Tamara Blazquez Haik: Hello everyone. My name is Tamara Blazquez Haik. I'm an award winning conservation photographer and environmental educator from Mexico City, Mexico. And today I'm going to tell you about my project called Mexico City's Wildlife: coexisting through photography and education; which is aimed at teaching people especially children about coexistence with the wildlife spaces that live with us on a daily basis here in Mexico City.

So some of you may be surprised at hearing that there are wildlife spaces in such a large populated and polluted city like Mexico City. But the truth is that this large city is home to approximately 2254 different wildlife spaces from from helminths, insects, birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles, the works in many of these spaces are even endemic. This means that this species can only be found here in Mexico City like the ajolote, which is found in the area of Xochimilco a very important and unique wetland in the world that is here in this city in Mexico City. So all this information is very important, right? But how can we succeed in educating citizens about these species, so that coexistence can actually take place? Well, sadly, as you may know, normally scientific knowledge all this kind of specialised knowledge on biodiversity and conservation is reserved for college or university level students or academics. And also places like zoos, your elementary school, middle school did not teach about any of this. Normally, what they teach about is like nature is very far away from us, and that wildlife comprises only species like lions and elephants, and that you cannot do much about some species in nature that is kilometres away from you. These place do not teach about local problems about the local biodiversity and they do not teach people how they can help and how they can coexist with wildlife. So that is why I created this project, which is a photographic and educational project that wants to teach society about this coexistence with urban wildlife that wants to spread all this knowledge to make science accessible to everyone, no matter their age, no matter their background. And also, you know, combines art and science to make learning fun, and more effective.

The objectives of this project are first and foremost, to document most of the species residing in Mexico City, especially those that are most harismatic. Why because this kind of species, you know, the ones that are cute and pretty, can help break the barrier between the project and myself and the spectator in learning. You know, sometimes people do not like certain animals like snakes or spiders, but they do like squirrels or the pretty birds like the hummingbirds or even the possums. So it's easier for me to approach people and tell them about the cute little animals and that will, in return, you know, make them interested enough for them to want to learn about other species and about their ecosystems. So that's why this is one of the main objectives. Also, spreading the photographs, as well as information in each species among students and citizens at every educational level of any background and age. Why, because as I was telling you, science has never been very, very accessible, nor has it made knowledge available to everyone. So I want to change that with with this project, because information is power and information and knowledge can help raise awareness and create empathy to not only help with people's education, but also it will help with the animals conservation. and that in turn is what is going to teach them to coexist and respect the wildlife they share their lives with on a daily basis, even on your backyard. So by making science available, I we ensure that conservation has better results in favour of biodiversity and also inspire society to take action in favour of nature and wildlife conservation. This project is also kind of like a call to action. You know, here biodiversity conservation concerns each and every one of us, no matter where we come from, no matter our age. So this project is also telling people like we need your hands out there. We need you out there, even if it's just talking to your neighbours and your family
members about animals so that they start changing habits and they start engaged and they stopped sorry engaging in this disrespectful activities.

We need you. So this project aims to inspire that even the smallest action that will benefit this animals here in Mexico City.

So the project is comprised by different aspects, one are the workshops and talks in schools. The first school I got to take this project to was the Jose 40s Elementary School. And then let me get element in elementary school. This experiences were incredible, because I realised that kids are still very connected to nature in animals, and all this kind of projects, you know, all this science information about, about animals that involves, you know, this species that they already know a lot about, I was very surprised to learn that they knew about these species, really, really interests them. So engaging with with them was a great learning experience, also for me, not just for the kids. And we created this kind of bonding, you know, that helped also create empathy for the animals. When children feel empathy and feel like they have a certain bond with their teacher or educator, it's easier for them to take interest and feel this special connection to the subject, they are learning. So in this case, it was learning about biodiversity. And as I was telling you, they still have this connection, and this empathy, really fresh in them towards this animal, which made the work easier way easier. And many of them even came up to me and said, like they wanted to be scientists when they grew up. So that's great that projects like this can plant these little seed in little kids, for them to become conservationists or scientists, because we sorely need more people like them in this planet. And the project was also taking to the budget is one high school. It's high school here in Mexico City, and the modern American School, which also comprised of high school and middle school students. And when I took the project there, it was a talk and also a photographic exhibition that was curated by the high school students. And it was great. I mean, they weren't just only interested in picking out the most pretty photographs, you know, instead, they wanted to learn about the animals, you know, on the photographs, and the rest of their classmates, the ones that were not involved in curating the project also came closer and started making all these questions. And I got to engage with them with all this, the students and it was overwhelming everybody, it was great. It was great that I mean, some photographs could you know, break the ice, and just engage young students in such a way, it's impressive the way art you know, can shake consciousness awake. So also, the Columbia marine elementary school was also great place, it was a great experience working with them and the UM Faculty of Sciences, you know, this is the Mexico's National University. So here, I got to talk with college loan students in science students. And I was very surprised that many of them didn't know much about the species that were portrayed on the photographs, even though they were science students. Because as I was telling you, normally, Nature Conservation, sciences, biology, focuses on the general picture, you know, like your local environmental issues. So I think it was a great learning experience, not just for them, but also for me, you know, an eye opener totally about what's needed. Also how we can support schools with these kinds of projects also, because sometimes, teachers, they just have a lot of on their hands, you know, so we can help them with these kinds of projects, to expand the educational curriculums and projects, you know, programmes for the kids so these projects can really make a difference in someone's education even if they are already a science student.

So the tools used during the environmental education workshops are mainly photographs, either printed or in digital formats, memory games, you know, like this memory cards and what you have to find pairs pair them up together. The cards have many of them Mexico City species and paragraph with information on them. So this games are great. They work with all ages. And the fact that they are very effective in learning and teaching is
because it helps students internalise what you have told them when you have told them all the science information data by playing by you know, having fun while learning it helps them internalise all this information, and in turn creates lasting results lesson learning results. Also, one of the most important tools for this project are these cute stuffed animals, you know, especially for the youngest kids, since they just love to call with them while they are listening to you while they are learning. And you can also use them as you know, as puppets, like they are telling the story and it engages really well with the youngest audiences. So I really recommend them as educational tools.

Digital presentations are great, especially with this pandemic, and the fact that we cannot be face to face right now. Of course, it makes things a bit more complicated, as it's always better to be face to face. But well, we have to adapt to continue working right? posters, posters, with the different animals with different bird species. For example, these work really great with younger children, especially since children are very visual and colourful images really help. Colouring books. Again, just like the memory games, kids really internalise the information way better if they are having fun colouring while listening to you. And they can learn better about the animals and memorise them better. So it's a really great tool as well as different artistic materials like crayons, making things like pencil cases from recycled plastic bottles that work really great because it taught the children about reusing and recycling and made them feel like they were doing something for the planet right at that moment. So yeah, we also have to encourage those kind of activities. And also other activities have been the photographic exhibitions, like I was telling you about the educational conferences and talks these great, these work great with older children, especially high school students, as you can be more grown up with them, you do not need to engage in many games, you can just talk, casual talk even with them. And you know, treating them like adults is actually what works best with the older students. And outdoor games, like role playing games. For example, I have a game in which some students play as the animals from Mexico City, and the other students are the threats these animals are facing. And the students have to go from one side of the patio to the other in their schools, why the threats, the students being the threads, chase and catch them. And it helps them realise how difficult the animal’s lives are on a daily basis, how difficult it is for them to survive, because you start with a group of 15 students and end up with a group of only three or four surviving wild wild animals from Mexico City. So and most of these threats are human-caused. So it makes them reflect on and really inspires them also to take an action, you know, even by changing habits by educating their have their own family members and friends. And by wanting to help animals in many other ways, so and most importantly, it creates empathy. Because as playing as the animal, it puts them in their shoes. And they realise how hard their lives are, and how important it is for us to learn to coexist, so that we can stop making the animals lives so hard. So role playing games, outdoor activities are great for students to all internalise but also to reflect on and achieve better learning results.

Artistic and ludic activities, as I was telling you like making the pencil cases like painting, drawing, making collages, I don't know there are many ways that we can combine art with science. And the activities with our general audience have been mainly to photographic exhibitions. The first one was at the central Cultural Centre, which is a very well big venue. Yeah, in southern Mexico City. Then we had the exhibition of the Lobby of SEMARNAT and CONANP are two of the of the most important environmental agencies in Mexico. So I was very honoured to have my my work exhibited there. And it wasn't just open for the the workers of the building. So anyone could just walk in, you know, people were walking up the street,
they could just come in, look at the photographs. Each photograph has a little card beside it with the species name, a scientific name information on the species. And there's also my information so people can write to me if they have any doubts. And normally exhibition at the beginning has an integration where I talk about the species and explain a lot of things. And that's when I give like this message of coexistence and this call to action. And also talks and conferences for radio shows. And for example, that from Fundacion Telmex, which is a very large foundation that has many different programmes, I was able to talk to some students that were part of an educational programme there. And radio shows have like these, they reach a lot of people still, even nowadays, they still reach a lot of people. So it's a great way to tell people about biodiversity and how they can help. And NGOs can also provide platforms or access to different schools that you haven't been to different kinds of people that you can talk to. So it's always great to from these allegiances.

Birdwatching can also be a great activity when the pandemic is over, of course, because you cannot only learn about the birds surrounding your city or living with you in your city, but also other wildlife species. And while you are out there, you can take people out there and teach them about these ecosystems. So it's like a very complete educational experience, while you're having fun, you're out in the sun, you're out in the open with a fresh air. So I also highly recommended newspaper and media articles, both traditional and digital have also been a great help and a great tool for reaching more and more citizens of Mexico City with this project, and strong presence in social media, where I keep uploading new photographs of new species, I talk a little bit about the species, but I also tell the story of that particular animal or individual or what happened, you know, behind the scenes while taking the photograph. Because this kind of stories, storytelling also engages a lot with people and also creates a lot of empathy and respect. So you know, it's like combining all these different tools, not just the photograph itself, but the storytelling, the science, the art. So it becomes like something really great and social media is a great outlet for this. It allows you to connect with a lot of your audience. And as I was telling you allegiances with other NGOs, it's very important that as conservationists, and scientists will learn this networking, conservation, as I was telling you concerns all of us. Networking really, really helps us it's teamwork, teamwork, conservation, reaching real results in conservation, will depend a lot of how well we know, we learn to work in teams. So and you know, eventually all these NGOs that we work on conservation subjects, we just tend to come together, and the more the better. So sorry, if I'm going a little fast, I just don't want to make this video too long. So here are a little of the photographs of the exhibitions. Here's the exhibition at the UM, the Faculty of Sciences with the students. Here's the workshop, with the little kids and here's the exhibition, the modern American school, the one that the students themselves curated. I'm very proud of them for this. And here you can see one of the newspaper articles I was telling you about. This was also part of the modern American school, workshop, that part of the talk, not just the exhibition. And this is a photograph of an elementary school workshop, the first one I did, I was really nervous, but real surprised that how much kids already know about wildlife and how much they want to learn and how eager they are to learn more and more and get even more involved. So kids are wonderful, it's great working with them. Here are some of the of the games with you know, the outdoor games, it's great to keep them you know, engaged and entertained. They just have so much energy that you know, playing outside, it's really great for them to learn. Here is the exhibition of the semarnat. Here you can see like the little cards, you know, besides the photograph with information, and this is the first exhibition of this intercultural centre here, we were still mounting the photographs, that's why they are on the floor was a great venue it was it
was great, you know, inaugurating the first exhibition of the project. So results. So results for this project, I have to clarify, the project is not done. It's still a long way from being finished.

So the results so far is that students in general audience are more conscious about their surroundings and eager to join in conservation projects I have been telling you, they have learned more about coexistence, and want to be involved further in conservation. More empathetic boys and girls eager to learn more about wildlife, nature and science, especially we're planting these little seeds in little kids with projects like this, we need to continue doing that. Public consider spaces more open to hosting environmental and educational art shows and activities. Normally, these venues are more for like your run of the mill, modern contemporary art, you know, event, so they tend to think that natural nature art shows or workshops, do not draw people, but they do so they are learning that nature draws people people want to learn about nature, people want to see photographs of nature, people want to be involved in these kind of projects. And this is great because it's opening their doors. Now they are opening their doors not just for me but for future projects from I don't know students or schools, whoever wants to do this. And that's great because we need more of this public spaces in order to spread more knowledge and to educate people further.

So conclusions. This project has taught me that it's of utmost importance to continue with environmental education among the Mexican society, as I was telling you, Mexican society believes, because we haven't been taught really well that nature and biodiversity is just in Africa or you know, like, It concerns only this megafauna, and no one is teaching us about our local environmental issues. So environmental education has to first focus on this local environmental issues and biodiversity conservation issues, and then go bigger towards the bigger picture. Because Science sometimes is, is difficult to grasp. Sometimes it's difficult to understand, if we want, you know, just to throw all this so much knowledge and complicated facts in terms to people like that it doesn't work. So environmental education has to continue into Mexican society, but first being particular about particular issues. And then the general issues we have to do, we have to teach people about the environment in smarter ways, you know, and also, that without environmental education, there is no conservation, no matter how many species we reintroduced back into the wild, like, for example, wolves, right. If we do not educate the local community about wolves, they are just going to hunt them down again. So by educating local communities, about their local wildlife, there is a better chance of the of them learning to coexist, and having better results in conservation. But without education, there is no conservation. Now, it's also very important to integrate multidisciplinary activities, as well, as professionals, you know, as I was telling you, science can be sometimes be pretty cold, pretty harsh, pretty difficult to grasp and to understand. But if we combine that with art, and with different teaching techniques, and fun activities, it can be easier to understand and can help it can have a better impact, it will be much more effective, you know, people will learn better. And sometimes, by having people coming from different backgrounds, teaching all this, people can connect ina better way. And all the knowledge can be given out in a much effective and better way that will help further everyone's education. So we need to be more open.

And also, more public spaces for the general audience to learn about science, as I was telling you, science has been always like reserved for the academic elite, for university students. And what about the rest of the population, for example, in places in countries, Latin American countries, and not everyone has an access to a to a university, or to a college education. So we need to have more spaces that even you know, consists of
having art shows or projects like this, or workshops, or just talks, whatever, but more spaces where people can just come, listen and learn and participate. Get involved, have fun, and make it accessible, make science and knowledge available if we really want to have real conservation results. And also the same in order to achieve a respectful, respectful and educated co-existing with wildlife. It's key to include citizens in all these kinds of enterprises. So we're selling you a call to action, conservation, biodiversity conservation concerns each and every one of us. So we have to inspire people and to make them feel confident and comfortable enough for them to want to join us. Because if we keep being like exclusive and excluding society, we are not going to reach real and long lasting results in conservation. So we have to involve citizens no matter their age, no matter their background, this will also help create empathy and will also further our coexistence with wildlife. And will just be create positive results for everyone, no matter how you said, so let's bring people in. So we cannot love or protect what we do not know. And that's also one of the objectives of this project to help people know their, their neighbours, their non human neighbours, so that they know they learn to exist. They learn about conservation, they get involved in conservation, and they learn about science and many other things. And also, this kind of project also, while can help communities come closer together.

So thank you very much for your time. I hope you enjoyed the talk. And I hope that it also inspires you to promote projects like this or to start your own or to continue with your own, don't get discouraged with the pandemic, things will get better we are working towards a better world. So thank you. Thank you everyone for all that everyone else is doing. Well, if you have any questions, suggestions, whatever, you can write to me either on my webpage or through my social media, I will be sure to answer any if you also have any questions about this project and this presentation, don't hesitate to ask. So I hope you enjoyed it. And thank you very much.