



MAMMAL NEWS

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**MAMMAL SOCIETY CONFERENCES • A CAREER IN CONSERVATION
EURASIAN OTTERS • HEDGEHOGS • MARMOTS • TIGERS • RED SQUIRRELS**

A Mammalogist's Career in Conservation

By PJ Stephenson, stephensonpj@gmail.com

I'm incredibly lucky to have fulfilled my lifelong dream of working with animals. For my zoology PhD I studied mammals in Madagascar and went on to work in biodiversity conservation for Scottish Natural Heritage, WWF, Conservation International and IUCN. But what have I learned from these last 30 years that might be of interest to students setting out on their career paths today?

My childhood passion for nature manifested itself in ways that many of you will relate to. I was an avid birdwatcher and kept a succession of fish and small mammals as pets. At school, I acquired good grades in biology and an addiction to David Attenborough documentaries. I conducted garden bird counts for the RSPB and knocked on neighbours' doors collecting for WWF. As I considered options for university courses, zoology stood out as a golden opportunity to spend three years studying what I loved most. At Royal Holloway & Bedford New College, London, I was an overly keen student, joining the Natural History Society and sitting on the staff-student committee. I spent both of my undergraduate summers foregoing the joys of InterRailing around Europe with my peers to participate in student expeditions to survey mammals in Madagascar. **I was late back for my third-year small mammal ecology course because I'd been trapping tenrecs in a Malagasy rainforest!** But most expat Brits I met in conservation had a doctorate so, in order to follow their path, I went back to the Indian Ocean island to study tenrecs for a PhD in zoology at the University of Aberdeen. I loved research and nearly did a post doc, but applying my skills to conservation seemed the more logical next step.



One of my study animals. A lesser hedgehog tenrec (*Echinops telfairi*). Many conservationists started their careers studying mammals

My first job opening came with Scottish Natural Heritage in the Cairngorms. It was a short-term contract but gave me some vital experience. From there I was lucky enough to secure a job with WWF in the Democratic Republic of Congo, developing a management plan for the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. This break came largely due to the experience I'd acquired during my PhD working productively in remote field sites and publishing results. I went on to develop and manage projects on the ground for WWF in Tanzania and DRC (again), and for Conservation International in Côte d'Ivoire. I then co-ordinated elephant, great ape and rhino programmes for WWF's Africa & Madagascar Programme before becoming WWF International's Director of Conservation Strategy & Performance, planning and monitoring conservation programmes worldwide. I am now at IUCN in Switzerland as Senior



PJ on hike into Zahamena 1985.



I saw my first wild Asian elephant during a work trip to Thailand for WWF Advisor, Monitoring and Chair of the IUCN SSC Species Monitoring Specialist Group, striving to improve the availability of species data for conservation.

Based on my own experiences, I would offer the following advice to students keen to make a career in conservation:

- **Study what you're interested in.** A lot of people with conventional jobs laughed at me for studying zoology. What was the point? What would I do afterwards? But my rationale was that, if you're interested in wildlife, why not study it; besides, it's easier to get good grades in subjects that interest you. These days there are more options than the meagre selection of botany, zoology or biology that I had in the 1980s, with many applied degrees on offer relating to environment sciences and conservation. And don't forget conservation is not just about fauna and flora; there are many roles for social scientists, statisticians, IT experts and others.
- **Get a higher degree.** You will be more competitive in the job market if you have a second degree. There are plenty of very good applied MSc courses and, if you're interested and motivated, go for a PhD. It is hard work, and you will have to wait even longer to earn a salary, but there is nothing more rewarding than spending several years focused on your very own research project to become an expert in your field.
- **Gain experience.** Qualifications alone are not enough and most conservation job ads ask for a higher degree *and* several years' experience. This is tough to take for people who've just spent six or seven years at uni. How do you get that first experience? My suggestion is to make your own. Volunteer with a research team or conservation project: many scientists, NGOs and IUCN specialist groups need help and some have formal or informal volunteer programmes. You'll need to be prepared to work for little more than your travel expenses, but you'll gain valuable experience and learn a lot – and it'll be fun. If that doesn't work, save up and travel. Experience visiting and working in other countries will enhance your CV, as will any practise you gain speaking other languages. French and Spanish are especially useful for tropical conservation.
- **Publish.** Even if you are lucky enough to move straight into a job, take time to write up your MSc or PhD research as scientific papers. This will further expand your CV and prove your credentials as a researcher. Disseminate your work in other forms too, through social media, newsletter articles and conference presentations.



PJ weighing a small mammal during a University of London expedition to Madagascar. Experience like this is vital for students to complement academic qualifications.

- **Keep abreast of current issues.** Join a couple of societies or NGOs and read (or subscribe to) one or two journals to keep up to date in your chosen field. I assume you're already a Mammal Society member, but what about joining the British Ecological Society as well? Or an NGO working on your favourite taxon, like the Bat Conservation Trust? I always advise students keen on conservation to join Fauna and Flora International. Membership includes a subscription to *Oryx*, a journal with very readable, applied scientific articles as well as conservation news and updates. The Society for Conservation Biology is another good option. In addition, talk to people you meet at uni, at conferences or during field work to find out more about what they do, the path they took and potential opportunities.
- **Be flexible.** You may only want to work with cheetahs in Kenya, but don't turn down a chance to work on squirrels in Britain (or non-mammal taxa for that matter). Conservation careers in the tropics are becoming harder to find for Europeans. Governments, donors, NGOs and international organizations increasingly (and quite rightly) prioritize investment in building local capacity in biodiversity-rich countries. It's not impossible to find openings, but competition is higher than ever. So be prepared to adapt your goals.

It is impossible to plot precisely your career path – you will face twists and turns, successes and failures along the way. But if you want to follow your passion, make every effort to develop a CV that includes key elements that conservation agencies look for when recruiting: solid qualifications in a related subject, a publications record, practical experience (abroad if relevant), and membership



PJ working in the lab.



PJ facilitating an IUCN meeting in 2016.

of a professional society or two. The more you can demonstrate your hard work, interest and initiative, the more likely it is you'll be able to find a job you want.

A career in conservation is more of a calling and has its rewards. For example, I've been lucky to see wild mammals in many countries I've travelled to for work, from sloths in Brazil to orangutans in Borneo to tigers in India. **But most conservation work is less about working with wildlife and more about working with people to reduce threats to wildlife. That means it's not always exciting and you're more likely to find yourself in a meeting or workshop than watching cheetahs in a park.** But you do have the reward of knowing you are doing your bit to ensure mammals and other species persist in the wild.

I wish you the best of luck finding the right path for your own career – and hope it includes mammals!



PJ in rainforest 1986

The Mammal Society's Autumn Symposium 2017 Advances in marine mammal science to support conservation

Friday, 3rd November 2017 10 am – 4pm

£65 – Members

£95 – Non-members

Speakers: Peter Evans, Bangor University & Sea Watch Foundation

Danuta Wisniewska, Stanford University, California

Sinead Murphy, Galway Marine Institute of Technology, Ireland

David Lusseau, University of Aberdeen

James Waggitt, Bangor University

Peter Tyack, Monica Arso Civil & Luke Rendell, University of St Andrews

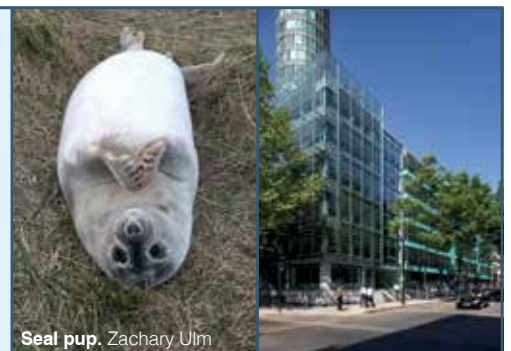
To be held at:

ARUP office,
13 Fitzroy Street,
London, W1T 4BQ

Book through the Mammal Society's website:

<http://www.mammal.org.uk/events/the-mammal-society-autumn-symposium-2017/>

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Seal pup. Zachary Ulm



Bottlenose dolphin. Tim Stenton