

GOOD NATURED S02-EP5 SOFIYA SHUKHOVA



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A PODCAST SERIES FROM
CONSERVATION OPTIMISM

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INTRO

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

Sofia: We interview inspiring conservationists from lots of different backgrounds who each engage with conservation in their own way. Today we're thrilled to have Sofiya Shukhova as a guest.

Julia: Today you can expect to hear about the artistic process, about collaborations between artists and scientists, and also about the wildlife trade.

Julia: Hey Sofia!

Sofia: Hi, Julia.

Sofia: Today on the podcast we have Sofiya Shukhova. Sofiya is a Russian native and Singapore-based wildlife artist and conservationist. And she has a particular interest in tackling illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade and promoting human wildlife co-existence.

Julia: And we're really excited to have Sofiya on the podcast today to tell us more about her artistic process but also about the ways she works with different stakeholders like scientists or conservation practitioners, and kind of bring the data that they have into these visual forms that her artworks can be.

Sofia: And Sofiya uses all kinds of mediums to create her art. So she's going to tell us more about that and how she chooses them. Sofiya identifies as an activist, which as the name indicates means combining your art and activism to kind of communicate about causes that you care about and maybe galvanise change.

Julia: So let's hear from Sofiya!

INTERVIEW

Julia: Hi, Sofiya! We're super excited to have you with us today.

Sofiya: Hi Sofia, hi Julia!

Julia: So you are both an artist and a conservationist. What drove you to combine those two interests together?

Sofiya: I actually have quite an unconventional journey to become a conservationist and artist. I finished architecture school and soon enough after finishing architecture school, I realised that architecture is probably not the thing I want to do for the rest of my life so I started exploring other options. I was looking for a job, I did some freelance projects. And while doing that, I also started to paint and the majority of the subjects of my paintings were animals.

So I started to learn more with them about their conservation statuses, the threats they are facing, etc. And through this exploration I actually understood that I would like to be involved more in conservation. Then I did a short course on species conservation, volunteered for a while, and then got my first job in conservation.

Sofia: I only recently learned about the activism movement, which I love. I mean, it's such a good word. So I was wondering, in what ways do you consider yourself an activist?

Sofiya: That's a very good question, especially because wildlife activism is quite new, so I guess for me, the way I see activism is the wildlife artist is not only portraying the animals in their natural habitat or wild background, but trying to tell a story which is related to conservation or the threats this particular species is facing. So there is a little bit more of the message behind the art piece.

The majority of my works are about the threats species are facing. So for example, I have a whole series of artworks about Asian songbird trading and about how the birds are captured, and how they are traded and kept in small cages, etc.

Julia: And so art can be a powerful way to engage different audiences with conservation issues, as you've already mentioned before. Can you tell us a bit more about your process of creating conservation related artworks?

Sofiya: Well, my creative process really differs from case to case and that's why it's called creative, I guess. And that's all right that it's different and sometimes unpredictable. Overall, I think my process depends on many different factors, including the project scales and limitations.

So for example, how much time I have to create a particular piece, which materials I have or any other resources that are available or not available to me.

Let me give you a couple of examples of artworks and the projects I have been working on so you have a better understanding of how it works. So, for example, one of the artworks I previously created is called Red Ivory, and it was inspired by a report that I read on the trade of the helmeted hornbills and how their casques are

used in decorations. So I think this report was written by Traffic if I'm not wrong a couple of years ago. So I just read it, got inspired and created the piece. I don't think I'd even done any sketches at all, but maybe I did a couple, but not too many so this piece was executed really, really quickly.

The project I'm currently working on is on stingray trade and conservation. And it's a long term collaboration with a shark and ray scientist and named Naomi Clark-Shen. She previously studied shark and ray trade in Singapore. And she's now doing her PhD, mostly focusing on biology of stingrays. So basically this project is about me learning from her, from the scientist, observing her work, asking right, and sometimes wrong, questions, brainstorming ideas together and creating art inspired by this experience of collaboration and learning from a scientist.

So this project started in the beginning of this year (2021) and it's still ongoing. And based on this experience, I already created quite a few sketches, works and sculpture, and now I'm planning on creating a larger scale piece, like even actually an installation for the public to see and to interact with.

It's relatively easy for me to get inspiration because I just consume a lot of information about various conservation issues on a daily basis. And a lot of artists, wildlife artists, are actually struggling because they do not have enough opportunities to learn about conservation topics. I feel like a lot of papers - some conservation or even reports are not engaging enough for them to read. So it might be a little bit more difficult for them to explore some conservation topics in their art. And that's why I think that collaboration between artists and conservation scientists or conservationists working in the field are so important. And especially it's important when it goes beyond just illustrating something or producing pieces for fundraising.

Sofia: And in your art, you use multiple techniques. So I looked through your Instagram and I saw that you use linocut prints, some watercolours and pencil sketches, and even kites. **How do you choose the right medium for a piece?**

Sofiya: That's a very good question. And I think often it's based on what medium I have available and which medium I'm feeling comfortable with. So when I just started creating wildlife art, I mostly used acrylic and watercolours. And then I moved into using linocuts. The linocut technique is basically a printing technique so an artist will use a piece of linoleum, which is a material used in construction for many different purposes, but this material is also used in art. So this piece of linoleum can be carved with knives or special cutters. Then an artist would apply paints on this piece of carve linoleum and print the image on the paper. So basically the final piece will be the print on the paper.

Right now I really experiment with whatever medium I feel like experimenting with for this particular piece. And it's really difficult for me to explain the choice sometimes. I just typically really am feeling like using it.

Sofia: So do you feel like it's more of an intuitive choice sometimes?

Sofiya: Yeah, definitely. Often when I'm thinking about a particular topic on which I want to create an art piece, I already have an image in my head called the look like, so this image might transform into something else with the time but I kind of would have already visualised if it's a very nuanced piece, for which I would probably go with watercolours, or if it is a piece where there is strong contrast which I would do with linocut. I guess it's just a matter of choosing the materials depending on the image that you want to create.

Sofia: And so you said that with some of your pieces, you get them done in a day and you only have to do maybe a couple of sketches, if anything. And so is that because you just have such a clear vision in your head that you can kind of execute it? What does the sketching add to the process?

Sofiya: I guess I don't do much of the sketches because I am quite good in visualisation of the prospective image in my head. So some artists really need to sit down and spend time sketching things, which is a part of their process. For me I can, for example, walk in the street or exercise or eat and keep thinking about how this particular piece will look like. So I'm kind of still sketching, but just in my head.

Sofia: I love it. Just your art in that every day, like you're going around just like kind of daydreaming and maybe being able to get all your errands done, but still doing the art.

Sofiya: Yeah, exactly. Sometimes I might even have a dinner with my partner and then say to him 'hey, can we just stop for a bit? I need to write some ideas down' or 'I need to make a quick sketch' (*laughter*) because I already visualise it in my head, but I need to just to put it somewhere so I don't forget.

Julia: And in terms of how the art is then perceived once, you know, you've got your installation or exhibition, or once you've posted the artwork on social media, what's been the perception of the public has there been anything that has been surprising to you when you've released artworks, what has been your experience?

Sofiya: It's actually, all of this is surprising for me because I'm really bad at predicting which artworks people will like more, but overall I usually get positive feedback. However having said that it doesn't translate to selling of the artworks. So sometimes you might get very positive feedback about the concept and the impact that a particular artwork produces on a person but that doesn't mean that the person will buy it.

So there is kind of a lot of good things about influencing people and perhaps even influencing their behaviours. But not as much profit in terms of livelihood opportunities I would say. It's very challenging actually because my day job is in conservation and I'm sure you know that it's not paid very well usually.

Sofia: Yeah, for sure. Beyond art, a lot of your work and research has focused on captive animals. So for example, studying exotic pets in Russia, and as you

were mentioning, the songbird trade in Southeast Asia, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what it's like to do conservation in these spaces where animals and humans are coexisting so closely.

Sofiya: That's a very good question. I guess that's a very natural area of conservation for me to work with because, well, first of all, I do not have a background in hardcore biology. All the studies that I did that conservation-related were more on the social science side of things. So it's kind of natural for me to consider the human dimension when it comes to conservation. It's always very interesting to talk with people and work with people who are engaged somehow with wildlife, whether that be by keeping it or selling it or trapping it or trying to save it as well.

I think my perception of these people have changed a lot since I started working in conservation. For example, when I did the research in Russia on exotic pet keepers, for example, people keeping tigers for pets in the small flats in Moscow, I was very sceptical about meeting these people and talking to them. But after engaging with them, I realized that they are actually good people. And they're thinking that by keeping this animal that they're protecting them and probably engaging them in the most important thing conservationists can do in order to change things and to help this species to survive.

I had an opportunity to meet a poacher of Asian songbirds in Indonesia, and he was trapping the birds just because he didn't have a livelihood to support his family. So he likes birds very much, and he was open to meet with me and to talk with me. And actually to show me how he traps and keeps the birds. And given another opportunity he wouldn't do that. So it's very important to work with such people and to try to engage them in conservation in different ways.

I'm currently staying in Singapore and in Singapore, a lot of wildlife cohabit very closely with humans. And I previously had an opportunity to work with a wildlife rescue center and to do some wildlife rescues where we were rescuing cobras from houses, pangolins, and hornbills, and many other species. And that's always so interesting how people from more or less the same background can react totally differently to the species present around them. I saw people just putting insect sprays on snakes, and other people trying to help them to escape in the safest ways possible, prioritising their welfare over their own. So that's interesting!

Sofia: I think that sometimes people can have such great intentions but then actually maybe the follow through is what you end up with a problem in conservation. Like maybe they think that something is the best thing to do for an animal, but ultimately perhaps it's actually not. And I guess you start to get into this distinction of animal welfare versus conservation, but have you seen this, this really good intention, but maybe needing a bit more guidance or education?

Sofiya: Yes. When I did my research in Russia on exotic pet ownership, a lot of people actually thought that by keeping these birds in captivity they were saving

them because there is no habitat left for them or the habitat is in such a poor condition that they wouldn't be able to survive there. As well some people thought that there is very high level of poaching in their natural habitat, so they prefer to keep and breed them in captivity.

So that can be a good intention but the problem is that the majority of these people aren't contributing to the captive breeding of this species in terms of conservation. I think a lot of these people who are collectors of exotic pets, they actually know the behaviours of animals and the husbandry very well. So engaging them into working for conservation as a captive breeding facility might be helpful. Or even if they have a collection of some rare species, they can add them to contribute individuals to conservation breeding facilities. As a conservationist who acknowledges very much the animal welfare, it's especially challenging for me to kind of not just saying that all people keep it wildlife captive are bad and that actually they can be very helpful for conservation if they have a good intentions.

Sofia: I mean, it's such murky waters. So in some ways, very brave to be working in them because it's so not clear-cut.

Sofiya: The illegal wildlife trade is not a good thing. Even the legal wildlife trade is not right is not always a good thing. And it's often cruel, it undermines animal welfare. It also poses a lot of risks to humans involved in the trade or humans not even involved in the trades like we all know now, trying to survive COVID, which is a direct consequence of the wildlife trade. Let's remember it! So that's a difficult part of it. And it's difficult to see the wildlife trade happening pretty much all the time, everywhere. I'm living in Asia so I'm very often seeing various species being sold on the markets or even in the pharmacy shelves as a food, etc.

So that's challenging and this is why I think for me to try to be able to think about other things and seeing wildlife and nature is such an important coping mechanism to just survive all this negativity.

Julia: We have a question for you that we ask all our guests on this podcast. So do you feel optimistic about the future of nature?

Sofiya: Well, I'm not a very optimistic person when it comes to conservation. It just can be really challenging to see how humans are erasing every conservation opportunities they have and how habitats are getting destroyed, species getting extinct, etc. It's heart breaking. However, I think I found the coping mechanisms for me to stay more optimistic and keep working and keep trying to save what is left.

So for myself, I think it's very important to stay connected with nature. Sometimes when I'm working long hours, especially when it's a desk-based job, I keep reading and reading everything about how the nature is being destroyed and how all those species are lost. So it's important for me to go outside and actually see that the trees are still there. There are birds on the trees. And again, I'm very lucky to live in Singapore so I can see lots of biodiversity around and it really helps and it gives me a bit more energy to keep fighting.

Julia: Yeah. So that's your way of recharging, just making sure that you have to spend that time in nature.

Sofia: That's great. I totally agree. I find when I'm getting a bit overwhelmed, going for a walk outside really helps. **Do you think you could please tell us about another conservationist that you admire?**

Sofiya: This is very difficult question to answer because I think there so many of them, and honestly each conservationist matters no matter which organisation they're working with or which position they have. If I really need to pick one person, it would be that Director of Save Vietnam's Wildlife an organization based in Vietnam, his name is Thai and he's such a huge inspiration for me.

Back in 2016, I did an art conservation project on pangolins in Vietnam. And during that time, I also was lucky enough to assist on the rescue of pangolins from illegal wildlife trade. And it's still such an important memory for me and a very motivating one. So I will be forever grateful for this opportunity to Thai. He is very hard working. He really believes in what he does. I think he's quite optimistic, actually, probably more optimistic than I am. *(laughter)*

Julia: Thank you so much for answering all our questions!

OUTRO

Sofia: That was great. I loved hearing about Sofiya's artistic process and then all of the ways that she's kind of combined that with her knowledge and experience in conservation as well.

Julia: Yeah, for sure. And I, I find it really interesting as well in terms of when we talk to artists who have an interest or a passion for conservation, to kind of see where that came from. And in her case I thought this process that she went through to kind of discover what she wanted to do and how she started with architecture and then like started doing art on our own was quite an interesting process.

Sofia: Totally. And also just hearing about this process of exploration that she will go through even every time that she's creating a different piece of art, just kind of that intuitive process where she will pick a medium or just kind of like visualise in her brain what it is that she wants to do next. I found that really cool to hear about.

Julia: Yeah. And I think as well, like that ties in with also the fact that she described that sometimes a creative process is not something that can be really explained. I loved the way she was saying how sometimes she'll be eating dinner with a partner and then suddenly something comes in her mind and she is just like, 'sorry, we have to pause, I have to like write this down'. And I find that so interesting in terms of creativity too. It's not something, I mean, I guess the process is different for different people, but I feel often it's not really something you can tame or really like say, oh, I'll do this from like 8 to 10 am today. It's just something that is a bit without boundaries.

Sofia: It's kind of embedded in daily life. I really loved when she said that about the dinner with her partner, because one of my really good friends still makes fun of me because we were at a party having a conversation and suddenly I was like, 'oh my God I've just had a really good idea for my PhD. Where are the post-its?!'. These ideas can just come to us in the most unexpected and maybe slightly inconvenient moments.

Julia: For sure. But I think another challenge as well of being an artist that she pointed us toward is the idea that you can't, it's really hard to predict how you work will land. You can never know if someone is going to really have that feeling with your artwork or if it's going to land the way you wanted. So it's such a hard thing to control as well, which I thought was again, quite interesting.

Sofia: It's probably a bit stressful when you don't know how people will react, but I don't know I feel like there is a little bit of a thrill in that. Maybe you make something that you think is really great, but it doesn't resonate. And then on the other hand, maybe one day you put something out that you're just not that sure about and it turns out people think it's great. Maybe part of gaining experience is sort of getting to the point where you can predict those responses a little bit more or like you get to know your audience better.

I wonder if even the most famous artist is like, I'm going to make this, that it's going to be so great and everybody's going to just react exactly as I please, like, I don't think that ever happened.

Julia: Yeah, it feels so subjective, but at the same time it's so important to have artists build that bridge as well, to showcase conservation in a way that is completely different from what we're seeing elsewhere. And I really love how she was saying she enjoys working with scientists and how many artists don't have that chance of actually really engaging with people who have the data. And I thought that was a really interesting process to hear about how she would read a report or just have a chat with a scientist and then take that onboard to start an artwork based on it.

Sofia: Yeah. And it's funny because I think in the podcast, we've spoken to a lot of these sorts of hybrid people who maybe have experience in both science and in art. And so it's interesting to think about the different ways that these processes can happen, right? Sometimes it's within one person and it's all being catalysed at the same time, but then there's also such value in kind of reaching across this divide sometimes and really kind of bringing different people's expertise to fruition. And I think sometimes those collaborations can be really great because you are actually sort of creating something new between the two of you.

Julia: I think as well as a science communicator, it also makes me think of how can we create more bridges between artists and scientists, you know? What is the process so that we can get these two groups to talk to each other so you can have these kinds of fruitful collaborations coming to life and have these artworks being developed so that we can reach audiences that we wouldn't reach otherwise with our conservation messages.

Sofia: Yeah. And because once you put together those sorts of radically different ways of thinking and processing things, then I think that such wonderful things can emerge. And speaking of connecting across divides, I don't know, I found it really interesting how Sofiya was talking about some of the work that she's done on the illegal wildlife trade and maybe some of the assumptions that she had going into it around the people who were involved in this trade, and then the ways that they were upended for her and everything that she learned from that.

Julia: But also in terms of thinking of how to engage them and the fact that she was saying as well that once she started engaging she discovered that completely different facet of them and realised that they are really passionate about these species. And sometimes we have the assumption of people being engaged in the wildlife trade as being a certain way or not caring. And I thought it was fascinating to hear about how she discovered a completely different layer to the people that she kind of thought in her head that she had figured out.

Sofia: Yeah. I don't know. I also find this idea of this proximity between people and wildlife so interesting because quite often maybe we think of conservation as something that happens far away in some like really exotic jungle, but actually it's sort of happening all around us and being expressed in these relationships and daily habits, closer to home.

Julia: Yeah. And I guess another great way of thinking about it as well is the fact that she was saying involving people who might be breeding species into conservation projects is so important because actually they have access to these species. They're really good at breeding them. And they can bring these skills in help of conservation rather than, you know, just breeding them to then sell them.

Sofia: Yeah. So it kind of capitalising on that knowledge and trying to maybe build collaborations rather than alienate different sectors. I mean, it might not always be possible, but I think that when it is, it could be a really promising way to move forward.

Julia: Yeah. And just, you know, tapping into the skills that people have as well, I think is always so powerful. So yeah, I guess it's a great way to end this episode.

Sofia: Collaboration working together, very Conservation Optimism!

We hope you enjoyed this episode. If you have any thoughts or reactions you can send us a voice note at podcast@conservationoptimism.org. Or you can reach us on Twitter @ConservOptimism.

Julia: And we're looking forward to receiving your voice notes. And if you send us some you might even be featured on the podcast. So send them our way!

Sofia: The Good Natured Podcast is hosted and produced by Julia Migné, and myself, Sofia Castelló y Tickell. Our theme song was composed and produced 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.