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Fair Pay for Fair Work?
Wages in the conservation sector

Wildlife conservation is a vocation filled with knowledgeable, passionate people working to make the world a better place. It is also a vocation with a reputation for being difficult to enter, and for poor pay. ***LIZZIE WILBERFORCE*** explores what lies behind this, investigating some of the impacts on individuals, organisations, and what we seek to achieve for wildlife. This is a high priority issue for INCC, and we look at how some of the pressures on our sector could be addressed through positive change.

There was a phrase I came across repeatedly as I was researching this article, and that was 'warm glow'. It is used in the literature to describe the phenomenon whereby motivated conservationists tolerate low wages because they are doing something they love, because of their personal values, or because of their belief in the societal gain. It's a phrase that disquiets me. I recognise it in colleagues throughout the voluntary sector where I've been privileged to spend most of my career. It reflects positively on their passion and commitment, driven as they are by a desire to make a difference, not by personal gain. Yet in the hands of the unscrupulous, it's a phenomenon that can lead to wilful exploitation- unusual, but not unheard of, in ecology. Then, between these two extremes, lie the complex and intersectional worlds of crippling resource shortages, competitive funding schemes and contracts, and a labour market with an over-supply of willing candidates. This is a world in which you don't need to be unscrupulous to feel pressure to suppress wages, in the hope of achieving more.

Remuneration in conservation

In employment terms, ecology and conservation is a young profession (see *Natur Cymru* issue 50 (2014)). Emerging from the world of skilled amateur naturalists in post-war Britain, a growing awareness of our destructive impact prompted action to redress it. Charities mobilised from campaigning into direct delivery, and tentatively employed their first staff, often on token wages, to look after special sites. The emergence of ecology within the civil service improved pay and condition prospects, and career options grew further with the advent of ecological consultancy and a new professional body for ecologists (now CIEEM) in the 1990s. We are, collectively, still on that journey towards becoming an established profession.

Against that backdrop, and to test the received wisdom that pay is still poor, I asked - what can an ecologist or conservationist currently expect? For a snapshot, I looked at 300 listings on three of the most prominent conservation vacancy websites, cataloguing all the jobs advertised over a two-week period of summer 2021. A total of 68 were in the private sector, 105 in the public sector, and 127 in the voluntary sector. Vacancies ranged from apprenticeships to CEOs, and so for comparability, I restricted my first trawl to the 206 that were 'officer' level posts with limited management responsibility and where the salary was specified. The resulting annual averages were: voluntary sector £23,238, private sector £24,900 and public sector £30,275.

How does that look to a potential recruit? Well, the minimum wage for adults, expressed as a full-time annual salary, is presently a little over £17,000. One estimate of average graduate starter salaries in UK charities (all sectors) is £25,062[1], and a skilled worker visa to the UK currently sets a minimum salary of £25,600. This benchmarks many conservation jobs significantly below a normal graduate starting salary, even within charities, despite the highly skilled nature of the roles. So far, the received wisdom was holding true.

I also looked at contract terms. Given that the data were collected in late summer, well after the peak of advertising for short seasonal contracts, the proportion of posts that were both fixed-term and part-time were surprisingly high, and highest of all in the voluntary sector (11% of all vacancies).

The impact on career entrants

These figures support the anecdotally familiar case – that many jobs in conservation are comparatively poorly paid, and precarious, particularly for career entrants.

Sitting within this already low benchmark is a sub-set of posts (especially rangers and land managers, who fared particularly poorly) with high entry requirements, but which are advertised at minimum wage. Even these entry level jobs often expect both a degree and voluntary experience. They also regularly ask for an expensive training dossier such as chainsaw and brushcutter qualifications, and volunteer supervision experience, all for £17,000 or so a year.

Many early career vacancies already expect a portfolio of expensive training certificates (such as brushcutter and chainsaw use) as well as academic qualifications. © Lizzie Wilberforce

The consequence is that entry-level applicants often face, in the words of one journalist, "serial unpaid internships, crippling student debt, short-term work for little or no pay, dismissive attitudes, and entry-level job requirements that include expectation of considerable field time and experience"[2]. The personal cost to individuals can be impossibly high. I spoke to Em Witcutt, a seabird ecologist who has been working professionally in the field for 7 years now but still finds herself trapped in a cycle of short-term seasonal contracts. She now campaigns for better conditions and greater equality in our sector. Her experience has been of multiple compounding influences. The seasonality of seabird contracts means that she rarely earns enough in a year to pay tax, yet is often expected to provide her own equipment (optics, and even safety kit on occasion), all despite being highly trained with specialist skills such as rope access and a bird ringing licence. Seasonal contracts are perhaps the most precarious of all; every year you re-apply for your own post, your salary never advances, you receive little or no training; to all intents and purposes you are treated like a contractor, but without the benefits. Em acknowledges that "if you work on seabirds you get to work in some amazing places, and with amazing species – but that in itself doesn't pay your bills."

Many posts in conservation and ecology rely on significant natural history skills, normally gained by individuals entirely on their own time and at their own expense. Pictured: identifying grassland fungi © Lizzie Wilberforce

Inevitably this combination of influences simply pushes many bright and competent individuals out of the market altogether. There's no denying that we benefit from some hugely talented people, but how many others are forced to make different career choices by the existential barriers to starting out as a conservationist?

Later in conservationists' careers

Later in careers, the personal impacts may be less extreme, but they do still impact on staff development and retention. For people like Em Witcutt, trapped in a cycle of seasonal employment, employers offer little or no opportunity to learn new skills that might assist in career development. Anecdotally, many people leave the sector after several years in such posts, either burned out by their workload, or because other priorities such as having dependents, or the need to secure a mortgage, make such precarious or low-paid work completely untenable.

If you're lucky to be one of those who finds permanent or more senior employment in conservation, then your salary, at least, increases. Based on the 300 jobs sampled, the increase to a management salary is proportionately greatest in the private sector (average £39,200, an increase of 57%) followed by voluntary (average only £33,797 but an increase of 45%) and public (average of £35,722, an increase of only 18%). Advancement in private and voluntary roles does appear to overcome some of the limitations of starter pay and conditions. However, the disparity with other professions actually increases- in the UK, the average pay for Chief Executives in charities is £82,324, compared to the median of £166,516 in other sectors[3].

Why it matters

There are substantial wider repercussions of low pay, on top of the effects on individuals. Some of these are more tangible than others, but they all erode our capacity to address the critical climate and biodiversity challenges that we now face.

Perhaps the most obvious is diversity. With the economic barriers to entry outlined above, conservation is dominated by those with private means – often in the form of parental support. A degree now costs thousands. Volunteering doesn't remove the costs of living, so is impossible for some, and nature reserves are often in inaccessible places requiring private transport. Training costs time and money. In this way, a requirement for voluntary experience explicitly limits our diversity and representation. Little wonder that environmental professions have been ranked as the second least diverse in the UK after farming[4]. To quote one provocatively titled paper ('*Volunteer field technicians are bad for wildlife ecology*'), "in a field that desperately requires greater diversity of gender, race, sexual orientation, and economic status, we cannot afford not to pay our technicians if we want things to change"[5]. Those who succeed are more likely to suffer from 'survivorship bias', and underestimate the barriers to others- and so fail to seek change from within. The consequence of appearing elitist or unrepresentative is that it makes it much harder to engage others as widely as we need to, because our ideas and methods become blinkered by the narrower life experiences we represent.

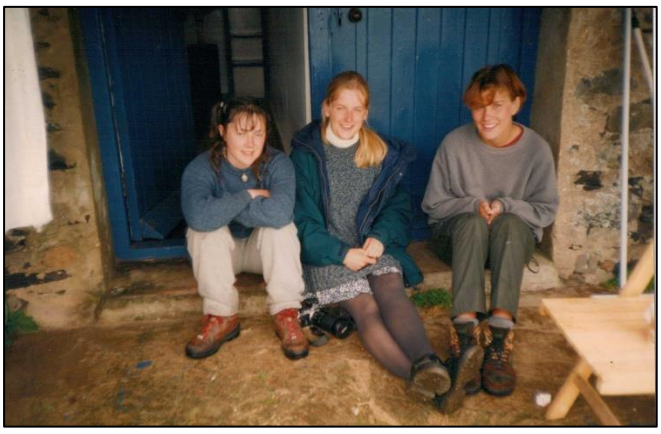
The prevalence of poor pay, lack of investment in professional development, and the replacement of paid roles with volunteers also lead to assumptions of non-professionalism, to the detriment of all involved. Em Witcutt tells me that in her roles she often faced the assumption that she was a volunteer, which she found to undermine her authority. Sally Hayns, in her role as chief executive of CIEEM, ecology's professional body, observed in one interview that there is a perception that because we are passionate, we "think with our hearts and not our heads".

It's also known that as fallible humans, we tend to associate greater authority and competence with things that look, feel or are in fact more expensive. Sadly, it seems that this also applies to expertise and professionalism. One charity CEO told me that they felt their staff's substantial expertise was routinely under-estimated by others; the willingness of such competent people to work for low salaries is sufficiently unusual that people make the false assumption of low skill, turning an absolute merit in the individuals into a perverse outcome for the organisation, despite decades of demonstrable achievements. This perception is compounded by a systemic lack of formal training and professional development in much of the voluntary sector. I've heard first-hand testimony of how even within conservation, the charity sector is perceived as collectively less professional by colleagues in the public sector.

Taken together, the under-investment in staff and in skills development maintain the perception that we hold our own knowledge, and our own staff, in low value.

The role of the volunteer

This brings in another hugely complex issue - the role of the volunteer. When managed well, volunteering is immensely personally rewarding, with all manner of benefits for both the individual and the hosting organisation. Yet this understandably dominant win-win narrative does disguise some under-explored challenges arising from the volunteering model.



The author, like many people working in conservation in Wales, achieved career success following some years of voluntary experience (pictured [left] volunteering on Skomer Island in 1997).

There are direct impacts arising from volunteer contributions; one study of American charities discovered that non-profit organisations that worked with volunteers had salaries that were, on average, 13.1% lower, through the effect on leaders' wage-setting behaviours[6]. There are also two major ethical areas of concern: one is that volunteering should always (literally by definition) be a choice, yet for many new career entrants, it's effectively a requirement. The other is that in the bid to reduce costs, volunteers are regularly deployed as a replacement for paid work rather than in addition. Whilst it's possible to make very sound arguments in favour of this approach, in terms of maximising short-term impact per pound spent (or for that matter, avoiding a deficit), it does enter dangerous ground when it

routinely supports a function for which the charity would otherwise pay. It also removes some of the key defining features of volunteering- for example, by imposing heavy managerial control, and barriers to both entry and exit of individuals.

There are also some interesting impacts of a personal history of volunteering on those in work. It has been observed that a history of volunteering creates an acceptance of unpaid overtime as part of an employee's identity[7] or personal honour, which leaves them more vulnerable to burn out or inadvertent exploitation. It's certainly an attitude to volunteering in the workplace that you see in few other sectors, and it is often implicitly relied upon (and sometimes explicitly requested) by employers. Unpaid over-work is a regular companion of under-pay, being driven by similar pressures on both individuals and organisations.

It's hugely important that the work we do is valued professionally by a world that thinks in financial terms, because otherwise we are actually facilitating decision makers invest their money elsewgere, instead of in conservation. Consider the huge volume of biological records on which so much environmental decision-making depends. For that information, we are almost entirely dependent on highly skilled volunteers, without whom the system would crash and burn. This self-funded input is highly valued by the organisations through which the data are channelled, but rarely recognised by politicians or in the press. How many other sectors see government reporting progress using data they did not pay for?

A huge amount of biological data, on which our entire system depends, is collected entirely by volunteers- often depending on a lifetime of experience in those individuals © Rob Parry

Overall, of course, volunteering brings immeasurable benefit to conservation. If all volunteering was to cease, what would happen? Some of the roles would be replaced by paid work but most would be lost. Volunteers bring knowledge, passion, joy, and huge value to the organisations they support, and to the wider conservation movement. The onus is on the hosting organisations to safeguard the wellbeing and interests of both their staff and volunteers, and to try and retain the separation that should come with the two very different kinds of role and responsibility.

The employer's perspective

There is little doubt that all this is a moral and practical minefield for employers. Most want to look after their teams; many feel a very personal responsibility for staff wellbeing, and want to be sustainable in all senses of the word. However, as leaders they also have a duty to maximise their impact, and for many, the costs also enter an existential domain, with budgets that struggle to break even.

For charities there is also a huge issue with public perception. Senior staff salaries are regularly criticised in the press, and one study found that 16% of people thought a charity CEO should not be paid at all[8], even though the work is often harder than in a profit-making company. They also found that spending too much on executive salaries was the greatest public concern with charities.

This perception is a perfect storm, because the mere suggestion of wasted money can slash donations, yet poor pay and conditions for staff can lead to burn-out, brain drain, high staff turnover and reduced effectiveness and efficiency for any charity. Charities often face supporters saying, "why should I donate if it's just going towards salaries?". The passion of charitable staff has unfortunately been shown to legitimise poor pay in these circumstances, mediated through the belief that the individuals would have volunteered to do the work anyway, or that passion is its own reward[9]. Donating the cost of tools may feel more tangible and rewarding than donating the cost of a day of staff time, or an insurance premium, or a tank of fuel, but the reality is that they are all essential to getting the job done.

There are also structural influences on charity leaders that make it harder for them to pay competitively. There is a clear and appropriate requirement to spend 80-85% of charity income directly on charitable objectives. However, because charity finance reporting rules (set by the Charity Commission) prevent some overhead costs being attributable to charitable objectives, leaders feel pressure to keep staff costs as low as possible to achieve compliance. Similarly, funders who refuse to pay full cost recovery exert pressure on charities to reduce their staff costs in order to reduce overheads. This exerts a creeping downward pressure on the pay structures of entire organisations.

Of course, there is a critical moral imperative not to waste money. Many leaders in our sector will set low wages knowing that they can, and that good people will still do the work for low rates. There are good cases to be made for that, but several charity leaders I spoke to also recognised the false economy of doing this in the longer term.

What can we do?

Inevitably, this is the hardest question to answer. When there is no new money to throw at a solution, it is incumbent on all of us to think carefully about our actions, and whether they're in the long-term interests of conservation.

All employers need to consider what they can do to improve conditions for employees, especially new starters for whom the personal impacts are most acute. For early career posts, the only fair response to the current situation is really 'just pay more'. However, there are other things that can make a difference too. If you are recruiting at a starter salary, make it a true starter post. Don't list expensive qualifications as essential- try and offer training in the job, especially when there is grant support. Does the post-holder really need an expensive degree? If a post needs a degree *and* field experience, what are we looking for from the academic qualification? It can be challenging to find ways to demonstrate on paper that you are a good ecologist that don't come from having a degree; is there a better solution?

Employers also need to commit to salaries that are over the living wage- given the level of qualifications they are normally seeking - and be transparent about them. This is especially true in the private sector, where salaries are often unspecified in job advertisements.

More care needs to be given to seasonal staff, who probably suffer more than any in terms of their pay and conditions. Are their work hours reasonable, is their contract long enough to take back time in lieu, can they take holiday they are owed (or get paid for them if not)? Can we manage their contracts so that they are not constantly re-starting and actually accrue benefits, like the extra holiday days and salary increases that many of us take for granted?

Unpaid internships and long-term voluntary posts are tricky- they are enjoyed and valued by so many, and they offer huge support to charities- but they are, without a doubt, financially discriminatory. We need to start compensating for that by offering more paid traineeships and apprenticeships; even a small growth in opportunities would be a step in the right direction. We need to be sure we maintain the passion and strong values that we currently see in our recruits, but reduce the economic barriers that favour applicants with private means.

We need to recognise that competitive bidding for contracts and grants imposes pressure to win by undercutting on staff costs. CIEEM are looking at ways of managing this effect in private ecological consultancy. In the voluntary sector, funders like the National Lottery have shone a light on low salaries in conservation compared to other professions they engage with. We need organisations and projects with scale and finance to exert positive pressure to raise employment terms, and we

need funders to understand the importance of longer-term investment and reasonable cost recovery to prevent a race to the bottom.

Organisations also need to prioritise increasing low salaries, even when finance is tight. Place posts as high in your salary structures as you can, contributing slowly to a change in culture. Too many charities' pay structures are being chased from the bottom by the rising minimum wage, and so they are finding it difficult to recruit staff. Vocational posts are often paid poorly compared to transferrable ones; ecologists are a captive market, whereas staff in finance, HR, or marketing have leverage in their power to walk away. There is no real reason why employers should disadvantage their technical specialists.

Even with limited extra resources there are also things that can be done to support employees. Consider the total package offered to a staff member, beyond the pay packet; it may include pensions, death in service benefits, sick pay, maternity pay, annual leave- these are often proportionately better in the voluntary sector than the salaries. Some organisations set the total size of that package and allow employees to choose how to balance components within the total – for example, relinquishing some annual leave for greater wages. This would support employees at all stages of their careers and would certainly help those early career individuals for whom cash in hand is an absolute limitation.

The charitable sector also needs to get better at explaining the benefits of professionalism and staff development, so that donors become more willing to support such costs. Providing more training and accreditation supports individuals. For the organisation, it demonstrates professionalism to other sectors where ongoing training is already an expectation of working life. Whilst not everyone you train will stay in your organisation, they will part as friends, and often return, or work in partnership, because they felt valued.

Ongoing training throughout careers increases the professionalism of our sector, as well as individual accountability, making us more effective in our collective endeavours for wildlife © Rob Parry

One thing is for certain; losing good people from our sector who are burned out, or resentful at having to choose between a career and a house, or a career and family, is damaging to us all.

We are what we value

Joe Biden is famously quoted as saying, "Don't tell me what you value. Show me your budget and I'll tell you what you value". Low wages may help cut an organisation's direct costs in the short term, but it does so at the cost of transferring hardship to those in the workforce who have the least resilience to withstand it.

Valuing people, and investing in them with salaries and wider benefit packages, especially if combined with training and continuous professional development, increases both professionalism and individual accountability. It makes us more effective. Of course, higher pay alone does not guarantee better people[10]; it is critical that we stay focussed on recruiting individuals with passion, knowledge and strong values. However, when the early career conditions are so poor that people can't afford to work, we have to acknowledge and address the fact that the low pay is not a rite of passage, it's a problem.

We aren't likely to see a halt in biodiversity declines until our knowledge and message is valued throughout society and therefore truly embedded in all decision-making. © Lizzie Wilberforce

We aren't likely to halt declines in biodiversity until biodiversity is *truly* at the heart of all decision-making. Not a luxury for the financial good times, not green-washing, not box ticking, and not a reluctant concession. We are only likely to succeed when our knowledge is valued by all of society in its decision making, and being more representative of the society we work within will be a big step forward.

Volunteers, activists and unpaid eco-warriors to whistle-blow and challenge are an essential part of that picture. It also worth saying that for many of us in established posts, our job satisfaction derives at least as much from our autonomy and impact as it does from our income, and that our working environment, and a sense of all being in it together, does more for our workplace happiness than our terms and conditions.

However, we also need viable careers, and rapid improvements at entry level. We need more and better routes to support and develop our collective professional expertise, to deliver the scale of change we need. We have to make the case that our time, our skills, and our knowledge are just as important and valuable as those of other professions. Without fair pay for fair work, we may find ourselves the architects of our own marginalisation.

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