



A FOCUS ON NATURE CAREERS HUB POLICY OFFICER

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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

My job title is Scotland Conservation Officer at the Marine Conservation Society and I started at the organisation and in this role six and a half years ago.

What are your main responsibilities?

My main responsibilities include leading on our Clean Seas asks in Scotland. We have a Clean Seas team based at our Head Office who focus on UK-wide issues but when these are devolved to the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government, I take the lead with support from them and my manager. This could be responding to public consultations, running campaigns to raise awareness of an issue such as single-use plastics or doing advocacy to bring about the policy changes we are asking for.

Who are the main people you have to work with?

I work closely with my manager who is the other half of the Scotland Team, my Clean Seas colleagues as well as the Volunteer and Community Engagement Manager in Scotland. Externally, I work closely with colleagues in other environmental NGOs, through coalitions such as Scottish Environment LINK and partnership campaigns. I also work regularly with public and regulatory bodies like Scottish Water, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Zero Waste Scotland, as well as the Scottish Government - with the main civil servants I work with sitting in Marine Scotland. Through the advocacy part of my role, I work quite often with politicians and their teams as well as volunteers and community groups for campaigning and evidence gathering.

What does your day-to-day look like?

My area of policy focus is on marine litter and with my previous experience of public engagement I saw the value in bringing the two together to get the policy changes we need for our ocean. My day can sometimes be on the beach gathering important data as evidence for our policy asks or might be in Scottish Parliament presenting at events to highlight what MSPs can do to help Scotland's Seas. The variety of the role is fantastic, and I get to work with so many different people, from community groups and businesses to politicians and more!



Catherine outside Scottish Parliament finishing a media stunt linked to a MCS campaign

What was your pathway into your role?

I studied Marine and Coastal Resource Management at the University of Aberdeen, but it was through my part time job at The Disney Store that I fell in love with engagement, so I looked into a career that would link the two together - and came across environmental education. My first graduate job was as a Field Studies Instructor for PGL in Dorset before returning to Scotland to work as a Visitor Services Assistant and then Supervisor at an Aquarium. It was then that I became a Sea Champion volunteer with the Marine Conservation Society and started doing citizen science, public talks, school workshops and beach cleans. It was through my volunteering that I heard of the opportunity for the Scotland Conservation Officer role and with encouragement from my volunteer manager plucked up the courage to go for it, even though I had no policy experience! Truth be told I didn't even really know what the word 'policy' meant during my interview - but I showed a willingness to learn and made the connection to how important it is to communicate well to get marine issues talked about and actioned.

What is the salary range for this type of role?

As I had no experience in policy when I started my role, I had a starter salary in the bracket of £18,000 to £21,000, and over the years I have increased my experience and skill. My role now sits roughly within the £28,000 to £32,000 bracket.

Is a degree essential to your role?

When my role was advertised six and a half years ago, it was essential – however, I have been working with colleagues across MCS to make our recruitment as inclusive and accessible as possible. I would therefore hope that, in the future, if my role was advertised a degree might be listed as desirable rather than essential. If you are interested in a policy role and would like a degree, I would

recommend it as it gave me a good level of understanding of the types of legislation that was relevant to my role even though it was many years later.

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

One of the most important skills I feel for policy work can be summarised as being able to make connections. On the one hand making connections between pieces of legislation, consultations, pieces of research or parliamentary evidence can be crucial to effective policy work, but on the other hand making connections between teams and organisations is also vital to ensure the best conservation policy outcome is achieved. So, for me, communication skills, team working and having the confidence to ask the sometimes-difficult, and sometimes-just-obvious questions are some of the most useful skills I use daily in my role.

Very rarely does the world of policy move quickly so you also have to be ready to be in it for the long haul which could mean years or even decades of work to get the policy outcome you are working for. So be prepared to jump through lots of hoops, be part of long and sometimes frustrating meetings, responding to long and complicated consultations but I promise you the feeling of when you do get that conservation policy outcome makes every minute worth it as you know you have made a massive and lasting difference to the world of conservation.

CAREER PATHWAYS

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

It was Scottish Standard Grades I did, and I have to admit I chose the ones I thought my parents could help me with! I was not very good at biology so did Physics and Chemistry, preferred History over Geography and loved PE and Art the best! Which I hope just shows that no matter what subjects you do at school, choose ones you are interested in - as I still ended up in a marine conservation charity doing policy without ever having formally studied biology or geography at school!



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

Again, I chose my favourites as well as what I needed to get into university but at that time, I wanted to go to Edinburgh to study Ancient History so did Higher and Advanced Higher History, Higher Maths, English, Physics and Chemistry, Philosophy, Psychology and Music over my 5th and 6th year. I did start volunteering at this time at the Scottish Dolphin Centre on a Saturday which I found to be a great way to learn more about working in the conservation field so when I came across the Marine and Coastal Management Degree at Aberdeen it suddenly clicked that I did not have to be a marine biologist to work in marine conservation!

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

I know you will have heard it before, but volunteering has played a vital part in my career path from volunteering at school at the Dolphin Centre, to volunteering at the University Dive Club and through the Disney VolunTEars project to finally signing up as a Sea Champion with the Marine Conservation Society. I know for certain if I did not have my volunteering I would not be in this job. So, whether or not a degree is right for you, I would strongly recommend looking at volunteering opportunities in areas that interest you to help build skills, confidence, and networking.

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

As much as I loved University, I knew after 4 years I was ready to try something different, so I went straight out to apply for jobs. I focussed on public engagement first, which helped me build up my confidence and skills working with lots of different types of people and helped me realise how many different types of jobs there were out there in the field of marine conservation beyond being the marine biologist I thought I had to be. If you loved University and would like to do another degree, there are some great policy-focussed Master's degrees which will give you a brilliant springboard into the working world of Marine Policy. Or if, like me, you don't fancy it, the skills you will have picked up in your Undergraduate degree, such as research, presentation skills, networking and volunteering, are all very transferable skills and if you are willing to learn the specifics of the policy area you want to work in then you can use the skills you have to help push those policies forward.

FINAL ADVICE

My last piece of advice is something I have learnt while working in the policy world – the policy world is not just for those who have policy in their job title or job description. It can, and should, be for everybody. I would highly encourage you to join an organisation as a supporter or volunteer and get involved in campaigning, write to politicians, attend council meetings at any level, respond to public consultations and perhaps even start your own campaign to achieve a specific policy outcome. So, definitely see where you can get involved, and I will perhaps see you at parliament, in the board room or on the beach soon!