

The background of the entire page is a photograph of two young people sitting on the floor, looking into a large, brightly lit aquarium tank. The tank is filled with a diverse coral reef ecosystem, including various types of coral, sea anemones, and small fish. The lighting is a mix of blue and purple, creating a vibrant underwater scene. The young people are wearing dark-colored clothing with reflective yellow and orange stripes. The person on the left has a black patch on their back with the text 'ZOO ACADEMY STUDENT' in white. The person on the right is wearing a dark hoodie with reflective stripes.

Young People's Perspectives on Conservation Careers

**A Co-Produced Study by the ZSL Youth
Advisory Board and Careers Team**

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a co-produced research study conducted by ZSL and our Youth Advisory Board, focused on understanding potential barriers to the equitable access of careers in the conservation sector. Despite a growing focus on diversity, inclusion and equitable practice across conservation, the environmental sector remains one of the least ethnically diverse industries in the UK. This lack of representation is reflected within ZSL itself, where staff from ethnic minority backgrounds and those with disabilities are currently underrepresented compared to national averages.

Motivated by these disparities and informed by direct conversations with participants in ZSL's youth careers programmes, this study aimed to investigate the perceived barriers faced by young people—particularly from underrepresented groups—seeking to enter the conservation sector. Through a mixed-methods approach, involving a survey and focus groups with 16-25 year olds in the UK, we heard from over 150 young people, capturing a wide range of experiences and perspectives. Our findings below highlight the key barriers that were discussed, the differences that we found between the responses across demographic groups and some actionable recommendations to support a more inclusive, diverse, and accessible conservation workforce.

Key Findings

- **Interest in the sector:** 83% of participants expressed interest in conservation careers, though interest was significantly higher among those from white backgrounds compared to participants from the global majority. Interest in wildlife conservation specifically notably increased with age and educational level, suggesting early engagement on this part of the sector is crucial.
- **Barriers to the sector:** Nine key themes emerged as barriers to accessing the sector:
 - **Job Scarcity and Competition:** The most commonly cited barrier was the limited number of jobs available, compounded by high competition.
 - **Pay and Financial Considerations:** Pay was a significant concern, especially for those already working or studying in the sector. While it may not deter initial interest, low pay and reliance on unpaid volunteering create barriers to sustained engagement and access.
 - **Exposure and Education:** Many young people lack sufficient knowledge about the range of careers available in conservation, often limiting their career aspirations to well-known roles such as zookeepers or veterinary staff.
 - **Specific skills, qualifications & experience required:** There was a widespread perception that high qualification were required to access the sector, alongside unrealistic levels of experience and skills to access even entry level roles.
 - **Lack of opportunities to gain sector specific skills:** Those interested in the sector cited that there are very few opportunities to gain the extensive hands-on experience required to access the sector

- **Lack of mentorship, networks and guidance:** Participants felt that a lack of mentorship and networks—especially among young people from global majority backgrounds—and limited family support can significantly hinder career interest and progression in conservation, underscoring the need for inclusive guidance and engagement.
- **Location and Accessibility:** Transport and accessibility challenges were particularly pronounced for participants with disabilities or neurodiversity.
- **Fear and frustration:** Fear of the unknown, concerns about lack of representation, and the high stakes and stress associated with conservation roles were all highlighted as things that can discourage young people—especially from minority backgrounds—from pursuing careers in the sector.
- **Perceptions of Rewarding Work:** The sector is broadly perceived as rewarding, though this perception varies by demographic factors including ethnicity, religion, and mental health status. Fulfilment and a sense of purpose could often outweigh financial incentives for many participants.

Recommendations

To address these barriers and foster a more equitable sector, our report recommends a number of key actions to be taken by conservation organisations:

- Emphasise and promote **representative examples** of people thriving in different roles across the sector – providing young people with role models in the sector
- When promoting roles, **highlight** aspects that different people find **rewarding**
- Run career **inspiration & engagement** programmes, illustrating the variety of roles in the sector
- Create **free to access** opportunities for interested young people to gain sector specific skills
- Create more **paid entry level roles**, valuing lived experience in their recruitment
- Highlight in recruitment all the **support available at the organisation** for a diverse workforce
- Create a **supportive network** of young people
- Undertake **further research** to understand the nuances of differences between different demographics

Conclusion and Next Steps

This co-produced research underscores the importance of centering youth voices in understanding and dismantling barriers to careers in conservation. While structural challenges such as job scarcity and sector pay scales are difficult to change rapidly, there are clear opportunities to improve inclusivity through targeted outreach, support, and role diversification. ZSL is committed to implementing these recommendations, alongside ongoing dialogue with young people and sector partners, to build a conservation workforce that truly reflects the diversity of society.

For more detailed findings, data, and insights, please refer to the full report. We welcome engagement, questions, and collaboration to further this vital work.

About this research

ZSL & Training Conservationists

We're ZSL, a science-driven conservation charity working to restore wildlife in the UK and around the world. We work to help wildlife and people thrive together. Guided by a scientific approach and passion for nature, we lead conservation, shape agendas and influence change to protect and restore nature.

One of the four key pillars of our work is Training Conservationist for the future. We share skills and knowledge to build a movement of conservationists equipped with the expertise, tools and networks to protect and restore wildlife. From pre-school to professors, we train, mentor and upskill the next generation of wildlife advocates and conservationists, to continue the fight for wildlife and protection of the natural world.

Opportunity to gain skills, knowledge and experience in conservation action hinges on creating equitable access to the conservation sector. It is imperative we increase the range of people choosing a career in our sector. We believe that for wildlife to thrive we all need to thrive. Diversifying who joins us in our work will strengthen our collective impact, bringing in a wider range of perspectives, skills and experiences, which can enhance creativity, innovation and decision-making.

OUR 2030 GOALS

- To increase global conservation capability by supporting more than three million young people and 5,000 career professionals in their development.
- To support 2,000 young people from underrepresented backgrounds to gain employment in conservation through mapped career pathways.

The ZSL Youth Advisory Board

The ZSL Youth Advisory Board was launched in summer 2023 to bring youth voices to the forefront of shaping ZSL's future. Comprising twelve voluntary members aged 16-25, the board advises ZSL on incorporating the needs and perspectives of young people into all their work.



Figure 1, ZSL's Youth Advisory Board

Our Mission:

To **unite** and **amplify** diverse youth voice within ZSL and beyond, fostering an **inclusive** and **equitable** future for people and wildlife.

Our Values



Collaborative



Sustainable



Reflective



Equitable



Inclusive



Respectful

Funding through Groundworks & the New to Nature Programme

Following the successful application to host two trainees at London and Whipsnade Zoo, through Groundwork's New to Nature Scheme, we were invited to apply for legacy funding to help embed longer term changes to will help diversify the staff within the organisation.

This research was carried out with this funding, enabling us to better understand the barriers young people from different backgrounds face to entering the sector.

Positionality Statement

We want to acknowledge that we, the ZSL Careers Team and Youth Advisory Board, do not represent all the voices and backgrounds that this research hopes to amplify. The ZSL Careers Team have significant experience working with young people during their early career journey. Through their work they have familiarity with the challenges young people face, which informed the analysis of the data, though they may not have directly experienced these themselves. The members of the Youth Advisory Board who co-produced this research have themselves experienced some of the barriers highlighted in recent time, and used this to inform their approach. This report represents only a snapshot of the broad and intersectional experiences its respondents hold, and must be taken as such.

Motivation and methodology

Motivation for this study

There were multiple factors, both internally and externally that influenced the desire to run this research project.

1. The lack of diversity within the sector

The environmental and conservation sectors are among the least diverse in the UK, with the 2024 Race report emphasising the continuing racial diversity gap between the UK working population and staff in environment, conservation, climate and sustainability charities. (SOS-UK, 2024)

2. ZSL's staff demographics

The makeup of ZSL's staff demographics reflect the sector more broadly. Of the approximately 670 staff across the international organisation, 9% are between 16-25 years old (the focus of the research). Only 13% of our workforce are from global majority groups, below the national average of 18%, and only 7% of our workforce declaring a disability, compared to the national average of 18%.

“Global Majority”

refers to the collective group of people who are Black, Asian, Brown, dual-heritage, indigenous to the global south, representing approximately 80% of the world's population.

3. Other research into “Green Jobs”

Other research, which has investigated young people's perspectives on “green jobs” more generally, has found some interesting trends, such as pay being seen as the top disadvantage to these roles, the roles being seen as the reserve of those who take an ‘academic route’, and young women being less interested in green jobs (Crowhurst & Taylor, 2023). It also appears that although young people view the environment as a top concern, this does not translate into their career choices (Crowhurst & Taylor, 2023).

However, this research tends to look at “green jobs” more broadly than those represented at ZSL. This most often focuses on any job that directly contributes to, or indirectly supports, the achievement of the UK's net zero emissions target, as well as other environmental goals,

such as nature restoration. (Green Jobs Task Force, 2021). As such, we wanted to drill down into animal care and conservation roles more specifically to see if these trends held up.

4. The experiences of the young people we work with

Working with over 1,800 students a year through ZSL’s Careers & Skills Programme, we have hundreds of conversations with young people about their career aspirations. Much of this audience is made up of those currently underrepresented in animal care and conservation – those from low income households, from global majority backgrounds or those with a disability. We know through these anecdotal conversations what some of the reasons are that they’re missing from our sector – a lack of awareness of the diversity of roles possible, a sector wide reliance on unpaid work experience or of them simply not seeing themselves represented. Through this research we wanted to clarify this understanding and explore the reasons more deeply.



Figure 2 Student on a ZSL Careers Course

Our Youth Advisory Board are all at the early stages of their own career journeys and many themselves are from this ‘underrepresented audience’. They have experienced some of the challenges of finding their way and were keen to support the gathering of data to push for change both internally at ZSL and externally in the sector.

Much of what the following report outlines may seem like common sense . However, now that we have the data to back up these feelings, we have more power to push for change, both at ZSL and in the sector more broadly. It also gives us clear directive for further research to explore some of the nuances more clearly.

Methods

We set out to answer three questions:

1. What are the **perceived barriers** to careers in animal care and wildlife conservation?
2. Is there a **difference** in the perceived **barriers** between those of different **demographics**?
3. Is there a correlation between someone’s ‘**nature connectedness**’ and their interest in the **nature-related careers** ZSL represents?

Due to the distinct pathways into each, particularly in terms of level of qualifications required, we decided to separate animal care and conservation roles in our questions. However, we acknowledge that one role can be a pathway into the other, and both may incorporate aspects of each other and work together closely.

Additionally, we acknowledge the veterinary careers play a vital role in both aforementioned sectors. Our research did not specifically investigate barriers to veterinary careers pathways as these are well researched by other institutions like the The Royal Veterinary College (RVC, 2024).

Data was collected between July and December 2024 from 16-25 year olds living in the UK through an online survey (Appendix I), with 129 respondents, and four two-hour long focus groups (Appendix II) with 26 participants. Two additional shorter pulse focus groups were conducted at conferences at Chester and London Zoos to assess how well the responses aligned with broader audiences.

Due to volume of questions asked in our survey, and the number of variables this created, we only employed statistical analysis when we noted interesting differences between those of different demographics. In the most part, we were comparing two nominal variables using a chi-squared test, run through the statistical analysis software JASP. On occasion, a Fisher's exact test was required due to the expected outcomes being less than 5.

Before commencing our data collection, this research went through full approval with the ZSL Human Ethics Committee.

Who did we hear from

We heard from 129 young people through our online survey and spoke to another 26 across our focus groups. Of the 155 young people who participate in the study, we had an even spread across ages from 16 years to 25, as well as respondents at a variety of stages of their education. Around half were already studying a subject or working in a role related to animal care or conservation (42.6%, n=66), while the rest were not. Of those who answered the question, roughly an equal number of participants disclosed a disability (38.7%, n=60/126) as didn't (42.6%, n=56/126), with 'mental health condition' (n=33) or 'neurodiversity' (n=33) being the most commonly selected.

Notably, the sample group include majority female respondents (69.7%, n=108/155). Only 32.9% (n=51/155) of participants were from a global majority background, which, when broken down to individual ethnicities, was too small to draw confident conclusions about the feelings of these different groups. Thus, for the majority of this report, we grouped the perspectives of those from Global Majority backgrounds together. We recognise this risks overlooking the diverse experiences and cultures of this group. The largest non-white ethnicity seen in survey respondents was those from an Asian background (16.0%, n=20/129), so occasionally we drew tentative comparisons between this those from an Asian and those from a white background (67.0%, n=87/129).

The percentage of those working or studying in the sector already was notably much higher amongst participants from a white background (51.7%, n=45) as opposed to those from a global majority background (35.3%, n=8).

A relatively even distribution of responses were attained from residents within (43.4%, n=56/129) versus outside (57.6%, n=73/129) London

The majority of participants cited 'No religion or belief' (54.1%, n=66/122), with the next largest groups being those who cited 'Christian' (20.5%, n=25/122) or 'Muslim' (8.2%, n=10/122) as their religion or belief.

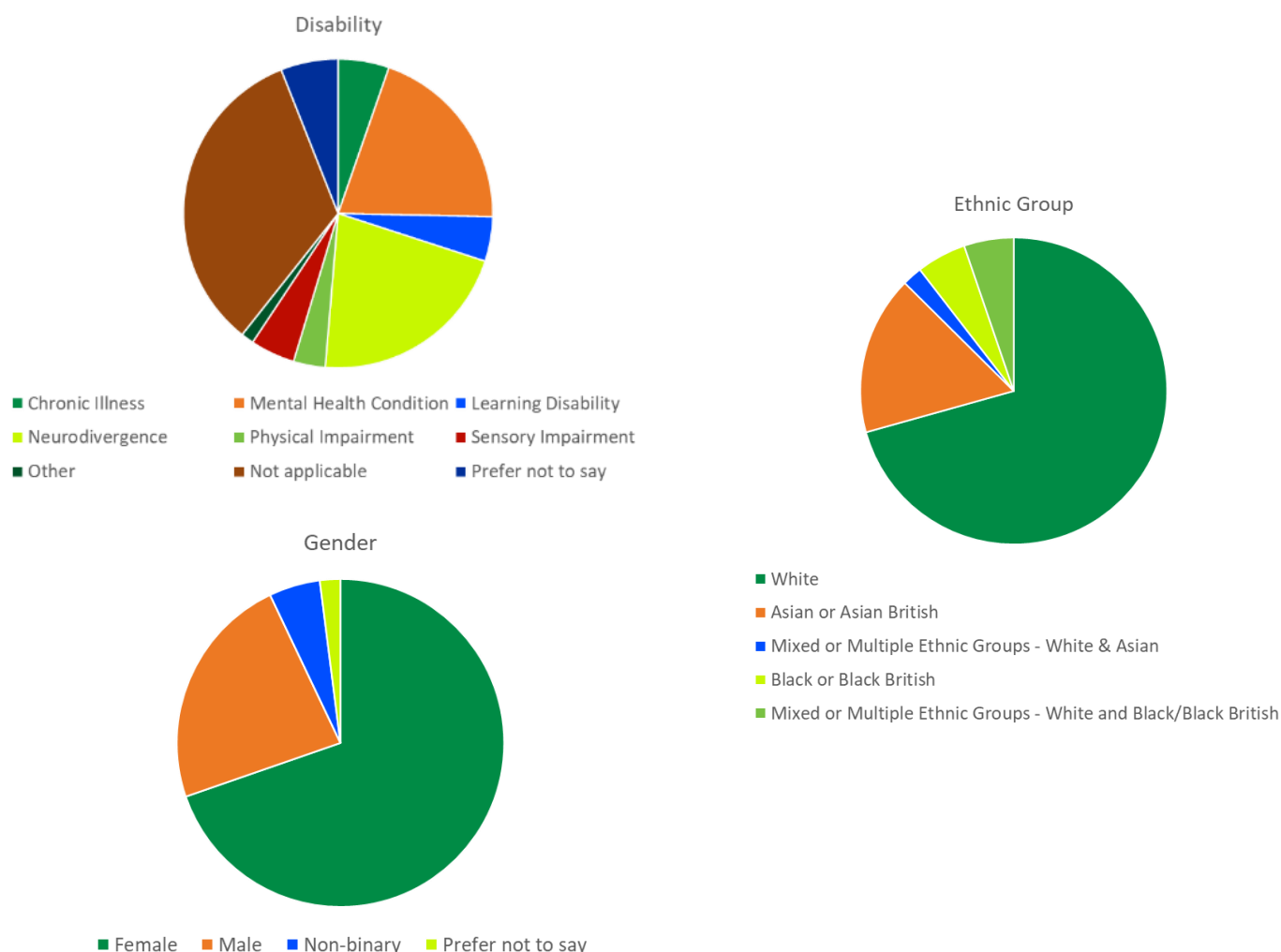


Figure 3 Demographic makeup of a our sample group

In analysis below, survey responses reported are out of a total of 129, unless otherwise specified.

General levels of interest in the sector

Who's interested in the sector?

The first questions we asked survey participants explored their interest in careers in different sectors, as well as in the different aspects of animal care and conservation.

When asked which three sectors they would be most interested in working in, 'Conservation, Agriculture, Forestry or Animal Care' (82.9%, n=107/129) was the most commonly selected answer. This does not reflect other more widescale national surveys of students' interest in careers, which found 'Creative & Media', 'Healthcare' and 'Business & Finance' as the most popular sector amongst 16-year-olds across the UK (Careers and Enterprise Company, 2024). This indicates a strong interest

driven selection bias in those who completed our survey, and must be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

The next most popular sector was 'Science' (46.7%, n=50), followed by 'Education' (16.3%, n=21/129), 'Government and Public Administration' (10.9%, n=14) and 'Health and Social Care' (10.1%, n=13/129). Interestingly there was very little overlap (1.00%) between those interested in our sector and those interested in 'Banking, Finance, Accounting, Real estate or Insurance', industries that can have a large environmental impact. This indicates that environmental organisations need education work around being sustainable in your career to specifically target those not interested in the animal care or conservation sectors if they are to reach these high impact audiences.

Despite potential selection bias, and a small sample size for respondents from global majority backgrounds, statistical significance ($p < 0.001$) was observed between white and global majority backgrounds participants regarding interest in our sector. (see fig. 4)

Those from a white background were significantly more likely to put our sector in their top three (90.8%, n=79) than those from a global majority background (60.7%, n=17). $\chi^2(1) = 9.50$, $p < 0.001$, $\Phi = 0.35$.

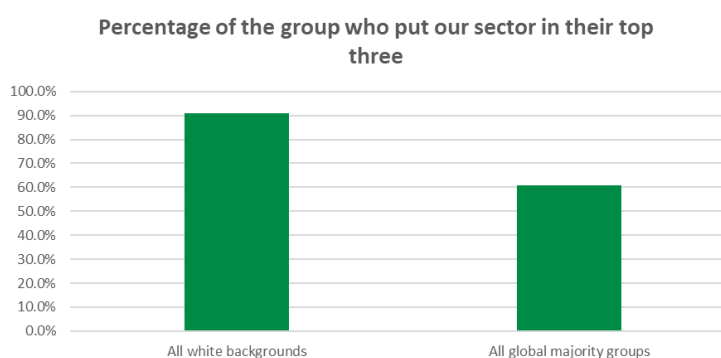


Figure 4 Percentage of survey respondents who put Conservation, agriculture, forestry or animal care' in their top three

Interestingly, participants were more likely to put the sector in their top three if they disclosed a disability or neurodiversity

(12.5% more than those with no disability or neurodiversity). However, this was not found to be statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 1.65$, $p = 0.20$, $\Phi = 0.13$

Which part of the sector are they interested in?

When asked which aspects of the sector participants were interested in - 'Wildlife Conservation', 'Animal Care/Zookeeping', 'Ecology & Environmental Sciences', 'Zoology or Animal Science' or 'Veterinary Care' - 'Wildlife Conservation' came out top (35.1%, n=40), followed by 'Animal Care/Zookeeping' (22.8%, n=26).

When this was broken down by the level of education respondents were at, interest in Wildlife Conservation was lowest at GCSE level, about 15-16 years old, but increased gradually up the education levels, from 13.0% (n=3/23) of the group to 63.4% (n=7/11). In contrast, interest in veterinary was highest amongst those at GCSE level but less amongst the A Level respondents and even more so those at University Level. This potentially reflects the common thought amongst younger students that the one of the few ways to work with animals is to be a vet, but that as students pass up the education levels they may become more aware of different possibilities within the sector. It also emphasises the need to engage with students earlier than GCSE level to showcase the variety of career pathways possible, before they make critical decisions around A Levels and potential further study. (See fig 5)

Participants showed similarly low levels of interest in ‘Ecology and Environmental Sciences’ at GCSE level, which only marginally increased amongst those at university level,. This may perhaps indicate similar levels of targeted secondary aged careers engagement are needed for this aspect of the sector.

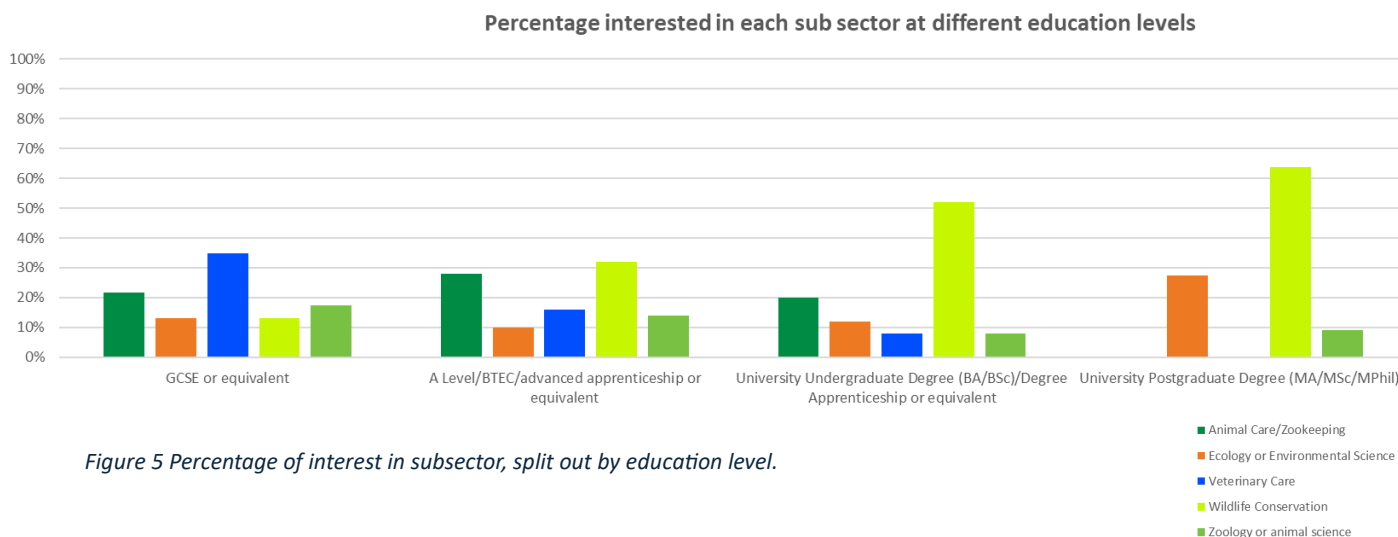


Figure 5 Percentage of interest in subsector, split out by education level.

When these results were split out by ethnic background, those from a white background were much more likely to be interested in ‘Wildlife Conservation’ (by 20.7%, n=29) and ‘Animal Care/Zookeeping’ (by 17.2%, n=20). However, global majority participants were much more likely to select ‘Ecology and Environmental Science’ (26.3% more than those of a white background, n=3). Of those who chose ‘Ecology and Environmental Sciences’, a large percentage of respondents were from an Asian Background (41.7% n=5/12). These differences may not be representative of the wider population, but should be further researched to understand why certain parts of our sector may be more interesting to different communities

Other perspectives on the sector

Out of the five subsectors, respondents felt ‘Wildlife Conservation’ and ‘Animal Care/Zookeeping’ were much less achievable, scoring on average 3.25 and 3.23 out of five respectively for how much participants agreed with the statement ‘*This career feels very achievable*’. These parts of the sector were also where participants felt least like they had the correct skills for the sector, or that they had gained the correct training or qualifications for this career during their education.

For those not already working or studying in the something related to the sector, there was on average disagreement with the statement ‘*I am clear on the next steps I need to take to work towards this career*’ when it came to those interested in Animal Care/Zookeeping, Wildlife Conservation & Zoology or Animal Sciences.

This illustrates that more work is needed to inform people on the steps to get into our sector. Career engagement programmes need to better illustrate the skills useful for animal care and conservation, particularly the transferrable skills that young people may already have developed through school and extra curriculars.

Perceived barriers to careers in animal care and conservation

Across our focus groups, participants discussed a number of factors that may be barriers to themselves or other's accessing careers in the animal care and conservation sector. We have grouped these into nine themes, which we used to explore our survey data, illustrating each with relevant data from survey respondents and quotes from our focus groups.

Job scarcity and competition

The strongest barrier indicated from the survey data was that of job scarcity and competition. Over 70.0% of participants rated the sector as competitive or very competitive (Animal Care: 78.3%, n=101), Wildlife Conservation: 72.9%, n=94). (See figure 6).

When asked what they would consider a barrier to working in animal care or conservation, the top chosen answer was *'There are not enough of these jobs around'*, chosen by 51.2% (n=66) in terms of Animal Care and 57.0% (n=74) in terms of Wildlife Conservation.

'There are not many of these jobs where I live' was the second most popular choice in terms of Wildlife Conservation (45.0%, n=58) and the third most popular choice in terms of Animal Care (41.1%, n=53).

"Every day it's people with PhDs, with Master's in biology, whatever, very relevant degrees, struggling to get entry level jobs and just complaining about how ridiculous this all is. There's no opportunities."

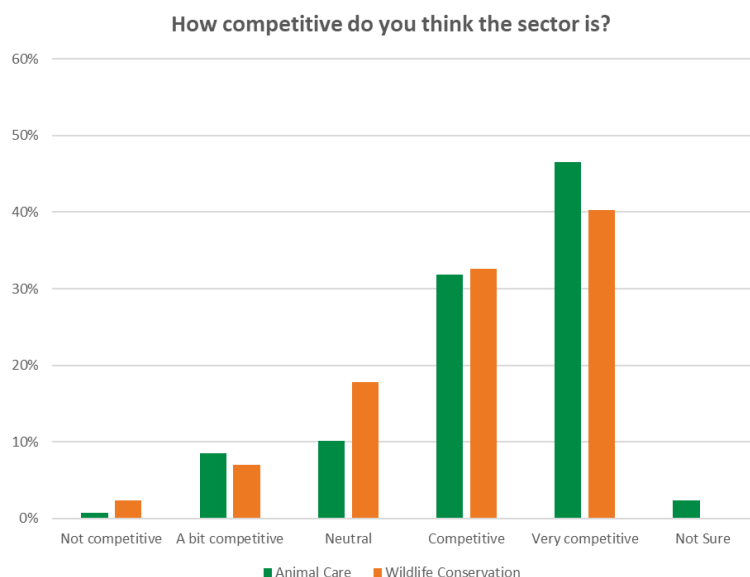


Figure 6 How competitive participants felt that Animal Care and Wildlife Conservation are

This challenge was raised by multiple members of our focus groups but particularly emphasised by those participants already studying or working in the sector and can also be seen illustrated by our Case Studies. Young people voiced that this scarcity of roles means that only those with a great deal of previous experience can access even jobs supposedly 'entry level'. This reduces the diversity of those who are recruited into these roles to those who recognise their interest incredibly early, have the disposable time and income to seek extracurricular and often unpaid experience, and work themselves to their maximum capacity.

Interestingly, those from global majority backgrounds were significantly less likely to see both Animal Care sector and Wildlife Conservation as competitive than those of white backgrounds (11.4% fewer chose ‘competitive’ and 20.95% fewer chose ‘very competitive’). This was found to be significant in both cases when using a chi-squared test, which indicated a strong effect in the case of Animal Care ($\chi^2(1) = 9.210, p=0.002, \Phi=0.340$) but only a weak effect for Wildlife Conservation ($\chi^2(1) = 4.252, p=0.039, \Phi=0.12$).

There was very little difference seen in the responses when grouped by whether an individual was working or studying in the sector already or not, so this can’t be used to account for this difference in the perspectives of different ethnicities. This would warrant further research to understand the perspective better.

Financial support

Pay as a barrier to the sector



The second barrier emphasized most strongly by our focus groups, as well as the survey data, was pay. When asked what would make participants more interested in working in the sector, ‘*Knowing it would pay me well*’ was the most chosen answer (57.4%, n=74).

When asked what they consider potential barriers to working in Animal Care, ‘*I don't think it would pay enough*’ was second most frequently selected choice (48.8%, n=63). It came fifth in potential barriers to Wildlife Conservation (33%, n=43).

In both cases this is higher than research has found for “green jobs” more generally, where only 25% of participants identified poor pay as a key barrier, which in that case was the most selected choice (Crowhurst & Taylor, 2023).

Difference in perception of those in and out of the sector

However, the picture is slightly more complicated than this. Those studying or working in the sector already were significantly more likely to see it as poorly paid than those not. When asked about

Animal Care, 18% more of those in the sector already saw it as poorly paid than those not (n=8). This was found to be statistically significant when run through a chi-squared test, $\chi^2(1) = 4.97$, $p=0.03$, $\Phi=-0.21$, showing a weak relationship between whether someone works or studies in the sector already and how poorly paid they feel the sector is (See figure 7). A similar difference was seen when asking in relation to Wildlife Conservation, though wasn't found to be significant, $\chi^2(1) = 3.083$, $p=0.08$.

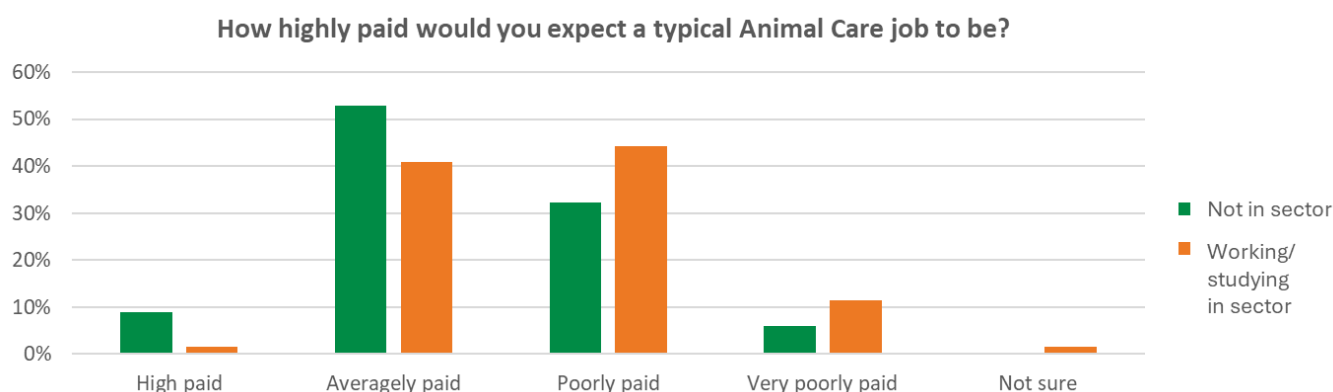


Figure 7 How highly paid survey participants in and out of the sector felt jobs in the Animal Care

This same pattern was seen in the focus groups, with those who had little experience or knowledge of the sector being unsure whether it was well paid or not, and those already in the sector expressing the challenges they foresaw with continuing to pursue their career.

This indicates that perceptions poor pay may not be deterring an interest in the sector, but once people are interested and begin to take steps into these career pathways, it very quickly becomes a potential barrier to those without a wider support system, enabling them to access these low paid roles.

Though pay is clearly an important issue, in our focus groups it wasn't the first thing that came up as influencing people's career decisions. Many participants expressed that, though a minimum threshold of financial stability is vital to provide for themselves and their families, beyond this they can prioritise happiness in their career, seeking reward from it in another way. We have explored perceptions of how rewarding the sector is in our 'Potential Solutions' section below.

"Money is a topic that you can't really avoid. But ultimately, if it came down to it, if I could sustain myself and then like that was like the most [...] money that I would get, I would [rather] be comfortable and be very happy in my career as opposed to like being super rich and like very unhappy."

Pay as a barrier to accessing experience

Aside from perceptions of pay within the sector, financial support is also a clear barrier to young people accessing the practical experience required to gain sector specific skills. As articulated by our case studies, practical experience is a vital prerequisite of many entry level roles in the sector, with unpaid volunteering being the most common opportunities available.

When we asked those survey participants who hadn't volunteered anywhere in the past year for their reasons, the most common response was *'I don't have time/can't afford to do unpaid work'* (n=15/25), followed by *'I don't want to do unpaid work'* (n=7/25).

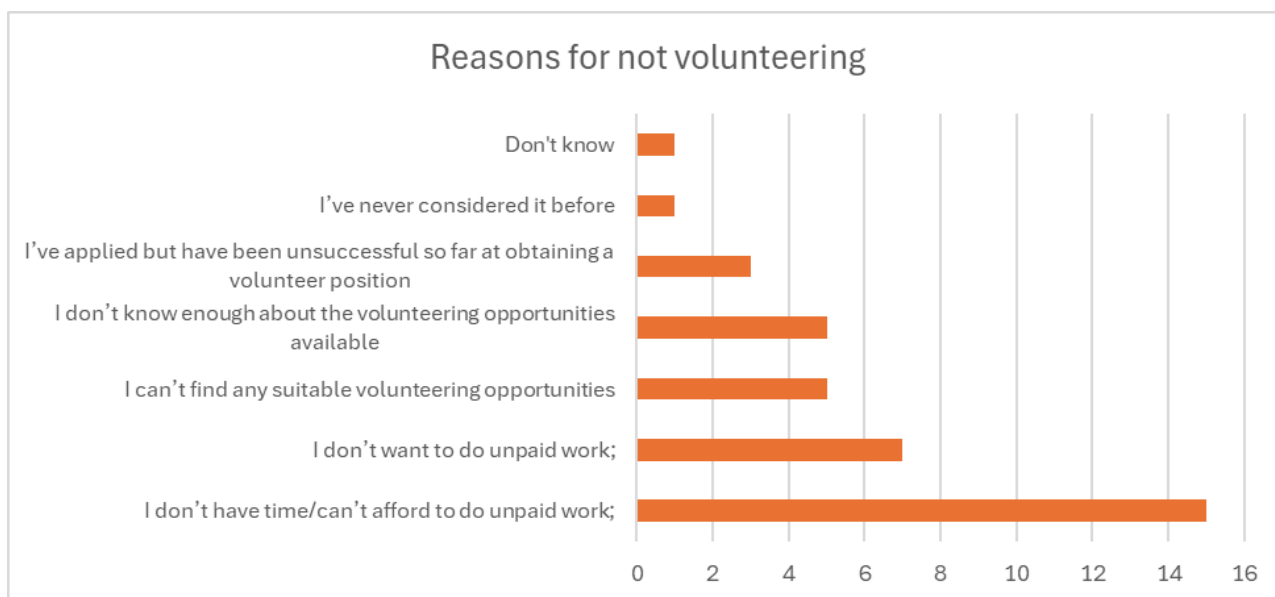


Figure 8 Participants reasons for not volunteering in the past year

Many survey respondents further voiced the challenge to finding the time and money to undertake unpaid volunteering when given the opportunity to at the end of the survey.

"Volunteering always seems to be essential, but I do not have time to volunteer with a full-time job"

Survey respondent

"I really want to work in conservation but it's so difficult to find volunteering roles which don't cost a ridiculous amount to do and then those that can afford to do those volunteering opportunities get prioritised for jobs"

Survey respondent

"Even just volunteer roles can be very, very competitive."

Focus group attendees also highlighted that even these unpaid volunteering roles can be highly competitive, and require pre-existing experience to access.

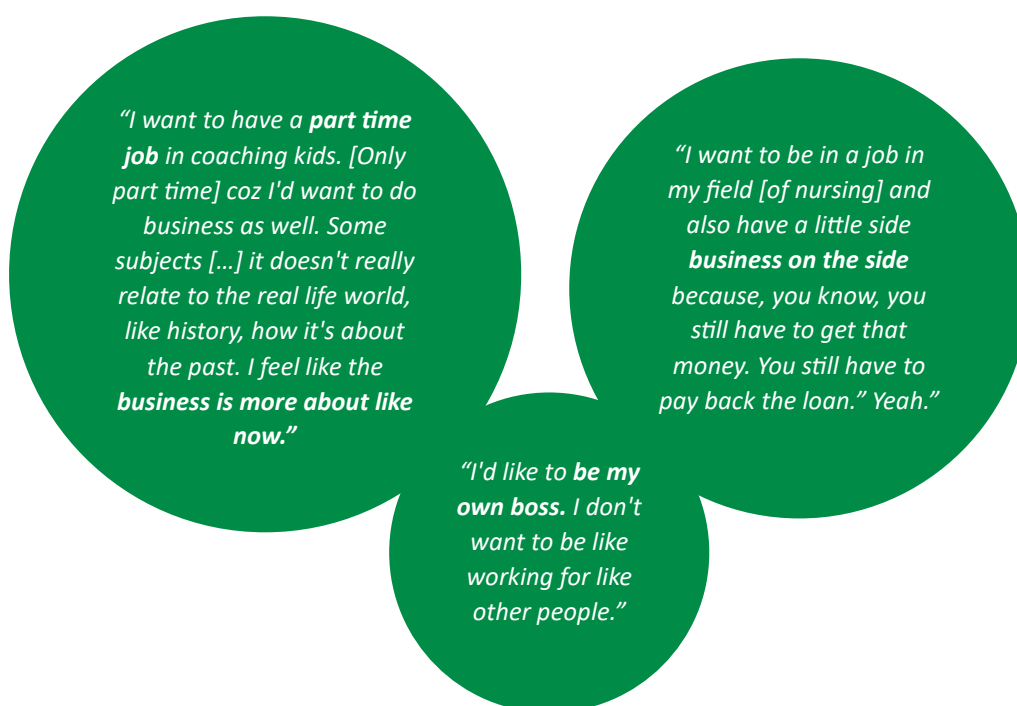
The theme of volunteering being inaccessible but vital was emphasised in one of our short pulse focus groups run at Chester Zoo Youth Summit. This was populated by young people either eager to

enter or already in the early stages of their careers in the sector, and the majority expressed how challenging it was to find and then make time for volunteer work.

Conservation and financial independence

Amongst our final focus group, which was run in partnership with Voyage Youth, an East London Charity who work with socially disadvantaged and excluded youth, there was a common desire from many of the participants to understand the inner workings of business and ultimately be their own boss. This focus group was entirely made up of young black Londoners, a group commonly missing from the conservation sector, none of whom had an interest in our sector. They indicated that an interest in conservation was completely at odds with an interest in business, and that it wouldn't be a pathway that would let them be in control of their own financial destiny.

This wasn't something that came up strongly in any of the other focus groups.



Lack of exposure and education

Responses from both focus group participants and our survey highlighted that a key barrier to both interest in and access to the conservation sector is simply that young people don't know enough about it or the jobs available.

In the two focus groups where attendees had no interest or experience of conservation, lack of awareness about the possibilities in the sector was suggested to be the biggest barrier to access.

For those survey respondents who didn't put our sector in the top three they'd like to work in in the future, *"I haven't thought about it before"* (26.7%, n=4/15), *"I don't know enough about it"* (20.0%, n=3/15) and *"It's not realistic for me"* (20.0%, n=3/15) were the top reasons selected (see figure 9).

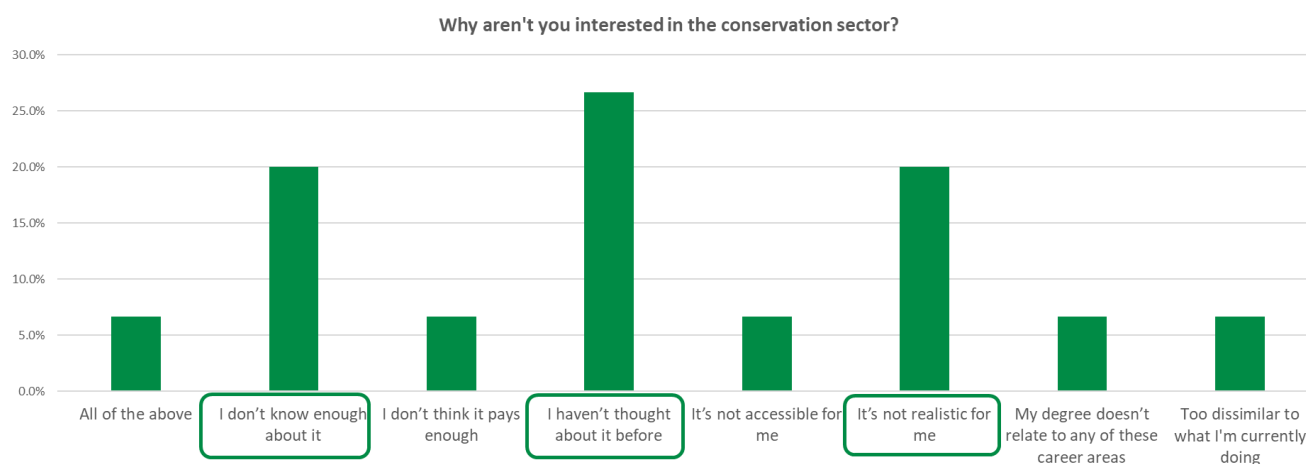


Figure 9 Reasons why participants weren't interested in the conservation sector

There were only fifteen respondents in this group in total, so conclusions drawn from breaking it down further into demographic groups can't be held with much confidence, but those from a global majority background were most likely to select 'I haven't thought about it before' (n=4/8 respondents), whereas none from a white background chose this. Those from a white background were more likely to select 'It's not realistic for me' (3/6). This indicates that perhaps those from a white background are more likely to have been exposed to the sector, or to at least feel they know enough to discount it.

Familiarity with different jobs in the sector

In both focus groups and survey, we investigated participants familiarity with different jobs in the sector.

For survey participants, the jobs that were most familiar were:

- **Zookeeper** – 79.8% (n=103) of participants had “personal experience of this job” or “could confidently describe what they do”
- **Vet Nurse** - 63.6% (n=82) of participants had “personal experience of this job” or “could confidently describe what they do”
- **Wildlife Vet** – 62.0% (n=80) of participants had “personal experience of this job” or “could confidently describe what they do”

The jobs they were least familiar with were:

- **Sustainable Business Partnerships Manager** – 68.9% (n=89) of participants cited they had “never heard of before” or had “heard of but not sure what they do”.
- **Policy Specialist** – 63.6% (n=82) of participants cited they had “never heard of before” or had “heard of but not sure what they do”.

- **Conservation Technologist** - 61.2% (n=79) of participants cited they had “never heard of before” or had “heard of but not sure what they do”.

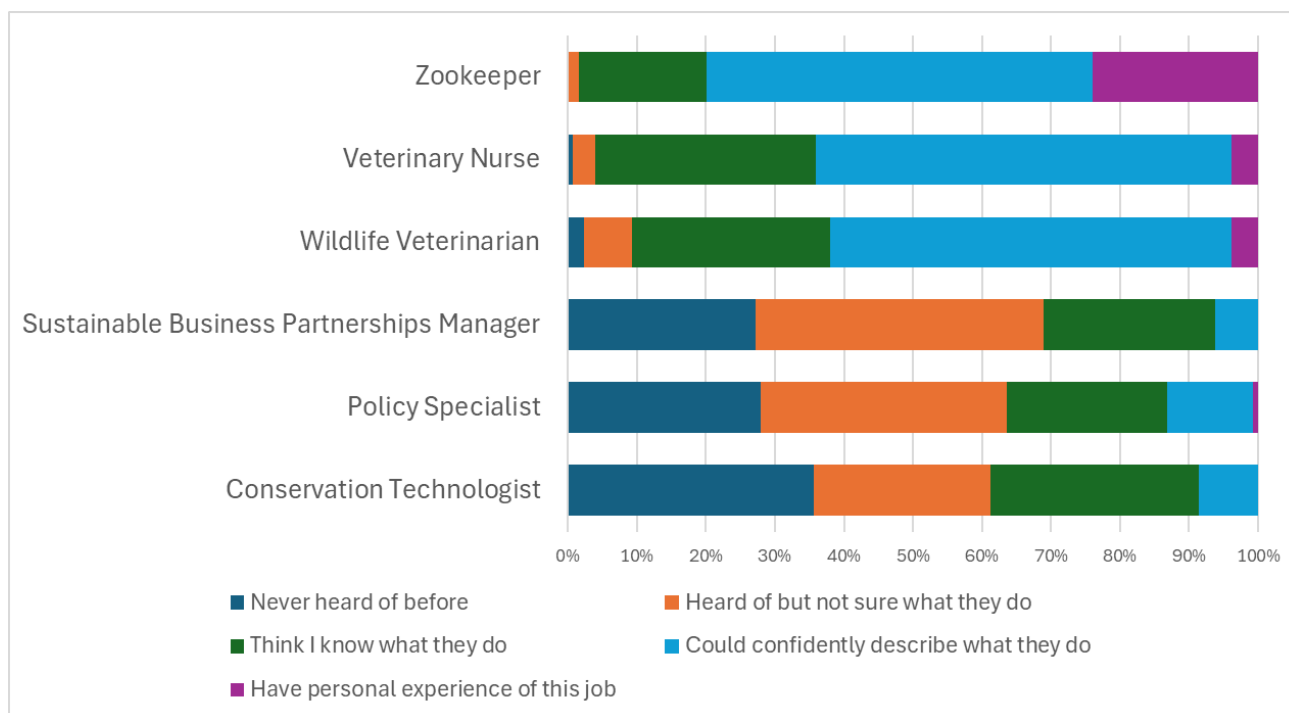


Figure 10 The three jobs roles survey participants were most and least familiar with

In our focus groups, where 80.1% (n=21/26) of participants had little to no experience of the sector, the main jobs highlighted as unfamiliar were:

- Policy specialist
- Pathologist
- Science Communicator

Interestingly, those jobs participants are least familiar with are those which require a very different skill set to those more familiar. Promoting a wider variety of roles in the sector, with broad skills required, will be an important way to highlight different ways in, for different types of people.

*“I feel like **not enough exposure**, especially in like secondary school, because that's like the stage that you start **picking what you want to do** and there's **not enough education** on the different types of jobs and job roles.”*

“I think that careers in wildlife conservation are absolutely amazing and I wish more information was available on how to get into them, as they don't seem very accessible”
– survey respondent

Specific skills, qualifications & experience required

Qualifications seen as a barrier to entry

Across focus group and survey respondents, it was thought that you need a high level of qualifications to access roles in both animal care and conservation.

A total of 41.9% (n=52) of survey participants thought that you require a foundation or bachelors degree to access careers in **Animal Care**. Another 19.4% (n=24) thought you required a postgraduate degree.

In terms of **Wildlife Conservation**, 48.4% (n=62) thought that a foundation degree was the highest level of education required for the sector, whereas 34.4% (n=44) felt you also needed a post graduate qualification. (See figure 11)

*"I think almost all of these need an academic degree and you need, like, at least **extensive experience** to be able to be in that role."*

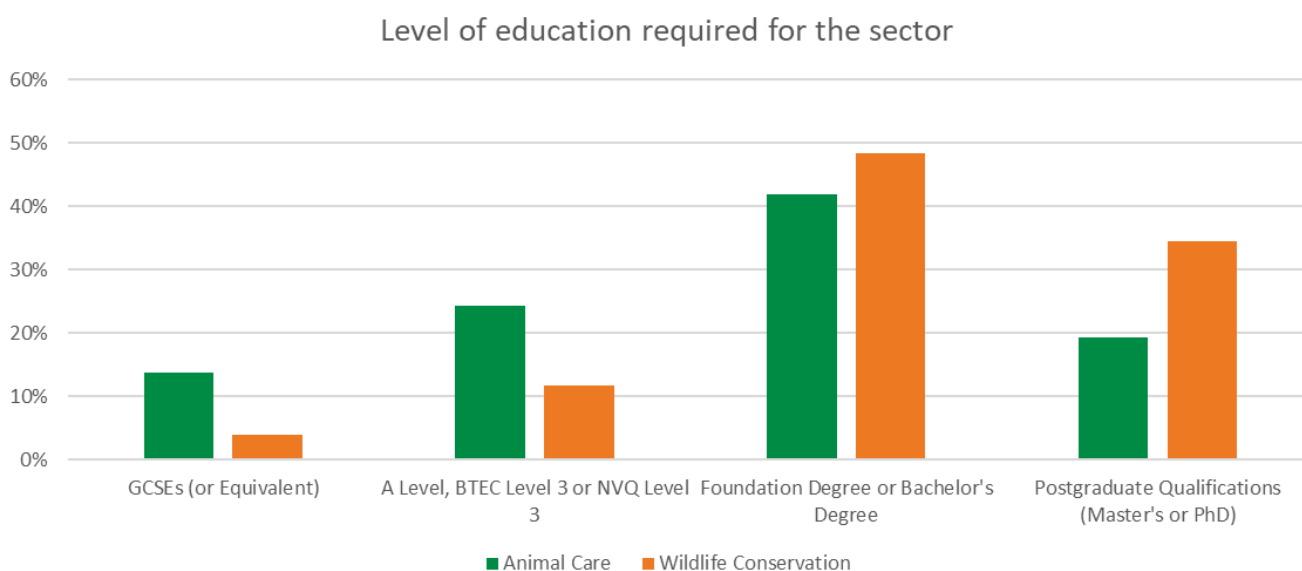


Figure 11 What level of education survey participants thought was needed to access the conservation sector

Though a bachelors degree (or higher) is commonly required for roles in Wildlife Conservation, the same is not true for Animal Care, which offers an apprenticeship route. However, in both cases this perception of a degree being required was higher than was found previously for green jobs more generally, with a recent study reporting only 30% of participants thinking a degree was needed (Crowhurst & Taylor, 2023).

Amongst focus group participants there was expressed a feeling that to get roles within our sector, you had to decide very early on in your education in order to choose the right qualifications path and build up relevant experience – echoed by our case studies. Many participants expressed that they felt that these career pathways were already closed to them, even at age 16-25, as they hadn't already started choosing relevant qualifications.

"...like, a lot of careers are blocked off. You have to start from the very beginning to really get there."

Further, some expressed that roles in our sector are often seen as “niche” jobs, which pigeonhole people into the sector and don’t develop skills transferable to other sectors, in contrast to other industries.

Skills and experience being a barrier

When survey participants were asked what they see as a barrier to them working in the sector, ‘*I don’t have the necessary skills or experience*’ was chosen by over 35% of participants for both Animal Care and Wildlife Conservation (37.2% (n=48) and 36% (n=47) respectively).

Interestingly, women were more likely to see their lack of skills and experience as a barrier (43.2%, n=38/88) than men (16.7%, n=5/30), in terms of accessing roles in Animal Care. This was found to be a statistically significant difference when run through a chi-square test, $X^2(1) = 9.50, p < 0.001, \Phi = 0.35$. However, this gender difference wasn’t seen within the same question for Wildlife Conservation.

Focus group participants also highlighted that in many cases, including within our sector, there is too much emphasis placed on traditional qualifications, with skills learnt in other ways, or through lived experience, not being valued. Echoing our Case Studies, participants expressed frustration at seeing advanced qualifications and excessive formal experience listed on the person specifications for entry level jobs, and personal experience gain in less traditional ways not being recognised.

“I feel like it's seen as a very niche job. So if you choose, if you go do go into it, it feels like you have to take that as your career.”

“I don't necessarily have the qualifications needed to do ths [entry level] jobs that I want. [...] I feel like lots of, like, large companies and such won't use my personal experience or my lived experience as a skill that I can bring to the company.”

“You see like a poster or an advert, they're like, oh, you need you to have like 5 years and experience in the industry and it's like, oh, is my interest not good?”

Lack of opportunities to gain sector specific skills

A theme that came out strongly from the focus groups was that even if young people are interested in our sector, opportunities to develop sector specific skills and gain hands on experience were very hard to find.



Interestingly, study respondents had conflicting responses about the benefits of living in a city in terms of accessing opportunities to develop conservation specific skills.

Our final focus group felt that living in London, there are so many opportunities to experience different careers that influence of parents and family was less important. The same was felt by focus group one – none of these attendees had experience in the sector.

When asking our survey respondents about barriers to Animal Care, *'There are not many of these jobs near where I live'* was selected fairly equally across those inside and outside of London. However, when asked about Wildlife Conservation, 12% more of those who lived inside London selected this barrier, in comparison to those living outside the city.

One survey respondent backed this up further by expressing that *'I feel that living in a city can make jobs catered to the environment quite hard to come by, or to help reach as the skills needed are bearded to gain.'*

Whether or not there are or aren't more opportunities to gain conservation sector specific skills in London as opposed to outside remains to be seen, but it is clear that more opportunities are needed in general.

Lack of mentorship, networks & guidance

Those survey respondents who **didn't** put the conservation sector in their top three future careers were much more likely to select '*I don't know anyone who does one of these jobs*' as a barrier to Animal Care, than those who did choose our sector (by a difference of 27.7%, n=9). This was found to be a significant association when using a chi-square test of independence, $\chi^2(1) = 8.03$, $p=0.005$, $\Phi=0.25$, though it was only a weak relationship. This perhaps illustrates what a key influence knowing people connected to a sector can be on career interests.

Even for those interested in the sector, many vocalized difficulties in knowing the next steps to take without any connections in the area.

Interestingly, for jobs in Animal Care, those from a global majority background were significantly more likely to select '*I don't*' know anyone who does one of these jobs' as a key barrier than those from a white background (46.2%, n=12 vs 13.8% , n=12). When run through a chi-square test, this was found to be a medium strength association $\chi^2(1) = 12.532$, $p<0.001$, $\Phi=0.33$. The same trend was seen for Wildlife Conservation, but with a less strong difference of 11.3%.

This theme also came through strongly from our focus groups. When discussing what had influenced their career aspirations, many participants cited knowing someone in their chosen sector as supporting them on their journey.

Additionally, several attendees also discussed how challenging it can be trying to pursue a career if their parents or guardians were not supportive of it, or didn't know much about the sector. This was voiced most strongly by those of an Asian background, indicating an interesting potential cultural trend. This emphasised the importance of engaging parents and guardians, along with young people themselves, in any careers education and engagement programmes.

"I have wanted to be a zoologist for a long time however I am starting to give up on this dream as I have limited connections to get there and therefore am unsure of what exactly to do."

"a lack of mentorship and guidance also feeds into it because if you don't have someone to teach you something, then you don't really have the experience that you need for your job or career"

"I feel like being Asian, my family, like, they wanted me to go down the street of like, being a lawyer or a doctor, so it was very hard to go in the route of media."

"It's very like the Middle Eastern parents dream of like children going into these like very professional career paths. And my interests lie in a much broader sense."

Location and accessibility

When selecting potential barriers to careers in the sector, *‘There are not many of these jobs where I live’* was the second most chosen answer for Wildlife Conservation careers (45.0%, n=58), and third most selected for Animal Care (41.1%, n=53). From those focus group participants not already interested in the sector, there was a general feeling that jobs in conservation aren’t very local and require the ability to travel, to not be tied to one location.

*"If you're more **connected** to your family or if you have like, children or if you need to look after someone... then you might not prioritise [these jobs]."*

*"because I probably **think** that, but, like, maybe people think that **conservation drops are always far**, but they're not always far."*

*"With, like, let's say, you know what David Attenborough does, it **requires him to move around a lot** and people might not, like, want to do that."*

Accessibility of jobs in the sector came out more strongly as a barrier to those survey participants who disclosed a disability or neurodiversity. This group were much more likely to choose *‘I can’t access transport to where the jobs are’* as a barrier (32.7%, n=17) than those without a disability or neurodiversity (10.0%, n=5). When analysed using a chi-square test, this was found to be a significant difference, though the relationship between the two variables was weak, $\chi^2(1) = 7.759, p < 0.005, \Phi = 0.276$. 100% of those who declared a physical disability selected this as a key barrier to the sector.

Those with a disability and neurodiversity were also significantly more likely to select *‘Knowing accessible travel was available or company support’* as something that would make them more interested in the sector (44.2%, n=23), again showing a significant weak relationship when run through a chi-square test, $\chi^2(1) = 4.629, p = 0.031, \Phi = 0.213$.

Fear & frustration

A theme that came strongly from our first focus group was that fear of the unknown could put people off

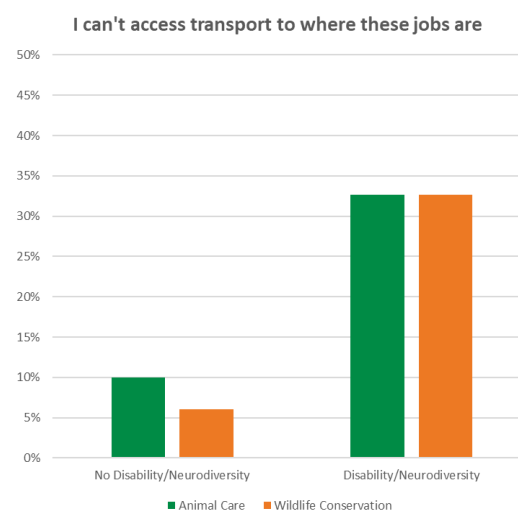


Figure 12 How many participants ranked access to transport as a key barrier

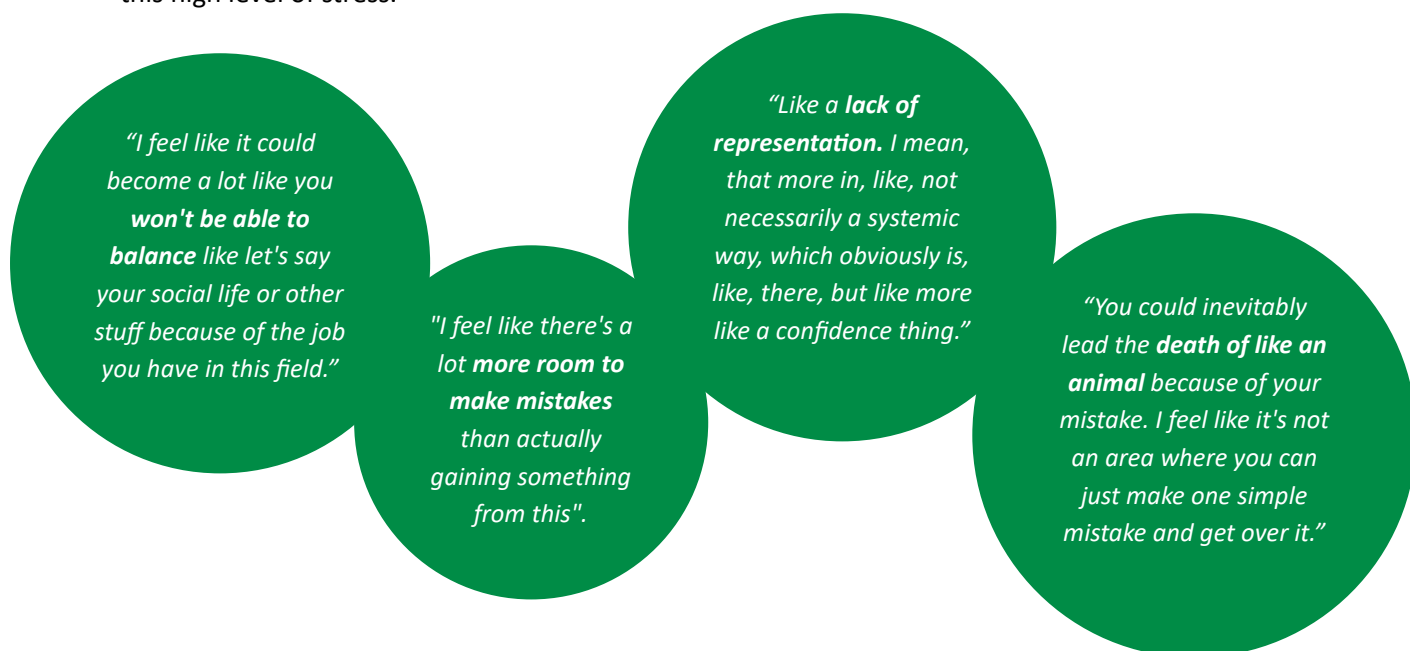
*"Something I perceive from the outside as being like challenge with like **long hours**. For example, if you're working with animals, someone who has like **chronic health condition** might struggle."*

applying for jobs or trying to take your first steps in a new sector.

Another group highlighted that, if you come from a minority, there may be a fear that there may not be anyone else in the organisation from your background, which could put you off applying.

Numerous participants also highlighted that though these roles are high reward, they also involve high stakes and a high level of risk. Individuals spoke of the intense level of work that they perceive as going into these roles, with people going above and beyond to try and make a difference. As highlighted in our case studies too, they had concerns about how people could balance this with a healthy lifestyle outside of work.

They also spoke of the great weight of responsibility that comes with these roles – the lives of individual animals, the survival of species – and questioned whether the rewards would be worth this high level of stress.



Other issues raised

Two of our focus groups raised that they felt discrimination in some cases could be a reason why some demographics are less represented in certain sectors. They weren't sure if this was the case within the conservation sector, but felt it important to highlight in their experience this is still an issue in some other sectors.



Another group raised that even just unconscious bias could be excluding people of certain appearances or class from certain jobs.

Finally, in one of pulse focus groups at Chester Youth Summit, as well as by our Case Studies, it was raised that even once young people make it into the sector, they often don't feel listened to or valued by staff. There was a call for hiring managers to receive improved training on how to best support diverse young people who join our sector, including training on supporting neurodiverse colleagues.

Key differences in the perceptions of different demographics

Below we have summarised some of the differences that we observed in the responses of participants from different demographics. Each of these should be used as a basis for further research to understand why these differences were observed.

Ethnicity

Different levels of interest in the sector

- Our research found a higher interest in the conservation sector from those of a white background, than those of a global majority background.
- When split out by which parts of the conservation sector participants were interested in, Global Majority participants were much more likely to select 'Ecology or Environmental Science' than those of a white background, who were more likely to show interest in 'Wildlife Conservation' and 'Zookeeping/Animal Care'. (See full stats above).

Different levels of awareness about roles in the sector

- Those from a global majority background were significantly less likely to know anyone who works in the sector than those from a white background.
- If not interested in the sector, those from a white background were more likely to have considered but discounted the sector, as opposed to those from a global majority background, who in contrast were more likely to have not thought about it at all previously.
- Respondents from a global majority background were less aware of conservation opportunities near to them than participants of a white background, but felt that jobs were much less competitive than those of a white background did.

Disability or Neurodiversity

Interest in the sector

- Participants with a disability or neurodiversity were more likely to show interest in the sector, even if this wasn't statistically significant.

Perspectives on the sector

- Those who declared a disability or neurodiversity were 14% likely to see the sector as very

competitive, though again, this wasn't a statistically significant difference ($X^2(1) = 0.628$, $p=0.43$)

- Participants neurodiversity were also 19% more likely to see Wildlife Conservation as a very challenging sector, though this again wasn't significant ($X^2(1) = 2.05$, $p=0.152$)

Accessibility of the sector

- Participants with a disability or neurodiversity felt more strongly than others that the sector had some physical accessibility barriers, being more likely to see transport and company support as things that would increase their interest.
- 100% of those who declared a physical disability saw transport as a key barrier to the sector.
- They were also more likely to be keen for "hybrid working/working from home" to be possible.

The same patterns were seen even when the above answers were broken down by the two largest subsectors of this group – those with a mental health condition (n=30) or neurodiversity (n=32).

How do our findings compare with 'Green Jobs' more widely?

Poor pay was seen as the top disadvantage of green jobs in previous research (Crowhurst & Taylor, 2023). A higher percentage of our respondents identified pay as a barrier, but job scarcity and competition came out even more strongly as a restrictive factor.

Green jobs broadly are seen as being for those who take an academic route, which limits how many young people feel confident they can access them (Crowhurst & Taylor, 2023). This perception was matched by our findings, with participants being even more likely to think that jobs in animal care and wildlife conservation require a degree.

Finally, young women have been found to be less aware of and less interested in green jobs – which risks perpetuating existing gender disparities in the industries that will be key to Net Zero. In our study, we heard from many more women than men, this interest driven selection bias suggesting that the opposite is true in the case of our sector – though young women were slightly more likely to feel that they lacked the specific skills for the sector.

Case studies – personal experiences of accessing the sector

Below are two case studies from members of the Youth Advisory Board, outlining their own experiences accessing the conservation sector. Their experiences echo many of the barriers explored above.

Case Study A

My journey into the conservation sector has been deeply personal, filled with both support and barriers. As someone from an interdisciplinary background and diverse lived experience, entering a field traditionally dominated by certain ecological/natural science norms and expectations has been a unique and sometimes difficult experience. However, key forms of support and a strong sense of purpose have kept me motivated and empowered throughout. One of the most critical forms of

support in my journey has been mentoring from both within and outside the conservation sector. These mentors have not only offered practical advice and knowledge but have created safe spaces for me to reflect on and process both the positive and negative aspects of working in conservation.

Mentors that specifically work with young people have been super vital as they empathise and understand without me having to explain all the dynamics that can come with being a young person in conservation. Their encouragement has helped me to trust in my abilities and recognise the value of the perspectives I bring. Supportive peers and colleagues have also played a crucial role. There have been moments where I have felt unable to advocate for myself, whether due to inexperience or systemic barriers. Having colleagues who champion my work and speak up on my behalf has been incredibly important. Similarly, knowing that I am contributing meaningful and tangible change for both people and planet makes the journey more worthwhile.

However, my path has not been without obstacles. The conservation sector can be rigid in its definitions of expertise, and interdisciplinary backgrounds, such as those blending social and natural sciences, are not always fully recognised. This often leaves me having to constantly prove the value of my perspectives and approaches. I thought getting a degree was enough to level the playing field but conservation jobs consistently require experience (such as volunteering or working abroad etc) that has not been accessible to me financially.

Similarly, as a young person, you already face pressure to perform and contribute beyond the expectations of your role as there is few of us and you feel pressure to pave the way for others. Being visibly different, by age, ethnicity, or background, compounds these challenges, resulting in comments that “I only received my role as I am a person of colour”. As a young person, I have frequently found myself to be the least classically “experienced” in the room, and assumptions about my capabilities are often made, such as “you shouldn't be doing this” or “this is way above your skill/level”, before I am invited to speak. This has also included expectations that I should naturally excel at communications, social media or technology because of my age.

Despite these barriers, the support I have received keeps me hopeful for systemic change for diverse young people in conservation. A key shift that needs to take place is the mindset and preparedness of both individuals and teams to work effectively with young professionals. Access is not only a systemic issue but also an individual one. It requires a conscious effort to create welcoming, supportive environments where young people from diverse and interdisciplinary backgrounds feel valued. This includes greater recognition of varied skills and experiences, building mentoring structures, providing regular and consistent support, and celebrating achievements openly. There is a need to meet young people with more grace and understanding, acknowledging that many may be navigating the professional world for the first time and dealing with unique challenges; from the impacts of COVID-19, personal/life changes or situations and financial struggles. With structured support and more empathy, the sector can become more accessible for the next generation of conservationists.

Case Study B

I've always known that I wanted to work with wild animals. I remember watching a YouTube video when I was about 12 or 13 about how to become a marine biologist. The first piece of advice was to pursue a broad science degree, such as biology or zoology, which stuck with me as I realised I'd need

a strong foundation in maths and science. That was daunting, as I had always found school difficult. At the time, I didn't understand why, but later discovered I have dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dyspraxia, which explained a lot. But before knowing that, my first major hurdle was simply education itself. I had to work much harder than many of my peers just to keep up.

That pattern of working harder to stay in the race continued throughout my academic journey. I managed to get the grades to do my A-levels and go on to university, but it was never easy. Balancing the demands of academia with the essential requirement for practical experience (even for entry level roles) quickly became another key challenge. So I threw myself into extracurriculars, volunteering at the Natural History Museum and taking on five different extracurricular roles at university including being a course representative, a marine mammal surveyor and a disability service advisor.

Despite all this, I found that many of the experiences required for further roles in conservation were unpaid. I worked as a research assistant in South Africa on a project studying human-wildlife conflict involving baboons and predators, part of Durham University's Primate and Predator Project, but had to work in hospitality alongside my studies to afford the opportunity. That kind of hidden labour, jobs like barista shifts that don't "count" on a CV, felt necessary just to be able to access the work that does. It's an exhausting but key element of pursuing a career in this field, and one that isn't discussed nearly enough.

After gaining some experience, I felt ready to pursue a master's at Imperial College London. My project focused on the distribution of two crocodile species: the false gharial and the gharial. Through this and other research experience I realised I really enjoyed the process of independent research, which led me to apply for a PhD, and I was accepted onto the London NERC DTP programme, which funds my current research.

My PhD focuses on all six species of wildcat that exist in Suriname, taking a multidisciplinary approach to explore the threats they face. I'm working closely with local communities and various stakeholders through interviews and engagement as well as using camera trapping to monitor one wildcat populations and examine how they might be affected by different threats. It's an ambitious project that brings together many of the skills and experiences I've developed throughout my academic and professional journey.

However, the barriers I faced early on continue to affect me today - barriers I believe reflect broader systemic issues within sector. The field remains highly competitive, and there is an ongoing pressure to stay constantly active, always doing more to remain visible. I'm currently balancing my PhD with serving on a youth board and trying to establish my own NGO. It often feels like you only begin to feel like you're doing enough when you're on the brink of burnout. That sense of overextension is something many people in conservation grapple with, and it continues to shape my experience.

I think much of this boils down to limited resources within the sector. The scarcity of positions makes the roles that exist extremely competitive. One way to begin addressing this could be through more inclusive and realistic hiring practices. Rather than asking applicants to meet an exhaustive list of prerequisites, even for unpaid roles, organisations could focus on different types of value. Lived experience, or whether a candidate expresses genuine interest or concern for key issues, could be recognised as meaningful indicators of potential. There needs to be a collective shift across

organisations to move away from a model that rewards only the most heavily experienced candidates.

Otherwise, we risk continuing to select from a narrow group of people: those who either decided very early on to pursue conservation, who have access to the resources to afford unpaid roles, or who, like me, have been pushing themselves at full pace for years. That model isn't sustainable, and it's shutting people out.

Recommendations and potential solutions

What does 'rewarding' mean to different people?

Despite the barriers listed above, the sector was seen as rewarding for the large majority of participants. Of our survey respondents, 92.9% (n=118) rated jobs in Animal Care as a rewarding and 90.7% (n=117) rated the same for jobs in Wildlife Conservation. (See figure 13)

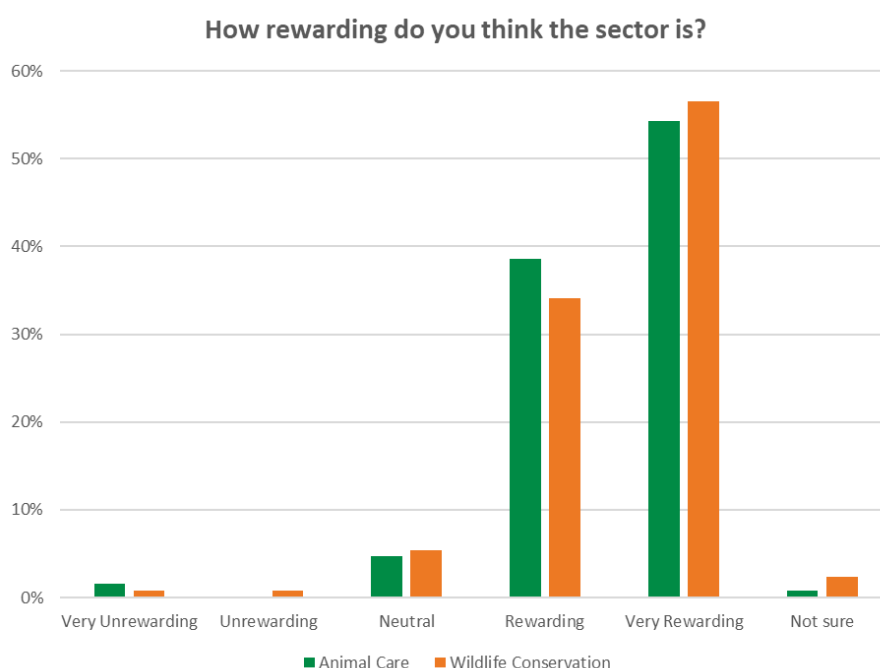


Figure 13 How rewarding participants thought the sector is

It was indicated by many members of the focus groups that a job being fulfilling and rewarding was a key factor in which careers they chose, indicating that if we can understand the nuances of what people see 'rewarding' to mean, leveraging this could help the sector to attract interest from more diverse areas.

Different groups varied in how rewarding they found the sector

The perception of how rewarding participants thought jobs in our sector varied between different groups.

Those from a white background were more likely to see jobs in both Animal Care and Conservation as rewarding (Animal Care: 95.4%, n=82/86, Wildlife Conservation: 95.4%, n=83/86) than those from a global majority background (Animal Care: 84.6%, n=22/26, Wildlife Conservation: 73.1%, n=19/26).

This was found to be a statistically significant difference in the case of Wildlife Conservation ($\chi^2(1) = 6.66, p=0.010, \Phi=0.245$), showing a weak positive relationship between those from a white background and whether they feel that Wildlife Conservation is rewarding.

For Animal Care, though this itself wasn't significant when run through a chi-squared test, ($\chi^2(1) = 1.71, p=0.191$), when comparing our two largest groups, those from a white background (n=87) and those from an Asian background (n=20), the same pattern was seen and was found to be statistically significant. (Fisher's exact test, p=0.04). Again this indicates that those from a white background are statistically more likely to find the sector rewarding.

Participants were more likely to see the sector as rewarding if they were from a Christian background (Animal Care: 100%, n=25, Wildlife Conservation: 92.0%, n=23) or with no religion or belief (Animal Care: 95.4%, n=62, Wildlife Conservation: 95.5%, n=63) than a Muslim background (Animal Care: 70%, n=7, Wildlife Conservation: 60%, n=6.). Groups from other religious backgrounds were too small to count.

A marginally higher proportion of those who disclosed a disability or neurodiversity saw jobs in both Animal Care and Wildlife Conservation as rewarding (Animal Care: 8% more, n=5, Wildlife Conservation: 6.2% difference, n=5), too small a difference to be significant. However interestingly, 100% of those who disclosed a mental health disorder saw jobs in both parts of the sector as rewarding.

What does rewarding mean to different people?

Asking our focus groups what rewarding meant to them, there were a few key themes that arose.

1. Alignment with your **values** and **interests**

*"It's just very rewarding... knowing that you're spending hours towards **something that you love** and you're passionate about"*

2. Being able to see the **direct** and **tangible impact** of your work

"the top priority in terms of what's rewarding I would see is like the output of your efforts. What is actually happening."

3. **Caring for living beings** or simply **helping people**

*"I feel like any job where you're **caring for someone or something** is very rewarding."*

4. Being part of a **community** with similar goals

"something that's kind of like community or like having some kind of a purpose."

5. Being challenged and given opportunities for continuous personal **growth**

"I feel like if you just get into a job and you stop learning, then that's really unfulfilling for me."

6. Having the **freedom** to govern your own time

“the freedom of, like, what, like, what we both want to do or does it allow us to, like, have more time and, like, be able to pick what we want to do each day”

All of the above are features that can be found through a career in the conservation sector.

How does pay feature in discussions on rewards?

Interesting, pay was very rarely mentioned organically in discussions around jobs being rewarding. Though we’ve seen it as a perceived barrier to progressing in the sector, the majority of focus group participants expressed that feeling **fulfilled** could **outweigh financial considerations**.

This came from participants across ethnicities, religions and those with and without disabilities, though was more likely to be voiced by females than males.

This suggests that pay may not be the limiting factor to engaging a wider demographic of young people with the sector. If we can work to overcome some of the other barriers and ensure that we communicate how the sector aligns with a broad number of the factors young people find rewarding, we could have more of an impact on attracting new audiences to these roles.

*“[As long as] I could like **sustain myself**... I would [rather] be comfortable and be very happy in my career as opposed to like being **super rich** and like very **unhappy**”.*

What makes the sector less rewarding?

In discussions around how rewarding the sector is seen to be, a couple of focus group participants raised concerns that made them question how rewarding it ultimately is.

They highlighted that often it can be hard to make change in the environmental sector, and this could lead to frustration and stress. Some doubted that the reward from impact made may not equal the amount of effort required and also, echoing our case studies, that the amount of time put in wouldn’t allow much of a work life balance. They highlighted that often, in careers considered

*“I took off a point because of how **stressful** it probably is and also because I know that, that even though people can have the best intentions of trying to solve a problem, sometimes it doesn't get solved. So that can be pretty frustrating as well.”*

*“I think that there's a problem in careers that are considered rewarding. **People expect you to give up your entire life**. There's an expectation of oh, because your job is so rewarding it doesn't matter if you have to work later. Like giving lots of personal sacrifices.”*

“rewarding”, or for a good cause, people are expected to work much harder than in other sectors.

The power of work experience

The positive influence that first-hand experience of the workplace can have on young people is well known. Experiences can have on young people is well known, with a core place in the Gatsby Benchmarks – the statutory careers guidance for schools (Gatsby, 2024). High quality work experience increases awareness of job pathways, builds confidence and key skills and reduces the likelihood of a young person becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) (Careers & Enterprise Company, 2024).

This benefit came through clearly from the respondents to our focus groups, with numerous individuals citing that their career aspirations were a direct result of undertaking work experience in the industry.

We’ve also seen the impact on student’s confidence and increase in interest in the sector through feedback from ZSL’s work experience programme. This currently focuses on animal care with an additional small programme run by our conservation science team, but we have plans in the next few years to expand this programme where possible, given the depth of impact and increasing appetite from schools and colleges.



Suggested actions to combat barriers

Below are several actions, suggested through conversations with focus group attendees as well as consultation with the ZSL Youth Advisory Board Members, that could be taken by organisations in the conservation sector, in a bid to address some of the barriers highlighted above.

Action	Description	Barriers addressing
Emphasise and promote representative examples of people thriving in different roles across the sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Showcase the type of lifestyle one can have with the salaries in the sector – that you can thrive even on lower salaries. Enable people to see themselves in role models the sector Provide clear transparency on what the reality of roles in the sector are like Use social media to raise awareness of roles and promote them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low pay as a barrier to interest Fear of the unknown
When promoting roles, highlight aspects that different people find rewarding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasise where roles meet the list of ‘rewarding’ requirements – seeing the direct impact of the work, helping people or other living beings, being part of a likeminded community, providing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feeling fulfilled outweighing pay as a barrier

	opportunities for challenge and continuous growth, freedom and flexibility	
Run career inspiration & engagement programmes, illustrating the variety of roles in the sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlighting lesser known roles and the different skills they require – which young people will already be developing. • Highlight the transferable skills that could be learnt other sectors and applied here or learnt here and applied elsewhere. • Showcasing where these roles are – they’re not always far away, conservation happens everywhere. • Highlight different routes into the sector not requiring a degree, such as apprenticeships or a postgraduate degree • Include programmes & activities engaging with parents and guardians, as large influencers on young people’s career decisions. • Provide opportunities from at least aged 11 and above. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of exposure and education about the sector • Fear of the unknown
Create free to access opportunities for interested young people to gain sector specific skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create hands on opportunities for young people to develop sector specific skills, including a broad work experience and experience of work programme cross a variety of roles. • Include support on application processes for roles as well as education pathways • Where possible, target opportunities at groups underrepresented in the sector, proving individuals with support on their next steps. • Provide opportunities from at least aged 11 and above. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of opportunities to gain sector specific skills • Job scarcity & high job competition • Specific skills, qualifications & experience required
Create more paid entry level roles , valuing lived experience in their recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where possible, target opportunities at groups underrepresented in the sector, proving individuals with support on their next steps. • Value applicant skills that can come from any work place, including those not directly related to the sector, as well as other lived experiences • Remove unnecessary qualification barriers where possible, particularly post graduate degrees for entry level roles in wildlife conservation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of opportunities to gain sector specific skills • Job scarcity & high job competition • Specific skills, qualifications & experience required
Highlight in recruitment all the support available at the organisation for a diverse workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasise the support available for those with a variety of needs to access the role. • Include the flexibility available in roles where possible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location and accessibility
Create a supportive network of young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide mentoring opportunities for young people taking part in entry level roles and skills activities – particularly for those underrepresented in the sector • Create spaces for networking and socialising amongst young people taking part in skills programming and entry level roles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of mentorship, networking and guidance

Key Reflections & Next steps

Reflections on the research

Reflecting on this work over the last year, a number of key learnings have arisen:

- The co-production of this research between the ZSL Careers Team and Youth Advisory Board was invaluable. It meant we were able to create our survey questions informed by the experiences of young people, and gain deeper insight from our focus groups participants as they were being facilitated by their peers.
- Those from low-income households are a key group missing from the sector, though research into this is limited. We didn't include questions about income in our research, but feel this would be a key area for future study.
- We should have including funding to cover data analysis time in our application, as this took a significant period that we hadn't budgeted for.
- Our survey was very broad and asked an extensive list of questions, making analysis particularly complex. Any subsequent research should hone-in on more specific questions.

Limitations

This research aimed to hear from a broad range of young people, including those not interested in our sector as well as those interested or already involved in it. However, due to publicising it through ZSL's channels and the connections of the Youth Advisory Board Members, we heard from many more of those who declared an interest in the sector than those who didn't, seeing a strong interest driven selection bias in those who chose to undertake the survey. Any future work should seek to hear more from those not interested, to understand the reasons for their lack of engagement more fully.

The equal spread across those who did and didn't disclose a disability or neurodiversity means we can be fairly confident in the conclusions drawn from these groups. However, only the two largest subsectors of this group, those disclosing a mental health disorder or a neurodiversity, were large enough to draw any strong conclusions from their answers. It would be worth exploring the other sectors to this group in more detail in future to understand their perspectives better.

The percentage of those working or studying in the sector already was notably much higher amongst participants from a white background (51.7%, n=45/87) as opposed to those from a global majority background (35.3%, n=8/28). This is worth bearing in mind when interpreting the responses above, as answers from the latter group will represent those with less experience in the sector to begin with.

Additionally, we didn't have enough survey responses from individual ethnic groups, thus why here we have grouped them together one 'global majority' group. Breaking this group down more specifically should be the focus of future research.

The majority of participants cited 'No religion or belief' (54.1%, n=66/122), with the only other groups being high enough to draw potential inferences being those who cited 'Christian' (20.5%, n=25/122) or 'Muslim' (8.2%, n=10/122) as their religion or belief. Exploring the perceptions of other religious groups would be a key focus of future work.

Due to time constraints on the project, we ran the survey and focus groups concurrently, rather than using the survey results to inform the focus group questions. In our report we have used the focus group responses to identify themes through which we explored our data. For future work, survey should be collected first, to then inform the questions explored in more depth in the focus groups.

Next Steps

Within ZSL, the recommendations from this research will be used to:

1. Adjust the programming of our Careers & Skills Programme
2. Inform the work of our People Team, particularly the recruitment team and EDI Steering Group
3. Plan for more in depth research by the Youth Advisory Board to better understand the nuances of the findings.

Externally:

- This report will be hosted on the ZSL Youth Board Website.
- The results of this survey were presented at the 2025 EAZA Educators Conference.
- Those involved in the study who requested it will receive a copy of the report.
- The ZSL Youth Advisory Board will present the findings at key conferences over the coming year.

Future research could explore:

- The difference in interest in the sector generally and between different subsectors seen between groups from different ethnic backgrounds.
- The difference between what those of different religious beliefs find to be rewarding.
- Whether and why there may be a higher interest in the sector from those with a neurodiversity or disability

Finally, we wish to extend our thanks to all the participants of our study who gave their time and thoughts to the work. We hope we have represented your perspectives with the respect they deserve.

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Appendix I – Nature Connectedness and Career Aspirations

One of our original intentions was to examine whether there was a correlation between someone’s ‘nature connectedness’ and their interest in the nature-related careers ZSL represents.

Every survey participant was asked to rate their agreement to six statements in order to calculate their score on the ‘Nature Connectedness Index’ (NCI), an empirical measure of how connected an individual feels to the nature (Richardson, et al., 2019). We were interested in exploring this link between Nature Connectedness and career aspirations as a high value of the former has been associated with pro-conservation behaviours, and has the capacity to be influenced by the “five pathways to as nature connectedness” (Lumber, Richardson, & Sheffield, 2017).

We found that the mean NCI score for those who selected ‘Conservation, agriculture, forestry or animal care’ as one of their top three sectors (64.9/100) was higher than those who didn’t select the sector (56.0/100). When comparing the SCI score between those who did choose our sector (n=107, mean=64.9) and those who didn’t (n=22, mean=56.0, through a Mann Whitney U test, this wasn’t found to be a significant difference (p=0.197).

However, it’s worth noting that the NCI scores calculated across all participants showed an inverse normal distribution. This is unusual for NCI scores, which usually show a positive skew due to the scores being calculated by a 6 point scale. This highlights a potential error in how the scale was interpreted by participants, as we put strongly agree at 1 and strongly disagree at 7 – in contrast to the rest of the scoring questions in the questionnaire.

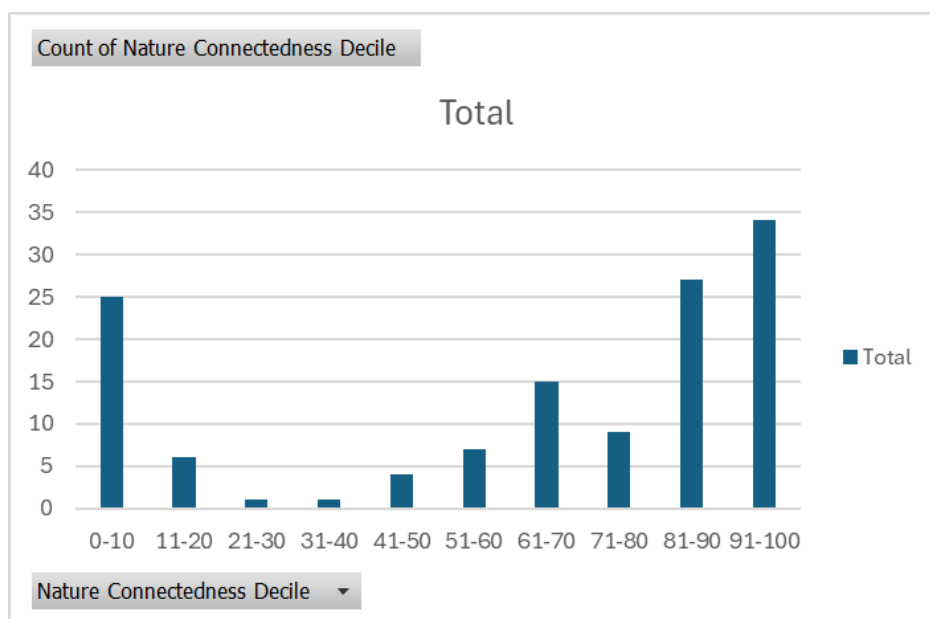


Figure 14 Nature Connectedness Scores showing an inverse normal distribution

This error is backed up by a strange spike in lowest quartile (32), particularly given many of these individuals work or study in the sector, so are unlikely to have a low connection with nature.

Therefore it’s impossible to conclude whether NC score correlates with likelihood to be interested in conservation/animal care or not, but the slightly raised mean NCI score for those who were interested in the sector does hint at a potential relationship to be explored more in future.

[Appendix II – Survey Design](#)

[Appendix III – Focus Group Design](#)