
12th edition of Biodiversity Conservation Awards

The BBVA Foundation recognizes ecosystem conservation in south-eastern Spain, the creation of protected spaces in Mexico and the journalistic excellence of Caty Arévalo

- The award for Projects in Spain goes to the Asociación de Naturalistas del Sureste (ANSE) for its committed work on biodiversity conservation in an ecologically unique part of Europe that is nonetheless subject to severe human pressure: the semi-arid littoral and pre-littoral zones along the south east of the Iberian Peninsula
- The winner in the Projects in Latin America category is the Wildlife Ecology and Conservation Laboratory at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), which has efficiently translated world-class scientific knowledge into public policy, enabling impactful conservation actions like the creation of 20 new nature reserves
- In Knowledge Dissemination and Communication, Caty Arévalo, environmental correspondent with Agencia Efe is distinguished for the exceptional quality and rigor of her work; indispensable these days to refute messages on the environment that run counter to the scientific evidence
- The BBVA Foundation Awards for Biodiversity Conservation distinguish actions to conserve nature that are based on scientific understanding and geared to obtaining results of wide-ranging impact.

Madrid, September 18, 2017.- At a "time in history" when science has shown protecting nature to be more urgent than ever, society is being subjected to "messages about complex environmental issues that are inexact and at odds with the scientific evidence," states the jury's citation in this 12th edition of the BBVA Foundation Awards for Biodiversity Conservation. Against this backdrop, the awards have gone to two projects anchored on sound scientific evidence, as witnessed by their outstanding results, and an environmental journalist whose reporting gives ample national and international coverage to the most rigorous, trustworthy sources in environmental science.

The award for Projects in Spain has been bestowed on the Asociación de Naturalistas del Sureste (ANSE), "for its committed work on biodiversity conservation" in an ecologically unique part of Europe that is nonetheless subject to severe human pressure: the semi-arid littoral and pre-littoral zones

along the south east of the Iberian Peninsula, particularly the Mar Menor lagoon.

The Wildlife Ecology and Conservation Laboratory at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) takes the award in the Projects in Latin America category “for efficiently translating world-class scientific knowledge into policy decisions enabling impactful conservation actions,” in the words of the awards jury.

Finally, the Knowledge Dissemination and Communication award has gone to Agencia Efe’s environmental correspondent Caty Arévalo for “the quality and rigor” of her influential journalism, much of it anonymous, since news agencies tend to generate contents without a byline that are then picked up by thousands of media outlets.

The protection of nature is a longstanding priority for the BBVA Foundation, which not only promotes knowledge generation in ecology and conservation biology but also conservationist projects based on scientific evidence, and communicative labors that bring society to a greater awareness of the threats. As we write, the gravity of environmental challenges like biodiversity loss or climate change contrasts with the stance taken by political leaders who ignore or are even hostile to the scientific community.

This truth underscores the vital importance of the work done by people and organizations to achieve solid, lasting progress in protecting nature, among them the winners of these BBVA Foundation Awards for Biodiversity Conservation. The awards recognize projects carried out in two geographical areas with a very high biodiversity, Spain and Latin America, with a third category reserved for knowledge dissemination and communication in this domain so crucial for the planet’s future. The jury deciding the awards, funded with a total of 580,000 euros, is formed by scientific experts, media professionals and representatives of NGOs (see list at the end of this document), who contribute their complementary backgrounds and perspectives in nature conservation.

Awards to date have gone to a diverse list of winners, including top ecologist and naturalist organizations like WWF and SEO/Birdlife; associations protecting a particular species or genus, like Fundación Oso Pardo, the Program for the Conservation of Mexican Bats or the Southern Right Whale Program in Argentina; actions targeted on a given ecosystem, such as the Fundación Global Nature’s wetlands project; and, finally, public agencies, like environmental police force SEPRONA or the Environmental Prosecutor’s office, engaged in vital work for the protection of nature.

Projects in Spain: ‘ANSE: Protecting the Semi-arid South-east’

The Asociación de Naturalistas del Sureste (ANSE) is Spain’s fourth oldest ecologist organization. It was founded in 1973 on the initiative of a small group of bird lovers, but quickly found itself with an expanding membership. Its

creation was spurred, among other factors, by the entry to force of the first species protection legislation in Spain, particularly the realization that the law's success would require an organization pushing for its effective enforcement.

"At the time, the general public was unaware of the huge value of biodiversity," says the director of ANSE, geographer Pedro García Moreno. Things may be different now, but the semi-arid systems of Spain's South-east remain, in his view, an underappreciated variety of landscape "despite their great ecological worth."

ANSE's area of operations covers mainly Murcia, where it has its offices, Alicante and Almería. Scant rainfall, the wind regime and its topographical relief have given birth along its coasts to a type of habitat unique in Europe. But this is also one of the Spanish regions where urban pressure has increased most steeply along with the impact of agriculture and infrastructures. "Our efforts have helped protect many zones, often halting plans for new residential schemes or coastal infrastructures," García Moreno remarks, "but the pressure has grown exponentially. The difference between protected and unprotected areas is becoming more and more marked."

ANSE has some 550 members and works alongside volunteers and other organizations. Among its activities are campaigns to protect natural areas and threatened species, control of pollutants harmful to wildlife, reporting of environmental offences and the study of local ecosystems, including littoral zones, irrigated cropland and rivers. One of its restoration projects with autochthonous flora has helped preserve the last sand stretches along the Mar Menor, where it also halted the urbanization of what are nowadays protected areas. Earlier multi-year campaigns led to the designation of the marine reserves of Cabo de Palos, over two decades back, and Cabo Tiñoso, in 2016.

Projects in Latin America: 'Conservation of Biological Diversity in Mexico: Species and Ecosystems'

The Wildlife Ecology and Conservation Laboratory at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) launched the program that earned it the BBVA Foundation award in 1995, with the aim of developing conservation policies for the greatest possible number of species and ecosystems.

In these two decades and more, the results of its activities include the creation of 20 reserves occupying millions of hectares, protection and management plans for 30 endangered species, among them the jaguar, bison, prairie dog and black-footed ferret, and partnership initiatives with rural communities. Its work has also laid the ground for policy decisions like the passage of the Mexican Endangered Species Act or the setup of the Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas.

"For us the key to results has been doing solid basic science work. What sets our group apart is that we have used this solid knowledge to address these

problems at two levels, with a major drive to protect both endangered species and ecosystems,” explains the Laboratory’s head Gerardo Ceballos.

Foremost among these initiatives is the development of the National Strategy for the Conservation of the Jaguar. In 2016, the Laboratory sealed a historic agreement with the Mexican Government to create reserves (of up to 2.5 million hectares) and biological corridors in order to protect this feline, in the process helping other species dependent on the same ecosystem. “What makes me proud is that we have leveraged basic science to generate public policy and conservation actions,” Ceballos continues. After hearing of the jury’s decision, he called the prize “a huge encouragement to keep on working, which will also enable us to move forward more quickly in getting new projects approved by the authorities.”

Knowledge Dissemination and Communication: Caty Arévalo

The jury granted the award to Caty Arévalo, environmental correspondent with Agencia Efe for “the quality and rigor of her reporting” in almost 20 years devoted to this branch of journalism. Such labors, it added, are “especially relevant and necessary at a time in history when society is being subjected to messages about complex environmental issues that are inexact and at odds with the scientific evidence.”

Arévalo began her professional career in the late 1990s covering environmental stories in Spain for the news bulletins of radio broadcasters Onda Cero and Cope, as well as for daily newspaper *El Mundo*, until in 2002 she was recruited by Efe as the agency’s first ever journalist specializing in biodiversity and climate change. Since then, she has covered all major international encounters on environmental matters, including the UN climate change and biodiversity conservation summits, for the more than one thousand media outlets subscribing to the Efe news service. She has also written hundreds of on-the-ground reports analyzing grave environmental problems, like the first Alaskan communities forced from their homes by the impacts of climate change, or the indigenous peoples affected by oil spills in the Amazon, informed always by the best available science.

Aside from her reporting output, Arévalo was among the co-founders of EFEverde, the environmental journalism platform launched by the agency in 2009, and now a key information source for the Spanish-speaking world. Throughout her career, moreover, she has maintained direct contacts with leading experts from the global scientific community at universities like Oxford, Harvard or the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), giving her first-hand access to some of the most cutting-edge research in the environment field. Hence the jury’s assertion that “she represents a new generation of journalists trained at international centers of excellence,” whose stories draw on the latest knowledge from the relevant field of science.

“Every day I start my professional endeavor convinced that I am writing about the most important issue confronting humanity: the way in which the dominant development model since the industrial revolution is driving us to the brink of collapse, and whether or not we can turn things round in time to ensure our own survival,” declared Arévalo shortly after hearing of the award. For the reporter, winning the award “has enormous value at this time of planetary crisis coinciding with a bleak time for the journalists’ trade, because it extends recognition to a specialist branch that addresses such crucial issues for humanity as climate change, yet which is often sidelined or dispensed with by editorial departments.”

Jury members

The jury in this edition was chaired by Rafael Pardo, Director of the BBVA Foundation, with members Alberto Aguirre de Cárcer, Director of daily newspaper *La Verdad*, Murcia; Araceli Acosta, Chief Coordinator for Environmental Reporting with *ABC Natural*; Carlos Montes, Professor of Ecology at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid; Eulalia Moreno, Research Professor at the Arid Zones Experimental Station, CSIC; Juan Carlos del Olmo, General Secretary of WWF España; Daniel Oro, Research Professor at the Mediterranean Institute for Advanced Studies, CSIC-University of the Balearic Islands; Xavier Querol, Research Professor at the Institute of Environmental Assessment and Water Research, CSIC; and Rafael Zardoya, Research Professor at the Spanish Museum of Natural Sciences, CSIC.

Fundación BBVA

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