



## Season 2, Episode 6: Java's Singing, Swinging Gibbons

**Kate:** Welcome to the latest episode of How to Save it - the podcast from the Whitley Fund for Nature - where you'll hear incredible stories about conservation pioneers changing the world for the better.

<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.

I'm Kate Humble.

**Edward:** And I'm the charity's founder, Edward Whitley. Take a trip with us around the globe. In each episode we hear the story of one of this year's Whitley Award winners. We can promise a healthy dose of inspiration and optimism.

**Kate:** So fasten your seatbelts because this episode takes us to Java, Indonesia's most populated island.

**Edward:** Java has lost most of its forests due to urbanisation, agriculture and infrastructure. Under 10 percent of the island remains forested. But these patches of forest are the habitat of the endangered Javan gibbon. Gunung Halimun Salak National Park is the home of much of the gibbon population, and its here where Rahayu - or Ayu Oktaviani is based....

<<Ayu gibbon sounds..

**Kate:** The sound or song of a Javan gibbon - as demonstrated by Ayu. She delights in her ability to mimic the gibbon's call. Ayu's conservation journey started when she was young... inspired by one very familiar name

**Ayu:** David Attenborough. He's really a big influence to open my eyes in terms of the different species in the animals we can observe. At the time I watched one of the movies he narrated, it was the first time I saw the blue whales, different mammals and the sparks in my eyes just opened and it was like OMG it is so amazing - I have to learn something about them.

And then later I learned a bit about primates and I knew about Birute Galdikas who studied orangutans and Jane Goodall who studied chimpanzees and Dian Fossey who studied gorillas. And all of them are women so they really inspired me - OK I should be like them as well and then later I knew somebody called Dr Suci Utami, she's a primatologist and studied orangutans and she's coming from Indonesia. They are the first people who inspired me to conduct the research and study the primate.

**Kate:** But studying the Javan gibbon was something of a happy accident

**Ayu:** First I aimed to study the orangutan but then I couldn't get any funding to study them so I switched my focus to Javan gibbons which I didn't know a lot about at the time - just for the sake of financial security. Yeah there's nothing exciting about the Javan gibbon for my younger mind until I went to the forest and my research at the time was about vocalization of the Javan gibbon so I went into the forest and couldn't get anything for two weeks. So I was really desperate. But then one day, the gibbon finally gave me permission to hear their song and it was the most beautiful song I ever heard in my life.

And I think that that was the first time that I realized, OK, there's a lot of primates in Indonesia and there's already a lot of researchers who study the orangutan, why don't I study the gibbon and spread the word about how beautiful and wonderful they are, to the world?

**Kate:** The singing gibbons had her hooked, and so her work began, and she started to learn about some of the stories and folklore around the gibbon.



**Ayu:** One thing about the Javan gibbon, not so many people know about that, how can you care about the species if you know nothing about them? I think that became the first mission for me to spread the words about the Javan gibbon so first because they are forgotten. I don't want them to be forgotten any more. That's why I developed KIARA, the organization who can hopefully expand the research that is becoming the root of our organization. And expand it into different programmes, especially education and also community engagement.

Because I believe from our long term data, we already gathered a lot of information about the behaviour, ecology, the habitat needed by the gibbon. It means we have to translate the research findings much more easily for the local community of course. That's becoming our second programme, which is to translate the research finding into something really simple and also blend it with the culture and folklore that's still available around the local community. And then it's not possible to do the conservation alone, we need a lot of people. One of the most important stakeholders to do this is the local community itself. They are the one, the champion for conservation, so we started our community engagement programme.

**Kate:** There a positive feeling towards the gibbon from local communities?

**Ayu:** Yeah, that's so interesting about the folklore about the gibbon. So one of the local community members told me about the stories. So once upon a time there is a gibbon who is very thirsty and you know gibbons are living up in the canopy and they are so afraid to go down to the forest floor because maybe the leopard is waiting so she stays up there while she is so thirsty she is singing. She makes a call to make the sky rain ... and the gibbon is begging for the sky to cry and the sky is crying after hearing the song. And since then, the locals believe that if the gibbon is singing, it means the rain will follow. There is a positive way that people see the Javan gibbon because even though the gibbon lives in the forest but sometimes they come to the boundary area where the settlement is side by side with the forest. They come to the boundary area and are eating the fruits around the boundary area, do not disturb or do crop raiding from the farmers. So the local community is actually fine with them. I think that one thing to build more is how can we share that pride with the local community? That I live with the one animal that you can't find anywhere else except in this – that's the way you can make people care.

**Kate:** Ayu explains how she and her team at KIARA are working with park rangers and community members to monitor biodiversity, they are also identifying and developing sustainable livelihoods through their Ambu Halimun initiative - running eco print workshops and financial literacy training for local women. These, Ayu hope, will create sustainable income streams for local women. They have also developed a plan, a roadmap, for the gibbons of Java.

**Ayu.** Hmmm what I hope for the future is everybody has the pride for the Javan gibbon and then we have the roadmap – how to do the right conservation with the Javan gibbon and habitat and not alone, but collaborating with other stakeholders, especially the local community and then the authority of the park – that's one of the most important thing. And from that point, we can bring this roadmap, the guidelines to the other areas that are inhabited by the gibbons that we hope can adapt this formula for their area.

For the sake of the research, especially long term research in behaviour and ecology, we have to habituate different groups and compare them and now we are following three groups of the Javan gibbon. We call them group A group B and then group S. Each of them actually have distinct characteristics and if we compare with humans actually we are really similar. First, we need forests, all of us need forests, both humans and the gibbon need the forest. And in terms of their behaviour, once the gibbon is growing up, once the gibbon is mature sexually and ready to reproduce it means, they have to get out from the family and then they have to move out and find their own family. It's really similar with humans. Once you grow up it means you have to find your own life.

**Kate:** So let's hear that fantastic gibbon call one more time....

**Ayu** <<gibbon sound and laughter...

**Edward:** It is impossible not to be charmed by the story of the singing swinging gibbons of Java, and Ayu and her team are having a real and lasting impact on their future. It's wonderful to hear her story.

**Kate:** It really is, and that's quite a talent she has – how are your gibbon impressions?

**Edward:** You've got the microphone!



**Kate:** I'm not even going to try. Well, thanks for listening everyone, I assure you that if Edward or I tried to do a gibbon impression you would turn off very quickly so we won't do that but we'll be back soon so please do like and subscribe.

We will be back next time for another inspirational story, so do like and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.