greenhood Nepal want to empower forest groups, clear invasive species, plant thousands of new yews and rehabilitate fallen orchids. She's also - crucially - working with government and forest officials to formalise a sustainable harvest and trade.

**Reshu:** The first idea is to engage local communities in conservation. Local communities have been living there with plants forever. They are harvesting but also they are also guarding plants and they know the importance of conserving plants – it's as important for them as it is important for me.

They are really worried about the declining status. So our idea is – as the habitat is degraded and there are signs of poaching, so we want to engage them in anti poaching patrols so that will be really exciting. I'm quite excited because there has been community engagement, there have been community-based anti-poaching units in Nepal which have been successfully supported the increasing the number of charismatic species.

So I'm really looking forward to engaging with communities on that. And then we also plan to engage local communities in the restoration of yews. There are very few numbers of Mairie's Yew remaining in the wild so we plan to plant at least 5,000 saplings in the forest, in the core habitat. We also plan to rescue and rehabilitate fallen orchids so basically sometimes it is not just about rescuing orchids, we plan to collaborate with one of the research centres in Nepal which is successfully doing the tissue culture of orchids and rehabilitating the grown orchid tissue culture of grown orchids in trees...

**Kate:** Does Reshu play favourites in terms of Nepal's plantlife?

**Reshu:** It will be quite poetic to say but there is not any species that I don't like. I like all the species. For me, all species of orchids are my favourite but there is one particular orchid that I recently saw – I was in the field in one of the community forests and I saw a critically endangered *Gastrochilus calceolaris* in one of the yew trees itself.

There were signs of forest fires, poaching, everything and that tree was just a side trail where people used to walk here and there but the Yew tree had such a nice and healthy clump of orchids - that orchid - I was so fascinated. Before that, all orchids were my favourite but after seeing that, that particular orchid, that really imprinted my heart and I cried when I saw that big clump so I would say, that for now, but I'm used to waiting for more other wonders to happen in the field.

**Edward:** Plants are such a critical part of our ecosystems, supporting all life. Reshu's work to create sustainable and formal harvests of yew and orchids is so important in keeping the balance between



supporting local economies, and conserving the plants themselves. Her devotion to the yew and the orchids is palpable, and absolutely inspirational.

**Kate:** That's all from this episode of How to Save It from the Whitley Fund for Nature, we will be back next time for another inspirational story. So do like and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.