

Worthwhile conservation

Sarah Bishop offers a guide to the huge variety of gap year conservation projects



African Conservation Experience

Elephant studies

With a bewildering array of projects to choose from, how do you make sure that the one you opt for is of real value to conservation?

The nature of conservation work

All conservation projects, whatever their specific topic, should have clear goals. Ask the organisers what the project is trying to achieve and what its long-term aims are. There should always be a purpose to an activity, whether it be collecting data on Elephant movements to aid the creation of a new nature reserve, or pulling out alien vegetation which may be causing the decline of rare local species of plant.

It is also worth finding out a bit about the history of the project and to ask how long it has

been running and what has been achieved to date. Ask to see field reports from the project so you can read for yourself what previous volunteers have been doing.

If you are collecting data on a conservation project, find out where the data goes and how it is used. Data collected on African Conservation Experience's Molemane project for example, is passed on to the North West Parks Board and is used by their regional ecologist to help make decisions about the development of the reserve and future animal introductions.

If you are repeating data collection or experiments that have been carried out in the past by other volunteers, check that there are good reasons for this. Some projects may

want to compare changes over months or years, in which case it is necessary to collect the same data over a period of time.

Think about the scale of the project as well. It is important that the size and scope of the project is appropriate to its aims. A population study of a few elephants on a small reserve for example is likely to be of little value, since elephants need a large area and ideally a herd size of 50+ for the population to be viable. Consider the size of the group you will be in as well - you don't want a large number of volunteers swamping an environment, nor do you want to be in too small a group to have an impact. 8 or so volunteers is a good group size for wildlife conservation, as a larger group would tend to scare away the animals you are trying to study!

Logistics and organisation

All Gap Year Placements should be safe and well-organised, and conservation projects are no exception. Quite often, conservation work is carried out in remote locations, and it is vital that an organisation has sufficient measures in place in the event of a problem or emergency. It is also worth remembering that if a project is safe and well-organised, this is likely to be reflected in the quality of the actual conservation work as well.

Field conservation work and data analysis should be overseen by trained and competent staff, and organisations carrying out conservation projects should employ staff with good levels of experience in the field and relevant qualifications. Ask what qualifications the project staff have, how long they have been working in conservation and what their areas of expertise are.

Good conservation projects will also have strong links with local government departments and any relevant bodies such as animal welfare organisations or local environmental groups and authorities.

Conservation in the 21st century

The practice of conservation has developed over the last century to become

a multi-disciplinary, complex and dynamic science. Measuring the worth of a biological resource, and hence its conservation value, is a very difficult thing to do, so it is important that you consider the wider implications of the conservation project. Conservation can only really be sustainable if it is carried out as a holistic process encompassing the local community.

The human component of an ecosystem is a vital one, and it is important that you ask what impact the conservation project is having on the local people. If the work you carry out will, for example, restrict access of locals to sustainable forest resources, and force them to poach animals or remove trees, then it could be more damaging to the environment as a whole.

A good conservation organisation should carry out sound environmental practices in all parts of their venture. Ask the organisation how they minimise their overall impact on the environment – how do they dispose of waste at the project site? How do they conserve water resources? Do they recycle paper in their UK offices?

Another way to evaluate a conservation project is to think about what you want to get out of the experience. Ask yourself if the project is going to enhance your understanding of nature and conservation, provide you with valuable work experience and leave you with the feeling that you have made a difference. A good conservation project should provide you with all of this.

Carrying out conservation work is a fantastic way to spend your Gap Year and can open your eyes to a whole new way of viewing the world around you. It is passion and commitment to the cause that drives most conservationists, so look for these qualities in the organisation. A good conservation organisation won't mind you asking lots of questions about the work they are carrying out. Doing a bit of your own research before you choose your placement can make sure that the work you do has the most beneficial impact on conservation efforts as possible.



David Wright - Tuli Conservation Project, South Africa

“I was on a research project in the Tuli Block, an area of unimaginable beauty and sheer wilderness. Here I was involved in mapping populations and herd dynamics of general game and of elephants. Studies were also being carried out on leopard populations in the area and we spent time studying the vegetation - basically a total ecological survey! So little is known about the Tuli Block and what animals exist there that you couldn't help but feel a bit like the explorers of old! It was wonderful to be so close to, and involved in, nature and conservation.

My placement with A.C.E. inspired me to change the degree course I had planned to study and gave me much needed experience in the zoological and ecological fields. I have now started at The University of Wales, Bangor and am studying for a degree in Zoology with Conservation. I have a new direction and a much altered view on wildlife and life in general!”

Choosing a good conservation project Top questions to ask:

- 1 Does the project have clearly defined aims?
- 2 Where does any data collected go and how is it used?
- 3 Are the staff qualified and experienced in conservation?
- 4 Does the project work with, rather than impose itself on, the local community?
- 5 Are the group sizes and scale of the project appropriate to the work being carried out?
- 6 Does the project have the support of local environmental groups?
- 7 Does the organisation carry out 'green' practices such as recycling?

The author works for African Conservation Experience.

For more information, Visit www.ConservationAfrica.net
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