



A FOCUS ON NATURE CAREERS HUB ECOLOGIST

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is your role, and how long have you been doing it?

Here at Chester Zoo, I am part of the Science Directorate, within the Field Programmes Team. I am the Regional Field Programme Manager for the UK & Site Ecology. Anything native species on site or off is my bag! I get to work on our 236-hectare estate with a range of native species and habitats as well as linking with partner organisations to deliver on preventing extinction off site too.

What are your main responsibilities?

That's a good question as there are lots! Ensuring our UK field projects are well managed and delivered for the species or habitat in question and that they meet the objectives set out. Also ensuring that the zoos activities are compliant with UK wildlife law and legislation. The management of our estate with regards to our biodiversity enhancement areas is also my responsibility, making sure we are doing the best we can and seeking opportunities to improve.

Who are the main people you have to work with?

I work with just about every internal department across the zoo, whether that's our Facilities and Development team on maintenance that could impact great crested newts, for example, or a development where we have to consider a native bat roost, or our keepers who manage our Large Heath butterfly breeding work. I also have close links with our Education team and the rest of the Science department, not to mention my fellow Field Programme Managers who cover areas such as Africa, Asia, Latin America and Madagascar and the Mascarenes. There are opportunities to learn off so many people and conservation is a fast-paced area, with things changing so much it's important to know what's going on elsewhere. Day to day, I work directly with my own small team who are progressing our biodiversity work across our estate.

What does your day-to-day look like?

It's very much the classic 'no two days are the same'! Week to week I could be on evening surveys such as great crested newt monitoring counts or bat roost monitoring surveys, then meetings during the day to progress projects such as our Nature Recovery Corridor or our Large heath butterfly reintroduction programme. Meeting contractors to arrange habitat management works, liaising with colleagues on a zoo development and how we can get the best for wildlife out of it are also important aspects of my job. There's a huge amount of planning and monitoring work that is seasonal, so it is a wonderfully varied role.

What was your pathway into your role?

I began as a Park Ranger after graduating, then moved into the role of an Ecologist working in the planning department of a local authority. I held this role at different councils for 12 years before joining CZ.

As a local authority ecologist, I assessed planning applications with regards to national and local planning policy and legislation and their impact to habitats and species. It was very much a desk-based role, but I got to deal with a huge range of different developments, everything from barn conversions to schools, fire stations, wastewater treatment sites, solar farms, new homes sites of 4000 houses. This meant knowing what impacts a development may pose to bats, badgers, birds, newts, otters and invertebrates, as well as to protected sites. Being able to scrutinise ecological reports, look for gaps as well as opportunities was a key part of the role. Dealing with people from local Councillors to residents to large developers or ecological consultancies it was also essential to have excellent people skills and good negotiation skills.

As well as my day job I spent a huge amount of my own time volunteering to learn more about the species I was working with. This meant being very active in my local bat group and badger group, for example, but also learning about species and habitats that weren't my natural interest area.

The role here at Chester Zoo attracted me because it was an opportunity to use all the skills I'd learnt, both in site management as well as the planning system and managing conservation projects.

What is the salary range for this type of role?

A more traditional ecologist role (working for a consultancy) is likely to have graduate positions starting at £22-25k. Senior/Principal Ecologists range up to £40k depending on what size an area and team they manage.

Is a degree essential to your role?

I would say yes. It helps embed broader knowledge of ecological systems and processes which is essential.

What are the most useful skills to have for this role?

People skills for sure! Knowing when to push, but also a great ability to see things from others point of view. It certainly helps to be an amazing multitasker and well-organised, owing to the complexity and variety of work and how changeable it is. In terms of learnable skills, species and habitats knowledge is essential. The ability to just get stuck in with things and give things a go is also key and not be intimidated by others.

EXTRA ADVICE

Volunteer, volunteer, volunteer!! A lot of my most valuable species knowledge has come from all my volunteering work. Start with your local groups - whether its botany, barn owls, bats or whatever - they are full of dedicated knowledgeable people, but you have to turn up and persevere! Also do the odd jobs like answering group emails, I managed the local bat group emails for a number of years and got to see all the questions that came in and it helped me understand the most common complaints/concerns people have, as well as learning what to say and what not to say and why. You get to see and hear about what other people are working on too, as many other ecologists volunteer with local groups. You'll make some great contacts who can become close friends. It's also great to meet people that don't work in conservation but have a huge passion for it and in many cases are the most knowledgeable people - don't make assumptions based on someone's day job!

It's important to keep a log of what you do and what you learn as its good to be able to demonstrate this when asked.

CAREER PATHWAYS

What GCSEs could someone study to help get into this career?

Geography, biology, and any IT skills - and once the new Natural History GCSE becomes available (currently planned for 2025) then that's sure to be an essential one!

What A-Levels or BTECs could someone study to help get into this career?

Also geography and biology and again IT - but having not looked at what's out there recently, there may be others I'm not aware of!

What could someone do after they leave school to help develop their skills for this career?

Choose what interests you the most when looking at courses. There are many now such as Wildlife Conservation degrees and Biological Recording courses that weren't around 10yrs ago even, so the choices are improving beyond degrees in 'Ecology'.

If university isn't floating your boat, see if ecological consultancies are taking on field assistants - they usually have an intake at the start of each spring for the pending survey season. Match that up with Field Studies Council (FSC) courses and, as above joining, your local groups and Local Environmental records centre - see if they have any projects you can work on for experience.

If someone has graduated university, what next steps could they take to develop their skills for this career?

It's a hard decision I know. A masters isn't always essential but there are some great ones around now. A non-conservation degree can be enhanced by doing courses as mentioned above such as FSC ones and just get out there and get some experience, contact as many consultancies as you can to see if they will give you paid experience, but you will have to up your skills to be useful so use online courses too such as bat call ID workshops online. This is where your local network helps