

How to get a career in conservation

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Introduction

Looking for a career with wildlife or in conservation? Well, the good news is that the opportunities to work in these fields are greater than they have ever been: the range of available jobs, both paid and unpaid, is vast and varied. The bad news is that competition is incredibly fierce. This is particularly true for paid jobs working for conservation organisations (whether they be large international groups such as Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth or much smaller community-based cooperatives or local wildlife trusts) and for paid jobs working with charismatic megafauna such as big cats or whales and dolphins. Unless you are exceptionally lucky, and fall into your dream job without really trying, you need passion, perseverance and preparation. You have to be passionate about your subject because, in many cases, you will need to work very hard for relatively little financial reward; and, of course, it helps to show that you are genuinely committed because there will be plenty of other people chasing the same job who are equally passionate. You need to persevere, because it may be a long time before you get exactly where you want to go – and there is likely to be a lot of hard work along the way. And you need to be prepared, so that when your ideal job does eventually come along you will stand head-and-shoulders above all the other applicants.

Here are some specific recommendations to consider. None of these hold any guarantees, of course, but they are based upon my own experiences and upon the experiences of my many friends and colleagues working in the same field.

Volunteer

Arguably, this is the most important piece of advice for anyone seeking a job in wildlife or conservation. A great many people now working in paid jobs in this field – even directors of prominent international charities – started their careers as volunteers.

Volunteers have four major advantages over people who do not volunteer:

They are demonstrating that they are seriously committed.

They are gaining practical experience. The experience gained through voluntary work can often be essential, simply because the abundance of professionally qualified people looking for paid work means that skills developed as a volunteer can be decisive in securing a good position – in this scenario, practical experience really does count.

They are getting a foot in the door. Volunteering provides the best way of being in the right place (and with the right experience) at the right time when a vacancy for paid work arises. You get to hear about forthcoming job vacancies before the outside world hears about them and, of course, you're already on site. It also offers an opportunity to develop a job specifically for yourself: make yourself invaluable and indispensable and, given time, you may be offered a permanent position. It happens surprisingly frequently. This

is exactly how a number of people working in paid positions in conservation organisations, in particular, got their jobs.

They are developing a much clearer picture of the kind of work they really want to do.

Unfortunately, though, even voluntary jobs are limited – so be prepared to be interviewed and to battle it out with some impressive competitors.

There's a very good book about this, called *Wildlife & Conservation Volunteering: The Complete Guide*, by Peter Lynch (Bradt Travel Guides, £13.99, ISBN 9781841622750), which is definitely worth a read.

Get Qualified

The people with the 'best' jobs in wildlife and conservation are generally well qualified. That doesn't mean to say that they all have botany, zoology or biology degrees, or that they are fully qualified environmentalists, though this is certainly true of many. If this is your preferred route, there are many universities that offer degree courses in Countryside Management, Environmental Science, Ecology, Marine and Fisheries Science, Conservation, and many other relevant subjects. But, more importantly, universities are now increasingly offering degree courses that are made up of self-contained modules, making it possible to tailor a course to your own needs and aspirations.

Many other people working in conservation are qualified lawyers, accountants, teachers, publicists... and so on. A great many different areas of expertise are needed, and by no means all conservation-oriented work requires knowledge of conservation or takes place in the field. Just imagine how many different professionals are required to run a complex multi-national organisation such as the World Wide Fund for Nature, for example. But whatever subject you have chosen, as a general rule, most of these professionals have completed some form of further education. Having said that, there is also a role for general office staff, without higher qualifications, and it's by no means unknown for a secretary or personal assistant to move into a managerial or field-based position. If this is your aim, it is still important to develop new skills and gain more knowledge specifically in the wildlife and conservation field.

There are many organisations running a variety of practical training courses: in the UK, these include the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland, Scottish Conservation Projects Trust, the Association of Countryside Rangers, and the National Trust.

Qualifications – or, at least, working skills – in other potentially useful fields can also tip the balance in your favour. Suppose 500 people apply for a job that you are keen to secure. You are one of many with the right qualifications, plenty of enthusiasm and a history of volunteer work. Having additional skills, such as word processing, computer knowledge, typing, languages, photography or business skills, will clearly give you an added advantage.

Network

A surprising number of paid jobs in wildlife and conservation are never advertised.

Some evolve through volunteer posts, while most existing vacancies are filled by personal contact or word of mouth. And to be the person they contact requires networking.

For example, if you are interested in a career with whales and dolphins, join both the European Cetacean Society, based in several countries in Europe, and the Marine Mammal Society, based in the United States. Both organisations hold regular conferences, open to all members, and this is the perfect way to find out what is going on in the marine mammal world and to meet many of the active professionals in this highly competitive field. Many students attend such conferences primarily to find voluntary or paid, short-term or long-term employment – and there's no doubt that more than a few of them succeed.

Present Yourself Professionally

When you apply for a job – whether it is voluntary or paid, part-time or full-time – make sure that you appear professional. Check and double-check your letter and curriculum vitae for grammatical and typographical errors – and make sure they are neatly presented. It sounds really obvious, but it's amazing how many people send in job queries or applications that are riddled with mistakes. Imagine being the potential employer... if you can't produce a professional job application, what can you do?

Persevere (but don't hassle)

There is a very important difference between persevering in your search for a job – and hassling. It's a thin line, but as soon as busy people feel exasperated by your approaches they will begin to avoid you instead of considering you for the next available post.

A Senior Producer friend of mine at the BBC Natural History Unit was sent a very impressive CV by a girl wanting to be a researcher, just before he went abroad on a filming trip. She persisted in e-mailing him twenty times in as many days, and then began to leave telephone messages; when he returned from his trip, she was promptly dropped from the list of 'possibles'.

If you do send in a CV, or an enquiry letter, and you get no response after a few weeks or so, a simple letter or brief telephone call is okay. If you still don't get a response, just try elsewhere.

And, finally, a little plea. If you do write to conservation organisations, research institutes or individuals already working in your chosen field, please remember that they have limited resources – yours will be just one of many, similar letters they receive on a regular basis. Help them by enclosing an SAE for the reply, and do your research before writing to make sure you don't waste their time unnecessarily.

I hope this has all helped a bit. There are some useful books etc and website addresses listed below to help you get started.

Good luck!

Useful Books, Newspapers and Magazines

The Guardian Guide to Volunteering, by Liz Ford, Guardian Newspapers 2007

Wildlife & Conservation Volunteering: The Complete Guide, by Peter Lynch, Bradt Travel Guides, 2009

Saving the Earth as a Career: Advice on Becoming a Conservation Professional, by Malcolm L. Hunter, David Lindenmayer and Aram Calhoun, Wiley Blackwell, 2007

Career Opportunities in Conservation and the Environment, by Paul Greenland and AnnaMarie L. Sheldon, Checkmark Books, 2007

Careers in Environmental Conservation, by John McCormick and Robert Lamb, Kogan Page, 1995

Careers in the Environment, by Mike Fasulo and Paul Walker, McGraw-Hill Contemporary, 2007

Working with the Environment, by Tim Ryder, Vacation Work, 2004

The Environmental Careers Handbook, institution of Environmental Sciences, Trotman & Company, 1995.

There are many others – so check with your local library.

Alternatively, if you're merely looking for inspiration, there's an excellent book called *Do What You Love, The Money Will Follow* (by Marsha Sinetar, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1996), which is well worth a read.

If you are based in the UK, environmental jobs are usually advertised in *The Guardian* or *The Independent* (only on specific days of the week) and in journals such as *New Scientist* and *Nature*. Administrative and more junior posts are often advertised in the regional press.

Useful Websites

Careers in Conservation: www.environmentjob.co.uk. This website has hundreds of conservation jobs and volunteering opportunities with organisations such as RSPB, the Wildlife Trusts, Butterfly Conservation and Froglife. You can also sign up for their weekly e-mail update and read their tips on getting a green job.

Twin Work and Volunteer: www.workandvolunteer.com/gap-years. This website offers a wide range of conservation and community gap year projects all around the world. A gap year experience abroad will help you discover new cultures and gain some valuable work experience and skills.

Wildlife Extra – Jobs: www.wildlifeextra.com/go/jobs. An invaluable page on the excellent Wildlife Extra website, with advertisements for wildlife and conservation jobs and courses.

Animal Jobs Direct: www.animal-job.co.uk. An excellent source of information on all kinds of careers with animals – everything from becoming a marine biologist to training to be a vet.

Ethical Volunteering: www.ethicalvolunteering.org. Provides advice and information for people who are interested in international volunteering and want to be sure that their efforts are of value.

African Conservation Experience: www.conservationafrica.net. A UK-registered company that places volunteers on wildlife conservation projects in southern Africa.

The British Trust for Conservation Volunteers: www.btcv.org.uk. An organization that runs hundreds of conservation volunteer projects throughout the UK.

Coral Cay Conservation: www.coralcay.org. Runs volunteer expeditions, in partnership with local NGOs, in the fields of coral reef and tropical rainforest conservation.

The Wildlife Trusts: www.wildlifetrusts.org. Every county in the UK has its own wildlife trust – and they all need volunteers to help with their endangered wildlife and habitat restoration projects.

Groundwork: www.groundwork.org.uk. A leading environmental regeneration charity that regularly uses volunteers seeking work experience before moving into full-time paid employment.

RSPB: www.rspb.org.uk. Thousands of volunteers work all over the UK helping to create, manage and monitor habitats for birds and other wildlife.

National Trust: www.nationaltrust.org.uk. Offering a great many opportunities for volunteering – everything from inexpensive working holidays at over 100 locations throughout the country to full-time volunteering placements.

Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO): www.vso.org.uk. Specialising in development work, and unique in paying volunteers a living wage, VSO seeks a wide range of skilled and professionally competent volunteers for work abroad.

Earthwatch Institute: www.earthwatch.org. A charity and limited company that runs conservation research projects in many countries around the world in partnership with academic institutions and research scientists.

Trekforce Worldwide: www.trekforce.org.uk. A limited company that runs its own projects, in partnership with NGOs, and runs conservation and teaching expeditions typically lasting two to five months.

Responsible Travel: www.responsibletravel.com. An online travel directory for prospective volunteers.

Real Gap Experience: www.realgap.co.uk. A travel company offering a wide selection of volunteering opportunities (not just conservation) around the world, aimed primarily at gap year students.

Raleigh International: www.raleigh.org.uk. A UK-based charity offering young people the chance to take part in five- or ten-week projects around the world.

Green Volunteers: www.greenvolunteers.org. An excellent source of information listing about 500 conservation groups worldwide in need of volunteers.

Ecoteer: www.ecoteer.com. An internet directory designed to put volunteers and projects (not all conservation) in direct contact with one another.

Useful Contacts for Working with Whales and Dolphins

IFAW, the International Fund for Animal Welfare, runs an internship scheme involving placements on their research vessel *Song of the Whale*. They are looking for people whose interest or academic career is taking them in the direction of welfare or conservation work. Sailing experience helps, but is not a requirement – a broad range of skills, motivation and personal qualities are more important. For further details contact the Song of the Whale Team, IFAW UK, 87-90 Albert Embankment, London SE1 9UD (www.marineconservationresearch.co.uk).

Other organisations occasionally offer volunteer opportunities and these include: the Sea Watch Foundation (www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk) the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (www.wdcs.org.uk), and the Marine Conservation Society (www.mcsuk.org).

Bearing in mind that boating experience is useful, especially if you want to work with whales and dolphins, the Royal Yachting Association runs a range of training courses across the UK (www.rya.org.uk).

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