Microsoft AI for Earth taps Wild Me as new featured project for $50M initiative

Professor Tanya Berger-Wolf’s career in research has come a long way (literally and figuratively) since she secured the first ever funding dollars ($91K grant) from Microsoft Research back in 1996. Ironically, it was on sabbatical in 2014 that became the duct taped Wildbook prototype, an open source platform which has rapidly become the world’s leading repository for tracking endangered wildlife.

Microsoft recently recognized the impact and potential of Wildbook’s framework and awarded Wild Me (Wildbook’s non-profit organization) with a featured project for its AI at Earth program. Wild Me will receive resources and support from Microsoft as part of its $50 million initiative to put its cloud and AI tools in the hands of those working to solve global environmental challenges.

“Microsoft’s partnership allows us to grow to planetary scales, to thousands of species, efficiently, accessibly for scientists and wildlife conservationists, who can use it to study and protect biodiversity of our planet,” said Berger-Wolf.

The recent win by Wild Me has not slowed their pursuit of growing Wildbook to even larger scales. Berger-Wolf just presented Wildbook to Google last week with an opportunity to showcase Wildbook at Google NEXT in San Francisco at the end of July. The sky (or cloud) is the limit for Wildbook.

Berger-Wolf is amazed to see Wildbook’s success from its infancy just a few years ago to what it has become today. “As a researcher, to have a thought and see it through; that it has such an impact on the world we live in; that you can do it all with zeroes and ones; and have a great team of people who are so passionate about this space. It’s still surreal to me” she said.

Professor Tanya Berger-Wolf’s Wild Me team secured funding, resources and support from Microsoft AI for Earth program which puts Microsoft’s cloud and AI tools in the hands of those working to solve global environmental challenges.

Artificial Intelligence meets biodiversity and conservation . . .

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The Wildbook team’s research started in 2014 with an initial grant from the National Science Foundation. By February 2015 the first Wildbook prototype was launched and was powering the first ever counts of animals using photographs from citizen scientists: The Great Zebra and Giraffe Count at Nairobi National Park. Wildbook’s popularity and growth within the conservation community was just getting started.

“There was an intense demand for something that didn’t yet exist,” Berger-Wolf said, alluding to Wildbook’s rapid success over the past few years with limited resources. “It was all happening so fast at the beginning. Research and development were happening at the same time. It takes a great team of talented, dedicated and passionate researchers and engineers.”

The team consists of 4 co-founders, 2 grad students and a 1/2 engineer: Along with Tanya, Chuck Stewart is the computer vision researcher at RPI, his two PhD students Jon Crall and Jason Parham, Dan Rubenstein is the ecologist and zebra expert (and a long term collaborator) at Princeton U, and Jason Holmberg is a found a part of growing Wildbook to even larger scales. Berger-Wolf plans to continue the success of Wildbook on a much larger scale by adding three more dedicated engineers and moving onto Microsoft’s Azure platform where Wildbook will be included in the Azure Marketplace. Adding many, many more images.