

Speech at the presentation ceremony of the BBVA Foundation Awards for Biodiversity Conservation

Frank Pope, CEO of Save the Elephants

Your Excellencies, distinguished members of the BBVA Foundation, colleagues, and friends,

I'm honoured to accept this award for our Elephant Crisis Fund on behalf of Save the Elephants ... and most importantly, the 120 partner organizations across 44 countries who are the true heroes of this story.

Life on our planet is in crisis. Not since the meteor strike that killed the dinosaurs have we lost so much so fast. This time humans are the meteor. It can feel overwhelming, paralyzing even. But it is not hopeless.

In 2002 Zakouma National Park in Chad had 4000 elephants. By 2010 just 450 remained. Stressed elephants don't reproduce, and the following year in 2011, only one calf was born. One. That single calf represented the only hope for the future that year. But in 2018, thanks to protection and partnership from our Elephant Crisis Fund grantee African Parks, 127 calves were born in Zakouma. From one to 127. That's what collaboration achieves. That's what science-driven hope looks like.

We've overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges before. 15 years ago the ivory trade threatened elephants across the whole of Africa with extinction from the wild. But citizens, scientists, organisations like ours, and governments came together, and in 2018 China closed their domestic market. With the demand for ivory quashed, poaching plummeted. We're keeping a wary eye on it, but, for the time being, in most parts of Africa, elephants no longer face being killed for their tusks.

Today we face an arguably bigger challenge. Africa's human population will double by 2070, and the continent is changing fast. Development is necessary, important, and desired. But it doesn't have to cost the wild.

Elephants need a voice in Africa's development – not as obstacles, but as guardians of the ecosystems we depend on for the water we drink and the air we breathe. GPS tracking and scientific analysis can give elephants a voice. Our partner organisations, trusted by their local communities, make it heard.

This is where the Elephant Crisis Fund is so powerful. We co-founded the project with the US-based Wildlife Conservation Network in 2013. It represents a new model of conservation – rapid, flexible, strategic, and collaborative. We are a network – a mycelium - of deeply local organizations with roots in their communities and expertise in their landscapes, that we feed with science and support.

The BBVA Foundation hasn't honoured an individual "wildlife hero" tonight. You've celebrated a model – a model that works. Elephant populations brought back from the brink. Key habitats and corridors protected. Trafficking networks disrupted. Communities empowered.

But we need to do more. Where we lose elephants – and the biodiversity that lives under their umbrella – they are almost impossible to bring back. When species go extinct, that door is slammed shut forever. Elephants represent and defend the wild. When we invest in them, we invest in the wild itself.

We are at a critical moment. Government funding for conservation in Africa is shrinking at precisely the time when biodiversity most needs our help. The Elephant Crisis Fund has proven this model succeeds. With the BBVA Foundation's recognition, we invite other funders to join a new way to save the wild.

On behalf of Save the Elephants, the Wildlife Conservation Network, and our 120 partners – thank you for believing in collaboration and recognizing that the future of biodiversity depends on all of us working together.

The elephants have found their voice. Now let's make sure the world is listening.
Thank you.