



## Guardian of Turkey's Turquoise Coast awarded 2023 Goldman Environmental Prize

Zafer Kizilkaya, President and Founder of Turkish NGO, [Akdeniz Koruma Derneği](#) (AKD), has received the 2023 Goldman Environmental Prize in recognition of his dedication to the conservation of Turkey's coastal waters and their incredible biodiversity.

Known as the Green Nobel Prize, the Goldman Environmental Prize honours people around the world who take extraordinary actions to protect the planet. Zafer is one of just six grassroots environmental champions – one from each inhabited continent – to receive this year's prize.

While beautiful, Turkey's Mediterranean coastal waters face a number of threats. Overfishing, coastal development, tourism and invasive species all have an impact on the so-called Turquoise Coast, which is home to a number of threatened species including the Mediterranean monk seal, sandbar shark and dusky grouper, as well as vital carbon-storing seagrass meadows.

Since 2008, Zafer has been working closely with local fishing communities in Turkey to protect these species and support the recovery of their marine habitat. In 2012, he founded AKD and was instrumental in establishing Turkey's first community-managed marine protected area (MPA) in Gökova Bay, to reduce the threat of destructive and illegal fishing. Based on this approach, many new MPAs have now been created in the area.

By successfully cooperating and working with local fishing communities, Zafer and his team have the led way in demonstrating how MPAs can restore degraded marine ecosystems for the benefit of both biodiversity and the livelihoods of local people living on the coastline. Thanks to the MPAs that AKD helped establish, marine life has rebounded, with fish biomass rapidly increasing – boosting catch and fishers' incomes – and the long-absent Mediterranean monk seals have also returned to the bay.

This conservation model, initiated by Zafer and his team, is now being replicated across the Turkish coastline, and, thanks to Zafer's fierce dedication, has firmly established Turkey as a leader in marine conservation in the most overfished sea on the planet.

Zafer Kizilkaya, 2023 Goldman Environmental Prize winner, comments: "Fishers and conservationists don't always have a harmonious relationship. But, by involving local fishing communities in conservation efforts, many benefits can be seen for everyone. Critical to the success of the MPAs has been drawing on the deep knowledge of local fishers, involving them in the design of the protected areas, and also employing them as marine rangers to ensure they are part of the enforcement effort too.

"Turkey's Mediterranean coast is a wonder of the natural world and there are so many things worth saving in this beautiful ecosystem. Seeing the restoration of Gökova Bay, and now more and more of the Turkish coast, has been so important for driving my team and me - but there is still so much work to be done. It's a privilege to have our work celebrated by the Goldman Environmental Prize, and we hope that the recognition and attention it brings will enable us to keep expanding our efforts. The ocean is our best friend; it makes this planet unique and liveable and we need to do everything we can to help our best friend now."

[Fauna & Flora](#), an international wildlife conservation charity which works with partners around the globe to protect nature, has worked closely with Zafer and AKD since the Turkish NGO was first established in 2012. As well as providing funding, Fauna & Flora has guided AKD throughout its development as an organisation, and has worked in close partnership with Zafer to develop and implement the NGO's conservation strategies, including the protection of Gökova Bay.

Zafer continues: "Fauna & Flora has always been a big brother for AKD. Whenever we need any kind of support Fauna & Flora is there. Our capacity building and institutional development strategies were

shaped by the leadership of the charity's team, and we have worked with them to expand and upscale our projects since the very beginning. Today, we still work very closely on several issues, new projects and opportunities and I'm so excited to celebrate this award with our friends at Fauna & Flora."

Berry Mulligan, Fauna & Flora's Senior Marine Programme Manager for Eurasia, comments: "We are hugely proud of Zafer for this incredible accolade. To be recognised through the Goldman Environmental Prize is no average achievement, but there is no one who has earned it more than he has. Fauna & Flora has witnessed first-hand how Zafer has built AKD – and its pioneering conservation projects – from the ground up, and has seen the massive impact he has had for nature and communities.

"it is an incredibly difficult and distressing time for the Turkish population as the country rebuilds following the devastating earthquakes, and we know that Zafer and his team are facing enormous and unprecedented challenges. It is a testament to Zafer's unrelenting dedication to his conservation work – and clear proof of why he is so deserving of the Goldman Environmental Prize – that he is pressing on during this time; we are, as ever, in awe of his commitment."

AKD's current focus is on helping to facilitate effective management of the protected areas, and introducing new strategies to manage the invasive species impacting the Mediterranean coastline. This includes a campaign, supported by Fauna & Flora, that encourages people to eat invasive fish species; the team has worked with famous Turkish chefs to increase interest and demand for previously low-value invasive species such as lionfish and rabbitfish. In turn, this increase in demand encouraged fishers to target these ecologically damaging fish – creating another win-win solution for people and nature.

To find out more about Fauna & Flora and AKD's partnership, please visit: <https://www.fauna-flora.org/projects/managing-no-take-zones-along-turkeys-mediterranean-coast>

## **ENDS**

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### **About Zafer Kizilkaya**

Zafer Kizilkaya is President and Founder of Turkish NGO, Akdeniz Koruma Derneği (AKD). Zafer's success is born out of his infectious love of the ocean and his fierce determination to protect it. A civil engineer by training and commercial deep-sea diver, he switched career paths and became a respected underwater photographer and marine researcher working in the tropical seas of the Indo-Pacific. On returning to Turkey, he settled in Izmir, on Turkey's Mediterranean coast but was shocked at the state of marine life on his doorstep, and there began his efforts with local fishers in Gökova Bay. He now knows every fisher in the area and every inch of this coastline, dedicating his life to restoring Turkey's waters. His long-term vision is to replicate this model across the Mediterranean, transforming this sea for good.

### **About Akdeniz Koruma Derneği (Mediterranean Conservation Society)**

The Mediterranean Conservation Society (MCS), an international non-governmental organization, was founded in 2012 in Izmir. MCS works to monitor and restore the Mediterranean monk seal, sand shark, and other endangered species and their marine ecosystems, as well as the impact of climate change on the seas. Additionally, MCS carries out initiatives to support the livelihoods of local communities dependent on the sea and preserve cultural values, such as promoting small-scale fishing and ecotourism.

<https://akdenizkoruma.org.tr/>

### **About Fauna & Flora**

Fauna & Flora protects threatened species and ecosystems worldwide, choosing solutions that are sustainable, based on sound science and that enhance human well-being. Operating in more than 40 countries worldwide, Fauna & Flora saves species from extinction and habitats from destruction, while improving the livelihoods of local people. Founded in 1903, it is the world's longest established international wildlife conservation organisation and a registered charity.

<https://www.fauna-flora.org>