

# Oryx

## Ad-hoc or strategic? How to plan and decide on professional development for conservation professionals

By Thirza Loffeld, Tatyana Humle, Susan Cheyne & Simon Black, 30th March 2022

There are many routes into conservation work. We are often presented with the following question: how do I obtain a paid job in conservation? Conservation work involves a wide range of skills, abilities, knowledge and characteristics (also called competences), and professionals often move into different positions throughout their careers. Even once in a paid position, the ongoing developments in our knowledge and understanding of conservation, coupled with technological innovations and rapid global change, make it imperative for professionals to regularly update their competences.



We initially set out to map which competences conservation professionals require. Soon after, we changed the course of our research, realising that a long list of competences would bring us limited insights, as no one professional can attain all competences during their career. Many other excellent initiatives have already mapped competences for protected area practitioners and for threatened species recovery. Instead, we sought to extrapolate those insights that could be beneficial to anyone working towards nature conservation goals, and help them answer: how do I

(or my organization) plan and decide on which professional development to dedicate my time, effort and money to?

Our **findings**, summarized in an effectiveness framework (Fig. 1), can help conservationists and organizations assess the quality of existing professional development initiatives and design such initiatives themselves. We used the term professional development to indicate the active process of growth and development an individual undertakes in their professional life across their entire career. It includes a range of approaches, activities and interventions, as well as the surrounding context and available resources that support this process.



Fig 1: Effectiveness framework for professional development, adapted from a framework for education (Campbell et al., 2017). This framework comprises three higher-order themes and seven key components, indicating how higher level components encompass and set prerequisites for effective professional development. This framework is derived from interviews with 22 conservation professionals. Right: Staff training at Borneo Nature Foundation International, Sebangau National Park, Kalimantan, Indonesia. Photo: Susan Cheyne

We conducted in-depth interviews with 22 conservationists of a total of 12 nationalities. They all had professional conservation work experience in high biodiversity countries where capacity and access to resources are limited (in Africa, Latin America and developing regions in Asia). We then examined what made professional development effective in their eyes and thematically analysed responses to identify commonalities (Fig. 1). Our findings revealed that very few of the professional development initiatives that our respondents had experienced or observed were data-driven and evidence-informed. Some even referred to these initiatives as tick box exercises with little or no follow up to check whether participants had actually learned anything. Our study contributes to building an evidence base to inform current and future professional development initiatives.



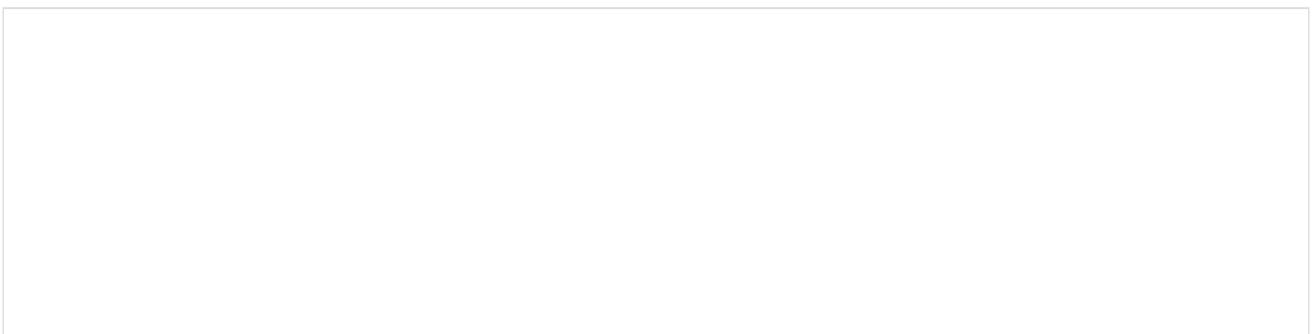
Training in genetic sampling of chimpanzee faeces for DNA analysis, and GPS, for young primatologists, all recent university graduates, by a national NGO, Guinée Ecologie, in Guinea, West Africa. Photos: Tatyana Humle

Lifelong learning is not a luxury when working in nature conservation: it is a necessity. There are opportunities that are available to conservation professionals. These, however, may not reach everyone in our global conservation workforce, especially those working in remote areas or in isolation, with limited means to connect with other experts. We argue that in our conservation workforce we should create and support a learner's agency, and provide equal and inclusive opportunities and access to professional development, so that all who work towards nature conservation goals can perform their job to the best of their abilities whilst progressing in their desired career.

As one of our respondents shared, "Standardize evaluations to whatever extent is possible. Because otherwise we are spending all of our time tweaking, when we could be spending all of our time expanding our reach. So I think that that's very important and I think we need to share relentlessly."

Help us distribute our findings across the global conservation workforce by sharing this open access research with your networks.

The article [Professional development in conservation: an effectiveness framework](#) is available in *Oryx—The International Journal of Conservation*.





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