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KAPLAN GRADUATE AWARDS PROGRAM GRANTS MORE THAN \$1 MILLION TO BECOME THE LARGEST FUNDER OF STUDENTS WITH A PASSION FOR CAT CONSERVATION

Cheetahs, tigers, lions and other big cats being studied through projects in more than 30 countries on five continents

New York, NY - [Panthera](#), the world's leading organization devoted solely to conserving wild cats, recently surpassed the \$1 million mark in grants made to Master's and Doctoral students through its Kaplan Graduate Awards program. This milestone makes Panthera the largest funder of graduate students in the field of cat conservation, a testament to its commitment to field-based training and education.

[The Kaplan Award program](#) is the world's only scholarship program focused on supporting outstanding young biologists in the field of cat conservation. Many of the world's wild cats are severely threatened, and creating a cadre of well-trained experts around the globe is essential in helping curtail the threats that could result in extinction. The program was created in 2005 by Panthera's Chairman, Dr. Thomas Kaplan, after a visit to South Africa's Phinda Game Reserve. During that trip, Dr. Kaplan met Guy Balme, a graduate student at the time, who was capturing and radio-collaring wild leopards to determine the effects of trophy hunting on the species.

[Click here for a photo of Dr. Thomas Kaplan and Guy Balme with a collared leopard \(Credit Luke Hunter\).](#)

"Meeting Guy was the inspiration for the Awards" **said Dr. Kaplan**. "Here was this dedicated student, struggling to find funding, and it made me think how many other extraordinary young students are out there who are unable to contribute to saving wild cats because of a dearth of funding".

Balme became the inaugural recipient of a Kaplan Award and his research went on to transform regulations for hunting leopards that resulted in a dramatic recovery of the population. The new rules are now being trialed by other countries.

The Kaplan Awards are made twice a year, with approximately \$200,000 awarded annually to the candidates and projects judged most likely to make a direct and measurable impact on cat conservation. Now in its sixth year, the program has made 78 Kaplan Awards to 49 students of 27 different nationalities, part of Panthera's effort to cultivate local talent.

Among them, the program supports Omar Figueroa, Belize's first PhD student studying jaguars, and also a Senator in the national government. "The Kaplan Award has helped sustain my project, not only through funding, but also through tapping into the expertise of Panthera's senior scientists at any time" **said Figueroa**. "They trained me to safely capture jaguars and pumas to fit them with GPS collars. I

recently caught my 25th cat, more than any study before in Central America. My PhD will reveal secrets about jaguars that we could only guess a few years ago.”

Kaplan projects span 31 countries on 5 continents, from cheetahs in Algeria’s Saharan Desert to Siberian Tigers in Far Eastern Russia. And unlike other grants programs, the Kaplan Awards support students throughout their entire studies, and beyond. Four Kaplan scholars have become key members of the organization’s growing team of field staff.

Among former grantees, Esteban Payan now heads Panthera’s office in Colombia, Guy Balme works throughout East and Southern Africa overseeing lion conservation efforts and Panthera’s newest addition, Joe Smith, heads Panthera’s tiger conservation program in Asia. All earned their doctorates on wild cat conservation through the Kaplan Graduate Awards Program.

“From the beginning, we wanted the Awards to take the most promising young cat scientists through three to four years of essential training to become experts in their field” **said Kaplan.** “And for the top tier, we work to place them in a job once they graduate. If we’re going to succeed, our model has to be cradle to grave.”

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