

GOOD NATURED S2-EP4

RACHEL ASHEGBOFE IKEMEH



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

Listen to the episode [here](#).

INTRO

Julia: Welcome to Good Natured, a podcast where you can join us for uplifting chats that shine a light on conservation challenges.

Sofia: Each week we interview inspiring conservationists who come from many different backgrounds and each engage with conservation in their own way.

Julia: I'm Julia.

Sofia: And I'm Sofia! Today are thrilled to be speaking with Rachel Ashegbofe Ikemeh.

Julia: Get ready to hear about conserving chimpanzees, the importance of mentorship, and also being a woman in the field.

Sofia: Hi Julia.

Julia: Hi Sofia.

Sofia: Today, we are super excited to have Rachel Ashegbofe Ikemeh with us. Rachel won a Whitley Award in 2020 for her work on chimpanzee populations in southwestern Nigeria and the Niger Delta.

Julia: Rachel is the Project Director at the Southwest Niger Delta Forest Project. And she's also an alumni of the Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology, which is also known as DICE. And she holds a degree in conservation project management from there.

Sofia: As you will hear, Rachel does many types of work and has many goals. But one of the things that she's trying to do at the moment is aiming to secure 20% of chimpanzee habitat in Southwest Nigeria.

Julia: And we're going to touch on lots of different topics today: be it being a woman in the field of conservation or the importance of mentorships. So we can't wait for you to listen to the episode. And just for you to know in this episode, we are going to discuss sexual harassment. So a bit of a content warning if that's not something

you're comfortable with, you can just skip that bit. It'll be between minute 18.30 and minute 20.

Sofia: Let's talk to Rachel!

Julia: Hi, Rachel! Welcome to the Good Natured podcast. We're so excited to have you with us today.

Rachel: Hi!

Julia: To kickstart the podcast - could you tell us how you became a conservationist?

Rachel: My journey to being a conservationist is quite non-traditional, not your typical path. I actually studied public administration for my first degree in the university, so it just happened that I was like fresh graduate, fresh out of school. I was just really looking for job opportunities. And I was your, shall I say, very unconventional job seeker, because I was like applying for anything and everything I was seeing in the newspaper ads and all of that. And so, yeah, I stumbled upon this vacancy ad for interns with the Nigerian Conservation Foundation.

That's was kind of like the beginning of it all for me because a week or so later I was told that I passed the interviewee test and I should resume for work as an intern with the Nigerian Conservation Foundation. And so I did, and I started learning about conservation at that very point, at that very moment, when I joined the organization as an intern.

I was gorging on every information I could get out there. I became fascinated just by the thoughts of knowing that we had wildlife resource and biodiversity. And we were not just doing like learning in the office, they were taking us out to the field to learn. And it was at that point also that I was able to see first-hand the conservation issues that was just confronting wildlife and confronting us as people.

I think I was just that person. I'm still that person who felt like: 'oh, there's a problem, let me just try and get it fixed'. And I think that's what has gotten me to this point. And I think, looking back, I probably wouldn't think that it was such an easy thing to fix, you know, but that was my mindset at the time. I felt: 'oh, there's a problem. I just could fix this problem'. I think that's what made me plunge myself into conservation the way I did.

Sofia: So, correct me if I'm wrong. But that was when you became engaged in conservation then? When you got this first job and internship?

Rachel: Yes, yes.

Sofia: Had you had any experiences in nature as a child or not really?

Rachel: No, not at all. I didn't watch National Geographic. I didn't know about David Attenborough. For me, I didn't have any of that. My parents were lower middle class family. We grew up in what you could tell is a cosmopolitan city in Northern Nigeria and yeah, so we were just having very average life. So I didn't live close to a park or a natural area. I didn't visit any zoos. So I had no clue, like absolutely no clue.

But in Nigeria there is what a call a National Youth Service Corps. It's a mandatory one year youth service for everyone who graduates from a higher institution and it seen as you serving your country and they post you in different parts of the country for where you have grown up or where you have lived or went to school. And at that time I was posted in a local community and in that community there was a small village that had lots of trees.

And at that time I would always watch, you know, daily, I was just seeing truck loads coming in as logs of wood, like very large woods, coming into that place. And I remember very, very well, very vividly, that there were certain days I would just sit and wonder where were those trees and logs coming from and because in this village I didn't really understand the language of the people there I just really couldn't ask anybody about it. It was something I pondered about a lot.

And in the first month of my internship, one of the things you were exposed to, all the opportunities that were available to us was to meet with renowned conservationists working across the country. So I remember we had this meeting with Professor John Oates who eventually became sort of like my professional mentor.

And I remember it was the first meeting with him. And then he was telling us about conservation issues in Nigeria and about how he used to work ever since the 1960s in the country and all of that. And then he said something like that the most significant conservation issue to wildlife in the countries is hunting.

And I said to him: 'no, it's not hunting'. And imagine as someone who is clueless about conservation, I was arguing with this expert with so many years of experience. And my only knowledge for arguing with him about this issue was just because of my experience in this village I'm telling you about.

And then I said to him, it's not hunting, it's habitat loss. The situation played in my favour in some ways, because he took notes of me. And then we exchanged emails and we formed this kind of very good professional working relationship.

Sofia: So your focus now is largely on chimpanzees in Southwestern, Nigeria, and the Niger Delta. What are the biggest threats that you've identified in the area?

Rachel: Habitat loss is certainly the most significant threat. I mean, you could go to a location today and see a group of monkeys, for example, you see red colobus monkey or you see chimps in a particular sites, you see their nests, you take your GPS record and coordinates and you write a nice report about it. You know, you start knocking on doors, offices of government officials and asking them do something.

There's this population of chimps, these are the sites, this and that, and you use the GPS locations to trace your way back there to see how they're doing.

And that place, it's not even a forest anymore. I mean, within a space of months, I'm not even talking about a year, within a space of months the old place has that used to be that land type is totally converted. It could be human settlements, it could be anything else, but not forests, it's no longer a habitat. So yeah, it was a complicated problem. There were complex issues that were driving this forest or habitat loss and it wasn't that straightforward to address them either.

Sofia: In the past, you've described a multiplier effect, in that conservation benefits for chimpanzees or other single species can also apply to other species. How have you seen this come to life in southwestern Nigeria?

Rachel: The chimpanzees share their habitats with others species in southwestern Nigeria like forest elephants, other primates as well, like red-capped mangabey, which are now endangered, the Nigerian white-throated monkey, the Nigerian putty-nosed monkey, and all of these are all threatened primates and they share that habitat with these primates.

And so when you find that their habitat overlaps with these other species as well, you realise that there is no way you'll be driving conservation efforts for chimpanzees and that it wouldn't act positively for other species that also share that same habitat. So we have seen, I can tell you for certain, say, for example, one of the protected areas, which we have just created in southwestern Nigeria, we are now beginning to see a comeback for some of all these other primates. And we are seeing them in our field count and before you couldn't even see them anymore. So that is a real big issue and that shows the extent to which conservation was badly needed.

Julia: That's always amazing to see how by protecting like one species you then end up protecting so many others. It's always very inspiring. And I just wanted to ask you so obviously the chimpanzee is such a charismatic, emblematic species. What is your experience working with chimps?

Rachel: It's really, really difficult because you hardly see them. You just have to rely on the signs that they leave behind, which is their nests. So we would rely on those nests, we rely on vocalizations. Chimpanzees are very social animals and they will vocalise lots when they are together. But then being able to trace them doesn't mean it would be easy for you to track them down and get to see them: take pictures, do videos. You know how it is for us conservationists; we get very excited when we are able to make such sightings.

We kind of live for those moments but it's not always the case in the places where there's been hunting and logging in that habitat, where there's been real human disturbance in that very habitat. I mean, we've had an occasion where, and this happened up in the Niger Delta, where we kind of camped out and saw a group of chimpanzee. We found out where they were sleeping and woke up at 4:00 AM. We tried to track them down and were just so determined to be able to see them. And,

and at that time I was collecting genetic sampling for chimps. So it wasn't just the ambition of trying to see them or having that kind of goal, but the goal was really to collect as many samples as possible.

So if you are sure they have been in an area, it will be easier for you to look for faeces because they would, you know, most certainly poop. So really that was really the main goal. So we stalked out this group of chimpanzees on that tree, we assumed that they had slept because we heard vocalisations. So we're out there at 4:00 AM in the morning and we were just there until 6-7 am and we discovered that they outsmarted us somehow and left the tree without making one single sound.

And then they just like escaped into the forest and we just weren't able to see them. And we just also weren't able to see their faeces as we had wanted at that very point. So it was so disappointing. That's how much hard work that goes into, you know, trying to monitor the chimps.

Sofia: Well, I mean, it sounds like you've had some amazing experiences just tracking them and of course it's hard work, but it sounds like you really love working with them as well.

Julia: I just love all your anecdotes as well. It makes it like so vivid and real. So you have previously said that women are often disregarded as agents of change in Nigeria and in conservation. So what has your experience been like as a woman in this field?

Rachel: That's a good question and it's a very difficult one to answer, because say, for example, if you get, if, if you're facing an issue, no one is going to tell you it's because you're a woman. My conservation work started in 2005. Right? So at that time, besides even being a woman, I really didn't have any, shall I say role models? Like I didn't see anybody becoming a field based conservationists. That's even male without them being male or female. I had to develop my own interests in conservation and had to build myself up. Of course, I mentioned the help I got from people like Professor John Oates, who would review my report. But besides that, in terms of being in the field, I didn't have anyone to pattern that after.

I started out doing field based conservation as a team leader so that was by itself, a challenge, especially considering the fact that of course as I said, I didn't have the biological background. I just had to learn it all through the way, which was doubly challenging.

And now I had to start leading teams. And this is where the challenge as a few more presented itself, I was leading an all-male team. I was very sick with fever, but at the same time, still waking up 6:00 AM 7:00 AM putting on several kilos of a backpack on my back, and then walking several kilometres across this landscape daily. It was high fever. It was so severe, but, you know, I couldn't stop because I was so afraid that if I showed any sign of weakness, it would completely be looked down upon by this team members who were just waiting for me to, you know, fall apart.

It would seem like it was insecurity but it was very strategic for me because if I showed them any weakness I knew for sure that even if I should tell them that I was tired it would still come across to them as 'no, she's a girl, she has just gotten tired of this whole thing. We knew she couldn't keep it up anyway!'

So it would translate to them in that sense. So that was my life for the next couple of years, every time I was at the field doing work, I couldn't show any weakness. I couldn't, you know, I just had to keep up.

Julia: That's so awful. I'm so sorry. You had to go through this and, you know, working when, when you're sick and when you have a fever, it's just not something you should have to go through. But I see how in that context, you know, you felt that you really had to, in order to prove yourself.

Rachel: Looking back. I wouldn't do such a thing today. So fast forward to when I started my work with chimps and now was transitioning from being a conservation researcher to being someone implementing conservation actions, I became an advocate for conservation. I started to do campaigns and meeting governments and community leaders to conserve species. So now the ball game changed, I'd proved myself in the field. And it was at this point, I said, seeing the other side of being a woman as well, because I've seen all the male colleagues do these aspects of work before, and I've not seen them being in any ways, disregarded. At least not in their face!

Even people at the community level who would tell it to my face like: 'is it that you don't have a family? You aren't married? Who let you come out here to do something like this, looking for monkeys?' You [as a woman] get those questions directly. And they stare at you like, well, you just give you that impression and make you know that you just wasted your time coming all the way here.

Now the reason why it seems to have changed now is because I persisted. You know, in the same communities where they saw me before they keep seeing me now, they're just like getting used to me and then they've come to that point where they're like, maybe we should listen to her, maybe we're afraid to see the signs of what she has been telling us all this time.

So not that any of these [behaviours] have stopped but it has kind of like improved over the years. Like for me, I just developed a thick skin for it. And then at the same time I brush it off. Now I guess I'm so used to it that immediately after that I'm not shocked, I'm not surprised, I'm not offended, I don't feel insulted. Nothing. I just continue on like nothing has happened.

I think recently I was sharing with someone that if not that I have most of the time, like I'm the one leading the team, I probably would have faced more sexual harassment than I have.

There was a time when I was a trainee and I was amongst like this all-men training. We were all trainees and they were all guys and I was the only female. And it was

the only time in my own history of doing conservation that I experienced sexual harassment, you know, from fellow trainees and in the field.

We were working in the field and we were trying to escape an approaching elephant and then at that moment, he just quickly threw his hands on my breasts, and then, after the whole scene, after we left that place, I met him later on and I confronted him. I said, you did XYZ and he totally just denied it, but I knew what happened. And it was so hard and it's because we are Africans. In the African setting, it's just very recently that issues of sexual harassment and rape became very prominent and people started discussing it more openly. In those years. I'm talking about in the beginning when I started, when all this happened, you don't talk about things like that. You never said openly.

Sofia: But you can face retribution, right? Like if you say it, then it can come back to you.

Rachel: Yeah. It's like the person will say that she asked for it or she made herself available for it. So it's always one of those mentalities that people you are reporting to have.

Sofia: So people not being responsible for their behaviour, and not being accountable either.

Rachel: But other than that, yes, that's just mostly that situation. Being a woman in the field of conservation has just been that challenging.

Sofia: I think these experiences are so much more common in conservation fieldwork than we ever acknowledge. Thank you so much for sharing those experiences with us. So my next question is kind of like thinking about the people that you have encountered within conservation. And it's a question that we're going to be asking all of our guests this season. Can you tell us about another conservationist who inspires you? And why?

Rachel: To be honest, I think it sounds so cliché, you know, but I would just say it's Professor John Oates. He is someone I've got to know professionally and even to some certain extent personally, because I worked very closely with him at some stage.

And then when I went to Kent to study for my masters in the University of Kent, he lives not so far, in the same county as Kent. So I got to meet him and his family during that time and share some good times with them while I was there. And I will say that I've been so inspired by him over the years, by just by his work ethic, by his passion for conservation, by his passion for building African leaders in conservation, I've seen him up close and it would be very hard for me to call someone who is very distant to me as someone who inspires me when I've not really seen them up close. And see what they are, like in maybe challenging situations. Every individual has their good sides and their bad sides or positives and negatives, I don't know how to call it. But yeah, for me, from all I've seen and I've learned from him, I think he's

really inspired a lot of people and there has been times when I've really felt like, you know, giving up but he kept encouraging me, even though himself, does not feel encouraged by situations on the ground.

And yeah, I would really name him as someone who's really inspired me over the years. And this is from like, from the very beginning to this day so that's almost 20 years now.

Sofia : It's such a lovely tribute and I love what you said about how sometimes the people that we admire most, in order to really admire them, we have to know them up close. Because sometimes you imagine somebody who's far away and you're inspired by them. But when you see somebody up close and the challenges that they have and everything like that, then it can really, it can mean something completely different.

Rachel: Yeah. Yeah. Because it's very easy to see people's strengths on TV or in the papers but when you don't get to see their weaknesses, you don't know when you see your own weaknesses, you will know how to pattern your reaction to those moments. When you are able to see how, certain people react to challenges, and know how they confront it, you see their strengths, you see their weaknesses and you're able to learn also from their weaknesses, as much as you learn from their strength.

Because I can look at Jane Goodall and think: 'wow great', you know, and call her my mentor or like an inspiration, but I've never really met her. And all I see about her or know about her is right on the Internet. That's everything I get to see. Real life conservation work isn't that. It's a lot of challenges. There are more challenges than there are successes. And then if you spend your time just waiting for the successes to happen, you miss opportunities to be able to invent yourself during the times of the challenges. And this is what made people like Jane Goodall who they are today.

Julia: Rachel, I feel we could talk to you all day long, but we are going to have to wrap up. So we wanted to ask you one more question, which is something we ask all our guests, again. And that question is, do you feel optimistic about the future of nature?

Rachel: What makes me optimistic is the people! I've seen a lot of things, working in the Nigeria landscape, that would make me have a thousand reasons to be pessimistic about the situation and about whether there is hope, a better way for people to relate with nature.

But in my opinion, or from what I've seen so far, I've seen optimism in the people, whether it's in the local communities, whether people in the local communities or people in the governments who have the power to do to change things. I've been so optimistic at the way that, we humans, we can really, yes, we can really be bad. We can be destroyers of nature. We can be the worst thing that ever happened to nature. While at the same time, we can also be the best thing that happened to

nature. And that happens in a seasonal, in a period of transition, in a time when there is a turnaround in the mind of people, consigning how they relate with nature.

And I have seen that. I've seen people totally change, do a complete turnaround from, you know, wanting to destroy nature, to being advocates for nature. But it all has to do with, I think, how we are able to make conservation relatable to these persons. I mean, how do you make conservation relatable to a two-year-old? How do you make conservation relatable to a government official who has spent all his life in politics?

And we are seeing all of that. We are seeing a growing number of young people who come from the age of 15, even 14, even less, younger, younger people who start advocating for nature. So I would say, the greatest optimism I've seen really is in people, and I think people really have the capacity to be the biggest champions for conservation.

Sofia: That's amazing to hear. Well, Rachel, thank you so much for speaking with us. I feel like we have just had such an amazing conversation.

Rachel: Thank you for having me, I'm really grateful for the opportunity.

OUTRO

Julia: Well I feel like we've covered lots of different topics. And the one I wanted to talk to you about first is again this question of having mentors and how important they can be. And I really loved how, in her story she kept repeating how Professor Oates has really been important in terms of shaping her career, but also in terms of providing that mentoring at the very beginning, when she wasn't really sure of what being a conservationist even meant.

Sofia: Yeah, I loved that and I really loved the way that she made the distinction between the people who we think are great on TV and the people who are great in reality and the way that kind of witnessing someone's struggles and seeing how they deal with challenges is a really great type of mentorship because maybe you can model your own attitudes and actions on that.

Julia: For sure. And I think that's something that you can really do at any point of your career as well. Like, you know, you might be a student or you might be a professional, but you always have these other people that you see in roles that you might want to be in the future. I think unconsciously as well, you kind of model your behaviour based on what you're seeing them do. And that's something that is really interesting.

Sofia: I can imagine Rachel being a wonderful mentor to people as well. She is so honest about the difficulties she has faced, but then also she is so determined in terms of the change that she knows she wants to make. So I can imagine her being a really wonderful example as well.

Julia: Yeah. And I think that having that empathy as well is so crucial. If you're a leader, just like making sure that you can show as well, the weaknesses and what you've gone through and that you show it's okay to go through rough patches. I feel like that's something that sometimes we want to pretend that we are like strong leaders and we don't want to show any of that but I think it's super important for other people to see that actually sometimes you fail and that's okay. And to actually see how you deal with that.

Sofia: Well she was very open with us about that, but she also talked about the ways that she had felt like she wasn't able to show weakness at other points specifically because of being a woman and worrying that she wouldn't be taken seriously. I mean, she knows the context, like she probably wouldn't have been taken serious.

Julia : Yeah. It's a very difficult balance. Isn't it? Between you have to, I feel like if you're a woman in, in leadership, you have to walk that tight rope where you, again, want to show empathy and show that, you know, you're not a robot, but at the same time, you also don't want to be seen as weak or seeing as like you're not doing enough compared to male leaders.

Sofia: I think it is a much more sensitive spot. And in some ways maybe we put extra burdens of expectation on women when they are leaders, because they're expected to be empathetic as well as kind of going above and beyond and hitting these goals.

For me personally, just thinking of mentors, I have had some really amazing women mentors. I mean, my PhD was co- supervised by two women. And seeing different lives of women and seeing all of these examples of really incredible women who I would like to emulate in some way has probably really shaped my perspective.

Julia: Yeah, that makes sense. And I think it was also very thought-provoking what she described. In terms of being a woman in the field as well. And the challenges that came with that. Because again, if you're in conservation, I mean, it depends of your jobs. Like for me as a science communicator, you know, I don't have to go to the field that much, but if you're a field conservationist, then you are facing all these difficulties as well. Like, you know, just making sure that. You're taken seriously, sometimes having to pretend that you have a boyfriend so that people don't harass you and there's like so many different layers.

Sofia: Yeah. So many different layers. And then also there's just such a range of challenges. I mean, just in the ones that Rachel described, you could really see how some of the situations that she's come up against already subtle, and even she said it. And then there are these other situations which are really glaring and completely unacceptable as well, which just really reveal the assumptions and perspectives of some of the people that she's working with.

Julia: It is just so important that we realize all these different aspects of like what being in the field actually entails and the challenges that can come with that to just

make sure that we have stuff in place to make sure that people can do the field work safely as well.

Sofia: Completely. I mean, it's pretty important to talk about those things.

Julia: But I think another reality is the reality of like what it means as well to be in the field. I feel for a lot of people you think 'conservationist' and you feel like, 'oh, they're chasing animals, like they're out there in the field having a great time'. And it's actually quite hard, isn't it?

I mean, I've done field work where I was meant to look for bird species. And I remember just days and days and days of walking in the Atlantic Rainforest. And sometimes, you know, I would spend an hour or two walking and seeing nothing. I think that's also an interesting aspect of the field conservation that people sometimes have a bit of a fantasized version of what it might look like.

Sofia: Yeah. I mean, it is this trade-off because you get to be in these incredibly beautiful places, you know, and be studying these questions that you're so interested in, but it can definitely be very physically demanding. And I think at times a bit monotonous. Rachel clearly has existed in these spaces with such stamina and just determinedness. And I love that, especially because she talked at the beginning of the interview about how as a child, she never spent time in nature. And I really identified with that because I grew up in Mexico City. And sometimes I kind of felt like, I mean, once I sort of became older and got on the path of conservation, there was a part of me that was like: 'oh my God, when I was a kid, I didn't go and climb loads of trees'. I kind of hated camping and still yet I am a conservationist now.

And so I kind of loved hearing this upending of the traditional narrative of like the Gerald Durrell type childhood of just going around and spending loads of time with animals and in nature and then that was how you became a biologist.

Julia: Yeah. It's definitely an inspiration and I think it's a great point on which to end this episode. And as usual, if you want to review us or rate us or subscribe, or just tell a friend about the podcast that really helps people know that we exist. And again, you can reach us if you have any thoughts about this episode, if anything resonated with you, you can either send us a message on Twitter @ConservOptimism or send us an email or a voice note at podcast@conservationoptimism.org.

Sofia: If you are a brave person and you send us a voice note, you might even find it gets featured on the podcast.

Julia: The Good Natured Podcast is hosted and produced by Sofia Castello y Tickell and, myself, Julia Migné. Our music is by Matthew Kemp and our transcripts are available thanks to the help of Alexandra Davis. This season of Good Natured is supported by the University of Oxford's Department of Public Engagement with Research Seed Fund, Synchronicity Earth, and the Whitley Fund for Nature.