

The nature of nature conservationists - freeing the spirit or toeing the line?

This article reports on a study which considered how the aspirations and values of nature conservationists themselves match with the organisations that employ them.

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A passion for nature or just a job?

VINE (Values In Nature and the Environment) is a network for nature conservation practitioners. It explores ideas and inspiration relating to the philosophy, ethics, culture and practice of nature conservation. VINE started in 2006 through a series of informal discussions about why people were inspired to take up jobs in conservation. This led to expressions of frustration about priorities and policies in the organisations that people worked for as they felt these were often unrelated to their own values. There was a feeling that personal connections to nature and commitment to conservation were not fully valued or recognised within professional structures. Consequently, VINE decided to gauge nature conservation practitioners' views on the practice of nature conservation, exploring issues about working in the field and how these relate to personal beliefs and inspiration. A research proposal was devised to understand more fully the personal values of conservationists and to assess the extent to which these values are recognised and supported by conservation organisations. The authors (two researchers, Gabrielle Horup and Cara Roberts), independently took on this research as part of their own MSc studies. Gabrielle used a mix of qualitative and quantitative research techniques, namely 20 in-depth interviews and an online survey to gather broad opinions. Cara conducted a narrative inquiry involving 20 interviewees to gain an insight into people's perceptions about nature and their work. This report also includes data for the graphs gleaned from 285 individuals from approximately 100 organisations. This article explores both our findings.

So, what motivates conservationists, and is it something you can 'bottle'? A central feature of the conservation sector in the UK is that it depends on the enthusiasm and commitment of individuals who give up much of their own time, developing their own knowledge, to share with others and improve the effectiveness of conservation. Are staff members' personal attachments to nature supported and reflected in the work of conservation organisations? Do core values fit when it comes to connection with nature and the motivation to get involved?

Nature conservation - the changing forces

To set the context for the research question, it is useful to consider some of the main factors that influence the conservation movement. Both conservation and the British countryside are social constructs, with material and social effects. A complex set of circumstances led to the development of a conservation movement and the organisations in existence today. The focus of activities and the roles played by these organisations has changed significantly over the years. This involved a move from natural history, to protected sites, through to landscape-scale conservation with an appreciation of people as part of the process. Today a plethora of conservation organisations are involved with a wide spectrum of activities. Conservation organisations are responsible for both pushing the political agenda and instigating change. Factors that influence the activities of the sector range from sustainable development through to sustainable de-growth¹, whilst corporate conservation expresses itself through concepts such as ecosystem services. To keep up with changing economics and politics, conservation organisations have become increasingly streamlined and commercial.

*“The mainstream manufactures people as a monoculture. It turns us out like cloned rows of apple trees on pesticide-manicured fields. The mainstream trains people by pruning. It forces growth in standardised ways. The song that we sing from within the mainstream is thereby not our own song. It does not issue from the opened gates of the soul. And so our personal branches and cultural roots atrophy away”.*²

This quote by McIntosh captures the essence of some organisations. He evokes the feeling of control they can have, through compartmentalising people in roles and remits, with processes and procedures. Have the new approaches, and a fixation on toeing the corporate line, diluted the passion that led people to work in conservation in the first place? The results from the study explore the implications of this in more detail.

Research methodology

The study focused on staff working in nature conservation in professional or technical roles. A mix of qualitative and quantitative research techniques were used to capture people’s views. The quantitative element provided a broad understanding of the general

perceptions and aspirations of conservation employees, whilst interviews added depth and context.

An online survey was sent to conservationists at a range of organisations. A total of 285 respondents completed the survey, representing around 100 conservation organisations. Around half the respondents worked for a charity or non government organisation (NGO), about a quarter for a government agency and fifteen percent worked for a local authority. A small number worked for consultancies or were self-employed.

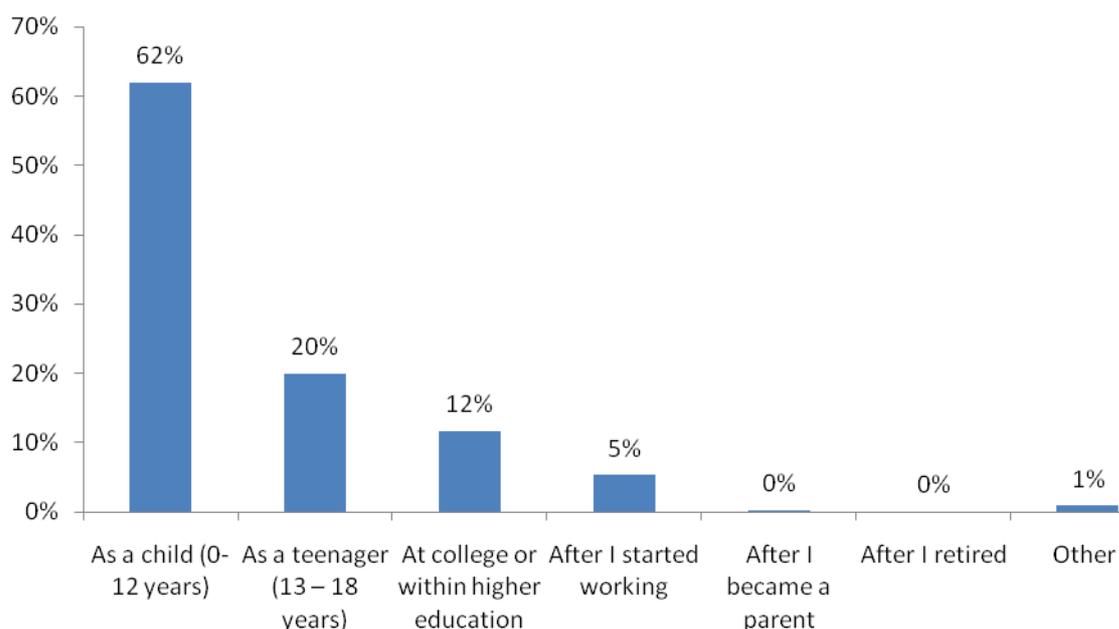
The interviews covered a similar spread of organisations. Most interviewees had worked or volunteered for more than one body, and so people’s feedback represented the scope of this experience. As a result, their attitudes and values can be seen as being more representative of the sector as a whole. Quotes from interviews will be used in “*italics*” to illustrate shared views or particular points.

Key themes

The survey started by asking people when they first became interested in nature. The results revealed that the majority of people became interested during their youth, with 4 out of 5 people stating they first became interested in nature under the age of 18. This initial interest was most evident during early childhood.

When did you first become interested in nature conservation?

Sample for this and subsequent graphs = 285 individuals from c.100 organisations across all sectors.



A raft of literature has examined the experiences that influence people to dedicate their lives to the environment. People working in environmental fields across different cultures have reported early memories of interacting with nature in studies into significant life experience.³ For example, E. O. Wilson said that direct experience with nature as a child was one of the greatest influences in the making of a naturalist.⁴ Our findings support the idea that wildlife is something people are interested in from an early age which can motivate them into considering a career in conservation in later life.

In the interviews many people talked about enjoyable childhood experiences in nature, *“I was one of these kids who was never in the house always up to mischief climbing trees getting covered in glaur [mud]”*. Experiences ranged from positive role models *“It was my Dad and my Grandad that got me interested when I was young”*, through to inspirational moments *“We used to have an annual trip to Slimbridge which was pretty special and we also used to go to Westonbirt Arboretum. Those were pretty inspirational trips”*.

Nature and identity

Our daily experience of the environment and people around us influences our personal identity and what we grow to value.⁵ The conservationists we spoke to identified nature as a crucial part of who they were. *“It is fundamental to my life to the extent that it is what my life is primarily about, if not wholly about”*.

People working in the sector have a genuine passion for nature conservation, many feel it is a pre-requisite for the job. This is illustrated by the results from the online survey where only 2% stated that they arrived in a conservation career by accident, and the majority who stated their reason for aspiring to work in conservation is due to a personal relationship with nature. Perhaps this is unsurprising, but all the respondents felt nature shaped their identity and nurtured them emotionally and spiritually. Nature appeared a continual source of wonder and awe, which fed a curiosity and drive for knowledge in creative, emotional and scientific ways.

Career pathways

The pathways to a career in conservation are varied, but tend to follow one of two routes.

Firstly, there are those who follow a logical progression from studying biological subjects at school and university that leads them to employment at a conservation organisation. Secondly, there are those who decided on a career change in later life. This can follow a period of self-evaluation through revisiting passions and interests, or witnessing environmental problems. However, most people are required to obtain a relevant environmental qualification, or volunteer for some time, before breaking into the field.

Many people expressed a sense of vocation, and a sense of duty to get involved in conservation *“I feel a strong sense of duty and moral obligation to be involved with helping to be part of that green movement towards maintaining biodiversity”*. There was a real sense that people felt they were doing a worthwhile, morally right job: *“It does feel like your job has a value and a worth that something like accountancy doesn’t really have”*.

There was also a strong desire to be working outside: *“I just love being outside in a natural environment watching wildlife. And to have a job where you can do that is just brilliant”*. This was backed up by the findings in the online survey where spending time in the field, experiencing landscapes, habitats and species, was highlighted as a key attraction to working in conservation. Conversely, a large proportion of people felt that they do not spend enough time in the field (apart from outdoor specific roles such as wardens).

Inspiring others was a key motivation for many staff, as was the ability to achieve goals and develop their personal knowledge of nature. *“Seeing the delight on children’s and grown-ups faces when I point out something entirely new to them”, “Because I cannot see people without wildlife, and I cannot see wildlife without people”*.

Why carry out nature conservation work?

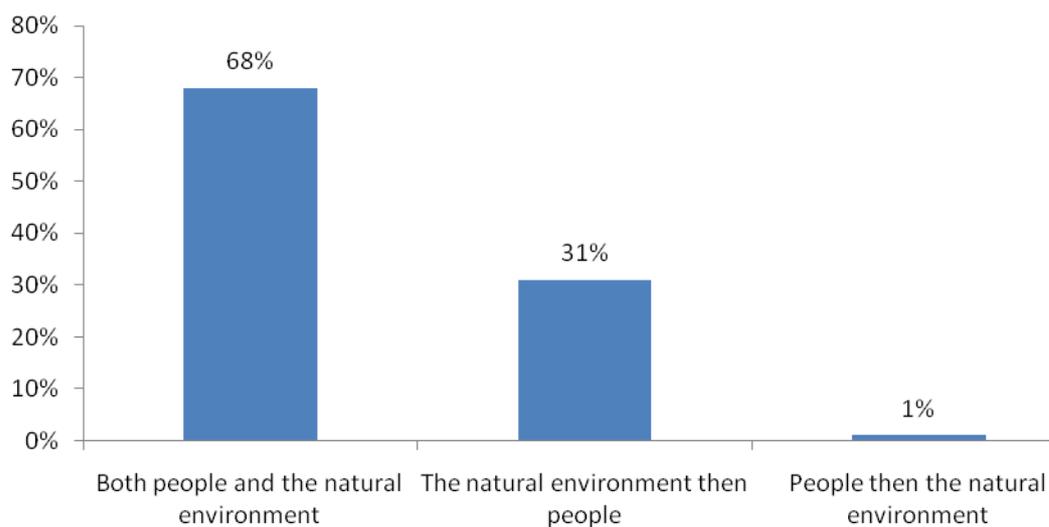
In the interviews conservationists were asked why they thought conservation work was necessary. The question evoked emotional responses, ranging from the altruistic to self interest. This highlights how the relationships between the environment and people are complex and difficult to articulate.

The prevailing theme of what conservation was for was defending nature, *“to ensure the continuation of habitats, ecosystems, species. And reduce the damage done by*

[hu]man[s]”. Conservation was seen as a compromise with economic development and the way our society functions, with the main roles seen as feeding into scientific understandings of the world and changing perceptions about the importance of nature.

Conservation organisations advocate the need to incorporate both people and wildlife, in equal measures, in their work. Whether staff members share this viewpoint was tested in the online survey. People were asked ‘In regard to nature conservation which of the following should come first?’ Around two-thirds of conservationists felt that both people and the natural environment should take equal priority (68%), almost a third (31%) felt that the natural environment should take priority, while a small minority (1%) put people before the natural environment. This suggests that conservationists demonstrate understanding, appreciation and support for a key message advocated by conservation organisations.

In regard to nature conservation which of the following should come first?



Job satisfaction

Both the online survey and the interviews measured aspects of job satisfaction. “*What we are seeking is not more money, it’s job satisfaction, [a] sense of achievement*”. Overwhelmingly staff wanted to be valued for their contribution and making a difference for nature. Most felt privileged that they were able to turn their love of nature into a career. Ways in which people expressed job satisfaction were:

- Belief in organisational core aims and aspirations;

- Autonomy, to prioritise tasks and influence decisions as well as the ability to object to management decisions;
- Support from other staff, a sense of community and common goal;
- Working towards achievable goals and recognising successes;
- Working for organisations who are willing to speak out for nature;
- Sharing experiences outdoors and receiving motivating training;
- Helping to build scientific knowledge, and alter perceptions about the value of nature.

Job dissatisfaction

Conservationists were also asked what makes them most unhappy about their jobs. A key cause of frustration was distraction from main purposes: *“80% plus of my time is spent pretty much doing what I used to do in business. Manipulating spreadsheets, analysing business propositions, writing business propositions and I’m doing that for a lot less money”*. The main factors that cause frustrations at work are summarised below:

- Reliance on short-term grants and funding;
- Administration and paperwork;
- Not spending the right amount of time in the field;
- Pay and financial reward;
- Scale of what people have to deal with;
- Organisational restructuring;
- Job security;
- Targets and reporting;
- The way the environment can become a political football when money is tight.

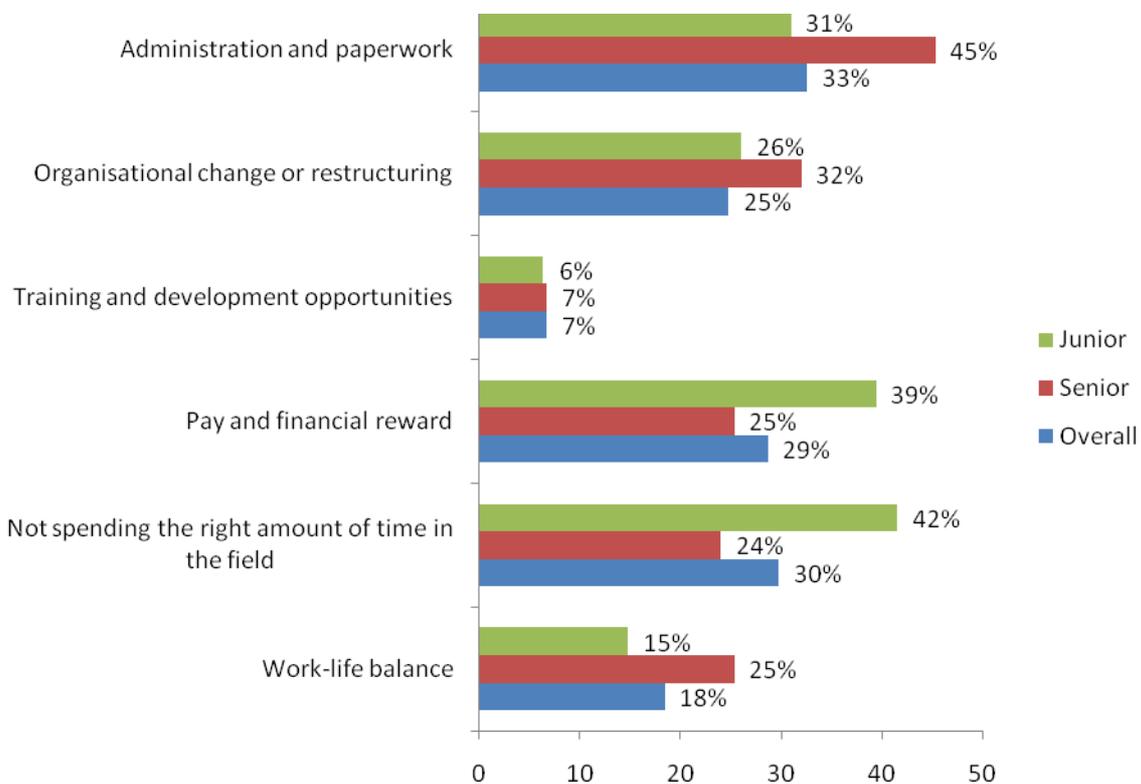
Pay was mentioned by several people in the interviews as an issue, namely that *“pay is not commensurate with skills relative to other sectors”*. It was highlighted as a factor that has contributed to people leaving an organisation and there was a feeling that increased pay levels would help retain motivated staff particularly within the charities. *“People don’t get a very decent wage and they still give everything for the organisation but you know that is the one thing and I think that would make us more effective”*.

“Training and development opportunities”, and *“promotion prospects”*, did not score particularly highly as an issue in this question, suggesting that while the lack of opportunities might be a source of frustration there are more fundamental issues causing

problems at work. “Targets and reporting” was rated as an issue and a frequent grumble, particularly for senior and managerial staff.

Differences were found between employee roles in an organisation. For example, ‘not spending the right amount of time in the field’ was the biggest issue for junior level staff but not such an issue for senior staff. Whereas, ‘administration and paperwork’, is more of a problem for senior staff than it is for junior staff. The interviews added context to this finding, by highlighting how administration and paperwork expresses itself through the target-driven culture that Britain has become bound up in.

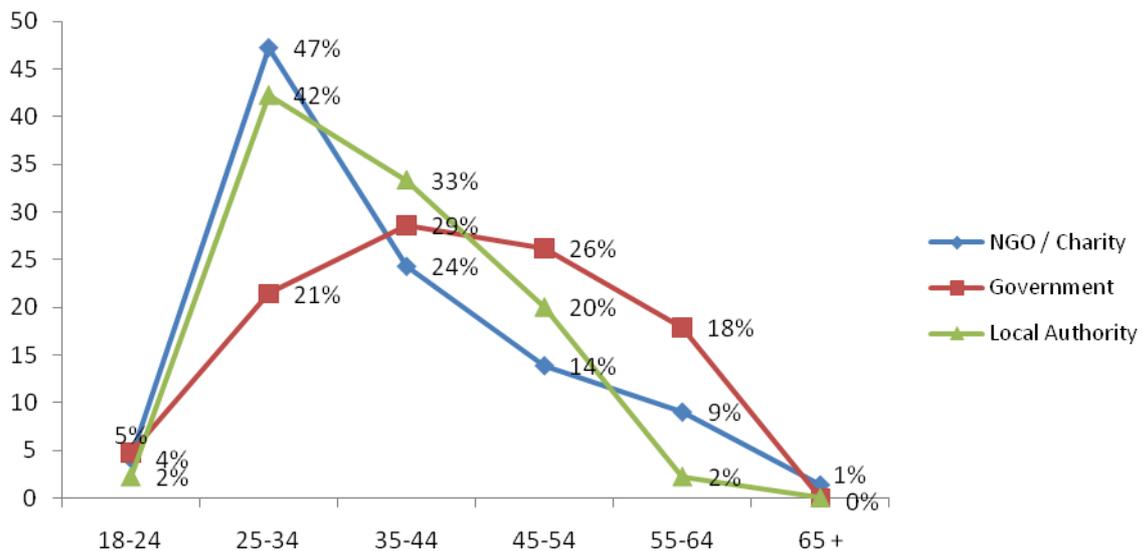
Factors that cause staff to be unhappy in comparison to their position in the organisation



N.B. Respondents were allowed to select multiple answers therefore percentage totals do not add up to 100%

The online survey revealed that a high proportion of NGO, charity and local authority conservationists are young people (aged 25 - 34). This proportion then drops as the respondents get older. In contrast, the age of people employed by government agencies was relatively stable across the different age groups (from 18 to retirement at 65).

Age group of conservation staff in different organisations within the conservation sector



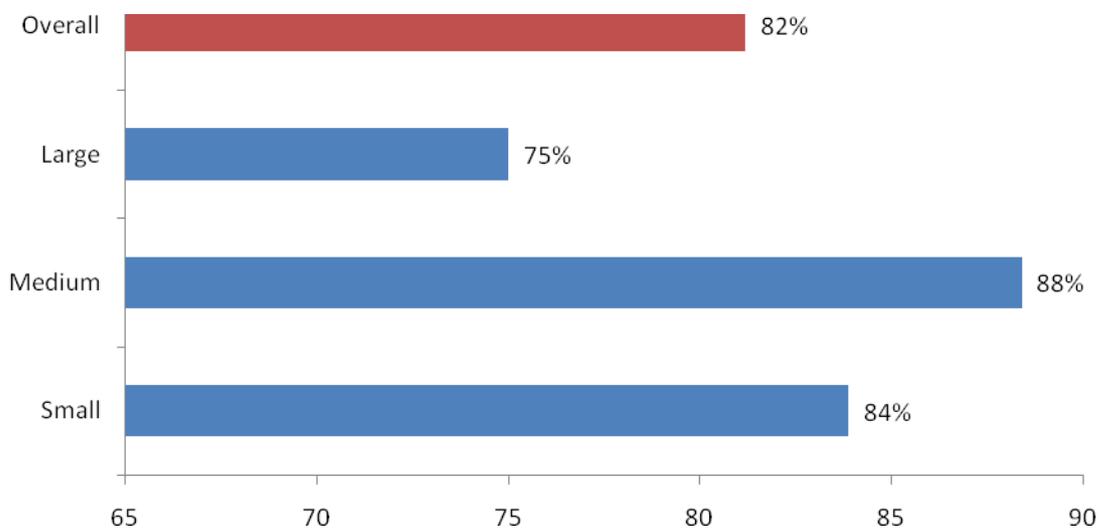
Where percentages do not add up this is due to rounding up.

Further analysis revealed that the drop in age of people working for NGOs, charities or local authorities over time could be due to limited career progression. One respondent commented that a particular charity lacks the scope for individuals to develop beyond a certain level. *“I always got told that the Trust is a nurturing ground for people before they leave. And I am beginning to see it for myself - you can only go so far. I don’t think the Trust necessarily supports the training and development that enables you to progress in your career”*.

Does size equate to happiness?

The size of an organisation was compared with levels of satisfaction. Overall, 82% of conservationists said they are either very or fairly satisfied with their role. There were some interesting differences by organisation size, with satisfaction being highest among those who work for medium sized organisations (88%), closely followed by those working for small organisations (84%). But satisfaction fell to 75% among those who work for large organisations. So although the majority are still satisfied, a greater proportion of staff at large organisations are less satisfied than those at small and medium organisations.

Levels of staff satisfaction compared with organisational size



A closer look at organisation size in relation to bureaucracy revealed that larger organisations were rated as much more bureaucratic than smaller ones. This is a potentially important issue that can affect the match between the individual and the organisation, and may explain why less people are satisfied in larger organisations.

Levels of bureaucracy in comparison to organisation size

Funds - a reality check

Many respondents mentioned restrictions on funding as a major issue when it came to the work organisations manage to achieve, *“it’s not the organisation that holds you back it’s the funds, there’s simply not enough money within our organisation”*. *“They have got aspirations to do a hell of a lot more than they do, but because of funding restraints they can’t”*.

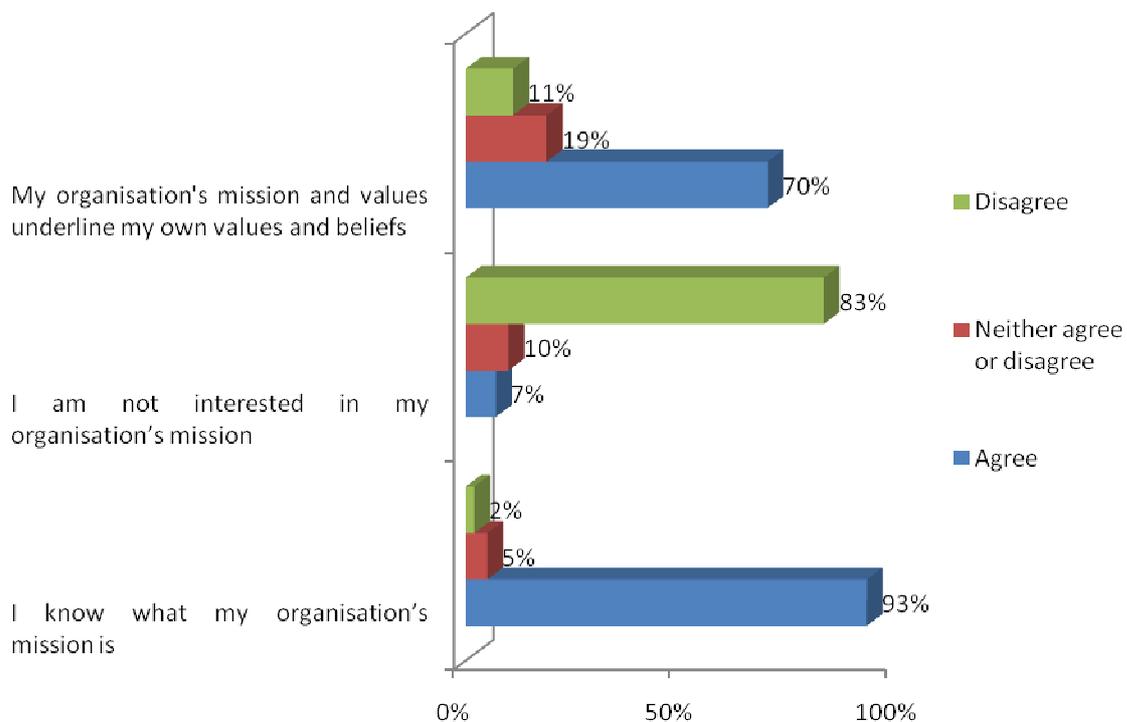
With the current financial crisis, fears about future funding, jobs and how the value of nature conservation was going to be seen against a backdrop of stimulating economic growth, were raised in interviews. Some staff were concerned about their personal futures, one had already been told their job was to go, but they expressed more concern for how resources would be focused and prioritised to help ensure that nature conservation was seen as a society wide priority.

The Government agencies are going to have to find big savings in their budgets and this will have an effect not only on their own work but on the NGOs through reduced funding. Staff from membership organisations also were concerned they may find more challenges in recruiting members, *“Because of other pressures in life, kids, financial, in these difficult times people may have an interest [in nature conservation] but other things take priority”*.

Match or mismatch?

In the online survey, respondents were asked about the mission of their organisation. The majority of conservationists (93%) know what their organisation’s mission is, a high number (83%) are interested in their organisation’s mission and around three-quarters (70%) said that their organisation’s mission statement underlines their own values and beliefs. These positive results suggest a high level of interest in organisational missions, which could be interpreted as a match between the individual and the organisation.

Staff interest in their organisation’s mission



Similar results were reflected in the interviews. Despite frustrations over policies and

systems, conservation staff agreed with what they perceived as the organisation's aspirations *"Oh god! They are where I am at myself! Absolutely no problem with that. We are about people's relationship with the natural world and cultural heritage, and taking that through to the future. I am completely on board with what our Director General says on that"*.

Conservation staff generally felt positive about their contribution and enjoyed their work *"I feel very positive 99% of the time"*, *"I love it I really do I wouldn't want to do anything else"*. This is also expressed in the survey - when asked to weigh everything up, 82% of conservationists are satisfied with their work.

Talking about value

So if nature conservationists generally agree with the mission and aims of their organisation why do many still appear to worry about the direction that policies and discussions about nature conservation are going? In the interviews there was a sense that the way conservationists actually valued nature was not getting across to a wider audience, or even being openly discussed by the organisations.

Core values are the central beliefs that inform individuals' identities, and in an organisation form the philosophical framework as to why and how the work is done. Our studies have shown conservationists view nature as an essential component of their personal identities. People were inspired into conservation often because of intangible values such as emotions, spirituality and acknowledgements of intrinsic worth in nature, and often driven by what they feel is a moral obligation to make a difference.

The value of nature highlighted particularly by government agencies has *"focused not on the natural heritage per se but on the benefits that we seek to secure for ...people from it"*.⁶ This comment reflects the direction that many strategic and corporate plans have been heading in recent years, with focus on goods and services from nature, such as water filtration and carbon capture, rather than moral, intrinsic, emotional or spiritual values. So while staff agreed with their organisations that conservation was important, the way organisations communicated nature's value often fails to connect with personal value systems.

A key finding of the study was that conservation staff felt inhibited in how they expressed their feelings about nature. They generally wanted to talk in more passionate and philosophical terms about the value of nature, but were concerned that would be seen as

lacking credibility. *“So in the end we just talk about nature as in we talk ecosystem services and bringing home to politicians that nature is money, seems to be the only way to do it. It works, it’s maybe a little bit dangerous but you know that’s what is important to people”*. This danger comes from the feeling that not everything can or should be valued in economic or scientific terms.

Science has been the basis for understanding the natural world and justifying the need for conservation since the 1940s.⁷ Policy makers tend to consider quantitative science valuations of nature as the ‘expert’ view raising them above less tangible feelings of value that people engaged with nature on an intimate basis perceive.⁸ Natural England describes itself as “an evidence-based organisation”⁹ and staff, from all sectors, agreed that scientific credibility was essential to discussions of why nature mattered. Across the board however, conservationists felt that instrumental values of nature were discussed and promoted as the central value of nature while the intrinsic and less tangible values were largely ignored, *“it’s talked about in far too limited a horizon I think wildlife and the natural environment have many, many, others values to society and to individual people other than pure scientific value, which is really the way in which it is argued. I think it is fundamentally important to people’s wellbeing”*. A physical science based understanding of nature provides only limited ways of knowing nature, whilst intrinsic, cultural, spiritual and emotional valuations are the ones that actually inspire people’s interest.

Ways forward?

The ‘Space for nature’ Lawton review published in September 2010 emphasises that “there are strong moral arguments for recognising the intrinsic values of other species and for passing on the natural riches we have inherited to future generations”.¹⁰ In terms of ecosystem services the report raises concerns about efforts to increasingly measure nature in monetary terms, even though the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment framework provides recognition of the aesthetic, enjoyment and other subjective values people derive from nature.¹¹ Crucially the report points to the need for a change in attitudes towards the value of nature, saying that efforts to conserve and expand natural habitats cannot succeed “without society accepting it to be necessary, desirable, and achievable”.¹² NGOs also stress the need to move people’s perceptions and emotions towards conserving nature as they feel that if society does “not value the natural world, then there will be no political drive or practical means to conserve it”.¹³ The membership organisations have acknowledged in recent reviews that more intrinsic, personal and emotional values have

often been missing from policies and practices in their own organisations, and are beginning to take steps to address this.

Getting emotional...

We have found that nature conservationists' relationships with nature are complex and central to their identities. They have described a sense of 'calling' that has drawn them to want to protect nature for moral and deeply personal reasons. Interests sparked, often in childhood, and then deepened by educational opportunity and growing understanding of the world - these are key motivators for becoming involved in conservation.

How conservationists, and the nature conservation organisations, see values in nature is also complex and multi-layered. Nature conservationists and the organisations they work for have similar aspirations and staff feel privileged to be able to make a difference towards those aims. However, staff do not always feel their core values are given space to influence how they carry out their work. Currently scientific and economic paradigms appear to hold sway in politics and organisational policies over moral and intrinsic arguments. Organisations (particularly government agencies) seem constrained to refer to nature in scientific and economic terms even to their own staff, who also feel wary of openly admitting the emotional attachments that inspired the initial interest. This is disappointing as it is precisely this inspiration that conservation hopes to develop in wider society.¹⁴

Our research has demonstrated that the field of nature conservation is staffed by individuals who show commitment and understand and care about the mission of the organisations that they work for. Some ideological differences exist in how nature's value is expressed, but job satisfaction is generally good, although there are marked differences between types of organisation. For most, the passion for nature is enough to sustain the commitment to conservation. However, negative experiences, often sector-wide, such as bureaucracy and short-termism combined with funding constraints can place strains on the relationship between individuals and the organisation. There are also issues around pay levels and personal development that cause frustration. The relationship would be strengthened if the organisations created the conditions to allow individuals to realise their aspirations whilst meeting the aims of the organisation, thereby paving the way for a fulfilling conservation career. Conservation staff need to be able to express original ideas, show creativity and have some level of autonomy in their roles. Importantly organisations

need to acknowledge 'love of nature' as a key motivator in their own staff management and communications - as well as in how they communicate nature conservation to the wider world.

Relationships with nature play a key role in the practice of conservation and are something that needs to be promoted in wider society. Passion is a powerful thing and nature conservationists' enthusiasm should be harnessed to encourage others. If staff who conserve nature cannot talk about 'loving' nature then who can? Nature will never be valued sufficiently to maintain its integrity if our culture continues to assume that only scientific and economic measurements of value are valid.¹⁵ Conservationists, and the organisations they work for, have an instrumental role to play in influencing wider societies understanding of the value of nature but they have to begin by reminding themselves why it is worthwhile. *"It has to be about inspiring other people, sharing your thoughts, keeping the thing going. There is a lot of talk about whether it is of any benefit preaching to the converted, but I believe you have to keep preaching to the converted otherwise they trickle off, you have to tell yourself often. Yes it is important"*.

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