

CONSERVATION ADVICE AND CAREER STORIES



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March 28, 2015

Volunteering in Seychelles as part of a Zoology degree

I recently [interviewed Adrian Skerrett](#), Chairman of the [Island Conservation Society](#) (ICS) in Seychelles, and discussed the experience that volunteers can gain to help launch their careers. When I worked with ICS we organised for two zoology undergraduates from the University of Manchester to spend one year work experience placements with us. The university offers placement years to help students enter employment when they graduate. One of our students, Kat Machin, was from the same Stoke-on-Trent home town as Adrian and shares her experience (and advice) here...



Kat Machin with a Hawksbill Turtle hatchling on Aride Island (photo: Kat Machin).

What was your conservation experience in Seychelles?

Hands on practical experience of real, tough everyday conservation work – in an intense and amazing place. I spent September to March on Desroches Island working at the ICS conservation centre alongside the hotel, [Desroches Island Lodge](#), and the island managers at the [Islands Development Company](#). I then completed the last few months of my placement on Aride Island.

Tell us about the conservation programme on Desroches and what you learnt.

Conservation efforts on Desroches are relatively new. The conservation centre was established only in 2009 but massive progress has been made. The forest restoration programme, aiming to plant 48,000 native broad-leaf trees in place of coconut palms, was launched shortly before I arrived and was a large part of my work in the team.

We completed the requisite infrastructure, including a nursery, and used experiments to develop the practical programme. There are some many factors to balance in efficiently planting that many trees: it is very labour intensive and all the activities must be carefully coordinated so that steps match up. We needed to fit all the tree work around turtle monitoring, guest nature tours, bird surveys, giant tortoise care, and inevitable short notice events too!

The Desroches Island conservation centre was led by Tony Jupiter, who spent most of his adult life working in conservation on the outer islands of Seychelles, and was a fantastic mentor. With his experience of sea turtle conservation and outer island life he was a steady guide for both professional skills and life skills. The key thing he pressed home was the importance of being thorough and accurate in your methods, data recording, and project management.



Kat Machin and Tony Jupiter working in the native tree nursery on Desroches Island
(photo: Adam Moolna)

Adrian (Island Conservation Society chairman) highlighted that “it is tough living and working in conservation” in Seychelles. What do you gain from those hardships?

The sudden change from being surrounded by friends, of similar age and interests, at university in Manchester to the isolation of Desroches was hard. Limited links with the outside world, however, pushed me to make friends on the island and make myself part of a new community. I gained a lot from knowing I am capable of living without luxuries – you get a great sense of self when you cut back on the frivolities of life.

The absence of distractions also meant I was fully immersed in the nature around me and got the maximum benefit from my time there.



“Living life simplistically, without the ties of technology, was hugely liberating and allowed for a deeper connection with nature” (photo: Kat Machin).

How did your experience influence you when you came back to finish your studies?

The placement totally confirmed that conservation is what I want to do and I’m a much more determined person in pursuit of that goal. I can see what I’m working towards for my future career and that helps me both with motivation and with making the right strategic choices.

The discipline of professional work helped immensely with coming back to university and getting top final year grades. I also caught the bug for working in new places and, with the confidence to get out of my comfort zone, I went straight to a job in the Canadian Rockies upon graduation. Four months in the middle of nowhere, one hour travel from the next human contact, this guiding job was available to me because the nature tour experience and isolation of my Seychelles placement demonstrated that I was capable.

You're now back in the UK applying for jobs. What's the hardest part and how does your Seychelles experience help?

Without doubt, the hardest part is the constant stream of rejections. But you learn to deal with that process and bounce back to keep applying. It's tough starting out and persevering when there are so many of us applying for each job. Applications get better with practice and I'll get there. *Seychelles really boosted my confidence and gave me substantial evidence of being able to deliver out there in the world of conservation work* – without that I'd really be struggling.



Kat Machin pictured with Desroches Island's youngest and oldest giant tortoises
(photo: Kat Machin)

What advice would you give to undergraduates considering a placement year?

Do it! Definitely. I can't think of a negative at all. It gives you that substantial full-time work experience vital as a young graduate. It is also an opportunity to see if conservation is really what you want to do as there is a big difference studying it and living it. It absolutely convinced me that a conservation career is what I want. But for

some of my other friends (not in conservation placements, I might add!), they found that their placements were not at all the kind of work they wanted to do afterwards. It's much better to discover that early on.

If your course does not offer you the opportunity of doing a placement year then make the most of your summer breaks to get full-time immersion experience of conservation. That could be a local group as a volunteer. It could even be 3 months moving to and living with a conservation project – as, for example, you could do with the [Island Conservation Society](#) on Aride Island in Seychelles.



Dr Keith White, senior lecturer in environmental biology at the University of Manchester, visiting Kat Machin on Desroches Island – with conservation centre leader Tony Jupiter and a giant tortoise (photo: Adam Moolna).

What advice would you share with your fellow early career aspirants?

Get as many practical skills and certifications as you can – especially a driving license! Be relaxed and confident during interviews. Always try to be the real and comfortable you, so that your interviewers can see themselves enjoying working with you. Be confident because you know that you have the experience and the ability... so go and talk about it and see it as fun. ***It's not the end of the world if you don't get the job – having an unsuccessful interview is the only real way of preparing for the successful one that will come to you eventually!***

Adam Moolna was talking to Kat Machin (@katmachin). Kat completed her BSc Zoology degree with a placement year working in conservation in Seychelles. She found out just hours after this interview that she has secured a fantastic seasonal seabird monitoring job in Wales with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Adam worked with the Island Conservation Society from September 2011 to February 2013 and now works through Giant Tortoise Environment & Conservation Limited. See www.giant-tortoise.co.uk and @DrAdamMoolna on Twitter.

Tony Jupiter sadly passed away in 2013. He dedicated his life to conservation in Seychelles and the legacy of his efforts includes the growing native broad-leaf forest on Desroches.