

## **Conservationist wins a Whitley Award for his work to save Brazilian 'living fossil' from local extinction**

**London, UK: 29 April 2015** – HRH The Princess Royal will today present a Whitley Award, a prestigious international nature conservation prize worth £35,000 in project funding, to Arnaud Desbiez at a ceremony at the Royal Geographical Society, London, in honour of his work to conserve the rarely sighted giant armadillo in Brazil.

Despite being one of the oldest mammal species on earth – in effect a living fossil - very few people will ever spot a giant armadillo (*Priodontes Maximus*) in the wild. Until recently, not many people were aware that the species even existed, and most of the information about it was anecdotal. However, since Arnaud, a former zoo keeper, founded the Giant Armadillo Conservation Project in 2010 and started the first ever long-term ecological study of the species, new information about parenting behaviour and their role as 'ecosystem engineers' has emerged. Over 65,000 local people have been directly engaged in an awareness-raising campaign, and subsequently authorities in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul have selected the giant armadillo as an indicator species for the creation of protected areas.

The Whitley Award will enable Arnaud to expand conservation efforts from the Pantanal – the largest continuous wetland in the world - to the Cerrado biome, a plateau of tropical scrubland, gallery and dry forests. This biome is Brazil's second largest ecosystem after the Amazon rainforest and has the richest flora among the world's savannahs. Yet only 2.2% of the Cerrado is under legal protection and deforestation rates here are even higher than in the Amazon: over the last 35 years, more than 50% of the ecosystem has been transformed into pasture or agricultural lands planted with cash crops such as soy and sugar cane. Here, Arnaud and his team will collect data to support the creation of a network of protected areas and tackle threats to the species' survival.

Edward Whitley, Founder of the Whitley Fund for Nature, said: "The calibre of this year's Whitley Awards winners is outstanding. Although they each face remarkable and different challenges in their home countries, these exceptional individuals are passionate about securing a better future for both people and wildlife. The Whitley Awards are a celebration of their efforts and achievements."

Arnaud is one of seven individuals to have been awarded a share of prize funding worth £245,000 by winning the Whitley Award donated by The Garden House School Parents' Association.