# Dr Farina Othman wins 2025 Whitley Award for pioneering Bornean elephant conservation in Sabah



KOTA KINABALU (May 2) – Dr Farina Othman, a prominent figure in conservation efforts, has been awarded the prestigious 2025 Whitley Award by the Whitley Fund for Nature, a UK charity dedicated to supporting grassroots conservation leaders in the Global South. The recognition is for her significant work in saving the critically endangered Bornean elephants, with an estimated population of just 300 remaining in the east coast of Sabah, where their habitat continues to diminish rapidly.

Farina, who is the founder and director of the nonprofit organization Seratu Aatai, which translates to “solidarity,” is focusing her efforts on addressing the rising incidents of human-elephant conflict. This conflict has become increasingly prevalent in the Lower Kinabatangan region, where palm oil development often leads to clashes between local farmers and the elephants navigating their altered habitats. The area has experienced severe fragmentation, with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) reporting a loss of 60% of the elephants' forest habitat over the past 40 years, primarily due to logging and agricultural expansion.

The Whitley Award was presented to Farina by Charity Patron Princess Anne on April 30 at the Royal Geographical Society in London, with the ceremony being livestreamed to an international audience via YouTube.

In her mission, Dr Farina is leading initiatives to promote what she terms an “elephant-friendly” approach among local stakeholders, including both large plantation owners and smallholders. The Lower Kinabatangan area is home to eleven major palm oil companies that control approximately 40% of the land, alongside around 150 independent palm oil farmers. By working collaboratively with these stakeholders, Farina aims to establish protected corridor networks that facilitate coexistence between local communities and the remaining elephant population.

Farina emphasised the broader implications of human-wildlife conflict, stating, “Human-wildlife conflict is often treated as a local issue, but it is a global challenge linked to habitat loss, climate change, and unsustainable development.” Her project under the Whitley Award seeks to combine conservation efforts with sustainable agricultural practices, reinforcing the importance of both environmental preservation and economic viability.

The initiative includes a citizen science programme where plantation staff will learn to identify and monitor elephant movements, contributing valuable data to local conservation efforts. This ongoing research will also be shared with the Sabah Wildlife Department and other governmental entities to improve conservation strategies.

Moreover, the project plans to establish clear guidelines and standard operating procedures for palm oil companies, ensuring alignment with environmental policies and laws. These protocols will focus on enhancing habitat connectivity, creating specific corridors, and implementing effective fencing strategies to mitigate conflict.

Training sessions will be designed for large plantations aimed at educating independent smallholders on sustainable farming methods, including efficient fertilisation and pest control techniques, minimising environmental impacts.

In an effort to further engage local communities, individuals will have the opportunity to become honorary wildlife wardens, empowered to enforce wildlife conservation laws as per the Sabah Wildlife Enactment of 1997. These wardens will also play a critical role in educating plantation school students about safe interactions with elephants and strategies for reducing conflict.

Founded in 1993, the Whitley Fund for Nature has allocated £24 million to support conservationists in 80 countries, highlighting its commitment to funding in-country leaders who drive meaningful change at the community level. Dr Farina's endeavours represent a vital step in protecting one of the world's smallest elephants and addressing the complexities of conservation intertwined with local livelihoods.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://whitleyaward.org/winners-hub/> - This page lists the winners of the Whitley Awards, including Dr. Farina Othman, who was awarded the 2025 Whitley Award for her conservation efforts in saving the critically endangered Bornean elephants.
* <https://whitleyaward.org/> - The Whitley Fund for Nature is a UK charity dedicated to supporting grassroots conservation leaders in the Global South, such as Dr. Farina Othman, who received the 2025 Whitley Award.
* <https://whitleyaward.org/awards/whitley-awards/> - This page provides information about the Whitley Awards, including details about the £50,000 project funding over one year awarded to winners like Dr. Farina Othman.
* <https://wildhub.community/posts/whitley-awards-2025> - This article discusses the 2025 Whitley Awards, highlighting the support provided to community-based projects, such as Dr. Farina Othman's initiative to address human-elephant conflict in Sabah.
* <https://www.noahwire.com> - Noah Wire Services is the source of the article detailing Dr. Farina Othman's award and conservation efforts for the Bornean elephants.
* <https://www.iucn.org/> - The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) reports on the loss of 60% of the Bornean elephants' forest habitat over the past 40 years, primarily due to logging and agricultural expansion.
* <https://news.google.com/rss/articles/CBMizAFBVV95cUxPaDVNM3B6WnJZWWZteGNHdGRmWDIza0NPdmNMUVlDVzNxbzRMdXFsNWJ6YU1nYm81cHMtbEFLUk03aE1DcVFyUm1XUW1sdFlHdVpwNjFYd1RPYWF5Zko3Nnlzb3owQnpkUExIVV9OQzJFVVJ0OUlKM3NPMnZfYTJ0M0xtYVlwMVpydmRzeWxJN2pZS0NHZmxzTVhOdXhoRHpvS01Gd29nWGt1eUhXZWNHamdLWVZNRnZzYmRBVWIxZFF0TWlBTDB3enBIQUw?oc=5&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en> - Please view link - unable to able to access data