

GOOD NATURED EP 1

CALEB OFORI-BOATENG



**GOOD
NATURED**
A PODCAST SERIES FROM
CONSERVATION OPTIMISM

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INTRO

Julia: The Good Natured podcast comes to you from Conservation Optimism and its Founding Partners, Synchronicity Earth and the University of Oxford.

Sofia: Welcome to Good Natured, a podcast where you can join us for uplifting chats that shine a light on conservation challenges. In each episode, we interview an inspiring conservationist. Our fascinating guests come from many backgrounds: artists, scientists, activists, and many more. I'm Sofia, a PhD student focusing on marine conservation. I love doing science and telling stories through film, writing, improvised comedy and now podcasts.

Julia: And I'm Julia, a science communicator, and journalist. I'm passionate about sharing what people are doing to make the world a better place. We know these are quite hard times and that everyone needs to have a bit of a pick me up. So we're hoping that this conversation will inspire you.

Sofia: So the first person we are excited to talk to is Caleb Ofori-Boateng. Caleb is the first formally trained herpetologist in Ghana. And we're so incredibly excited to be able to talk to him today. And just to be clear, an herpetologist is somebody who studies, reptiles and amphibians.

Julia: Caleb actually discovered the population of the Togo slippery frog after it had been considered extinct by scientists for 40 years.

Sofia: I think there's always something super romantic about somebody rediscovering a species or discovering a new species. It's something that can really capture people's imagination. But you know, Caleb has actually gone quite a lot further! He discovered this population of this species and then now he's also created this NGO called Herp Conservation Ghana, which focuses on the conservation of reptiles and amphibians in Ghana.

Julia: But what's also very exciting about the work that Caleb does is that he is working with local communities. And actually one of the things he does is using what he calls conservation evangelism. I'm not going to tell you too much about it right now because actually, he's going to tell us all about it during the conversation that we're going to have.

Sofia: I think that Caleb is a really good example of somebody who's maybe like a biologist, but at the same time is doing a lot of work with communities and has a really broad understanding of what conservation can be, and what makes it inspirational. Also, just to say, I watched him speak at the Conservation Optimism Summit last year, and I just thought he was a wonderful speaker! So we are very lucky to be talking to him today.

Julia: So here it comes! Now we're going to start a conversation with Caleb.

THE INTERVIEW

Julia: Hi, Caleb!

Sofia: Hi, Caleb! Thank you so much for being here with us today. We're so excited to talk to you about all your conservation experience. So our first question is what drove you to become a conservationist?

Caleb: Well, that's an interesting question and by the way, thank you for having me. I had that rare privilege of being born and raised in a wildlife-protected area so I took it really for granted that I had such an early exposure to wildlife. My father was a park warden and it was my normal life. So when I grew up and I went to the university, it was like the easiest course to do, because I could really understand and appreciate it. But then as I grew up in society and came to the city, I realised that things were really very different there. That people didn't really care about wildlife and that wildlife was in big trouble and nobody could feel it. But I had just had that opportunity to feel it very deeply within me.

Julia: Oh, that's amazing. Actually, you're the first formally trained herpetologist in Ghana, aren't you? And you've also discovered while on an expedition, a population of the Togo slippery frog, a species that had been considered extinct by scientists for 40 years. That's quite an amazing achievement! I was wondering, what first got you interested in amphibians specifically?

Caleb: Well, that is a very good question. Most of my colleagues who are herpetologists or amphibian biologists had a frog for a pet. They really, really, really like to spend time with frogs and all that, which I am really jealous of! But my experience was really

different. What really drove me to work on amphibians was because of extinction. When I think of extinction, I think that you're losing somebody that you love so much and the person dies or something. You can never bring the person back. That's how I view extinction. And my personal journey growing up as a child makes it even more real to me because I was very close to my father. He was my hero. I loved him dearly.

And then when I was seven years, he passed on. He fell asleep and when I lost him I thought he was going to come back. As a child, I couldn't imagine that he was gone for good. And I always hoped that he was going to show up one day and it's been over 20 years now and he never showed up. And that's the reality of extinction that we take it for granted, that we have amphibians and we have elephants and, and then one day and they will not be there. And once it's gone, it's gone. There's really nothing you can do.

I realised that amphibians were going through a mass extinction crisis and that really horrified me to think of it, that these animals are going and once they are gone, there's nothing that we can do about it. I couldn't just stand and watch it so I decided to do something about it. And that's how my love relationship with amphibians began.

Sofia: Wow, that's such an amazing story. Thank you for sharing it. What makes you optimistic about the future of frogs and of the Togo slippery frog more specifically?

Caleb: Well, let me say this first. I'm very optimistic about wildlife conservation in general, because we have been able to protect that frog species in Ghana! And I believe that if we can protect that frog in Ghana, then we can protect wildlife anywhere in the world. Frogs are not liked in any way where I come from. I've been struggling to get any attention from the public at all. Not many people think about wildlife and wildlife conservation, let alone think about frogs. So if we were able to protect habitats and rivers and streams and mountains because of a frog species, then I'm very optimistic that we can do much more. And it is with this optimism that I'm actually expanding [the project].

We have established a new branch of our conservation in Liberia, for example. In our strategic planning we'll have another branch in Sierra Leone in two years because we think that it's possible, that the community people are reasonable. They will not self-destruct. They will not do things that hurts them on the long term. And if you can approach them with all your sincerity and with a very clear purpose then you are able to work with them to realise conservation goals.

I'm very optimistic about not just frog conservation but for wildlife and nature conservation in general. I have seen a lot of young people champion to join us in protecting frogs. Whereas I was the first formally trained person and I was the first

Ghanaian to decide to dedicate a career in amphibian conservation, which now feels like a good thing. I can be proud of it and smile about it but now there are so many people across West Africa are doing the same thing.

They find the successes that I have achieved as something nice and it inspires them. And they are not only inspired to protect the forest. Young Ghanaians and Africans can get out of school, finish their BSc and decide that I want to spend a career protecting the crocodile because somebody protected a frog and has been successful so I'm very optimistic.

Sofia: So another thing that you are well known for is for having implemented a novel church based conservation education approach to engender and create local support. It's such an intriguing approach that I think is maybe not well known in conservation. What exactly does it involve? Do you think you could just tell us a little bit more about it?

Caleb: It was born out of a strong desire to make a difference. It was born out of the knowledge that we couldn't save these critically endangered species without communities. Community involvement was so key to saving this species so I needed to find a way to engage them. Conservation evangelism was the only way, at least at that moment. When we say conservation evangelism, it is not just a church-based approach. It is using people's belief systems. It could be traditional; it could be any form of religion at all to inspire them so that they are willing to do something to save species.

When we do conservation evangelism, we are just basically reasoning out with people, looking at what their own Quran or Bible or Hadid says about conservation. And it's a way of getting the attention of local people as an initial starting point of engagement, when it comes to conservation.

Conservation promises long-term benefits mostly, which makes it very difficult to sell to these people. But when you use conservation evangelism, it's very synonymous to what most religion teaches, which is basically trying to minimise some pleasures of life in anticipation with a hope that you would gain some long-term benefits. That's basically what conservation also promises. It's a meeting point really between conservation and religion. Once we had done that, we realised that we were able to, to get more support. And so in my case, the frog I protect is a delicacy. People have been eating it for several years and they explain to you how delicious that is. They also believe that it also has health benefits to them. And these are not things that you can use science to change.

One thing I that I always tell the community people is that Africa suffer from a deadly disease called Ebola, which just devastated the continent and the sub region. I tell them

'imagine that the cure to this Ebola virus was sitting right behind the Togo slippery frog and you ate the very last one'. So we've been able to convince them not to do so and to protect the forest as a community based protected area. And now what is happening is that we are helping them benefit from this kind of sacrifice. So we've had funding and we are putting in a canopy walkway in this forest so by protecting the forest and the animals, they are also getting employment. They are getting an income and all that.

Julia: That's fascinating, it's such an interesting concept. What would you say makes this approach so powerful?

Caleb: I think that conservation evangelism is a very powerful tool in many respects. Firstly, it is, is cheap and can easily be replicated because religious people gather at least on a weekly basis as part of the normal things that they do in society. And so when we do conservation evangelism, basically we seek a time within the period when they gather for congregation or worship to reason with them, present these ideas to them and to see whether they will embrace it or otherwise.

The second reason is that usually when people go for set meetings the atmosphere is that of change. When people go to the mosque or the church it is because they want to be better people and so it's a very unique opportunity to give them a reason to do so or to show the way as to some of the changes. It's different if I met somebody at the bar and I've talked to him about conservation. The results may not be the same if I met that person in church, because on that Sunday or Friday morning, he is determined that he wants to live a better life.

And probably the third one I wanted to put across is that people's faith is very central to their attitudes and all that. People pay more attention to things that are coming from either the Quran or the Bible, for example, rather than something that scientists are saying. So these are very few reasons why I think that conservation evangelism is such a powerful tool.

Julia: I was wondering, so as you just say, you do a lot of work with local communities, what are the kind of key challenges that you have been facing?

Caleb: So I would say that the first challenge is just the challenge of dealing with humans and there are also external challenges like the government. Sometimes after a year or so of work, the government is the one who suddenly mines the reserve and pick out some bauxite or gold and you spent nine years of your life trying to protect this forest and it's way above you. There is not much you can do. It is happening in one of Ghana's forests right now. We've worked here for years, we've even received some awards for helping the communities protect this forest, and now the government is

opening roads and wants to destroy this huge mountain forest. It's unbelievable the things that we need to deal with but we keep trying.

Sofia: One side of conservation is this kind of failure but there is that balance and there are also these moments maybe of success where you feel like maybe you did something well. Do you think you could describe one of those moments for us as well?

Caleb: Yes. We've had some remarkable successes. The key one is when I was finally able to work with my team to protect what was then 847 acres of forestland legally. It happened so fast! The process took time trying to engage them but once they were on board it happened so fast that I couldn't believe it. And now that forest has been expanded to an additional 2,500 acres with an added 10,000 acres of sustainable use area. This is unprecedented. It has never happened in my country before, and I can't really believe that that's happened for me! This is very remarkable. What I like about this is that we aimed to protect critically endangered frog species but now because of the large area that we are protecting, we've seen wildlife populations on our camera traps are have seen more encounters with large mammals and we are discovering new species. Some of them are were not described in this reserve.

The last time I checked there were 11 IUCN threatened species, including two that are critically endangered, that are protected by this reserve. So this really very exciting! You can look back at those achievements and then fight through the failures and challenges that you have on the way. Those successes have made me not even remember some of them but certainly there were many challenges along the way. But it's so exciting and for me, it's more like realising a childhood dream. It's like I've been able to recreate my childhood to some extent because the life that I had as a child was when people lived with wildlife in protected areas and when they did not harm these animals, they tried as much as possible not to harm us also and I thought that was very beautiful.

Julia: That definitely make us feel very optimistic.

Sofia: And why do you think it is important to be optimistic in conservation more generally?

Caleb: I think that nothing really grows or flourishes in a gloomy atmosphere so being optimistic help. And I find that when, in our personal lives as individuals, we open our mouth and we say something positive then our whole life begins to take a positive turn. Whereas if we decided to open our mouth and confess negativity then we begin to act exactly so. So personally I look at the little successes, I choose to declare success, and interestingly, that is exactly what we then accomplish!

So it's good to be optimistic! And if we decide to be optimistic, then we are going to realise the things that we are optimistic about. Whereas, if we decide, otherwise, trust me, it doesn't matter how hard we work we'll receive that otherwise result.

I don't know if this makes sense to many people but this is really from my practical experience. When I have come to the office and we are facing challenges I could choose to say 'Oh, these people, they are unbelievable. They are cutting more trees. Oh no. Why do they do this? We are doomed!' Then the atmosphere on that day in the office is such that nothing really gets done because everybody is so depressed.

But I can say 'You know what? Never mind, this is just an isolated incident. Look, we are protecting 10,000 acres. This man is going to change. We're going to prove him wrong. We're going to put so much money in his pocket by protecting this wildlife that he is going to regret what he did. Let's do this!' And when I can do that, the atmosphere changes and we work better and we achieve our targets. So it really pays off to be optimistic!

Julia: This has been such a, an amazing and inspiring discussion so far. We've got one more question for you, which is a question we ask all our guests here on the podcast. I know this might be hard, but if you had to pick just one species to make a case for which would it be and why. Would it be the Togo slippery frog, or would it be another species?

Caleb: I think if I wanted to choose one species then I'd choose the Afiabrago puddle frog. The Afiabrago puddle frog is a species that I discovered and described recently. And just a few days ago it was listed as critically endangered. It's most likely only restricted to a smaller locality in Eastern Ghana called Atewa Forest which the government is planning to mine any moment from now.

I think that it deserves all the attention that it can get in the whole world! And more importantly, that's because I named this frog after my mother and I don't want my mother's name to be related to an extinct frog. I want this frog to be alive for a very long time because my mother has been so dear to me, just as this frog is so dear to me. So I want both of them to be around for a very long time and I think that the Afiabrago puddle frog deserves some attention.

Sofia: I think you've made a strong case. Thank you so much for joining us. This has been a really wonderful interview. It's been great to learn more about your work and just hear about your perspective on everything from frogs to communities to how to get people on your side and be patient. Start with what people really believe in and go from there!

OUTRO

Sofia: Such an amazing conversation with Caleb. It was really cool to speak with him and hear all about what he's been up to and in between hear a few of the animals and things that he's got going on around his office.

Julia: I think one thing that I thought was particularly inspiring is how he pointed out that young people are now becoming frog, frog champions and how important it is to have that one person being kind of a role model. I think often we forget that in conservation and we don't really realise that you need lots of different role models for different species to get people really into them. Hearing about how he has made that happen in Ghana for amphibians was really inspiring to me.

Sofia: Absolutely. I think the other thing that I found really interesting during our conversation is just thinking about how you can reach people where they are. Thinking about in what ways you can connect with what people care about in order to get them to prioritise conservation or maybe think about what responsibilities or things they would like to do in conservation. So in this case, maybe connecting through church based activities but basically really thinking about what belief systems people and how we can connect through those ways, as well as maybe doing more old fashioned science.

Julia: That's something that we can actually replicate in other situations. So here it's looking specifically at different religions, but actually I think it's really interesting to look at other belief systems that people might have and how you can use these belief systems that might not necessarily be religious to really connect them with conservation issues. And I think that's something that Caleb really highlighted in the conversation, which was quite interesting to me.

Sofia: It's all about finding these points of connection because there are maybe going to be lots of people who care about the same things or who have shared values, but being able to present conservation issues in a new way that touches on these shared communities or shared beliefs can be a really powerful thing.

And finally, the importance of being the positive person in the office! Trying to stay positive and remembering that your positivity can impact other people as well.

Julia: And that's something that is really important in the current situations that we're in. So I'll definitely try to take a leaf out of Caleb's book on that one and try to stay positive and spread that positivity around.

Sofia: It can be really helpful in even allowing us to imagine what is possible.

Julia: And so that's it for this episode. We hope you enjoyed this episode, you can let us know your thoughts on Twitter using the #conservationoptimism or send us a voice note or an email podcast@conservationoptimism.org. We'd love to hear from you. And if you've enjoyed this episode, don't forget that you can subscribe on Apple Podcasts and Spotify.

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