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Natural Talent Traineeships: using museum collections to bridge the skills gap

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Abstract

The Natural Talent traineeship scheme, run by The Conservation Volunteers (TCV), aims to address skills shortages in taxonomy and specialist habitat management within the conservation sector. The scheme is currently funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and previously the Heritage Lottery Fund. There are 60 trainees to date, many of them placed with museums across the UK where they receive expert mentoring, guidance and access to museum collections to develop their skills. Over 90% of trainees are employed in the sector, and over 30,000 individuals have engaged with the trainees through outreach and training delivered as part of the scheme.

Keywords: museum collections, Natural Talent, public outreach, taxonomic skills shortage, TCV, training

Introduction

Natural Talent aims to increase expertise across the whole of the UK to protect our less well known species and create awareness of the habitats that support them. The programme responds to identified skills shortages in the conservation sector (CIEEM, 2011a, 2011b) by providing trainees with the opportunity to develop expertise in a specific taxonomic group, habitat or a mixture of both. Natural Talent also increases the capacity of volunteers and communities to play an active role in surveying, mapping, and taking action to increase the biodiversity value of their local places.

Natural Talent Traineeships

Natural Talent is currently funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and previously by the Heritage Lottery Fund. There have been 60 trainees since 2006, working on a wide range of taxonomic groups including Hymenoptera (bees, wasps, ants and sawflies), fungi, and lichens; and

specialist habitats such as brownfield sites, saline lagoons, and upland freshwater habitats. There are six trainees currently in post, and many of them are placed with museums across the UK, where they receive expert mentoring, guidance, and access to museum collections to develop their specialist skills.

Museum collections play a key role in the training and development of naturalist skills. Access to reference collections and specialist literature is an essential resource for anyone wishing to learn how to confidently and correctly identify species. This combined with the willingness of museum staff and expert volunteers to share their knowledge with the trainees forms a fundamental part of the continued success of the scheme. Natural Talent trainees have a unique opportunity to experience the colourful, inspirational, and diverse world of museums behind the scenes. Gaining experience in both a museum and field setting has resulted in highly skilled professionals on completion of their traineeships. The relationship that Natural Talent

had built up over the years with museums, and the outstanding trainees that museums produce, has encouraged TCV to ensure that all trainees visit a museum at some stage during their traineeship.

Outcomes

Over 90% of previous participants are now employed in the sector and 11 have undertaken PhDs, which is testament to how desirable these skills are within the sector.

The scheme has been hugely successful in delivering its outcomes. Expertise across the UK in specialist taxonomic groups and habitats has increased. There is more widespread recording as a direct result, which is essential since basic distribution information is necessary to inform conservation measures. Other successes include improved local action to protect local biodiversity. For example, providing training and support for local communities in projects that encourage wildflower meadow planting; and encouraging communities in Edinburgh to use lichens as a way of measuring the air quality. Natural Talent has been successful in building partnerships between the environment and heritage sectors. Trainees have disseminated their skills to members of the public and professionals within the sector. Since 2014, over 30,000 individuals from all walks of life have engaged with the trainees through outreach and training delivered as part of the scheme. Natural Talent owes its success to a rare combination of specialist taxonomic skills and public outreach, and the enthusiasm and commitment of those involved.

Acknowledgements

References

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