

# THEY RISK THEIR OWN LIVES TO PROTECT ENDANGERED ANIMALS

Raabia Hawa gave up a successful career in the media industry to fight poaching and protect gamekeepers in East Africa.

Angela Maldonado is the researcher who wants to stop the illegal trade of Amazonian wildlife and protect the rights of indigenous people.

Both their lives are in danger.

"I find it hard to accept that there are men sitting and planning which road to drive to my house so they can rape me, kill me and burn my house so no one will find my body," says Raabia Hawa

They met recently but have quickly become close. Because even though they work in completely different parts of the world - Kenya's border with Somalia, and the tri-border region between Colombia, Peru and Brazil - they recognize the parallels in each other's lives.

-I do research on monkeys and try to stop the illegal trade in night monkeys. I've been doing that for 15 years now. That's also how I became a human rights defender, because of the indigenous people living in the forests where I conduct my research. I has become clear to me that they lack access to basic rights, such as healthcare, education and clean water, and that this leads to conflicts with the monkeys, says Angela Maldonado. She started her conservation organization, Fundación Entropika, in 2007.

Raabia Hawa is a few years younger. She started the foundation Ulinzi Africa, which is Swahili for "Defender of Africa", in 2014.

"Our mission is to protect the animal guardians who go out every day to prevent poaching. They find and destroy traps and keep track on what's happening in the area. If they find injured animals, our organization makes sure they get veterinary care. We care about each individual animal," says Raabia Hawa.

We meet in Stockholm, where both have traveled to participate in a conference organized by the human rights organization Civil Rights Defenders. They have a packed schedule, the conversation is shorter than we would

like, but we manage to both laugh and cry in the hour or so we meet. Both Angela Maldonado and Raabia Hawa are part of the Natalia project, Civil Rights Defender's alert and security system for human rights activists. The system is named after Natalia Estemirova who was kidnapped and murdered in Chechnya in 2009. The participants, known as Natalia carriers, are equipped with a GPS system so they can activate an emergency alarm in case they are attacked. The activist's position is then sent directly to Civil Rights Defenders and to relatives, who can quickly mobilize aid and inform the outside world about the attack.

"It's like a kind of panic alarm," says Angela.

"Yes, it's a funny little button. I hope that I never have to try it, but I like the feeling that if something were to happen to me, I would get help. I can't call the police. As a human being, it is natural to ask for help when you are in danger..."

"But in our case, if we call the police, that is basically suicide," Angela Maldonado fills in.

## The world's most dangerous country

Colombia has long been considered the world's most dangerous country for environmental activists. In the wake of the peace agreement concluded in 2016 between the government and the Farc guerrillas, large parts of the country have fallen into the hands of drug cartels. Several hundred people who fought to protect wildlife and nature have been murdered in recent years. Since last summer, the country has

**No, I belong in my forest, I'm just a monkey too.**



experienced a new president - leftist politician and former rebel leader Gustavo Petro, who has promised to put an end to lawlessness and has appointed environmental activist Francia Marquez as his vice-president. However, Angela Maldonado, who herself votes for politicians more towards the middle of the political spectrum, is cautious in her hopes. In part, the country is divided, polarized, "which you also experience in Sweden", she says.

"Gustavo Petro and his staff contributed to this scenario through a dirty election campaign with elements of false claims. But then I see some of his proposals as very positive, for example he wants to return large amounts of land to people who were driven out of their homes by paramilitary groups. This reform is desperately needed. We are one of the most biodiverse countries in the world, but we have very little food production, we cannot feed our own population. He also wants to negotiate peace with the drug cartels, who are completely devoid of ethics and morals. It remains to be seen whether he succeeds in this feat, which basically requires magic. But I really want to see peace in these lawless areas, because that's where my monkeys live," says Angela Maldonado.

## Knowledge lost during the pandemic

Meanwhile, the situation in the rainforest is worse than it has been for a long time, she says. During the pandemic many indigenous elders died, and with them, knowledge disappeared, along with many of their

Angela Maldonado and Raabia Hawa take on the fight against poachers, extremists and corrupt authorities. Now they have just visited Stockholm. Raabia Hawa took the opportunity to dip her feet in the "very cold" water during her visit to Stockholm. "I did it and the same day I got 31 new followers on Instagram. I'm very proud of that too!"  
PHOTO ZANNA NORDQVIST





Angela Maldonado is the director of the environmental organisation Fundación Entropika, which is based in the Colombian city of Leticia on the Amazon River, by the border with Brazil and Peru.  
 PHOTO NOWACZYK/SHUTTERSTOCK

Colombia's night monkeys are classified as "vulnerable", meaning that they are at high risk of extinction in the medium term. They are smuggled out of the country to become laboratory animals for the pharmaceutical industry.  
 IMAGE GARY L. CLARK, WIKICOMMONS

sources of income, such as tourism. Simultaneously, law enforcement authorities have withdrawn from the area, leaving the forests open for the cultivation of coca crops, drug and endangered animal trafficking, land-grabbing for palm oil production, and other illegal activities carried out by various insurgents and criminal groups who do not want conservationists to operate in the same area and interfere. Even some indigenous members, in the absence of other sources of income, try to make money by poaching night monkeys. Angela Maldonado strives to give them other opportunities to make a living. She has also spent a lot of time collecting money for food, medicine and other everyday items that indigenous people need. But she is concerned that the authorities won't even respond to her requests for safe ways to distribute the supplies.  
 "They are thoroughly corrupt," she says.

Raabia Hawa has similar experiences. "So many officials are very angry with me, which I didn't understand for a long time. Where I live, there are no independent organisations that scrutinise the authorities and how they work. I started pursuing different

cases, when I didn't get a response from the station commander, I took it to the regional director and then to the next level, until I finally ended up in Nairobi. Thanks to my persistence, I made a lot of enemies."  
 She too believes that conservation is a struggle for human rights.  
 "We work in the Tana River Valley where indigenous people practice nomadic cattle herding. They depend on their animals, and right now there are many poachers from other places hunting bushmeat (an African word for unsustainable hunting for consumption and trade of wild meat) and selling it in markets all over Kenya. This affects indigenous people, because even if they don't eat this meat themselves, when poachers take species, predators in the area have nothing to eat and start attacking indigenous people's livestock instead - which is their only income. They depend on it to send their children to school and to buy the things they need. It puts milk in their tea, so to speak. That's why my foundation is also committed to educate local people on their rights. They suffer when the rule of law does not work.

**How can you continue to fight despite**

**the threats against you?**

"I try to stop what I'm doing all the time. But when I leave the rainforest, and especially when I had to leave Colombia because of all the threats, I realised very quickly that I can't do anything else. This is my mission in life. I am getting emotional now ... but I feel such a strong love for nature, and I have a life and what else can I do but dedicate it to saving other lives? No, I belong in my forests, I'm just a monkey too," says Angela Maldonado, wiping away a few tears.  
 Raabia Hawa gives her a hug and adds: "I experience something similar. I identify very easily with animals. Because they can't speak for themselves and don't understand why someone is trying to hurt or kill them, I need to help them. I have felt many times that I cannot go on. The threats never end. It is not possible to live like that. I have been very close to throwing in the towel because I'm afraid that I die. I can see them hurting my family, my cat. I know the first thing they'll do is to hang my cat from a tree somewhere. Am I sure it's worth it? Why don't I give up? But then I think about the elephants. I've lived with them for so long, I know



**Angela Maldonado**  
 Researcher and founder of environmental organisation Fundación Entropika, in the Colombian city of Leticia on the Amazon River. Entropika works against illegal trade in wildlife and plants, and has a range of educational projects with indigenous peoples in the region. In a collaborative project with Civil Rights Defenders the organisation trains secondary school students in human rights and how they can stand up against injustice and corruption. In another project funded by the Swedish Mission Council, Fundación Entropika is working to strengthen the indigenous group of Ticunas so they can better advocate for environmental protection.



It is the love of elephants that drives Raabia Hawa to fight on. Kenya has around 36,000 elephants, but they are threatened by both poaching and drought in the wake of global warming. PHOTO KAREL PRINSLOO/TT

whole families of elephants. I know that if I stop fighting, they will have nowhere to go. What does it mean for their children - and for our children? I have no children of my own yet, but my sisters do and my niece loves every insect, every animal. If I don't save this place, what will she see in her life? What will her children ever see? If we lose the animals, we also lose our identity, our humanity. We lose the ability to show ourselves compassion to something that cannot speak, Raabia Hawa says and continues: "I feel I have this responsibility. Nobody else dares to live in my forest, big organisations don't want to be here because of the presence of Al-Shabaab, it would be too expensive for them to guarantee the safety of their employees. I like to think that God put me in that forest and made it so that I never want to leave. Thanks to my late father, I am well enough educated to use my brain and my skills and my resources to protect what is really important. Then it feels good to know that there are others who are in the same situation as me. Perhaps the hardest thing is to feel alone in the forest..." says Raabia Hawa,

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sobbing. "Now it's my turn to give you a hug," says Angela Maldonado. "You see, I, who can't hurt a fly, find it hard to accept that there are men sitting and planning which road to drive to my house so they can rape me, kill me and burn my house so no one will find my body," Raabia Hawa continues.

**Broaden her horizons**

She says the visit to Stockholm has broaden her horizons. "I've never seen myself as an activist before. I feel first and foremost like a conservationist trying to protect animals. But now I also feel part of a particular community of people who are willing, like Angela, to put their own lives on the line. When I think like that, I feel lucky."

ALEKSANDRA POGORZELSKA



**CIVIL RIGHTS DEFENDERS**

**Civil Rights Defenders**  
 An international human rights organisation founded in Sweden in 1982 that supports human rights defenders around the world.