



Main Trainer on Team Management

Jorge Gibbons

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Born and raised in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Jorge is a biologist who has spent the last two decades training business and nonprofit organizations in the fields of leadership development, conflict management and team effectiveness. Curious and passionate about human behaviour and performance, Jorge has designed and facilitated numerous training projects involving participants at all levels, from senior global leaders to frontline supervisors. As a practitioner of experiential education, his philosophy is that “one cannot think his way into changed behaviour,” but rather one has to “act his way into changed behaviour.” His recent clients include Thomsom Reuters, ExxonMobil, Roche, Biogen, Deutsche Bank, Imerys, Ernst & Young, and Salesforce. Jorge played a key role in a long-term training program to improve the performance of Rewilding Argentina, and has conducted intensive training exercises with conservation organizations in South America and Africa.

Team Leaders and Trainers

Astrid Vargas

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Astrid brings thirty-five years of experience in biodiversity conservation, community engagement, ecosystem restoration, and Art 4 Action. Her work has made a positive impact on nature restoration initiatives across Europe, North America, South America, and Madagascar. Astrid is a wildlife veterinarian with a Ph.D. in Conservation Biology. She has built and led teams across three continents and spanning multiple countries. Her teams have delivered results through managing the complex, cross-disciplinary relationships between conservation science and research, technical practicalities, local communities and businesses, NGOs and international organisations, as well as local and international political imperatives. Astrid has coordinated International Conservation Action Plans for the recovery of two critically endangered species—the Iberian Lynx in Spain and the black-footed ferret in North America. In Madagascar she helped establish a new protected area in the North of the country. In collaboration with Commonland and local community members, Astrid was key in establishing the ALVELAL initiative—a large scale landscape and community restoration program in Southern Spain that is considered a beacon initiative in landscape restoration. She has recently published the educational book “On a Butterfly’s Wing: Lessons From Nature on Embracing Change”.

Xavier Van Leeuwe

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Xavier is an accomplished international business leader and author with three decades of experience guiding teams and organizations toward sustainable success. Originally from the Netherlands, he holds degrees in Business Economics, Law and Journalism. Xavier is now the CEO of a prominent media organization active in eight European territories where he leads digital transformation grounded in empathy, innovation, and long-term impact.

After working at the United Nations in Geneva he worked as a political and financial journalist. His career then included leadership roles in marketing and customer engagement, where he implemented groundbreaking data strategies and helped shift organizational cultures toward customer-centric thinking. Xavier has consistently championed the integration of emotional intelligence into management practices, leading to improved team performance, deeper stakeholder relationships, and durable economic results.

He has lead several turn-arounds, including multiple reorganizations, strategic reorientations, including product and process innovations. Over the past ten years, Xavier has authored two internationally recognized management books. His writing explores how understanding the genuine needs of employees, clients, and stakeholders can unlock trust, foster loyalty, and produce results that are both financially and socially sustainable.

Xavier now applies these principles to support leaders and teams and guide them towards high performance. He brings a unique perspective that combines strategic insight with a deep commitment to human connection and shared purpose. His approach equips teams to perform at their best while aligning their goals with the broader mission of environmental and social responsibility.

Jean Labuschagne

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Jean was brought up in a conservation family, and spent her childhood in national parks in South Africa, Malawi, Tanzania (including the Serengeti) and Kenya. She has a BSc Honours in Conservation & Ecology from Stellenbosch University in South Africa. Jean has been working with the conservation organisation African Parks since 2012, spending 2 years working in Zakouma National Park in Chad and then 4 years in Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo, as the Special Projects Manager. Over the past 7 years, she has been the Director for Conservation Development at the institutional level, leading the development and conclusion of new partnership agreements with governments, as well as supporting global strategy, strategic planning, and policy development.

**Dennis Rentsch**

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Dennis is a conservation biologist with over two decades of experience in protected area management, applied conservation research, and community-based conservation across East Africa. He began his work in the Serengeti ecosystem in 2004, focusing on applied research that addressed the socio-economic drivers of bushmeat hunting and the complex interactions between people and wildlife. His PhD from the University of Minnesota helped inform strategies to mitigate illegal hunting and promote sustainable livelihoods. From 2008 to 2016, Dennis led the Frankfurt Zoological Society's Serengeti Ecosystem Management Program, where he oversaw the growth of the program aimed at landscape-level conservation efforts, and championed initiatives to strengthen benefit-sharing mechanisms between national parks and local communities.

From 2016 to 2019, Dennis served as the Serengeti Research Scientist with Lincoln Park Zoo, where he directed research programs focused on human-wildlife interactions and practical conservation interventions. Currently, Dennis serves as Deputy Africa Director at the Frankfurt Zoological Society, supporting nine landscape programs across six countries. A key part of his role involves helping to develop and implement FZS's Africa strategy aimed at doubling conservation impact. He is deeply committed to the belief that long-term conservation success depends on meaningful engagement with communities—ensuring shared responsibility, mutual benefits, and inclusive stewardship of natural resources.

Rudi Putra

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Rudi is the founder and strategic advisor of the Leuser Conservation Forum (FKL), a local NGO that manages over 450 field staff to protect and restore the Leuser Ecosystem. This 2.6 million-hectare forest is located in northern Sumatra in the province of Aceh in Indonesia. Rudi and his team dismantle illegal palm oil plantations that cause massive deforestation in the Leuser Ecosystem. They also protect the habitat of the Sumatran rhino, elephant, tiger, and orangutan, mitigate wildlife conflicts, restore ecosystems, and work with governments, the private sector, and local communities to promote sustainable production. In 2013, Rudi received the Future for Award for his efforts to protect the Sumatran rhino. In 2014, he received the Goldman Environmental Prize for combating illegal logging and forest encroachment for palm oil production and for fighting policies that open endangered ecosystems to mining and plantation industries. In 2019, he was selected as a National Geographic Fellow. He has dedicated more than 25 years to conserving the Leuser Ecosystem.

John Kanowski

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John is a conservation ecologist, with a PhD in rainforest ecology, eight years of post-doctoral research on the outcomes of rainforest restoration, and 17 years working in science leadership roles for Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC).

John has been AWC's Chief Science Officer since 2014. In this role, John leads a team of ecologists implementing AWC's science program across a national network of wildlife sanctuaries and partnership sites. Key areas of work include developing a nationally-coherent program of ecological monitoring and evaluation; developing and overseeing the conduct of applied conservation research; providing ecological input to the design of conservation land management strategies; and overseeing AWC's national reintroduction program, which involves the return of threatened mammals to our national network of 'safe havens'.

Beyond the technical components of the role, John works to develop the culture of AWC's science team, with a focus on developing professional standards and career pathways for staff. An important part of his work involves promoting the robust integration of AWC's science program with the operations team, building on respect for the expertise in each work group, and awareness of the synergies obtained by integrating conservation science, practical skills and know-how in the implementation of effective conservation.

As a member of AWC's Executive, John contributes to the strategic development of the organisation, its policies and processes; engages with AWC's partners, supporters and external stakeholders; communicates AWC's mission to the public; and engages in debate around key issues in the conservation sector. Throughout John's career, he has worked at the interface of science and practice, applying knowledge to improving conservation outcomes in a diverse range of situations.

**Christof Schenck**schenck@zgf.de 

Christof is the Executive Director of the Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS). His involvement with FZS began in 1990 as a project manager in Peru's Manú National Park. For research purposes, he lived in the rainforest for several years with his wife Dr. Elke Staib and completed his doctorate on the endangered giant otters. After his doctorate, he became a research associate for FZS in Frankfurt am Main. Later, in 2000 he took over the management of the organization. Christof is convinced that successful conservation cannot happen from a desk. As such, he regularly visits FZS project countries to exchange ideas with international teams and to learn about the developments on the ground. As a biodiversity conservation expert, he developed FZS into an internationally respected conservation organization. Additionally, he significantly increased its international network and professionalized its conservation program. Dr. Schenck also represents FZS in scientific discussions, public events, and the media. As a biologist and conservationist, he is, in his own words, "by nature, an optimist".

Ignacio Jiménezi_jimenez_perez@yahoo.es **Course Coordinator and Main Trainer**

Ignacio is a Spanish biologist with three decades of conservation practice. He has worked with manatees in Central America, golden-crowned sifakas in Madagascar, and protected areas in El Salvador, Brazil, and Uruguay. From 2005 to 2015, he designed and coordinated the largest reintroduction program in the Americas, located in the Iberá wetlands of Argentina. He spent a year in South Africa learning how conservation organizations manage and integrate nature reserves, rewilding, and ecotourism. Ignacio has designed and coordinated over 30 training courses on the applied and interdisciplinary aspects of biodiversity conservation in ten countries. He wrote and co-directed the 27-minute documentary Rewilding Iberá and has directed and/or written dozens of short videos in Argentina, Brazil, and Spain. In 2022, he organized and coordinated the First Global Meeting for Translocation Practitioners. He is the author of the conservation manual Effective Conservation: Parks, Rewilding, and Local Development (Island Press), which compiles ideas from years of intensive courses and conservation programs into a cohesive framework that presents all the major aspects to consider in any conservation program. Currently, Ignacio coordinates the Effective Conservation Training Initiative and promotes improved management and public support for protected areas in Spain.