



Natural Talent Case Study

Name: Katherine Whyte
Age: 23
Traineeship: Saline Lagoons
Dates of traineeship: 25/01/16 – 24/01/17



About your traineeship

Can you give an overview of your Natural Talent UK traineeship? (What organisations are you placed with/type of work you will be involved in?)

My traineeship focuses on saline lagoons: semi-enclosed bodies of water that are partially separated from the nearby sea. The salinity of these habitats is highly variable both between lagoons and within individual lagoons over time, giving rise to unique biological communities. The invertebrates and plants that thrive there include marine species that are tolerant of low salinity, freshwater species that are tolerant of high salinity and highly adapted lagoon specialists that are rarely found elsewhere.

Based at National Museums Scotland in Edinburgh, I will learn about the identification, taxonomy, ecology and biogeography of saline lagoon invertebrates, plants and closely related marine species. I will carry out fieldwork across Scotland with the aim of recording the species found within lagoons and creating a voucher specimen collection. As part of the project I also hope to work with various conservation organisations, local groups and the general public to improve awareness and conservation efforts for saline lagoons.

Why did you apply for a Natural Talent traineeship?

Studying Marine Biology at university has developed my long-held passion for nature and conservation. After graduating, the Natural Talent traineeship scheme seemed like the perfect opportunity for me to transition out of volunteering and into a full-time occupation in conservation. I liked that Natural Talent would enable me to contribute to a real conservation project whilst still learning and improving my career prospects.

What kind of employment were you in before undertaking a Natural Talent traineeship?

For the previous year, I have been studying towards an MSc in Marine Mammal Science at the University of St Andrews.



What voluntary experience had you done prior to your traineeship?

Over the past five years, I have volunteered with a wide range of organisations involved in ecological research, conservation and education. Through these positions I have been fortunate enough to sail around the western isles of Scotland on marine mammal surveys with the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust, help care for rescued seals at the Cornish Seal Sanctuary and work as a wildlife guide aboard a whale-watching tour boat with Sea Life Surveys. One of my most inspiring conservation experiences was when I lived and worked on the Isle of May National Nature Reserve. There, I carried out essential maintenance work around the reserve, collected survey data for the seabird monitoring programme and was responsible for speaking to visitors about the nature reserve and its wildlife. Most recently, I have been volunteering at the Sea Mammal Research Unit in St Andrews where I worked on the potential environmental impacts of marine renewable energy developments.

What are you most looking forward to during your traineeship?

I am looking forward to learning more about saline lagoon biology, but am particularly excited about being able to actively contribute to conservation by applying and sharing this knowledge. I am also looking forward to doing fieldwork in some of the UK's most remote and beautiful habitats.

What skills do you anticipate this traineeship will give you?

This traineeship will develop my current skills and provide me with a whole host of new ones. In particular, my training will enable me to develop skills in planning and running ecological surveys, species identification, taxonomy, species preservation techniques, working with partner organisations, community engagement, data analysis and communication skills.

How do you feel your traineeship benefits the conservation sector in the United Kingdom?

Saline lagoons are recognised as a priority habitat type under Annex I of the EC Habitats Directive and the importance of lagoon specialists to biodiversity is also recognised in UK conservation legislation. Nevertheless, these important habitats are relatively understudied and more research is required in order to effectively inform conservation. My traineeship will allow me to play an important role in this area and to share the skills and knowledge I learn with conservation organisations, researchers and the general public.

What career path do you see yourself pursuing and how will this experience help you?

My greatest career motivation is to contribute to conservation. This traineeship will provide me with the skills, knowledge and practical experience I need to help me enter this field and decide my next career steps.