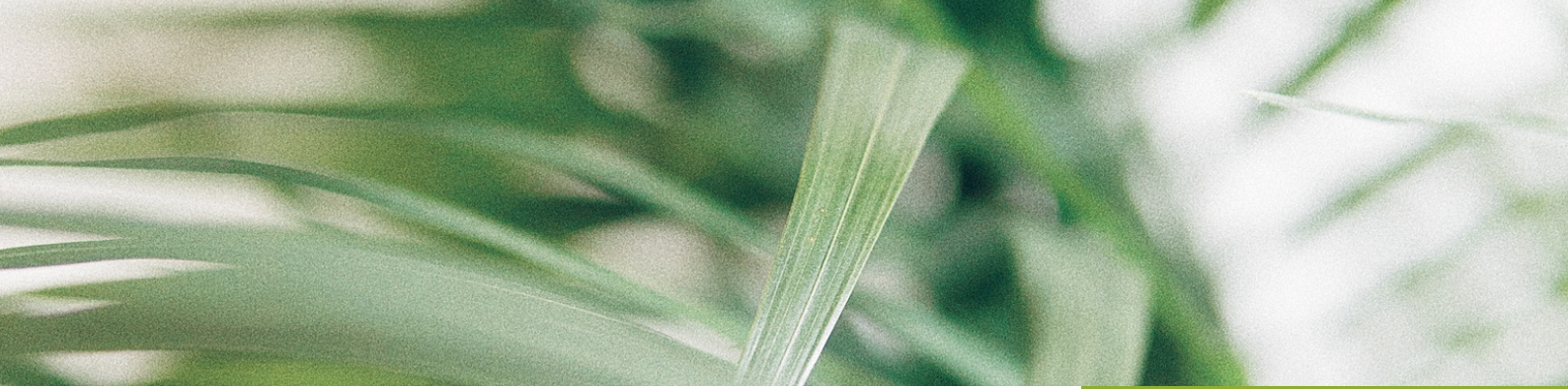




Ultimate Guide

How to Find the Best Conservation
Internships & Volunteering Opportunities





How to Find the Best Conservation Internships & Volunteering Opportunities

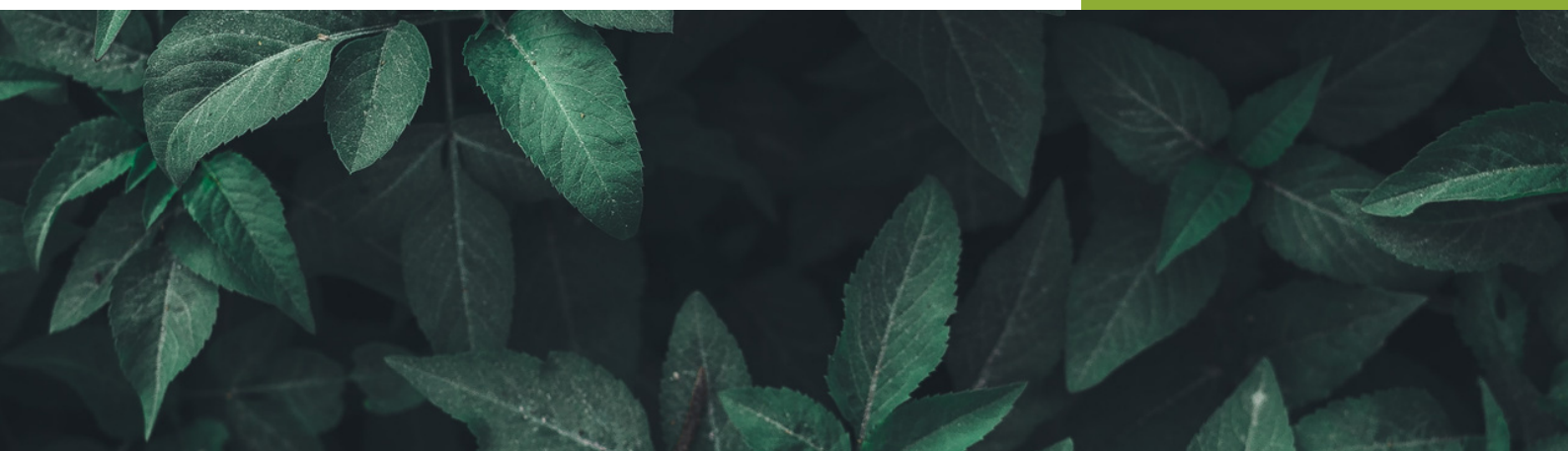
Conservation internships and volunteering are often considered fundamental rites-of-passage to land a conservation job. But if you haven't had much experience in the sector, how can you choose the best path for you? In this article we've compiled years of experience in the conservation sector, plus advice from conservationists from around the globe to help guide you.

Before many aspiring conservationists attend the first class of their undergraduate course or degree, they're already bombarded with this message: in order to land a paid conservation job, it's necessary to work for free.

Long before graduation, many young conservationists already feel stressed about the idea of working with little or no pay for months or years after earning their degree.

Would you like to become active in nature and species conservation and expand your academic knowledge and hands-on skills, overseas or close to home?

Have you thought about applying for a conservation internship or doing volunteering?





Conservation internships and volunteering is often considered the single most controversial topic in the sector, because it tends to throw up a whole host of questions:

- Why do companies expect work without pay? Is this right, or ethical?
- Why does this happen in conservation and not in other job sectors?
- How can young conservationists from less-privileged backgrounds be competitive?
- Is it true that you can't get a conservation job without taking unpaid work?
- Is it even economical to work in conservation, anyways?

It's so bad that, with no real experience or first-hand knowledge of the conservation sector, many promising young conservationists are giving up, choosing alternate career paths, and walking away from conservation – before they even have a chance to put their skills to use.

And in a sector where we need every single ounce of help that we can get, that's an alarm bell.

The topic of conservation internships and volunteering comes up so often in our webinars, social media channels, online courses and discussions that we dedicated this article to exploring it in depth.

If you've heard your friends, classmates, peers or even professors express concern about conservation internships and volunteering, this article is for you.

If you're feeling conflicted about the ethics of a sector that seems to expect unpaid labour, this article is for you. And if you've ever second-guessed conservation as a career choice because you're worried about being trapped volunteering or interning indefinitely, this article is definitely for you.

We'll explore the realities and myths about the conservation job market, and challenge some of the common opinions about conservation interning and volunteering. We'll introduce you to information, resources, tips and ideas if you're considering a conservation internship or volunteer opportunity. And we'll guide you through finding the right next step for your career.



HOW TO GET A CONSERVATION JOB

Free Video Training Series

Learn how to quickly and easily start your career as a professional wildlife conservationist with Conservation Careers.

If you're a student, job-seeker or career-switcher you'll learn the golden rule for getting started, the key mistakes to avoid, and answer your biggest questions.

[CLICK HERE](#)

[Get my free training!](#)

www.howtogetaconservationjob.com

"I can safely say that without this course, I probably would still be working in a pub in Manchester and applying for my dream jobs, unsuccessfully. I now work in one of the most beautiful places in the west of Scotland, get to see amazing wildlife every day. Thank you!"

- Kilian Hughes, UK





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THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INTERNSHIPS AND VOLUNTEERING

WHAT CAN YOU GAIN FROM EXPERIENCES?

HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT ONE FOR YOU



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1. What's the difference between conservation internships and volunteering?

Read on to hear all about our top conservation internships and volunteering!

Volunteering means giving your time and effort to help support a cause, usually without expectation of any monetary or other tangible benefit.

Interning implies a focus on training, where the intern develops specific skills and/or competencies through the internship.

To illustrate the difference, let's take the example of a volunteer park ranger and a ranger traineeship (internship).

The volunteer ranger already has the skills needed to fulfil the duties of their role (or they act as an assistant who requires minimal training). There is less emphasis on training and more emphasis on simply getting the work done and furthering the cause.

The intern or trainee, on the other hand, receives specific training during their internship. They are expected to learn, develop and progress during the course of the internship, and have guidance from a skilled supervisor or mentor in order to do so. They may have specific learning targets to achieve and their training might even be aimed towards a paid position at the end of their internship.





We've summarised the main differences between conservation internships and volunteering in the next table:

Interning

- Primary goal to develop your skills in a chosen area
- A step closer to working as an employee for an organisation
- Offer full time for a fixed-term employment period, embedded with a defined role, and longer term
- May be paid or provide other benefits (e.g. a stipend, accommodation, food, etc.)

Volunteering

- Primary goal to help a cause (though it may help develop skills as a secondary goal).
- A step further from working as an employee for an organisation
- Often part-time for a shorter or flexible employment period
- Usually unpaid and without benefits.

Keep in mind that there are always exceptions to the 'rule'. For example, you can find part-time internships and long-term volunteer roles that have benefits. But keeping in mind your primary goal will help you decide which is best for you.





2. What types of conservation internships and volunteering are available?

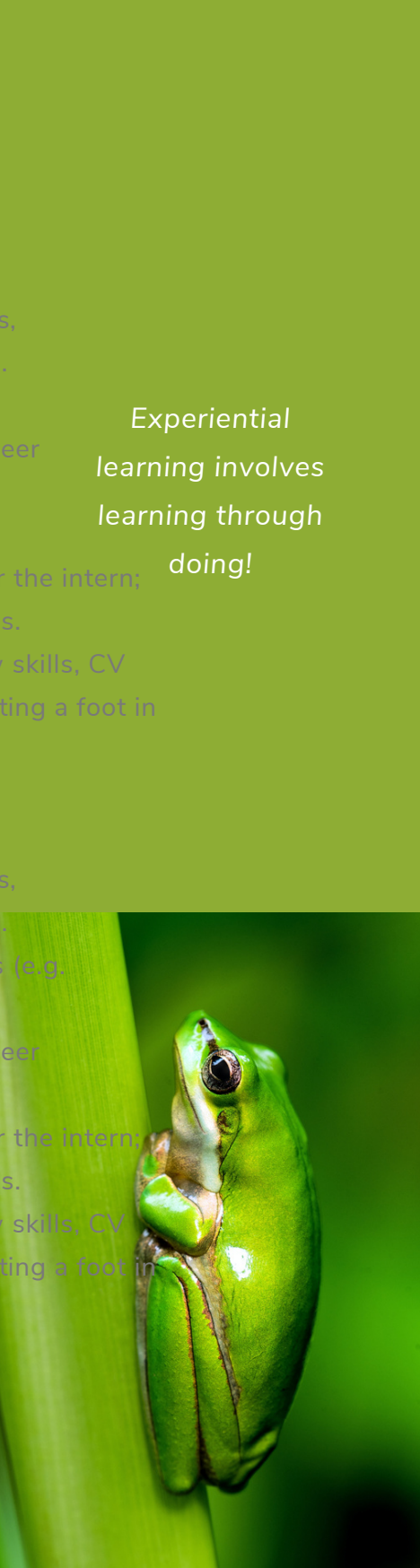
We've summarised the different types of conservation internship and volunteer opportunities to help you decide which is best for you.

Skilled volunteering

- What it involves: Conservationists with specific skills donate them to a project or organisation.
- Costs & benefits: Usually unpaid, however some organisations provide support (e.g. a stipend).
- Who it's for: Professional conservationists with specific skillsets that they wish to donate to a cause.
- Examples: [CUSO International](#), [VSO International](#), [Vets Without Borders](#), etc.
- Outcome: Volunteer fulfills a very specific need.
- What's in it for you? Helping a cause, career break, CV building, networking, challenge, etc.

There are six types of conservation internships and volunteering... read on to find out more.





Experiential
learning involves
learning through
doing!

Unskilled volunteering

- **What it involves:** Contributing to projects that require unskilled support.
- **Costs & benefits:** Usually unpaid.
- **Who it's for:** Conservationists of all career levels (early career conservationists, career-switchers, mid-career and senior) who wish to support a cause.
- **Examples:** [Conservation Volunteers Australia](#), habitat restoration work (tree planting, invasive species removal), canvassing, etc.
- **Outcome:** Volunteer contributes via unskilled labour or a role that requires minimal training.
- **What's in it for you?** Helping a cause, career break, CV building, networking, challenge, etc.

Experiential learning

- **What it involves:** Often similar to ecotourism, this type of volunteering focuses on the volunteer's experience and conservation outcomes combined.
- **Costs & benefits:** Usually fee-based to provide any or all of: transport, accommodation, food, training, special experiences, materials, etc.
- **Who it's for:** Conservationists of all career levels, but especially early career conservationists and career switchers.
- **Examples:** [GVI](#), [Blue Ventures](#), [Earthwatch](#), [Operation Wallacea](#).
- **Outcome:** Depending on the opportunity, it may 1) help achieve conservation outcomes (e.g. through labour, data collection), 2) help fund conservation projects, and 3) create ambassadors for conservation.
- **What's in it for you?** Test-driving a career path, gaining knowledge and/or experience, networking, getting a foot in with an organisation, transitioning to paid employment, etc.

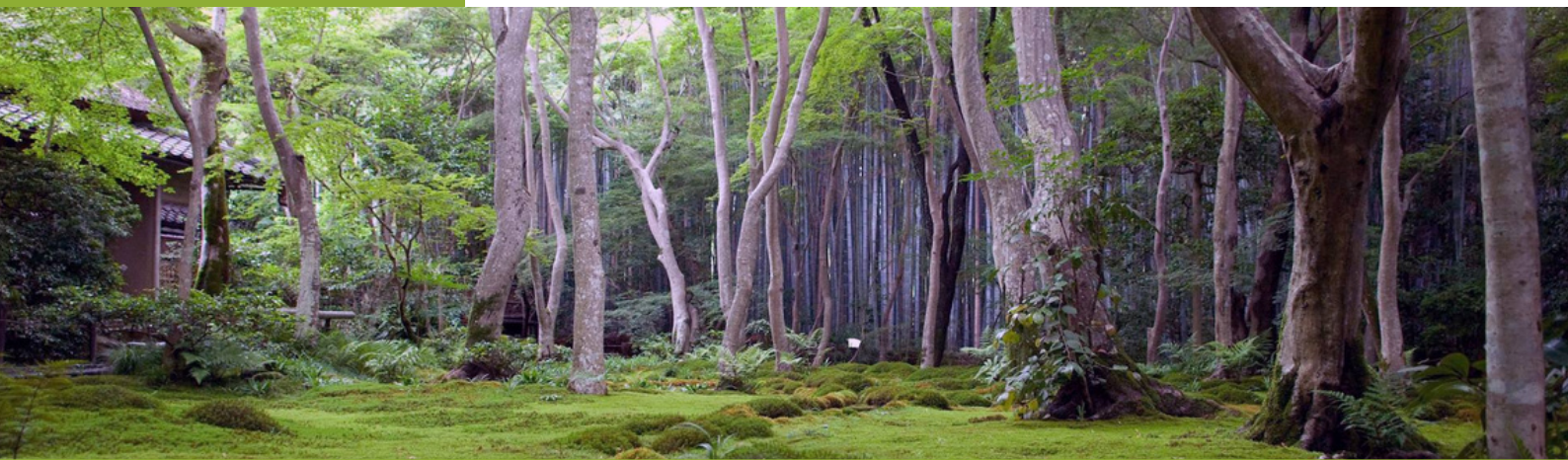


No-fee internships

- **What it involves:** Focuses on transferring skills, competencies and/or experiences to the intern.
- **Costs & benefits:** No fee. May provide benefits (e.g. accommodation, board, transport, etc.)
- **Who it's for:** Early career conservationists, career switchers.
- **Outcome:** Career development and training for the intern; possible contribution to conservation outcomes.
- **What's in it for you?** Experience, training, new skills, CV building, progression to paid employment, getting a foot in with an organisation, etc.

Fee-based internships

- **What it involves:** Focuses on transferring skills, competencies and/or experiences to the intern.
- **Costs & benefits:** Carries a fee to cover any or all of: room, board, transport, materials, special activities, staff time and a contribution to conservation projects.
- **Who it's for:** Early career conservationists, career switchers.
- **Examples:** Archipelagos Institute of Marine Conservation
- **Outcome:** Career development and training for the intern; possible contribution to conservation outcomes.
- **What's in it for you?** Experience, training, new skills, CV building, progression to paid employment, getting a foot in with an organisation, etc.





Fee-based internships involve transferring skills, competencies, and/or experiences to an intern in exchange for a fee to cover costs.

Fee-based internships

- **What it involves:** Focuses on transferring skills, competencies and/or experiences to the intern.
- **Costs & benefits:** Carries a fee to cover any or all of: room, board, transport, materials, special activities, staff time and a contribution to conservation projects.
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- **Examples:** Archipelagos Institute of Marine Conservation
- **Outcome:** Career development and training for the intern; possible contribution to conservation outcomes.
- **What's in it for you?** Experience, training, new skills, CV building, progression to paid employment, getting a foot in with an organisation, etc.

Where do conservation internships and volunteering take place?

You can find conservation internships and volunteering opportunities in remote corners of the planet, in your hometown, online and everything in between!





3. How can conservation internships and volunteering help your career?

At Conservation Careers we've spoken to over 400 professional conservationists and shared their career stories, advice, tips and much more in our [career advice article](#) and in our [Conservation Careers podcast](#).

Almost all of these often very successful professors, leaders and conservation heroes share a single piece of advice: volunteer, volunteer, volunteer (or intern).

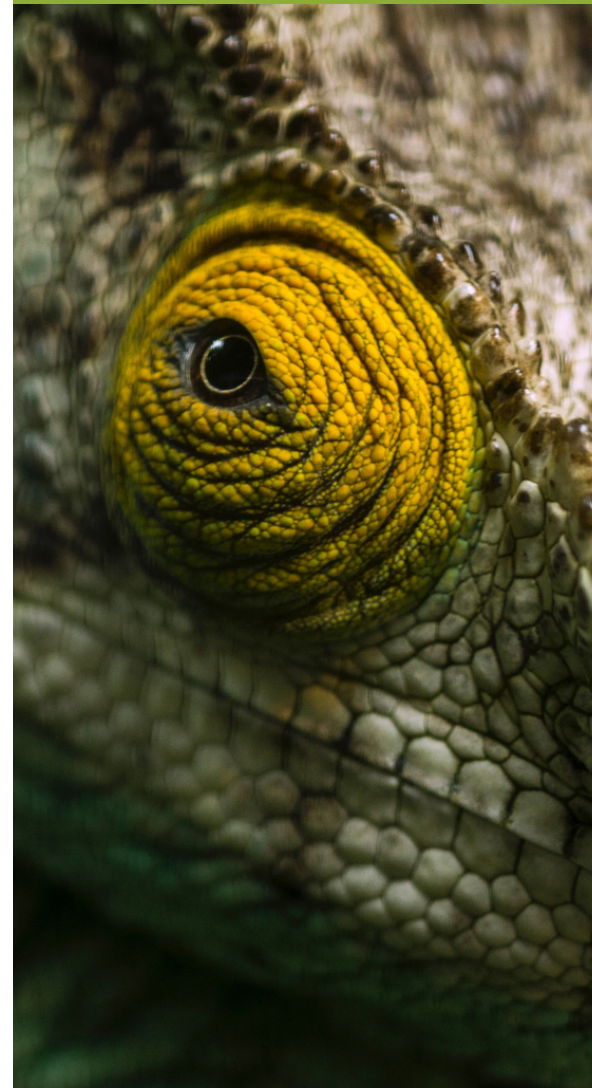
Why? Why would anyone ever work for free?

Conservation internships and volunteering are highly recommended because they are a great way to get on-the-job training and develop key skills in your chosen area. They can be an excellent way to fill key gaps in your experience for your target role.

For example, if you're working towards being a Communications Officer but lack social media experience, embedding yourself with a conservation organisation's communications team as an intern could be the ideal way to develop your skills, accumulate great experience, grow your network of contacts within your chosen area of work and to test drive the job.

If it's close to what you want to be doing it should also be lots of fun!

Almost all
professionals from
our network
recommend
volunteering or
interning!



4. 12 things you stand to gain for conservation internships or volunteering

1. Contributing to a cause you believe in. Maybe it's [saving sea turtles](#) or maybe entomology's your passion. No matter what your interests are, hands-on experience connects us with the why behind the work that we do while helping to advance the causes we believe in. The [United Nations](#) even calls volunteerism a 'vehicle for sustainable development'.

"Many of the Sustainable Development Goals call for long-term attitude and behaviour changes. Volunteers facilitate changes in mindsets by raising awareness or championing those changes and inspiring others" – [UN Volunteers](#).

2. New skills. Learn career-relevant skills you can't easily pick up in an academic environment.

3. Key experience. Gain experience in different roles (e.g. fieldwork, policy, marketing) and types of organisations (e.g. NGOs, government, ecotourism).

4. An understanding of conservation in context. Although access to information about real-life conservation is becoming more accessible online, nothing beats experiencing it in practice if you want to really understand the complexities and challenges in the conservation field. What struggles do conservation organisations face? What role does context play? What barriers to change are there? What do partnerships with local communities look like in practice? An internship or volunteer experience can help answer these and more questions, giving you an advantage in your next job application and future projects.

There's lots to gain from volunteering or interning for conservation!

What reasons can you think of?





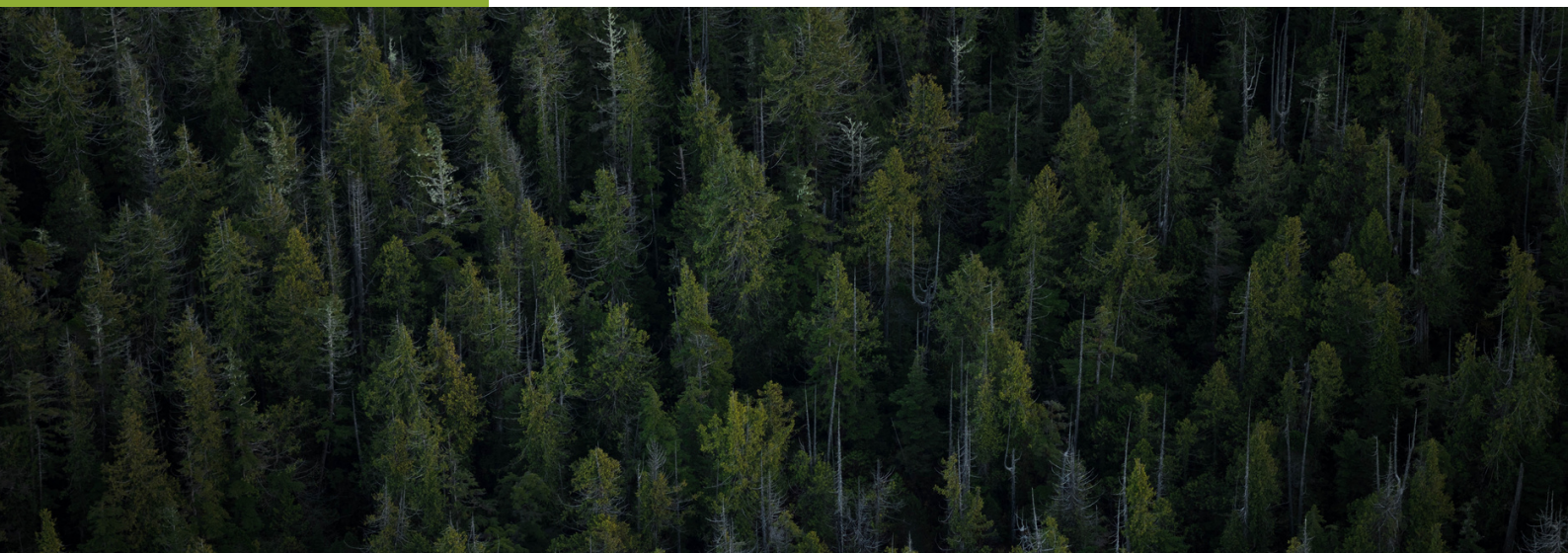
Internships and
volunteering can
help boost your CV,
plus much more...

5. **Knowledge.** Gain first-hand knowledge about different regions, disciplines, species, ecosystems, etc.

6. **A boost for your CV/resume.** In the conservation field in particular, internships and volunteer roles often carry the same weight on a CV as regular paid positions if you use relevant skills and competencies – especially if you're given the same level of responsibility as in a paid job.

7. **Proof of your skills and knowledge.** Fresh out of university with coursework? Put your skills and knowledge into practice with a real project and demonstrate exactly what you can do.

8. **Figuring out what you like (or don't like).** Not sure what [conservation job type](#) is right for you or what career direction to take? The best way to clarify your direction is by trying one out!





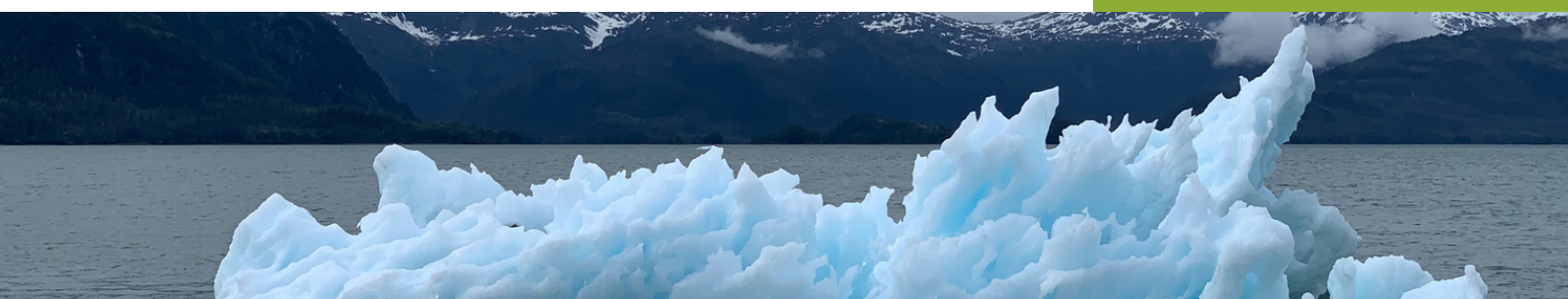
9. **Valuable connections.** From like-minded volunteers and interns, to organisations, researchers, local community members and more, the connections you build while volunteering or interning are often the web that can help support and grow your conservation career.

10. **Demonstrated commitment.** Changing careers? Fresh out of university? Have limited experience in conservation? A conservation internship or volunteer placement shows that you're serious about playing an active role in the sector.

11. **Test-driving a career switch into conservation.** It's not uncommon for amazing experiences to lead to work, further education or other opportunities for great interns and volunteers, regardless of whether they have a background in conservation. Learn more about [switching careers into conservation](#).

12. **Challenge yourself.** Shy when it comes to meeting new people? Curious about getting out of your comfort zone? Putting yourself in a completely new context can do wonders in terms of proving that you can do far more than you thought you could.

*Think of doing an
internship or
volunteering as a
way of test-
driving a career in
conservation*





5. Why don't all conservation internship and volunteer opportunities pay?

It seems a bit backwards, doesn't it? You're giving your time, energy and skills to help a cause – and you're paying for the privilege of doing so?

Why doesn't this happen in other job sectors and why does it happen in conservation?

Let's take two examples to illustrate this.

First, picture an established law firm that hires a paid intern for one year. The company is for-profit – meaning that they aim to maximise their profits and share these with the company's owners, shareholders (and employees).

The intern is fresh out of law school, living in the same city and looking to establish themselves with a reputable firm. At the same time, the law firm wants a new employee that they can train from the ground up based on their needs, with the aim of them becoming a long-term member of their staff.

It's an investment by the company with future returns for the company.

Now picture a small non-profit organisation focussed on marine conservation in the tropics. Their primary aim is to provide for society's and the planet's needs and this is where the vast majority of their funding goes, with just enough to cover basic staff salaries.

They take on international volunteers who participate in their projects. In a few cases, these volunteers might turn into interns or staff members, but the majority spend only a few weeks or months on site, and staff members usually only stay for a year.

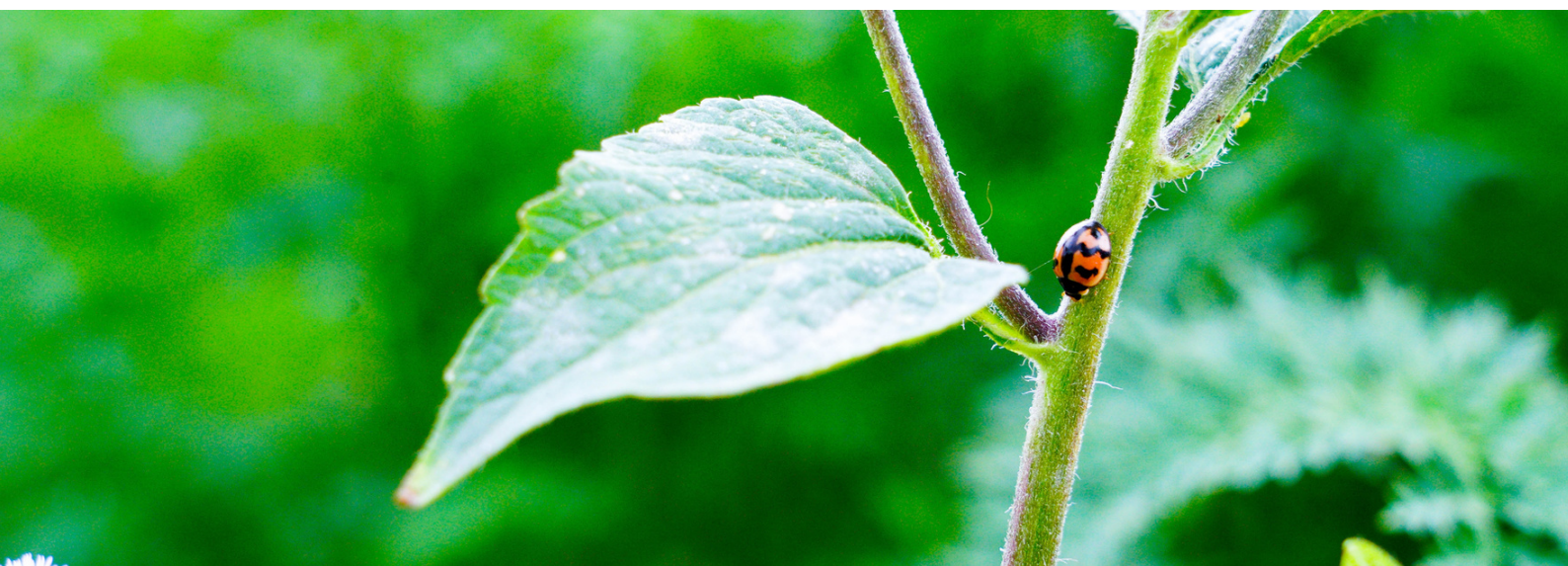


On top of that, their staff are likely working long, hard days without much pay – and training brand-new volunteers can take several weeks or more just to get them up to speed. (Think about how long it takes to be proficient in a new job – depending on the complexity of the role, it can be anywhere from a couple weeks to a full year!)

The non-profit organisation relies on funding from donors (and sometimes even volunteers) to operate and achieve their goals. Some grants fund volunteer hours, but the vast majority do not – meaning that these types of organisations simply do not have the resources to pay.

But... if they can set up a two-way exchange – where they provide a valuable experience for a volunteer while helping support their mission and the greater good – perfect! It's a potential win-win for the organisation and the volunteer.

These two examples sit at opposite ends of the scale, and there are all sorts of examples in between them. But they do a good job of illustrating the basic difference between conservation internships (or non-profit sector internships in general) and internships in for-profit sectors.





Does it really cost that much?

[Check out our Top Conservation Internships | PAID or FREE Opportunities for 20 opportunities worldwide](#)

As a potential volunteer or intern, you're probably all too aware of the investments of time, money and (possibly) international travel you're making. However, it can help to put yourself in the shoes of a project or programme manager who also must invest in supporting you as a volunteer or intern.

Depending on the project, getting a new person sufficiently set up might include housing and food; transport to and from remote project sites; resources such as uniforms, tools and materials; specialised health and safety training and more – plus the staff time to train and support you.

For an organisation that operates on donations, this kind of investment may simply not be an option.

However, many organisations do provide paid internship opportunities. These may be a result of a specific grant/donation to support volunteers, a logical investment for the organisation (e.g. future trained employee) or long-term temporary roles (e.g. field base manager). Check out our [Top Conservation Internships | PAID or FREE Opportunities for 20 opportunities worldwide](#).



6. Is it possible to get a conservation job without an internship or volunteering experience?

For those of you who like taking shortcuts straight to the answer... yes!

The vast majority of conservationists we've spoken to for our [career advice articles](#) and [Conservation Careers podcast](#) (to date we've spoken to over 400!) highly recommend conservation volunteering or internships to get started in the sector.

But that doesn't mean that conservation interning or volunteering is the only path for you. For example, in some sectors – like [ecological consultancy](#) and [ecotourism](#) – jobs are often less competitive and companies (who are sustained by profits rather than donor funding) tend to hire more early career conservationists for paid roles. In order to decide whether conservation interning or volunteering is right for you, it helps to understand the entry-level requirements for your chosen area within conservation and identify if there are any key gaps you need to fill to be employable.

“Understand the entry-level requirements for your chosen area, and strengthen and fill any gaps you might have in a strategic way. You might need to do some specific volunteering or internship, go back to Uni and do a Degree or Masters, or take an online course. But know exactly what skills or knowledge you need to become employable for your chosen niche in the first place, and then focus on finding the best way to get it”, said [Conservation Careers Director Dr Nick Askew](#).

Let's rephrase that...
it *IS* possible to get a
conservation job
without an internship or
volunteering experience



7. How to choose the right opportunity for you? | Where's Wally?

Work out what your
'Wally' looks like
before you start
looking for them!

With all the information (and sometimes even misinformation...) available online, looking for conservation internships and volunteer opportunities is nearly as complex as conducting a job search.

If you go about it unprepared, it can feel a bit like looking at a very complex Where's Wally book after several pints of beer (we've not actually tried this, but you get the picture).

Imagine you open a Where's Wally book (or Where's Waldo, depending what country you're in) and start searching – but you're not quite sure what Wally looks like.

What happens? You get distracted by hundreds of characters who aren't Wally, you your search takes far longer than it should, you give up partway through, or, worst of all, you end up with an opportunity that isn't what you're looking for. You don't benefit, other conservationists don't benefit and conservation as a whole doesn't benefit.

So to help save you time (and sanity!) and get on with your career and the business of saving the planet, you need to know what your own personal Wally or Waldo looks like before you start your search.



Does yours look like Jane Goodall at a remote field station in Africa, gaining hands-on experience in chimpanzee research techniques to prepare for a master's or PhD?

Or is yours joining a community of enthusiastic volunteers through a local marine conservation organisation, contributing to beach clean-ups while test-driving environmental education for youth groups as a potential career path?

Or maybe your Wally is running a remote research station in Ecuador with next-to-no resources, taking on responsibility for a field research programme and the health and safety of and international team of volunteers, interns and staff – to give you the experience you need for your next career jump?



To help figure out what your own personal Wally (aka ideal conservation internship or volunteer opportunity) looks like, it can help to ask yourself a few questions:

1. What is your primary motivation? Is it contributing to a cause? Gaining experience? Getting a foot in the door with an organisation? Making professional contacts? Testing out an area of interest? Boosting your CV? Having an unforgettable experience? Something else?
2. What (if any) secondary benefits are you looking for?
3. Do you have any specific skills to offer?
4. Are you looking to gain any specific skills, competencies and/or experience? What are they?
5. Do you want or need to travel to achieve the type of experience you're looking for? Or would you benefit more from an opportunity close to home?

Interested in doing an internship but not sure how to fund it?

Check out our [Guide on no-fee internships here!](#)





It's important to choose the internship and volunteering program that's right for you. Keep on track and avoid exploitation in conservation by [listening to our podcast here!](#)

6. What **time commitment** is best for you? What range is possible? Think not just in terms of weeks, months or years, but in terms of hours per week or month.

7. What level of **responsibility** are you comfortable with? Unless you're coming in highly-skilled, it's unlikely you'll be given much responsibility within a few weeks or months. If you want high-level competencies – like leadership, communication, planning, organisation, etc. – you'll usually need to invest more time (but get more benefits and often a more affordable monthly cost).

8. How much **training and support** are you looking for? You might a well-structured programme that supports and guides you through, or you might want a high level of freedom to learn, innovate and adapt on your own – or something in the middle.

9. What is your total **budget** (factoring in cost of living, travel, etc.)?

10. In an ideal world, what would be the **outcome** at the end of the conservation internship or volunteer placement? Start a job search to find [paid work](#)? Start a [master's degree](#)? Test out another [area of conservation](#)? Get a letter of recommendation? Be considered for positions with the company?

Try to visualise your ideal experience, and come up with a short, prioritised list that you can use as criteria to evaluate the opportunities you come across.

8. How to find conservation internships and volunteering opportunities? | Paid, no-fee and fee-based roles

Once you know what your own personal Wally (or Waldo) looks like, so you can start filtering opportunities, here are a few useful places to start looking for opportunities:

- Your university or college's career services department or course/programme/department coordinator
- Your city or community. Many have a volunteer service board updated with current opportunities.
- Your own research. Keep a list of organisations of interest and note the kinds of opportunities and when they're available. You can then refer back regularly.
- **Reach out.** Contact organisations that don't offer conservation internship and volunteer opportunities and ask about opportunities – you might be surprised by their response!
- Search the **Conservation Careers job board**, where we find and update conservation internships and volunteer opportunities from around the world every day. Head to [conservation-careers.com/conservation-jobs](https://www.conservation-careers.com/conservation-jobs) and search for 'Volunteer & Internships'.
- Looking for PAID or No-fee conservation internships opportunities? Check out these great organisations: [conservation-careers.com/top-conservation-internships](https://www.conservation-careers.com/top-conservation-internships).
- If you're interested in sea turtle conservation internships and volunteering, check out these great organisations: [conservation-careers.com/top-sea-turtle-conservation-internships-and-volunteer-opportunities](https://www.conservation-careers.com/top-sea-turtle-conservation-internships-and-volunteer-opportunities).
- Check out [Conservation Guide](#), a marketplace for quality conservation experiences.
- Still haven't found your Wally? Why not start your own conservation project, based around your interests and goals?



Need more ideas and inspiration? Check out these articles written by Conservation Careers and our team of Conservation Careers Bloggers:

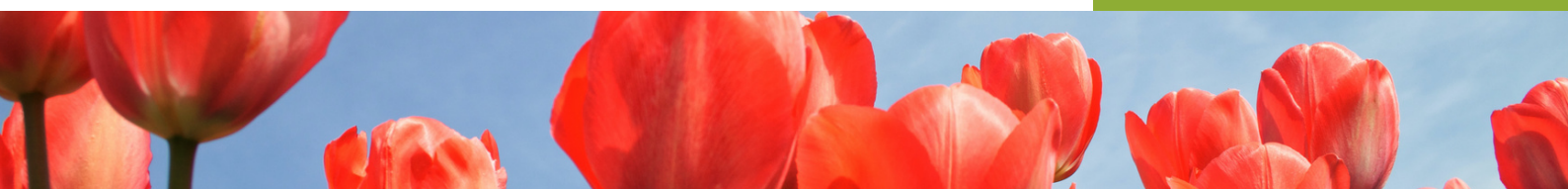
Volunteering – Overviews & Advice

- [Volunteering in Conservation Part 1: Local Volunteering](#)
- [Volunteering in Conservation Part 2: International Volunteering](#)
- [8 things to consider when choosing a volunteer project](#)
- [How to become a Conservation Volunteer? Part One](#)
- [How to become a Conservation Volunteer? Part Two](#)
- [How to become a Conservation Volunteer? Part Three](#)
- [How can conservation volunteering help you?](#)
- [Volunteering: The stepping stone to employment?](#)

Volunteering – Career stories & Advice

- [International Nature Volunteers – Volunteering that Won't Cost the Earth](#)
- [Volunteer to Conservation Manager with Zoo Keeper Sara Fee](#)
- [Volunteering forced me to re-evaluate my life: An interview with Wild Tomorrow Fund Executive Director John Steward](#)
- [Educating the younger generation vital for conservation; an interview with Wild Volunteers' founder Anton Roberts](#)
- [Volunteering in Seychelles as part of a Zoology degree](#)

Read our [guide on how to get conservation experience](#) and start building up your CV now!





Interning – Overviews & Advice

- [Top tips on how to gain the right internship for you](#)
- [The five golden rules of internship success](#)
- [From intern to inspiration story: landing an adventure job in the Peruvian Amazon](#)

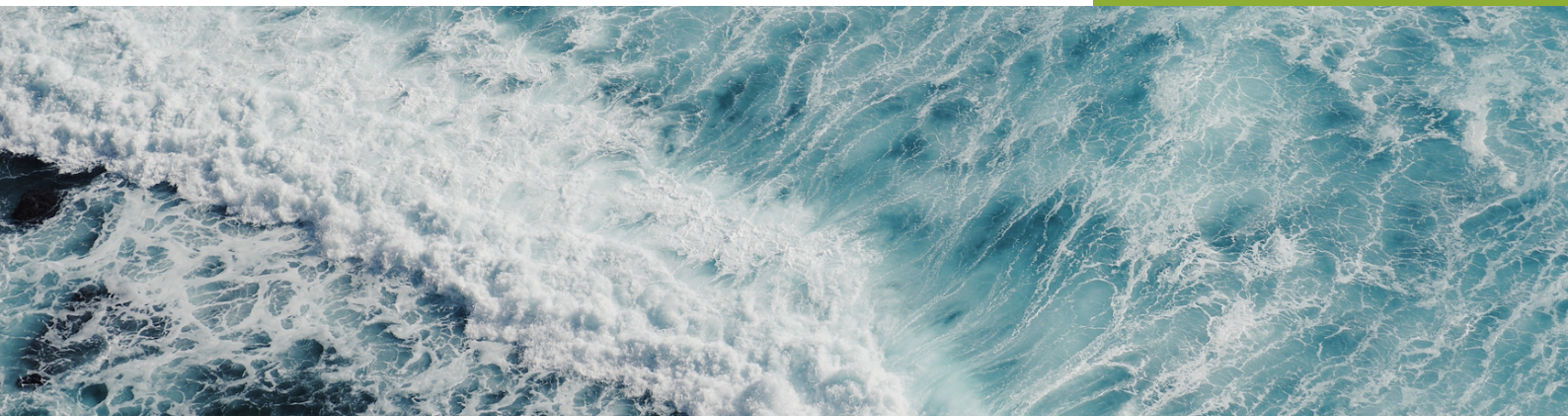
Internships – PAID & No-fee opportunities

- [Podcast: Anna Kloth | Paradise Interns](#)
- [Save the Rhino International – Interview with Rory Harding, Michael Hearn Intern 2013](#)
- [How to work for Save the Rhino – Interview with Aron White, Michael Hearn Intern 2014](#)

Internships – Fee-based programmes

- [Podcast: Steve Gwenin | Global Vision International](#)
- [A week in the life of a Conservation Careers Intern in the Limpopo](#)
- [Want to work in conservation? There is no better job interview than to volunteer: An interview with GVI Limpopo's base manager Leah Brown](#)

Read our [guide on avoiding exploitation in conservation](#) and start your adventure in finding the right internship or volunteering program for you



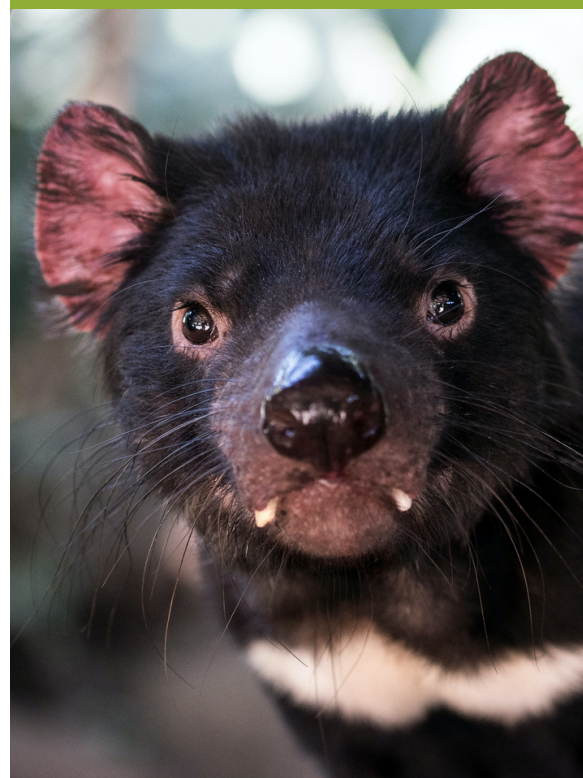
9. How to review conservation internships and volunteer opportunities? | What to look out for

Before you start, make sure you've read section 7: How to choose the right opportunity for you. Once you find a promising role, there are four important questions to ask to help determine if it's the right opportunity for you.

1. **Reputation.** What does some online research say about the organisation offering the volunteer opportunity? What independent satisfaction rating do they have? What do past participants have to say? Often you can tell a lot about how well an opportunity is organised by the amount of information provided, such as day-by-day activities, pre-departure packs and packing lists.
2. **Suitability.** How it might help in your chosen career? What gap(s) will it help you to fill? This is essentially evaluating against your personal criteria and asking yourself, is this MY Wally or Waldo? Tip: Forget about all the other possible Wally's out there that belong to other conservationists with different goals (even if they seem very attractive) – you only care about finding yours!
3. **Value.** What are the time and money commitments involved. How is the money used? Does it offer good value?
4. **Conservation impact.** Is the work achieving something truly important? Is it serious work, or a holiday?

Also keep in mind that any given opportunity is unlikely to fulfill everything you're looking for, but you need to make sure that it ticks off the top priorities on your list.

Once you find a promising role, there are four important questions to ask to help determine if it's the right opportunity for you.





What if I suspect that an organisation is unethical?

It's an unfortunate reality that some organisations exaggerate conservation impact greatly in order to attract volunteers and interns. The opportunity to experience exotic species and places while contributing to a meaningful cause is attractive (as it should be!) but it means that occasionally it gets abused.

If you suspect an organisation is not representing its conservation impact accurately or isn't operating ethically, you can:

- **Research the organisation in detail.** Check out their website and social media platforms; look for project updates, results and outcomes; and read past reviews.
- **Look at the organisation's partners.** A good conservation internship or volunteer operator should be sharing projects, data and results with in-country NGOs at the least. If the organisation is stand alone, you may want to question why.
- **Find out what past participants have to say.** If you can't find any information, ask the organisation to put you in touch with past participants so you can get their honest, first-hand feedback.
- **Ask questions.** Want to know where your fees go? Ask. Want to know what the organisation accomplished in the past year? Ask. Most organisations should be happy to answer (even if it takes them a little time to reply).

If you'd like more, [Moving Worlds](#), [Verge Magazine](#) and [Idealist](#) all offer great advice on volunteering ethically.

If you suspect an organisation is not representing its conservation impact accurately or isn't operating ethically, there's a few things you can do...

10. How to apply for a conservation internship or volunteer opportunity?



Applying for a conservation internship or volunteer position can be much like applying to a conservation job, especially if it's longer-term, in-demand, requires specific skills or linked to career progression.

The good news is that, if you've done your homework and really identified the ideal opportunity or opportunities for you, it should be much easier to articulate your 'fit' in an application.

If you want your application to have the best possible chance of being successful, check out our guide '[How to Apply for a Conservation Job: A complete guide to producing successful CVs, Resumes and Cover Letters by Conservation Careers](#)'.

The guide covers the 10 key steps in the application process, from deciding to apply through to submitting your application. It has real-life examples of before and after applications to help you craft an application that stands out. And it has a series of templates and examples to help you choose the right CV style for you.

Check out our guide

['How to Apply for a Conservation Job: A complete guide to producing successful CVs, Resumes and Cover Letters by Conservation Careers'](#)





11. How to fund conservation internships and volunteering opportunities that are fee-based?

We know that when you're studying or job-hunting, money can be tight, and paying for a conservation internship or volunteer placement can be out of the question. These tips and resources can help prevent money from becoming a major barrier to your career goals.

- Look for paid or no-fee opportunities. Contrary to popular belief, there are 1000s of great internships that become available every year that pay you, provide benefits or carry no fee. We've listed some of the best in [Top Conservation Internships | PAID or FREE Opportunities](#).
- Participate online. Just as remote, flexible and home-based jobs become more common, more opportunities are opening up to intern or volunteer online. Check out [Volunteering at home: accessible to all](#) and keep an eye on organisations that offer online positions.
- Stay local. Sometimes the most relevant experience is available close to home, especially if you plan to seek paid work in the area in the future.
- Ask your university or workplace. Sometimes universities offer funding for career-relevant training, and/or can provide academic credit for work experience.
- Check out charities. [Money Matters: 6 tips on how to fund volunteer work](#) lists 14 different potential funding options. You're likely to have most success if you target charities whose [missions align with what you hope to achieve](#).

Check out our guide
['Top Conservation Scholarships'](#)





- **Look for local participant funding.** Many organisations offer a number of free or subsidised placements for local or national applicants as an investment in training the next generation of conservationists in their area of work.
- **Keep an eye on social media.** Many master's and PhD students and smaller organisations need research assistants and some provide a living allowance during field work.
- **Ask past participants.** Past participants who've successfully fundraised can have great tips for specific organisations or approaches to target. Ask the organisation you're applying to if they can put you in touch. While there are lots of opportunities out there to find funding, the search can be a small job in itself. Many interns and volunteers simply set some time aside to work and save in order to fund their experiences.
- **Check out tip #13, 'How to fund your international volunteering trip' by [Moving Worlds](#).**
- **Don't be afraid to ask!** Ask around in your network and let them know about your plans and goals. You might be surprised at the information, resources – and possibly even financial support – you receive. We've all been in a similar situation at one point or another in our lives, and most people are more than happy to help others if they have the means.

There are lots of ways. to fund yourself... let's get creative!





Want inspiration and ideas to think outside of the box? Check out [How to Fund a Conservation Expedition](#) for examples and advice from conservationists who've successfully funded their way around the planet.

You can also check out James Borrell's article on Sponsorship and Fieldwork Grants and GVI's [Fundraising ideas for volunteering abroad](#).

Check out [How to Fund a Conservation Expedition](#) guide for some radical ideas...





12. How to make the most of conservation internships and volunteering?

Much like doing a master's degree or training course, conservation internships and volunteering represent an investment of your time and - potentially - money. Here's how to make the most of them.

- **Prepare.** “Comments like “I was over-prepared” and “I regretted being so ready” are never seen on volunteer evaluation forms” says this [Verge Magazine article](#). The more preparation you do in advance – asking questions, reading about the organisation's projects in detail, checking out reference materials, learning about the local context, getting advice from past participants, etc. – that more background you'll have to build on when you arrive on-site. Sadly sleep-banking doesn't work, or we'd recommend that as well!
- **Go in with clear goals and flexible expectations.** Knowing what you want to learn or achieve through conservation internships or volunteering is one of the best ways to ensure that you stay focussed, prioritise your time and make the most of your experience. But if you arrive at a project with very specific, rigid expectations about how the experience will be, you run the risk that some or all of your expectations won't be met, and you might not be in the right frame of mind to take advantage of the new opportunities available to you. We find it's best to be clear about your general goals (you can always adapt how you work towards them) but stay open to new experiences that might be very different than anything you've come across before.



- **Be flexible.** If you're working on a project in a remote location, with a lot of moving parts or with a diverse team, you should always expect the unexpected. Learning how to adapt to changes and make the most of them is part of the learning process – and often part of the fun!
- **Make contacts!** Conservation interning and volunteering is often an incredible opportunity to meet new, like-minded people, sometimes from very different walks of life. You might make a new friend, find a partner for a future project, connect with a potential supervisor, or even meet a conservation idol. If you feel uncomfortable with the idea of 'networking', remember that starting a conversation is as simple as being curious about what another person does and asking them about it.
- **Communicate.** If something isn't working well, if you ever feel uncomfortable or if you feel you're not getting something useful out of the internship or volunteering, let the project coordinator or manager know. Speaking up (especially early on) can help ensure you can get the most out of the experience and even help improve the project for others.





- **Take initiative.** The staff who run conservation internships and volunteering projects are usually eager to ensure you have a great experience, but often also very short on time. If you have an idea to improve the project or a project you'd like to explore, let them know – and you might be surprised that they're happy to support you.
- **Own the experience.** While the organisation you're interning or volunteering with has a responsibility to help you have a positive, productive experience, an even larger part of that responsibility rests with you. Ultimately you have the opportunity to decide whether an experience will help you grow and develop as a conservationist and as a person – or not.
- **Share your experiences.** Word of mouth – online or offline – is one of the most powerful ways to help others find great experiences. Take a few minutes to share your experience with other conservationists and provide constructive feedback to the organisation you volunteered or interned with. A great place to do this is via [Conservation Guide](#), an online marketplace for quality conservation opportunities, where you can let the global community know what you thought of your experiences.





13. How to avoid common pitfalls with conservation internships and volunteering?

If you've read section 1 of this article, you know the difference between conservation internships and volunteering. So why is it still difficult to differentiate between conservation volunteering and interning in practice?

There are a few reasons why this can happen:

1. **Expectations of benefits.** In its purest or simplest form, volunteering is an altruistic activity focussed on helping a cause, with no money exchanged by either the volunteer or service organisation. However, there are a range of other potential benefits (see sections 3 and 4 of this article) available – such as accommodation, food, a stipend, networking, experience, etc. And because it's unpaid work, sometimes volunteers still expect tangible benefits that the organisation can't provide. **How to avoid problems?** Be very clear about your personal and professional goals and make sure your expectations align with what the volunteer organisation can offer before you sign up.

2. **Skilled vs. unskilled conservation volunteering.** Some volunteers volunteer specific skills (sometimes referred to as 'skilled volunteering'), while others participate in activities that require minimal training, such as invasive plant removal, tree planting or canvassing. While both are volunteering, the first is much more similar to paid work. **How to avoid problems?** Be clear about what skills you have to offer before you look for a volunteer opportunity. If you are very early in your career, unskilled volunteering or internship training might be best for you. If you're more skilled, you may want to apply for paid opportunities, unless you're in a position to volunteer your skills freely.

We can help you
to find the best
conservation
internships and
volunteering
opportunities...


[Find out
more here!](#)



3. **Unsupported conservation internships.** Sometimes the term 'intern' is used when little training or support is involved (or when you're expected to train and manage yourself). How to avoid problems? Be clear about what level of responsibility you're looking for. If you're comfortable fending for yourself and having freedom in your work, it can be an uber-fast ways to pick up new skills and gain valuable experience. On the other hand, it can be miserable if you're the kind of person who likes having more hands-on guidance and support.

4. **Paid work labelled as conservation interning or volunteering.** Sometimes the terms 'intern', 'volunteer' or 'assistant' are used to refer to staff roles that carry staff-level responsibilities. How to avoid problems? Make sure that the benefits for you outweigh the costs for you. Taking a one-year high-responsibility unpaid role can be an enormous career boost, but only if you feel like it's a worthwhile step for you.

In practice, the definitions of conservation internships and volunteering are often all shades of grey or even misused. The best way to avoid confusion is to be as clear as possible about what type of opportunity (section 2) you're looking and what you want to get out of it. That way you'll learn to quickly recognise whether an opportunity is a good fit for you, regardless of what it's called.



14. How to know when you're ready for a paid conservation job?

Chances are, if you're asking this question, you're already there!

We've seen CVs from conservationists who have spent several years in conservation internships and volunteer placements. And as hiring managers, we have sometimes bypassed those candidates.

Why? If you have only training experiences on your CV and you're applying for more, it raises the question, does this person know what they want and what they can offer? It's a huge problem in conservation - a sector full of people focussed on helping a cause - that we often undervalue ourselves and don't give ourselves enough credit where it's due.

Of course, if you're fresh out of university with no real-life experience, you'll need to build some up to become employable. But if you've already got an experience or two under your belt, make sure you take the time to reflect on and recognise the skills and knowledge you've gained. Chances are you have more experience than you realise that is relevant to a paid job.

The real trick to knowing when you're ready for paid work is identifying the right job to target, the entry level requirements and any key gaps to fill – something we review in '[How to get a conservation job](#)' and cover in detail in our online course [The Kick-Starter for Early Career Conservationists](#).

15. How to help yourself (and other conservationists) | Setting boundaries and creating balance

When we enter a job sector where the apparent 'norm' is being unpaid, underpaid and/or working overtime, it's easy to assume that we have to do all these things and more in order to be competitive.

Let's think about this for a second from the employer's perspective.

Does an employer want someone who can't plan and manage their time realistically, who does not maintain a healthy work-life balance to maintain productivity over time, who isn't motivated to advance to greater responsibility in paid roles, or who burns out after weeks or months?

Probably not.

So, what is the right amount of 'going the extra mile'?

While it's true that you need to be open to learning, available for some extra hours (especially in field-based work), flexible and adaptable, there's a big difference between this and saying yes to everything.

A good employer will know that you need a healthy balance in order to maintain productivity, do your best work and stick around.

When you interview for a conservation job, internship or other opportunity, be conscious about promising that you'll work weekends, evenings and overtime whenever the employer asks. While you may need to show that you're willing to do this occasionally for important deadlines or events, if you go overboard you might even make the employer second-guess you! Make sure you know and set your boundaries and do your best work within them.





Think you're in the market
for a scholarship?
Check out our
[Ultimate Guide to Top
Conservation Scholarships](#)
right now!

Remember that just because you may see others working chronic overtime hours, what you're probably not seeing is the detriment this has on their productivity, happiness and health.

The last thing we need is to perpetuate the unsustainable idea that to be a conservationist you must give up everything - including your mental, physical or emotional health - for your career.

We're here to help each other achieve shared goals, and that means respecting our and others' boundaries, speaking up if a work environment becomes unhealthy, and making sure conservation is a sector that is challenging, inspiring and rewarding to work in.





16. Is it economical to work in conservation?

Interested in a scholarship before you commit to a career in conservation?

Read out our [Ultimate Guide to Top Conservation Scholarships](#)

Conservation doesn't usually draw people who are motivated primarily by financial goals, but that doesn't mean you need to sacrifice all financial security in order to work in the sector.

You'll need to be prepared to make less money at the beginning, but once you've built up the entry-level requirements for your chosen area, you can certainly make a decent living in conservation. If you work for a well-established charity or university you should be comfortable, while if you work in an area like ecological consultancy or ecotourism, you may even be paid very well.





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"I got hired for an education and outreach position teaching about endemic butterflies at a local conservation area! As a career switcher, it's my first conservation related job. The course has really helped me focus on how I want my future career to look. Thank you for a wonderful program! "

- Christina Carlton, USA





17. Useful Links and Free Stuff

To help you navigate your options, please select which best describes you:

You want to work in conservation but you're feeling lost, disillusioned or confused?!?

Check out our Kick-Starter training designed to help you understand the job market, to navigate your career options, and to get hired more quickly. It's designed for students, graduates, job-seekers and career-switchers. We're proud to say it also has 100% satisfaction and recommendation ratings. We know you'll love it. Find out more about our [Kick-Starter – Online Course](#).

You need answers to top questions about working in conservation?

Check out our free [Ultimate Guides](#) covering topics like the [Top Conservation Internships](#), [Paid or Free](#) and [Marine Conservation Jobs](#), and answering questions like [How to Switch Careers into Conservation](#), [Do I need a Master's Degree?](#) and much more!

You feel ready to be applying for jobs in conservation?

Check out our membership packages for job seekers which provide access to the world's biggest conservation job board – with over 10,000 conservation jobs shared each year – plus a range of other benefits. [Check out our monthly memberships here](#).

You're submitting applications, but failing to get many interviews?

Check out our FREE eBook Conservation Jobs: The Step-by-Step System to Get Hired as a Wildlife Conservationist – available on [Kindle](#), [EPUB](#) and [PDF](#). We can also review your applications, and provide 1:1 advice on how to improve them (and we don't cost the earth). Check out our [application support here](#).

You've got an interview (well done!) and would like our help to prepare for it?

We know what employers want, and have helped many people prepare for and deliver successful interviews. Check out our [interview preparation here](#).

You feel stuck, are struggling with a difficult career decision, or need some clarity about your next steps? We can help you form a clear plan of action so you can feel confident and take the next steps to make your dream career a reality. Check out our [1:1 career coaching here](#).

[Find more of our Ultimate Guides HERE!](#)



DISCLAIMER

All internships are subject to current travel restrictions. Please check with the internship provider for more information.

About Conservation Careers

We are the #1 careers advice centre for conservationists – helping 630,000 conservationists in 178 countries across the globe.

We believe that all wildlife is beautiful and that it deserves great conservationists working to protect it. We have extensive international knowledge, experience and a network of contacts within the conservation career sector. This means that we can help job seekers and conservation organisations to form lasting relationships. We do this by providing careers advice and information to a network of dedicated conservationists across the globe.

Have a question or suggestion?

Contact us at mail@conservation-careers.com

The legal bit

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