



## Season 2, Episode 7: Connecting Corridors for Colombia's Brown Spider

### Monkeys

**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:** it's easy to see how Spider monkeys can capture the imagination. These nimble monkeys swing through the treetops, their long arms or tails gripping branches as they peek out between the leaves. The brown spider monkey certainly had an impact on this episode's winner, Dr Andres Link. He's been working for the past twenty five years to help conserve this critically endangered species.

**Kate:** Over 85 percent of the brown spider monkeys' habitat has vanished. Large scale agriculture, cattle ranching, deforestation and palm oil production have squeezed the monkeys into smaller areas, reducing their ability to roam for mating and for food. The monkeys are seed dispersers, and play a vital role within the forest ecosystem.

**Edward:** So let's hear from Andres about his fight for the rights of the brown spider monkey...

**Kate:** the sound of a brown spider monkey. So what would it be like to be dropped in the forest - what would we see and hear?

**Andres:** The forests in the Magdalena River valley are very very magic – definitely you would be surprised by the amount of sounds, especially here in the late morning or the late afternoon when animals are coordinating or finishing their daily duties. It's like an orchestra. You cannot predict what's going to happen so it's really beautiful because it's full of noises, lots of birds, lots of insects, the water itself from the river – it's very pretty – yeah, like an ongoing orchestra for the whole day.

**Kate:** And this ongoing orchestra has inspired Andres now for over two decades

**Andres:** Every day that you spend in the forest, you are more interested. There is something else that you want to answer, there's something else that surprises you and there is always something that you have never seen before.

**Kate:** Monkeys weren't the plan for Andres, he was interested in studying birds...

**Andres:** Colombia has these beautiful biodiversity, almost 2,000 species of birds and it was easy to get, I don't know... fascinated by going to so many different places, watching so many birds, because of that, I was offered an opportunity to help with research on woolly monkeys in the Amazon. And when I went there I was helping with the bird part of the project but spider monkeys used to go to our camp every morning and they have really nice vocalizations. They can shout really loud and they are trying to coordinate their whole day, and they also move very nicely – they are very gentle in their movements so every morning I would see them pass through the camp – it's on a little hill so I would see them almost face to face and they just look fascinating and honestly I started to think, I wanna know more about these animals. In the same way that you look at the forest and you look at these monkeys – every day you learn something but you want to learn something else. It's very intriguing and interesting

**Kate:** are they sociable animals?



**Andres:** Males will stay all their lives, 30 to 40 years in their natal group and females when they reach sexual maturity they migrate to the group where they are going to stay their whole lives so it's individuals that are spending their lives with 20 or 30 other individuals – there are very complex relations. There's friendships, there's antagonism, there's relations like the ones we have with our neighbours, our family, our friends. That's the interesting part of the story. And spider monkeys have a very unique kind of grouping pattern let's say – for example, the group that we studied the most has six males and 12 females with their kids – but they are not always together – you can have two males and one female, then the female leaves, it's very flexible.

**Kate:** How did they earn their name spider monkey?

**Andres:** Spider monkeys are big monkeys, at least for the Americas. They are some of the biggest monkeys. They can weigh up to 10 kilos – like a medium size dog but in the canopy, you know 40 metres above the trees - that's a big monkey. They are beautiful, they're called spider monkeys because they have a prehensile tail – their tail is very big. It has like a finger, in the tip, they can hold anything, of course they hold branches but when you look at them in the canopy in the treetops you can see the four limbs plus the tail so it really looks like you are looking like a spider, or something like that. They are very nice because they move so gently – they have lost their thumb and that makes it – I don't know – they can move easily just by hanging from branch to branch, and they're very pretty animals, they are very pretty.

**Kate:** Andres explains the monkey's importance for the forest

**Andres:** We have been working with spider monkeys for almost, I'd say, 25 years and it all started trying to look at the scientific aspects of their behaviour, their ecology, what do they eat – their incredible role as seed dispersers. At the beginning I was interested in that and then I got more interested in their social behaviour but I was working in really beautiful forests that are still present in the Amazon and I was aware that in Colombia and some other landscapes there were also spider monkeys but they were struggling to survive in small forests, fragmented forests, so we really wanted to start our research study on how these primates are able to cope with the challenges of fragmentation, deforestation etc So it was very scientific, let's say at the beginning but as you start to study your species in degraded landscapes, you start to understand that it's not only about studying them and understanding how do they behave. It's more about how can you get them to persist in these landscapes and then you have to understand that it's no longer for the forest and the monkeys and other animal organisms, but it's the people that live around.

**Kate:** He has been working with local communities on a variety of solutions to try and protect the monkeys who are living in fragmented and disconnected forested areas.

**Andres:** So then you start working with the people, start to understand what are the pressures that forests have. How do people rely on forests and if it's sustainable or not and then you try to think with them, what are the best alternatives, different economic alternatives, sustainable livelihoods, and then, with them, you try to come with solutions. And when you notice, you realise that you are not only doing science but you are working with the communities, with other stakeholders, trying to create solutions, for these animals and ecosystems that are so threatened nowadays.

**Kate:** Working with cattle ranchers has been key ..

**Andres:** Yeah, I guess the biggest conflict in Colombia between humans and spider monkeys has been related to deforestation. As we humans need more land for cattle ranching or for agriculture, we reduce the habitat of the monkeys, so that's the main conflict but there are alternatives to protect certain areas and also to do cattle ranching or agriculture that is somehow aligned with conservation so that is when we started to think in our project, ok in these heavily deforested and degraded landscapes how can we increase the probability of survival of these species and we thought – ok, the first thing is if we are in a landscape full of fragmented and isolated forest fragments – how can we reconnect them? And that is where we work with local communities, on ranches. How can we create solutions that are both positive for people but also for wildlife and that's what we aim to do. Try to get people to have better practices that in the long run are going to be even better for their economic activities but would also help us protect the incredible biodiversity that is living just next to this project.

**Kate:** Getting farmers on side has proved critical - and one pilot project has become a long-term success.

**Andres:** It was the first farm that was interested in exploring the possibility of connecting the forests. It is Hacienda Lusitania in the middle of Colombia. And the owners have always been very keen to explore any



possibility to protect wildlife within their cattle ranch. What I'm very proud (of is) we started to do corridors but it is not unfrequent when the owners, Andres and his family, come to our tree nurseries and just ask for 200 trees, 1000 trees because they are going to plant them. They are replicating these efforts just because they are committed to doing so. I really like how by doing this restoration with our team, a couple of people are starting to get motivated and I think if we can get this ball rolling it can have a major geographical effect.

**Kate:** Voluntary conservation agreements with private landowners, and the expansion of a community based restoration programme to reconnect the disconnected forest areas are some of the solutions Andres has created. He's also developing a community based wildlife monitoring project AND there's the annual brown spider monkey festival, now in its tenth year. So what's next for Andres?

**Andres:** My hopes are that everything we have done to create this – I'm going to say pilot project because it's in a small scale - is replicated, like I think what we are finding, or what I hope, that are viable solutions for aligning the development of economic activities with biodiversity. And I think this is opening a very nice window that we can really escalate. This is going to have a regional impact. I hope that many more people in Colombia, many more cattle ranchers and landowners get involved in doing this because it's going to be beneficial for them but it could easily generate a large scale conservation effort that honestly, aligns our well being with the wellbeing of nature in this beautiful region of Colombia.

**Edward:** Andres and his team are leading by example - by engaging cattle ranchers and landowners, working with them, and creating positive relations with the surrounding communities , they are creating long term networks and solutions.

**Kate:** Sadly, that is all we have time for but it's been an absolute pleasure to have you here with us. Many thanks from me, Kate Humble, and from me Edward Whitley.

**Kate:** Check out our back catalogue too and do like and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.