# Educated and willing… but unemployed! The state of the conservation job market

*Embarking on a career in the current environmental-conservation job market is not an easy feat. There are things that you can do to influence your chances. However, most of all unguarded determination, being optimistic and undertaking activities that are worthwhile to conservation and help to develop your skills are important in the current situation of intense competition.*

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For the last few years I have been pursuing a career in the environmental conservation field. I have always had an interest in the natural world and employment in this field would provide job satisfaction. After completing my MSc in Conservation last year I have now embarked on the task of seeking employment within the conservation job market. This article is based on personal experience and on a questionnaire sent to a variety of conservation organisations. Comprehensive responses were received from the RSPB, RSK Carter Ecological (part of the RSK Group Plc) and the Countryside Jobs Service. Several other bodies across different sectors were asked for their views, but nothing was received even after reminders. In fairness, due to the current economic situation where bodies are making painful cuts and shedding staff, it is perhaps not a good time to seek such views as resources are already stretched. For example, Natural England announced last year that it planned to cut back nearly a third of its 2,500 jobs.[1] Thus 800 full time equivalent posts are to be shed through to 2014. The Forestry Commission recently announced a programme of 400 redundancies.

There is an entire web site (www.voluntarysectorcuts.org.uk) dedicated to voicing people's experiences who either volunteer or are involved with charity and community groups and how public funding cuts have affected their organisations. For example, the Goblin Combe Environment Centre in North Somerset has completely restructured its organisation, lost one post and implemented changes of salary and the working hours for other staff. This centre is facing an overall cut of 23%. Another example, The Devon Conservation Forum has been fostered and supported by Devon County Council for the past 40 years, but has now been informed that there is not enough money within the County Council budget to continue supporting it. Therefore, this charity will have to inform Charity Commissioners of its closure and cease taking subscriptions. This is the only impartial charitable organisation seeking to conserve

the environmental qualities in Devon's cities, towns and countryside. It is sustained by volunteer effort with widespread expertise in land surveying, farming, bee keeping, listed buildings, water engineering, building industry, climatology, town planning, photogrammetry, demography, business management and the like. One part time administration job will cease. The organisation's newly created website will finish (see the Forum's Submission to the Royal Commission on 'Devon's Demography').

The voluntarysectorcuts web site is a helpful indication of some of the trends in cuts throughout the entire voluntary sector, beyond environment and conservation disciplines, but what is apparent is how silent many organisations are at present, about their cost-cutting plans and the programmes and the posts they are having to let go. Part of this may be as a result of the rationalisations within organisations which are still being worked out, but part of it seems to be a reluctance to admit the termination of activity and jobs, as organisations try to keep a relationship with their potential funding sources in government, and so don't wish to cause a fuss.

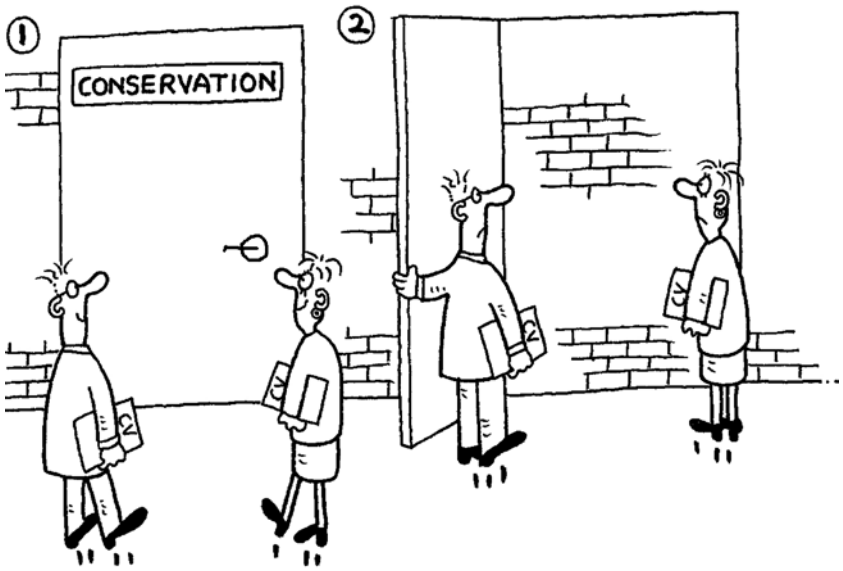
## Limited jobs - unlimited candidates

Being a fairly specialist job market there are a limited number of jobs available and there appears to be an unlimited number of candidates applying for those posts that are advertised.[2] The economic climate in general has not helped the situation with many governmental organisations undergoing a recruitment freeze and other organisations having to make cuts and redundancies within their staff. The Countryside Jobs Service (www.countryside-jobs.com), a website that publishes and advertises jobs, advertised approximately 2500 paid positions in 2010 – a reduction from 2007 when it advertised 4867; 2008 with 4349 jobs and 2009 with 3465 jobs. That is 1400 fewer paid jobs advertised in 2009 compared to 2007. Last year, this organisation saw fewer people already in work subscribing to the organisation's publications, although there have been more people signing up and the web hits have risen substantially. There have also been more enquiries from people who have been made redundant or who are looking to change careers. Private consultancies have also had to reduce staffing levels and in the case of RSK (see comment above) the staff now consists of a very strong core of people and skills, and as the economy improves RSK will no doubt expand its team and skills set. RSK has also speculated that there has been an increase in the number of applicants from a non-conservation background who view conservation as a way of being paid to do something that they enjoy out of doors. However, these people are in competition with others who have a strong conservation background and unless they have some other skills, for example project management, they may find it difficult to compete.

People who wish to enter the conservation and environmental sector tend to be passionate individuals who are determined to make their mark. In many other sectors there is not such a prolonged process of education, training and gaining of experience followed by a competitive scramble to break into a job. At least in many other sectors where the training and gaining of experience is drawn out there are more comfortable salaries as a consolation, but the conservation world does not offer the same financial rewards. This illustrates just how motivated and determined individuals are within this sector.





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However, the picture is not quite so bleak everywhere. During 2010, the RSPB advertised 450 positions in comparison to 380 in 2009, and employment in this organisation appears to be increasing. The amount of jobs on offer tends to increase around January-February as many organisations offer seasonal contracts for the field season which generally runs from April until September. However, funding often acts as a constraint on the number of seasonal positions offered. But overall, it seems that the intensity of competition for jobs has increased: I recently applied for a position as an Ecological Trainee at a salary funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund for approximately £12,000. From the feedback I received, there were over 420 applicants, even for a post with that modest salary.

## Volunteering

A common reason for not succeeding to an interview stage is that the candidate does not have enough experience or enough relevant experience. It is a catch 22 situation in that sense, for one cannot gain experience without successfully securing a role and learning through the job. However, volunteering is a valuable tool for gaining this experience and plays a significant role in the running of many conservation organisations. For example, the RSPB recruits a lot of volunteers and checks the volunteer management system as part of its recruitment process. This organisation offers both residential and day volunteering and clearly sees the benefits and knowledge that volunteers gain about the running and organisation of the RSPB making them useful candidates for employment. Furthermore, many recruits for the large consultancy RSK have worked within the volunteering sector and have gained experience from a number of different places. Ecologists are often people who care very deeply about wildlife and the environment and so many are willing to take on voluntary roles if paid ones are not available. Sarah Harmer, a staff member of RSK highlighted the fact that volunteering plays a vital role in training ecologists and that

despite very demanding careers, nearly all staff at RSK dedicate time to voluntary groups and environmental/wildlife charities. Volunteering also provides a valuable tool for developing useful contacts for future employment opportunities.[3]

Most conservation organisations offer volunteering opportunities. This can be mutually beneficial in providing experience to people and offering additional resources to the organisation. Opportunities include volunteer warden posts through the National Trust, which include incentives such as linked accommodation, but require a commitment to the position and still involve an application process. Likewise, the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society offers positions such as a volunteer Conservation Guide, but again, these involve an application process. So, although, there are opportunities such as this around, all involve an interview process and there can be an overwhelming response as applicants look to make a break into the conservation market through such positions.

## Academic study

Academic qualifications and study allow development of several aspects of conservation, including policy and legislation, basic scientific techniques and monitoring methods, as well as the wider socio-political and economic challenges of conservation. However, this is only part of the requirement for prospective recruits, as practical experience is an intrinsic and vital part of the job. It is important to balance academic knowledge with practical experience. At RSK many applicants going for jobs are generally better-qualified, but not necessarily more experienced. Therefore, if applicants have a good degree then recruiters would primarily look at their experience to make a decision. This is also reflected in a lot of the job specifications now advertised, particularly for jobs in ecology.

## Practical skills

One of the present gaps highlighted in ecology is that there is a decline in practical skills and knowledge in areas such as species identification, as discussed in *ECOS* 30 (3/4). Another aspect is peoples' engagement with nature. The RSPB has been offered Heritage Lottery Funding to be used to fill some of the skills gaps that the organisation has identified in ecology and people engagement. The project will be run over the next three years and will provide eighteen training placements across the UK to fill skills gaps in species identification and helping people to enjoy nature. These training placements will combine practical experience, mentoring from experienced professionals and formal specialist training courses. As well as learning specialist skills, the placements will cover essential business skills such as creating a CV, project management and formulating budgets. There are a variety of courses offered by the Field Studies Council that allow for training for such skills as identification of grasses or bryophytes, or the identification of bats, although these do come at a financial cost. However, analysing specifications of ecology and conservation jobs, a lot of positions are asking for specific experience with protected species such as bats and great crested newts.

## Challenges to aspiring conservationists – a view from experience

One of the major problems for young conservationists trying to break into the market is that although we may be well qualified, we just lack the necessary experience. A problem specific to jobs in ecology is the fact that they are seasonal and dependent upon short-term funding for individual projects, but not everyone can afford to live like that. Jobs in ecological consultancy tend to be more competitive, with the successful candidates demonstrating that they have often done a great variety of work and are hard working. It is important to have academic knowledge but this needs to be coupled with practical experience and related specific skills.

Currently, I am still seeking work within the conservation job market. I am doing volunteer work to gain more experience and develop a variety of fieldwork skills. Through volunteering I have learnt a number of new skills including hazel coppicing, rhododendron clearance, and making protective baskets around trees using natural materials. I have even created trout nests! I have also helped with the day-to-day running tasks of the organisation. I am reading around subjects and trying to keep myself up-to-date with conservation issues. These activities and organisations have made me feel valued, worthwhile and determined to carry on my quest to achieve paid employment within the sector. Individuals in my host organisations have offered me strong support, teaching and encouragement to continue working in the environment. The Heritage Lottery Fund appears to be a form of funded support to conservationists wanting to be trained and employed within the market providing many bursary supported positions.

Most organisations wish to employ people who already have experience associated with the job specification. However, how are younger people and new-graduates able to gain this experience when training schemes and internships, plus seasonal contracts are being reduced due to funding constraints? With these internships and placements being reduced, people such as myself are turning to volunteering to make it into the conservation job market. Having entered this route, I am now understanding why this is a valuable thing to do. Organisations can offer to support in various guises, such as to cover travel expenses, offer accommodation, resources, discount on identification keys and field guides, medical expenses if needed, equipment and even clothing. Although this may seem a small token, to someone who is just starting out it is a valuable resource and in the words of Tesco 'Every little helps!' The people who work within the conservation job market are often very inspiring individuals and I shall aspire to be one of them! Perhaps staying upbeat, positive and determined is an important attitude to adopt in these pressured times.

## References


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3. Boogert, R. (2009) Getting started in conservation – better late than never. *ECOS* 30 (3/4) 28-32.



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