

## Transcript – Becky Fisher

Hello,

My name is Emily Seccombe, and I'm the Mentoring Officer for A Focus on Nature. This recording is part of our careers advice resources, through which we hope to provide young people with advice and support for getting into the conservation sector and building their careers. In this recording, I'm talking to Becky Fisher, who is the Engagement Manager for the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust. Becky is one of the mentors on the AFON Mentoring Scheme, through which professionals volunteer their time to support young people with an interest in conservation. Through the scheme, you can receive tailored, ongoing advice and support from a mentor. If you'd like to learn more about the scheme and how you can sign up as a mentee, please do have a look at the mentoring page on our website.

It was great to chat to Becky about her career and discuss the challenges and opportunities of working in the engagement side of conservation. I hope you enjoy listening!

*Emily:* Thank you so much for joining us today Becky, it's great to talk to you about your career in conservation and especially in education and engagement which is perhaps something that not everyone knows about as a career option. I thought to start us off we could talk a bit about your career path and how you've got to the role you're in now.

*Becky:* I had no intention of doing the role I do now when I first started thinking about my career, I'd wanted to be a vet since I was tiny and that was mostly because I knew I wanted to work with animals, and was the only career option I had ever seen that was out there. I was doing my GCSEs and my A levels and that was what I was focusing on. As most people end up doing, I did a little career advice quiz and when I was at school we got it in a big booklet and you got a list of things you might be interested in doing and in there was a degree in animal behaviour and I thought that's really cool, I'm probably not getting the grades I need to become a vet, maybe I will have a look at this instead. That was at Chester University, and I was lucky enough that whilst there as part of my course to get to go to South Africa. I sort of started becoming interested in education around that time and thinking about how we might encourage more people to do things for wildlife. I was much more interested in education on the other side of the world, I wanted to go and work with communities who lived with tigers and that sort of stuff. Whilst I was in South Africa I got to get involved in lots of their education and engagement projects from their reserves and found that was really interesting.

So when I came back I started looking at options for how I could do that in the UK and I did volunteer, I think everyone realises that's kind of part of it now although hopefully that will change. I spent some time in New Quay in Wales volunteering there, helping with their public engagement and their citizen science side of things. I spent some time with the Thames Valley Groundwork team, who worked on the canal boats, so I volunteered some of my time taking inner city London children out onto the canal. During that time whilst I was volunteering, I was also working for Wetherspoons so I was kind of keeping the balance between the two. It was whilst I was with Groundwork that I found a job working for a local council and that was in events, running the gift shop on a nature reserve. So I took part in that and was there for eight years in total and over that time my role really changed, it became much more about community engagement, education, and that council owned

space was taken over by The Wildlife Trust. So I worked for one Wildlife Trust and in the last three years I've moved to another Trust.

I now work for Hampshire Wildlife Trust and I'm the engagement manager so I've worked my way up through the ranks. If you had asked me fifteen years ago what I wanted to be, I'd have never told you this because I didn't know this role existed so it has been a bit of a change over the years just as I've found things that I've loved, things that have really interested me and things that have inspired me.

*Emily:* It's quite interesting talking to different people working in conservation about what their perception of conservation was before they started. I certainly thought the only roles were as a ranger and I was unaware of some of the other options, it's really interesting to talk about the engagement side of things.

When you were at University, were there other people who were interested in doing a similar sort of thing so you could talk to about how to go down this career path or did you feel a bit isolated like you were the only one with that interest?

*Becky:* There were not that many, most of the people on my course were interested in working with pets or maybe zoo animals sometimes but mostly they were interested in animal behaviour from a pet point of view. Some of them were a bit like me, had not got the grades to become a vet and so were looking at other options for working with animals and didn't really know what was out there. I don't remember having a very close network of people that I could share what I was doing or to get ideas from if I'm honest, it was me and maybe a couple of friends who said - oh shall we have a go at it this at the weekend.

*Emily:* That's interesting and it's something we are trying to tackle through AFON to connect people and make sure they're not thinking "what are my options and is anyone else in the same boat as me". I was going to ask what you found the most challenging part of your roles, because a lot of people who work in conservation think it's a great job and there are loads of fantastic highlights but it can be quite challenging sometimes. I wondered if you could shed some light on what you think the most challenging part of doing engagement related work is?

*Becky:* From an engagement point of view, I'd say the most challenging things are: never having enough time, never having enough money. We come up with these incredible ideas, and we really want to do them and we have lots of people who are interested in taking part but getting funding for engagement is quite tricky, it's very competitive, as lots of people are doing really worthy things that are really important and should be funded, but there's never enough out there for everyone. There are never enough hours in the day, which is probably not an engagement specific thing, I think that's conservation specific. It's challenging to know what to do, what to let go of and how to evolve projects to fit them with funding programmes or to find alternative ways of funding things.

*Emily:* Has it changed whilst you've been working in the sector - the amount of funding available?

*Becky:* Yes, quite a lot of funding has opened up in the health and wellbeing sphere, lots more funders and the health sector more generally are understanding how important nature is to wellbeing, so there are lots of opportunities from that point of view. Also, it's got more competitive because it has become trickier to be a conservation organisation and more and more people are looking for funding. It's become more competitive as well as there being more pockets.

*Emily:* From my perspective, it does seem like it's become more mainstream to talk about connecting young people to nature but then you get more people wanting to do projects and there is some funding but maybe not enough still.

*Emily:* I was wondering if we could talk a bit about careers advice, especially for people who are thinking that this is something they would like to get involved with or explore their options. What sort of skills do you think young people should try and develop if they do want a career in environmental engagement or education?

*Becky:* I think the most important thing you can do is learn how to adapt what you are trying to say to lots of different audiences. Not so much now because I work in the strategy and management side of things, but in my previous role, I could in one day be talking to a general member of the public who would walk through the door and just wanted to come and entertain their family, I could be talking to someone who was incredibly into birds and actually knew way more than I did, I could be talking to a child, a young person. We have a set of messages that we want to get across but for every person, it's a different way of talking to them so I think it's really valuable to get the confidence in talking to loads of different people, and also the ability to really adapt your message.

*Emily:* I guess that is potentially quite a transferable thing, if you can't get a role immediately in this sector, other public facing roles will give you some of that experience and you might be able to get into this line of work - is that true?

*Becky:* Absolutely, I think certainly from my point of view I am looking for a passion for nature but I am not necessarily worried if you have done lots in the sector, provided you've got transferable skills you can apply from elsewhere. So if you have done customer service, public speaking or communications or anything like that, if you know your audiences and you know how to talk to people, and you have a real passion, then that's going to push you up the list of people even if you haven't got loads and loads of experience in the nature conservation sector.

*Emily:* That's really interesting and it's quite useful as in AFON we've been thinking a bit about how we can support people who aren't able to take on a full time unpaid internship or really extensive volunteering and how they can develop these skills and experiences. That sounds like it's one way to do it, to find a job that will get you those transferable skills.

Do you have any other recommendations for people who are working, studying or caring for other people full time, how they can do perhaps just an hour or two a week of something that would be really useful to get one of these roles?

*Becky:* Absolutely, so I get that it's tough, I remember doing it myself - volunteering full time, working three nights a week and running myself into the ground in order to get the experience that was required and so I certainly am quite passionate about trying to change that because I think it is important that we open up the options to as many people as possible. In terms of what else you can do, I think there are many more micro-volunteering opportunities appearing now, particularly where we are all doing this - face to face online, so I would definitely look out for those. I would also argue for people that are doing your own thing, so what we do at Hampshire Wildlife Trust is we have a programme called Team Wilder which is all about encouraging people to take action, both in their own gardens, if they don't have their own garden then on their windowsill, and in their local communities. If someone came to me who was looking for a role who had spent an hour a week, not even that, encouraging their neighbours to do things for wildlife, even if they hadn't done that as a job or a set volunteering role, if it was just something that they were really passionate about and they could show me how they got their neighbours involved, who they talked to, what they did and

what the outcomes were, then that's a really good example of the sorts of things I'd be looking for someone to do as a project officer for instance.

*Emily:* That's really interesting, sort of demonstrable passion and wanting to take action to make that impact. That's really useful thank you.

*Becky:* If you can encourage your neighbours or your friends & family then you can easily encourage other people that you haven't met yet.

*Emily:* Whilst we're talking about recruitment and skills, I don't know if you had any advice for people if they have got an interview coming up or they're doing an application if there's any sort of advice you'd have for interviews?

*Becky:* Specifically for interviews, I would say make sure you've read the strategies, any of the documents that are online, get access to them. Plan your questions carefully, we love being asked the "what's great about working here" question but we'll always answer to it the same so everyone who works in my organisation gets asked this question quite frequently in interviews - what's the best thing about working for this organisation - and all of us will give you the same answer which is the people, because you can't work for a conservation organisation without the people being amazing. There's really no other sector where everyone is ultimately passionate about the same thing. What we love in an interview is when someone asks us a question that makes us go... "oh, I'm not sure, let's think about that". There will maybe be two or three of us interviewing and we'll discuss it between us and it's those kinds of challenging questions that challenge something that evidence that you've read something that we've put out there that you either disagree with or that you'd like to ask more about. Those are the ones that stick you in our memory and kind of add to the extra things that we might have asked you.

*Emily:* That's really interesting, for these sort of roles, are interviews usually a formal, traditional, desk based interview? Or do you ever have any activities or exercises that you ask candidates to do?

*Becky:* It varies depending on the role, they tend to be mostly traditional, sat across the desk, tell us about yourself sort of questions. But, quite often, particularly if it's a more practical engagement role, we would ask you to bring an activity with you, we'll ask you to bring something that you have done before with a group and either demonstrate it as if we were the group or to talk us through what you might have done. The best ones from those questions are the ones that really spark that joy that we kind of forget about when we're doing it as adults. I really love it when someone brings me an activity and I can really get into that activity and really want to know about whatever it is you're showing me. If you're bringing me something exciting that you found out in nature or you've got a really cool craft that's really different, those things inspire me. Because if you're going to inspire me, that means you inspire other people as well.

*Emily:* Brilliant, sounds like as interviews go, a relatively fun thing to have to do. The AFON audience is up to the age of 30, so some people might have got a role, an entry level position, and for that area of our audience, I was wondering if you had any advice or careers advice on making the most of your first role in conservation. Say if it's a short term contract of a year or something?

*Becky:* Say yes to everything, take every opportunity that comes your way, even if it's something that you're not sure about - go and try it out, because you might be like me and you find out you actually love doing something that's slightly different to where you thought you'd start. What else would I have liked to have known when I was younger... I would say also to kind of get to know other partners in the sector, so if you're in that entry level role, find out the contacts in other organisations

that other people have, speak to your manager to find out if they know anybody who works for a different organisation or another local group, and get to know them as well. Often who you know is really valuable when it comes to your next job.

*Emily:* That's really useful, I think when I first started I was doing a sort of trainee ranger scheme and it was through finding out what other people did in conservation, I was like "oh there are other options as well" which was then quite nice to explore other avenues.

*Emily:* We have a few quick fire questions just to finish off and I was wondering if you had one thing - like a do and don't on a CV/application, that if when you're recruiting and you look at it and think "oh no" - anything that's a big no no, or something that you think "oh brilliant, we love to see that"?

*Becky:* Ok, so don't make it really long - pages and pages and pages - we don't need to know absolutely everything that you've ever done. Do make it relevant to what's on the job description. So for any one job, I can be reading up to 100 applications and my favourite ones are the ones that are laid out so it says exactly what I wrote on the job description, in bold maybe, and then everything that you've got, you know, your experience that's relevant to that piece of the job description underneath, and then the next piece of the job description and everything that's relevant. So lay it out really really simply, because that makes comparison between roles really easy and it also breaks up the fatigue of reading lots and lots of applications, and it makes yours kind of stand out a little bit more from the crowd.

*Emily:* Yeah, so make it easy for you to read. Brilliant, thank you. And then I was going to ask if you had a favourite animal or plant that you love talking to people about?

*Becky:* UK animal - my favourite is the cased caddisfly larvae, because I just think they're so weird and cool and they just do really bizarre things and I like that depending on where they live, they collect different things to make their home. And I also love the look on someone's face, and it is children but also adults, when you hold out what looks like a stick and it suddenly is a head. That is my absolute favourite thing - I just love it, I love watching people go "what is that?!" and then being able to explain to them about them.

*Emily:* That's brilliant, I think I heard something about an artist who had got some and he put them in a special tank with gold and they made their cases out of gold and jewels and things which was quite cool.

*Becky:* Yeah, I love telling people that fact! People are just like "that's so odd! Why do we have that creature in the world?" Yeah - I love that.

*Emily:* It's a good wonder of nature!

*Becky:* The wonder of it is really important.

*Emily:* Then to finish off on a nice positive note, I was wondering if you could share a highlight of your career, a memory of your time in conservation that you look back on as a really good highlight?

*Becky:* Oh there are so many! Can I have two?

*Emily:* Yes! Of course.

*Becky:* 1 - I got the chance last year to present to the all party parliamentary group for nature, so I went to parliament and I got to talk to some MPs about how amazing nature and wellbeing is and why we should encourage more people to go outside, and how beneficial it can be for people who are living with dementia or mental health conditions.

The other one is about that group, so I set up a group in my previous role at the nature discovery centre called nature memories cafe. And that was for people living with dementia and their families to come, and the impact it had on those people who had felt really isolated and just didn't know what to share and how to share, so particularly the families of those people living with dementia, I had not anticipated the impact it would have on them. It was life changing for some of them, and being able to set that group up and have that impact on people's lives, will probably stay with me for the rest of my life. And then being able to go to parliament and tell people how amazing it was, and hear people go "Yes that's brilliant, why don't we have more of these", was super special. That group will always have a special place in my heart.

*Emily:* That sounds like such a good project and a really nice thing to think "I've had such a good impact". Thank you for sharing that.

*Emily:* Brilliant, thank you for chatting to us, it's been really interesting and I hope it will be useful to AFON's audience who are interested in these roles. Thank you very much.

*Emily:* I hope you found that interview interesting and informative. We'd like to say a big thank you to our mentors for offering their time for us, both in these interviews and in the mentoring scheme. If you'd like to get in touch with us, or to sign up as a mentee, please do have a look at our website or social media, and you can contact me via email at [mentors@afocusonnature.org](mailto:mentors@afocusonnature.org). We're very open to feedback and discussion, so I'd be very happy to hear from you. Thanks for listening!