



# A FOCUS ON NATURE CAREERS HUB LEARNING OFFICER

© Emily Burton

HOLLY BESTLEY – SENIOR LEARNING OFFICER, LONDON ZOO



## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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

I'm a Senior Learning Officer at ZSL London Zoo, currently running our Careers and Youth Programme. I've been a Learning Officer at ZSL since March 2018, but only took up this programme in September 2021.

### **What are your main responsibilities?**

The careers and youth programme sits within the Community and Learning Team at ZSL London Zoo, alongside our community engagement team and the general schools visit team. Essentially, our programme focuses on local youth engagement, trying to increase access to animal related careers for those groups who are underrepresented in animal care, conservation and the environmental sector. This involves identifying what the barriers are that these groups are facing, introducing as many young people as possible to the wide variety of amazing animal jobs there are out there, running courses to increase employability skills to help them gain access to these jobs, and working across ZSL to improve career pathways for those young people once they get their foot in the door.

### **Who are the main people you have to work with?**

I have to be very good at networking and relationship building for my role, as I work with lots of local organisations, partners and schools to facilitate workshops and courses for the young people they work with. I also have to work closely with keepers and staff across the zoo to organise and run courses with them, ensuring that we're helping the keepers in their day to day when we bring students round (instead of getting their way!). And of course, I work with lots of brilliant young people, from ages 5 to 25, who inspire me daily.



### What does your day-to-day look like?

My day-to-day can be incredibly varied. I would say I'm about 50% in the office - planning courses and workshops, developing partner relationships with local youth charities and organisations and coordinating work experience plans with local schools and staff across the zoo – and 50% out on site or in the local community engaging with young people.

Our engagement includes attending careers fairs, delivering animal careers workshops, running on-site animal care courses, running workshops on the environment at local youth groups, meeting and setting up work experience students and much more. One minute I might be on a call with the Mayor of London's youth engagement officers, the next I'll be mucking out the camel paddock with 8 students from a local school.



Holly getting licked by a camel



Holly delivering digital outreach in the giraffe house

### What was your pathway into your role?

I studied Biological Natural Sciences at Cambridge and it was here I discovered that though I loved science, I was much better at talking about it than the nitty gritty of research itself.

This led me to complete an MSc in Science Communication at Imperial College, London, which looked at all the different interfaces between science and the wider world, from journalism and documentary making right through to education and policy making. I knew that the cause I cared most about was wildlife conservation and the plight of species and ecosystems around the world, so decided to look for a job engaging people with this issue. During this time, I was also volunteering as a general engagement volunteer at ZSL London Zoo, chatting to the public around the site, and I fell in love with ZSL.

In 2015 I joined ZSL to work in the press office, publicising the science and conservation work of the organisation to the media as their Specialist Media Press Officer. Though I enjoyed my time working with the press, I decided I wanted to move to more face-to-face engagement, as opposed to focusing on the written form, so joined the Learning Team at ZSL Whipsnade Zoo in early 2018 to work with



schools and young people. This job mainly involved running daily workshops for the visiting school groups as well as our hands-on weekend and holiday courses like Zoo Academy.

This year I've since made it back to London Zoo and the youth and careers programme to think up new ways to work with young people in the local community, exploring how they can work for wildlife and how ZSL can work for them.

### **What is the salary range for this type of role?**

As a Learning Officer at ZSL you may start at around £24,000 but could move up anywhere within £28,000-£36,000 bracket as a Senior Learning Officer.



Holly handling a snake during a school session

### **Is a degree essential to your role?**

When I first became a Learning Officer 4 years ago, a degree was essential on the person specification. However, much work is being done at ZSL to make jobs more inclusive and accessible, including not requiring qualifications where they're not needed. This means that in many cases, equivalent experience will also meet the requirements instead of a degree.

If you are interested in doing a degree, it doesn't need to be a teaching qualification, or even biology related (though that might help!). Some of my colleagues did come down the PCGE/teacher training route before coming to the zoo, but still others came via languages or physics degrees.

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

The most useful skills for working in the zoo education sector are being a friendly, clear communicator, able to adapt your approach to different age groups and back grounds. I've also found it vital to be organised and good at time management, to help coordinate all the different projects you work on within the team. We're all fantastic team players too, willing to adapt and pick things up last minute (as working with young people can be quite unpredictable!). I always know my team have



my back if I need support with anything, and I know I'll be there to help them with anything they need too.

You also need to be pretty resilient to constructive criticism and willing to constantly learn. Becoming a good educator can only be done through practice and reflection – so you have to be willing to watch and learn from others, ask them to review your work and be open to self-reflection to improve your craft. Young people can be pretty cutting with their criticism too, but if we truly want to empower people from all backgrounds to create a work where wildlife thrives, you can't be dissuaded by this. You have to strive to see things from their perspective and try and make your engagement relevant to their lives so we can work together.



Holly delivering a school session at ZSL Whipsnade Zoo

## CAREER PATHWAYS

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

Taking separate sciences will help you keep your options open, and geography is always useful in conservation related roles. For an engagement focus role like conservation education, subjects which develop your communication skills like English and Drama will also be incredibly useful.

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

I took Biology, Chemistry, Maths and Theatre Studies at A Level. The last of those definitely helped me to become confident in speaking in front of large groups, but it also challenged my brain in a different way to the others (as there wasn't a right or wrong answer). This sort of contrast can be really helpful in conservation roles in thinking up creative solutions to challenges, so do indulge your creative side too!

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

For those wanting to go to university, a key thing is to look at the individual modules of the courses you're considering to see which most interest you. I was fascinated by the history and philosophy of science, which helped make my course decision out of the myriad biology courses out there. You may find a course that has a science communication or public engagement aspect to it which would help you explore if this sector is for you.

For those not interested in university, get any sort of experience you can. Volunteering in visitor engagement at a zoo could be a good start, and more and more conservation organisations are taking on paid interns and apprentices these days which is a brilliant first step into the sector.

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

As long as you can demonstrate a passion for the environment and proven communication and engagement skills, moving across into the conservation education sector is possible. Youth work experience is also something that will be desirable, much of which you can get by volunteering.