

2022 Marianne Schmink Outstanding Dissertation Award



The Tropical Conservation and Development program congratulates Dr. Mahi Puri for being the 2022 recipient of the Marianne Schmink Outstanding Dissertation Award. Dr. Puri received her PhD in Wildlife Ecology and Conservation in 2021 under the supervision of Drs. Bette Loiselle (Advisor) and Elizabeth Pienaar (Co-Advisor). The outstanding dissertation award was established in 2010 in recognition of Dr. Marianne Schmink, former Director of the TCD Program for her significant and transformative contributions to graduate education, the Center for Latin American Studies and the TCD Program.

Dr. Puri's dissertation entitled "***Prioritizing and identifying opportunities for carnivore conservation in human-dominated landscapes of India***"

took an integrative, interdisciplinary approach to address key issues regarding carnivore conservation in densely populated agricultural landscapes. Dr. Puri's dissertation research was centered in the Pench Tiger Reserve and the large surrounding buffer area where small-scale

agriculture predominates, and conflict with large vertebrates, such as tigers, leopards, sloth-bears, and several herbivores is not uncommon. Like most protected areas in India, the Pench Tiger Reserve is not sufficiently large enough to conserve these large vertebrates, and they move into surrounding human-dominated landscapes for resources. Dr. Puri's dissertation tells an interwoven story regarding the spatial use of and temporal activity in the buffer areas by large carnivores (where, when and why), the programs and underlying factors that might motivate farmers to modify land use practices to benefit biodiversity conservation (what and why) and how one integrates carnivore ecology and farmer willingness to modify land use to prioritize sites for implementation of an incentive-based agroforestry program for conservation (where and how).

The selection committee noted that the "question underpinning the dissertation - how to best identify and prioritize approaches to the conservation of carnivores in areas dominated by humans, with whom they often come into conflict - is a fundamental one throughout the tropics". The topic is largely understudied in India and, thus, her results are locally important for establishing conservation programs, while being broadly relevant to other locations. The committee highlighted the novel ecological data on carnivore activity across a large landscape, and the strong economic theory and analytical approaches that resulted in relevant insights on farmers' willingness to engage in conservation actions. Further, the committee complimented Dr. Puri on her ability to integrate these seemingly disparate data sets to prioritize sites for implementing an incentive-based agroforestry program. The committee congratulates Dr. Puri for her challenging and impactful research.

After graduating, Dr. Puri has worked as a Senior Research Associate at the Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources, University of Georgia in a collaborative project with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. She studied the tolerance of metro Atlanta residents towards urban wildlife and tested appropriate messaging for public to reduce human-wildlife conflict. Currently, Mahi works as a Coexistence Scientist in the Global Conservation Program at Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden where she is working on various in-situ conservation projects across Africa and Asia.

The selection committee was composed of TCD core faculty Dr. Emilio Bruna (Center for Latin American Studies and Department of Wildlife Ecology & Conservation) and Joel Correia (Center for Latin American Studies) and TCD alumna Dr. Christine Lucas.

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