

Reflections on a Career in Ecology

by Jon Davies
& Paola Reason

Everyone's career is different. But in this article, two of RSK Biocensus' most experienced staff members explain how there are common themes when seeking to make the best of your job

 Issue 2
 10th August 2026
 10 minute read

INTRODUCTION

At the end of March 2026, RSK Biocensus Directors Jon Davies and Paola Reason stepped away from consultancy into a well-deserved (quasi) retirement. In this reflection on their careers, Jon and Paola talk about how their initial work in tropical conservation, along with their subsequent role helping develop Cresswell Associates in the very early days of ecological consultancy, shaped the ecologists they became.

From getting a true sense of how amazingly diverse and beautiful this planet is, through to developing an understanding of how people and institutions work, they understand better than most how to achieve our ecological goals with passion and pragmatism.

JON - THE EARLY YEARS

When we started out in ecology, almost 40 years ago, ecological consultancy barely existed as a career. The Wildlife & Countryside Act had only been around for about a decade or so, and the Habitats Regulations were still being drafted (partly by Boris Johnson's dad, of all people!). So, the regulatory regime that we see today - in which ecology is a key factor in many planning decisions - was very much in its infancy, and there were hardly any ecological consultancies.

Back then a career in ecology largely meant research or conservation, and my early career involved carrying out research into tropical beetle diversity, based out of the newly-founded Biodiversity Division at the Natural History Museum (NHM) in London in the 1990s. After working on beetles across the tropics I'd have to say that if, as an ecologist working in the UK, you think you 'understand' biodiversity, think again; the incredible variety of tropical insects is next level!

The specimens I brought back from Venezuela, Bolivia, Namibia, Tanzania and Laos (see Figure 1 and Figure 2) - all now within the NHM collections - reflect the astonishing variety of life. And never forget that as ecologists we are trying to protect that, to ensure that species that have been on this planet for hundreds of millions of years do not disappear.



Figure 1: Jon with insecticide fogger, Venezuela 1990



Figure 2: And on a hill overlooking Mkomazi Game Reserve, Tanzania

I said that we were around in the early days of consultancy. When I joined Cresswell Associates back in 1996, I was the fourth member of staff; and whenever we went to conferences, we pretty much knew everyone. By the end of my career, I was in an ecology team that was over 200-strong and, at conferences now, maybe I see half a dozen people I know.

This illustrates how massively the industry has grown. This is a good thing - ensuring that nature is properly protected whilst at the same time providing a steady stream of jobs for ecology graduates - but it leads to challenges...



THE IMPORTANCE OF HIGH STANDARDS

Keeping staff up to speed on best practice - from survey techniques to impact assessment and mitigation design - is one of the greatest of these challenges and is of course why RSK Biocensus invests so much in training. But you can't rely on organised training alone; to be a good consultant, it is incumbent on you to do plenty of your own learning.

So, I would recommend to any early career ecologists, to focus your career progression on those habitats or species that you find most interesting; that way, becoming an expert will be rewarding and fun!

And if you want to know why doing things properly is so important, I would urge all ecologists to either attend a Public Inquiry or at least listen in to one (many are live-streamed these days!). This is where any mistakes (surveys at the wrong time of year or using the wrong methodology, key receptors not surveyed, etc.) are picked apart, and it can be the difference between our clients getting consent or not. So best practice is not just a nice-to-have, it's essential.

ADVICE TO YOUNG ECOLOGISTS

If I had any advice for the next generation, especially given the uncertainty around the industry at the moment (the Planning and Infrastructure Act being Exhibit A...), it would be to keep a close eye on how things are changing, and to be agile and innovative. The best strategic moves I made as a leader at RSK Biocensus were to set up RSK Wilding (Figure 3 and Figure 4) (in response to the arrival of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)) and to apply early for Responsible Body status (as soon as it

became apparent that private companies could do this). Both teams are doing brilliantly, and are perfectly positioned to exploit new, and positive opportunities.



Figure 3: The RSK Wilding team engaged in a massive game of pooh sticks during a training away day in the Cotswolds...

Finally, we pretty much all have imposter syndrome. Try to overcome this, and have the confidence to do exciting things that are outside your comfort zone, especially when you're young.



Figure 4: Jon was so proud of his Wilding team he had their logo rendered permanently...

So, if opportunities come your way, seize them (as I did in my tropical days and later with Wilding). Interesting experiences make for more interesting and well-rounded consultants (I'm the exception that proves the rule, clearly...), and even if 'taking a punt' doesn't quite pan out the way you hoped, at least you can learn from the experience!

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PAOLA - THE EARLY DAYS

I joined Cresswell Associates six or so months before Jon; initially, it was just Warren Cresswell, Stephanie Wray and me. Like Jon, my qualifications were in Zoology (BSc) and Conservation (MSc), but I'd also spent some time as a researcher in Bristol University's mammal research team.

We had one flagship project (for what became the M6 Toll), and a handful of smaller ones. I didn't really get out much, but I did almost everything else (including the fledgling accounts), as I came with the key trait: 'organised'.

What really set my direction was having spent months (spread over three years) in the Comoro Islands studying Livingstone's fruit bat (*Pteropus livingstonii*) (Figure 5). The endless variety and specialisms of bats wholly captured my imagination from the start and, without really choosing, became my 'thing'.



Figure 5: Paola working hard in the Comoro Islands.

Two episodes set me firmly on this track: one was that a local trainer helped to secure my first bat licence based on my experiences abroad. The other was taking over a helpline for bat enquiries for several counties on Natural England's behalf. This was a 'seize the day'

moment for our consultancy; the service in place wasn't working, and Steph offered our services as 'BatLine'. From that day, my understanding grew pretty rapidly (bats and people). It was a tough old time though; matching householders with our network of wonderful volunteers often required evening work after a long day... I ran that service until 2007 (growing to service twelve counties with a support team of two).

LICENSING AND GUIDANCE

Licensing was in its infancy; although everyone had personal licences to work on protected species, there was a legal challenge in the early 2000s which changed everything. The challenge related to how the Habitats Directive had been applied in the UK, and was raised in relation to great crested newts (*Triturus cristatus*), but meant that the outcome applied to all European Protected Species. From that point on, licensing became more complicated and prescriptive to the point that it has become, to all intents and purposes, broken (not just my view).

Alongside that, more and more guidance has been produced to encourage best practice; all with the good intentions of weeding out the inexperienced and the rogues who might be tempted to cut corners. It does happen... But in focussing so much on those individuals, we have contributed, unwittingly, to a culture which is process-heavy and neglects to consider the 'so what' principle. That principle is key: always ask yourself 'why am I doing this, and what difference could it make?'.

We - practitioners, planners and regulators - definitely need more of this in our industry! So, even at the beginning of your career, ask your project manager those questions. Be clear what you are doing and why, and how it fits into the bigger picture.



“Always ask yourself:
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GROWING AS A CONSULTANT

Jon is quite right about career progression; my mantra is ‘don’t assume that everything that is work-related should be paid for by your employer’. It is much easier to absorb new information if it is a subject that fascinates you! Equally, don’t assume that the hard stuff (e.g. legislation and policy) is for someone else to understand and spoon-feed you with. The best way to learn is to try and explain something to someone else, and to use that information in your work. In all honesty, it’s how I came to be regarded as a specialist: I was interested enough to learn and then to share. From small beginnings (BatLine) came the first bat courses Steph and I taught to consultants (for the Bat Conservation Trust), and then eventually to the Bat Mitigation Guidelines...



Paola has formally been on the Technical Review Board since Issue 3 (credit BCT)

Guidance prompted by reroofing projects that drove Paola (and others) crazy (credit BCT)

Paola's legacy to the bat world (credit CIEEM)

If you want to hear more, access my ‘VOICE OF REASON’ talk here (£10 fee to BCT) for a dose of pragmatism in our approach to bat work: <https://learn.bats.org.uk/courses/Voice-of-Reason>

CONCLUSIONS

Finally, from both of us, don’t forget how lucky you are to be working in ecology; we certainly never took that for granted. Ecology is a vocation not a job. And whilst it can be challenging, the hours can be long and your accountant friends will likely be paid more, it is definitely fun and rewarding. And the people are great!

Of course, there has never been a more important time to use your energy and skills to help protect and restore nature - in the UK and beyond - and indeed to reverse biodiversity loss. In many ways, climate and biodiversity are inextricably linked, so you will be doing your bit to save the planet, in more ways than one...

So, make the most of your career in ecology, enjoy your work, be the best you can be, and do all you can to be an engaging, hard-working and passionate advocate for nature.

Key Takeaway:

*The most successful careers in ecology are built on **curiosity**, continual **learning** and a willingness to **embrace** new opportunities. Technical expertise matters, but so too do **passion**, **pragmatism** and never losing sight of the **bigger picture**; protecting and restoring nature.*



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jon Davies BSc MSc CEcol Env FCIEEM began his career carrying out research into tropical beetle diversity at the Natural History Museum in London, working in places such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Namibia, Tanzania and Laos. He moved sideways into ecological consultancy in 1996, and has been there ever since, assessing the ecological impacts of development and designing mitigation measures.

He led the Arcadis Ecology Team for four years before joining RSK Biocensus and setting up RSK Wilding. This team, now 25-strong, has a focus on delivering habitat restoration, especially through Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) a mandatory requirement for developers in the UK.

Jon retired at the end of March but will continue supporting a savannah restoration project in Africa called WildeBeef, as well as completing a travelogue/popular science book about his tropical adventures and beetle research called "Beetlemania: my life with the fab four (million)".



Paola Reason BSc MSc CEcol CEnv FCIEEM MIEMA SpDipEM's first ecology job was in Bristol University's Mammal Research Group, in the lab next-door to where Gareth Jones ran the 'BatLab'; a sign of things to come perhaps. After several years focussed on Action Comores, the organisation she co-founded to study and conserve Livingstone's fruit bats, she also (somewhat haphazardly) stepped into ecological consultancy in 1995. She remained at Cresswell/Hyder/Arcadis through various acquisitions until 2019 when she moved to RSK Biocensus to take on a similar role.

Also sort-of retired, Paola continues to work on high-profile projects such as HS2 and is taking on the odd Public Inquiry.

Paola is a member of Infrastructure and Ecology Network Europe (IENE)'s Scientific and Expert Committee and (to her great surprise) made the ENDS 2024 Power List as an influential environmental consultant. She was also CIEEM's (joint) Member of the Year in 2021.

Photo Credit - Jon Davies, Paola Reason, RSK Biocensus

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Biocensus Insights is a thought leadership article series from RSK Biocensus, bringing together ideas, experience and evidence from across the ecology profession. Through articles written by our own colleagues, we explore the challenges, innovations and opportunities shaping the future of ecology and nature recovery.



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