

Transcript – Clive Chatters

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 Clive Chatters, who is a naturalist, conservationist and author. Clive is also one of the mentors on the AFON Mentoring Scheme. Through the scheme, young people can receive tailored, ongoing advice and support from professionals in the conservation sector. If you'd like to learn more about the scheme and how you can get involved please do have a look at our website <https://www.afocusonnature.org/mentors>

It was really interesting to talk to Clive about his varied experiences working in the sector, and hear his suggestions for young people. I hope you enjoy listening!

Emily: Thank you for joining us to talk about your career in conservation. To start off would you mind telling us a bit about your career journey and what you do now?

Clive: I think career journey is a very generous term for somebody who has managed to have a series of jobs. It was very hard to get work - I left college in the early 1980s and there were three and a half million unemployed people, it was very very hard. So I started by being a residential volunteer because I could still live an independent life even though I was utterly skint and then really I suppose it was a series of jobs that gained momentum because you learnt your trade - you really learnt your trade rather than what you learn at college. You meet people and people are the source of the jobs and its your relationship with them. So yeah, I started as a volunteer, I then did a bit of work in local government, a little bit of work in national government agencies, a bit of self employed work - and that took about 10 years before I got a proper job with a pension plan, when I ended up with the Wildlife Trust. I've been with them since the late 1980s in one form or another but I've sometimes been part-time, sometimes been full-time as well as taking opportunities elsewhere, as a volunteer helping to set up a National Park and things like that. Within the Wildlife Trust I've really I suppose done whatever they needed me to do, so I have acted as Chief Executive at one time, I've been their Conservation Officer, I'm currently their company secretary - whatever was required of me, I tried to be flexible and fitted in. So in terms of management, I have climbed around the management tree and currently I have absolutely no management responsibilities and it's lovely.

Emily: Yeah, that sounds good. That's fascinating, it sounds like you knew from the get go that you wanted to go into conservation, was that definitely the path you wanted to go down?

Clive: That's an interesting question. At the age of 18 when you have to make these decisions you haven't a clue really, you know, you convince yourself you do and my career path could have gone down two routes. Either I'd go to college, go to university and look at environmental work or I had an opportunity to go to Kew Gardens and do the Kew Diploma, which was sort of horticulture and botany. I made the decision based on a dreadfully misinformed basis, such as I couldn't stand living in London for 5 years which the Kew Diploma would require. The college I ended up with I had put as my last choice on the application form and I remember them at the interview "we're a prestigious college, why did you put us last?" and I said "because you are Wye which is W, if you were Aberdeen

I would have put you first” - I’d put them in alphabetical order. There was none of this sophisticated career advice and sort of, careful manipulation - there might have been for other people but our school didn’t really do O Levels and A Levels and people didn’t go to university really.

Emily: When you were starting out in conservation did you know many other people in the sector who were interested or did you find it quite isolating or like you didn’t really know who to speak to?

Clive: I had the good fortune of being at Wye College which was - well it's no longer there anymore, Imperial College took it up - so it was a college which specialised in practical Life Sciences, they had a lot of agriculture there, a lot of horticulture, but about half of it was overseas development, very wide ranging. And it was tiny - I think there were 400 of us, all the students and post grads, there were only 400, so you knew your peer group really well irrespective of their interests. So you got to meet farmer’s daughters and chaps whose family owned big estates in central Africa and all sorts of weird and wonderful people and that gave you a really good, deep, rich education which wasn't about environmentalism, it was about the land, the world and people - and how people live. And you know, by the time you’re 19/20, suddenly there are these astonishing people you’re spending time with and some of them were environmentalists - very few, maybe half a dozen. But the others, well they all cared about the land, you know, you could start a conversation “what’s your favourite soil?” and no one would laugh.

Emily: That’s great. I think it’s probably quite important to get an appreciation of people who are interested in the land in other ways than conservation so you’re not just coming in it from one side - there’s other perspectives.

Clive: We had a very fine professor called Gerald Wibberley, who is long dead now, a truly great man - was one of the civil servants who helped to rebuild Britain after the second world war. I can remember him talking to us and saying things like “the trouble with you environmentalists is you want it all your own way” - well that is actually true, we do. and also, he devised a course, it was called Environmental Studies. So you could walk into a field, whether a professional farmer, or an engineer or something, and be able to understand their vocabulary, be able to understand what they were seeking to achieve. So he ensured we had a very diverse education and that served me well over the years.

Emily: Yeah sounds great. Sounds like you’ve done lots of different exciting things. I was going to ask what was the most challenging part of working in conservation, for you?

Clive: Um, challenging on the negative side of that word, I used to quite a lot of public enquiries, and when you have a gentleman (I think they all were male) who has or more than two brains - an astonishing intellect - and his job is to destroy you, that's pretty tough going and you’ve got to do your preparation and you’ve got to be extremely cautious. So they were challenging in the intellectual sense. Challenging in other senses, I’ve been involved in promoting nature conservation and as I said, I helped set up the New Forest national Park and there was a movement to see if a group could break it - to make the National Park fail. that was at a political level ,but it was also at a physical level, you know there was physical threats, threats to my family. We had meetings where there were mini-buses full of police waiting around the back. Now that is challenging when you’ve got to perform and be pleasant and courteous to people, even if you disagree with them. That is tough when you feel physically threatened. But the way to get round it is to always be cheerful, always be courteous and you know, tomorrow’s another day.

Emily: Yeah. Do you think that the conservation landscape has changed since then, in that that sort of thing is less likely to happen in the UK?

Clive: Oh I don't know, I wouldn't know about that. What we as nature conservationists want is an alternative vision to a lot of the mainstream socio-economic structures. David Attenborough has recently done that super podcast where he talked about the economy and how we have built a profit-led growth economy and that really in the long-term isn't reconcilable with actually having a planet fit to live on. So we are offering something very very different to people who have got deep-vested interest in that way of life. And, you know, I can see certain occasions when people promoting a more environmental point of view might feel uncomfortable or intimidated by the environment they are working in. They haven't gone away, it's just a bit quieter.

Emily: Yeah definitely, I suppose I was sort of thinking that perhaps some of the biodiversity agendas have sort of got a bit more mainstream?

Clive: Oh it is certainly mainstream, absolutely, you're right there. Yeah, you listen to our Prime Minister saying "oh a third of the countryside is going to be marvellous" - well 26% of it already is marvellous, and you're thinking "hmm he's not thinking of the landscape as I know it". Yes it is certainly something that I think, well even in the 1980s when I started, Mrs. Thatcher got climate change, she understood it. Now she was unable to get it through the cabinet, particularly the financial consequences of it. But you know I look back at those times and I think, where did this mainstream start and I think it was with Mrs. Thatcher's scientific I suppose basis, you know she was a trained scientist. And when the early issues of climate change started emerging - the science started, she understood it, and I suppose said "oh, we're going to have to do something about that". Now it's taken what, where are we, 40 years and the government still hasn't really got to grips with it but you know it is in the mainstream.

Emily: hm yeah, that's really fascinating to get that perspective on it. So we're hoping with this podcast that some people can use it if they're looking for sort of careers advice or if they're unsure of what to do next. So I was going to ask you, what do you think are the key skills young people should try to develop if they want a career in conservation?

Clive: I suppose there are a number of things that have served me well and I don't think the world has changed so much that they're no longer relevant. You need resilience, it is going to be tough, work is going to be really hard to find, it might not be exactly what you want, certainly the pay in our profession is not good, you know it's not a well paid line, so you need to be resilient. You need to keep pointing in the direction that you want to go in, even if you're weaving round obstacles and making compromises to get there. The other thing is, learn something really well, for your own joy, it might be you become intoxicated with a love of high summer butterflies, or some bizarre sedge, or 'what's your favourite soil?' - that's a bit obscure. But to actually have a deep knowledge of some aspect of natural history which you're passionate about, which when it's been a boring year, you've trudged along and you know work can be boring and hard at times, you can always go back to the joy of nature which is why you probably got into it in the first place. And those skills, those increasingly deep understandings of the organisms or whatever it is you're looking at, that will help inform your decisions, you know you'll get a real feel for what life is like out there you know, non-human life. So those two things - resilience and a love of nature through which you can grow your skills as a naturalist.

Emily: Yeah that's really interesting. May I ask what is your one species or group for of species that you're really passionate about.

Clive: urm 'what's your favourite species'. It tends to change over the years. But urm, I was talking to some friends last weekend who were down to look at muddy places. Ancient bits of landscape which

are still maybe managed by commoners or ruff and ready farmers and they're muddy and they're mucky, and they have the whole suit of species from invertebrates to birds and plants. You need these ancient landscapes of ruff and ready, muddy, sort of cow trodden, poeey places. And they're fantastically nice these organisms and they tell you something, they tell you something about human society, they tell you about the local economy, they tell you about the history of the place. So I suppose yeah, muddy places, umm, muddy places with deep history.

Emily: Umm yeah that's really interesting. So it's not just ecology but yeah land management and tradition and culture and history all sort of muddled up.

Clive: A dear friend a few years ago when I was being a bit pompous and high-horse about nature conservation stopped me and he said "no it's not about science it's about our culture, it's a cultural response, it's what we do as humans, it isn't just you know, scientific spreadsheets" and he's absolutely right and the solutions to many of our problems are socio-economic. Um so I had the good fortune of living and working in the New Forest. The New Forest is driven by an economy which is basically medieval, you know the common economy is urm, it's very modern, they're modern people living modern lives, but the structures, the social structures, the economic structures are medieval. And if we lost that, if that economy failed, well the place would fall apart. Conservationists can't do it, we are not commoners, you know we are not in control, we'd dither and it would fall apart.

Emily: Yeah, that's very interesting. And so, A Focus On Nature's audience is sort of 16 to 30. I was wondering if you had any advice for people right at the lower end, who are say 16 or 17, where it can be quite hard to find any sort of formal opportunities, if you're really just starting out. Or if you've sort of had a bit of a career change and realise, actually, this is what you want to do. Any ideas?

Clive: The first thing is, have fun, for a start. If it's not fun you do have to ask yourself why you're doing it. Urm a passion, passion is good, but passion without joy, you know, you can burn it out. There are like minded people out there that it's always good to spend time with. The boss who taught me my trade, a brilliant man called Colin Tubbs. Urm, we learnt most of our trade in the pub, in those good old happy days when it would be pub at lunchtime and then pub after work. But amongst us there were other naturalists and people who'd say, "oh, shall we pop over and have a look at so and so", we'd call it a jolly, so yeah find like minded people. Um, they might be at work. There's still lots of Natural History societies out there. They tend to be dominated by the older people because they've got the time. But my experience is a young sparky person who's saying I'm keen to learn, they will just download their life's knowledge onto you, they're so generous with their time. But you know, it can feel a bit socially odd if you're 17 and you're out with a bunch of old crinklies. But they, you know, if that works for you, you know, look around Natural History societies, wildlife trusts, do walks and talks. This is where you'll meet people and the people will help open your eyes and help you learn, might even give you a job.

Emily: Yeah, definitely, when I started sort of getting involved, I didn't realise how many other young people were interested as well, because not many of my friends were interested. But I think now, especially recently, I found a lot more youth related organisations or like youth councils for charities and things. There seems to be like a few more opportunities as well to connect with other people who have the same sort of interests.

Clive: Yeah, natural history can be a solitary vize, but it is much more fun with other people. A little bit of competition and teasing that comes with chasing around some rare plant or some obscure

shrimp. Because you know it's absurd and the type of friend who tells you you're being absurd is great.

Emily: yeah haha that sounds great. Urm I don't if you're involved, or have been involved in previous roles when you were in sort of more management positions, with recruitment?

Clive: Yes I have yeah

Emily: Yeah. Have you got a sort of key tip or like maybe your main do or don't for applications or interviews.

Clive: Urm I still do recruitment, but it tends to be at a governance level. There is a tendency of people to oversell themselves. You know, you've got that person who's just left college and they tell you how they're masterful at interpersonal skills and you're sat there sort of thinking oh god. It's just that sincerity, authenticity will shine through. And nobody is expecting you to have knowledge and experience that you can't possibly have at an early stage in your career, you know, there are sensible people doing recruiting. If you get to an interview, they clearly think you can do the job. And so you're there to compete with the other people at the interview. People don't have the time or the money to, you know, interview wild cards. It's then a matter that the judgement will be made, well you've passed a threshold, you can do the job, but how will you fit into the team? How do you see different candidates' roles? The synergy in the other things you're looking to do? And, uh, well, you know, you will be appointed on your merits. But your merits might be invisible to you, you know, you might be bringing something absolutely wonderful to the team that you weren't actually aware you had - your interviewers will see it. So I think sincerity, authenticity and don't try to oversell yourself. False modesty is dangerous. But you know you've got to steer that line.

Emily: Yeah, it's quite interesting because I think some of the interview advice you find online that's not sector specific, it's sort of more geared towards sort of the business sector where it's more sales related or finance related, and they want you to be very confident at doing that, yes, selling yourself, which may be slightly different than in a conservation sector, maybe it's not about just selling things or selling yourself. It's about building relationships.

Clive: Yeah, it's flexibility. If somebody is flexible in the way they approach things. You know you might be looking for a fairly junior role, but you know that they might be knocking on the door of a major landowner and the, you know, lord so and so from down the road. So you're thinking, can they operate comfortably in that world? And then in the afternoon, maybe go and sit in a parish council meeting, because they've got a problem with their pond or whatever. That social ability, social flexibility is incredibly important.

Emily: Yeah, that sort of leads on to the next question I was going to ask. For people who are just starting out, they might feel that they have to do some sort of full time extensive, unpaid volunteering thing, because those opportunities are out there they think that'll get me the experience, but those opportunities, obviously aren't accessible to everyone and there's sort of financial barriers to these things. And so I was wondering if you had any suggestions for sort of, less time demanding things that people can do alongside working or studying or caring for other people full time, that they could do a few hours at the weekend, or in the evenings to still cry and get that experience.

Clive: I think you put the finger on one of the really big problems in recruiting in nature conservation, and that's people need capital. And that might just be, you know, family support, or you know, something behind them to weather that rough period, until you actually get the job you seek. I was

willing to live in abject poverty. You know, I literally lived in a shed for the best part of a year, it did have plumbing, which was helpful. When I moved out they knocked the end wall off and stored boats in it. But I wouldn't recommend that to anyone, particularly on a cold winter's night, when you're damp. There is absolutely no shame if you're in an interview or you're filling in a job application form to say, you know, I'm currently working in so and so, which is a completely different area of work. Maybe it's even better paid than you're currently looking for. But at the same time, you would need to have, you know, be able to say I've volunteered, there's a local activist group or there's something else going on, but it needs to be part of your life and what you do without it being your profession. Any good recruiter will understand that, first of all, people have got to make a living and survive, then they might use that as a springboard to get to where they actually want to be.

Emily: Yeah, speaking of which, for people who have landed that first role and are trying to work their way up and to get into a slightly, yeah from like an entry level role on to the next step. Do you have any sort of careers advice on how to make the most of entry level opportunities.

Clive: If you work hard, be flexible, be personable, you know, opportunities do arise. We're in a shrinking world at the moment, you know, money is really, really tight, and there's going to be less of it. And so it's harder to develop a career. But I would say if you're a hard worker, you're personable, you're flexible. And let it be known you're ambitious. Nature Conservation is a strange world, in that there are lots of people I've worked with over the years who are not particularly ambitious for themselves. They're ambitious to achieve, they're ambitious to change the world. But they don't, you know, they're not personally ambitious. When you occasionally come across these people who are, you know, they think I want to be a chief exec or, you know, I want to be a senior manager, you're thinking, oh crumbs? You know, that's a little strange. It's not held against them. Indeed, you know, I think we have to be grateful that there are people who are willing to do roles like that. Being a senior manager is a tough gig, not least the things that you love, maybe nature, looking after the natural world, gets subsumed into looking after your team.

Emily: mmh, yeah, yeah, I've definitely had managers who've felt that and sort of, yeah, wished they could get out in the field a bit more.

Clive: Well, do what I did. You know, I had great fun doing that, I enjoyed it. Now I'm going to do something different. And I climbed back down the management tree, it isn't one way. You know, the cat flap works in both directions. If you're flexible, you know, you can climb the tree, look around, do the job and then move on to something else.

Emily: Yeah, that's great. Um, so I was gonna ask a quick question to finish things off, with what has been the highlight of your career, or the best sort of memory you've had from working in conservation as a sort of positive, optimistic finish.

Clive: I talked about the big, the big challenges. And the big challenges are, you know, that if you've got a man with two brains trying to destroy your public inquiry, and you win, that is a rush which is wonderful. From the benefit of hindsight - what you win is time, you know, because they can always come back later. I think there are daily joys, and it's often with things that you've been working on for decades, you know, ideas, opportunities you see. And then they start to happen. Because the world has changed, or you've built those relationships. And we're seeing an awful lot of change now in countryside management. Big estates are coming to people like me and saying, you've been banging on about some ideas over the last few years, you know, come over and have a cup of tea, let's have a chat about them. And that gives me, that's thrilling. Because there's real change, there's more hectorage of high quality habitat, that's dynamic. And it's expanding, and little islands that you

looked at before and thought oh my God, it's doomed, no matter what we do, it's doomed. And the solutions you were thinking about promoting, might have been decades ago, suddenly come to pass. And that is just wonderful! You're thinking oh wow. You know, the next time I drive down that motorway, I'm thinking, we did that, we made that change. The world's a better place.

Emily: Yeah, that's brilliant. Yeah, I've worked in the sector for just a few years but I definitely find the most satisfying thing is to be able to look back on something and say that definitely made a difference. Yeah.

Clive: Yeah. Well, if you're not making a difference, what are you doing? You know, go out and get a proper job, learn to be a, you know, a plumber or a chippy or an electrician, and you know, get yourself a trade, you can get a good income that way, and then spend your leisure time enjoying nature. Because if you're not getting joy out of your work, well, you know, you've only got one life.

Emily: Well, yeah, this has been fascinating talking to you, and great to hear about your experience of all sorts of different roles. Was there anything you wanted to mention, or promote that you're involved with?

Clive: This is a 'would you like to plug your next book, Clive?'. Yeah, I'm currently working on a book about heathlands, British heathlands for Bloomsbury, part of their British Wildlife Collection. I did one for them on salt marshes a few years ago. And, um, it's a book I always wanted to write, and I've finally been given the opportunity to do so. So it'll be out next May. And it will talk a lot about these things that we've touched on, about, it's about societies, about rural economies. It's about people's ways of life, both currently and historically. And that's what makes nature wonderful. And so yeah, I'm sure it will be available in all good book shops. Heathlands.

Emily: Ha, that's brilliant, I look forward to that. Well, thank you so much for joining us, it's been really, really interesting to talk to you. And I should mention as well that you are one of the mentors on the AFON mentoring scheme. So if people want to apply to that scheme and hear some more advice, they can look on our mentoring web page.

Clive: Or if they just want a friendly ear, we don't have magic wands, us mentors. You know we can't say here's the advice that'll solve it. But sometimes it's just nice to have a friendly ear, you know a safe pair of hands.

Emily: Yeah and someone to talk things through with if you're not sure what to do, sometimes you just need to sort of sound things out. It's been fantastic talking to you. And so thank you so much for joining me.

Clive: Thank you, 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. We're very open to feedback and discussion, so I'd be very happy to hear from you. Thank you for listening!