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How to be a Conservationist

In [Changing Planet](#), [Wildlife](#)

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“How can I make the *biggest* difference for conservation?” Over the past 5 years, I’ve asked a lot of people this question. I was sure someone would have a straightforward answer, even if I didn’t like it. “If it means saving rainforests,” I thought to my naive self, “I’ll spend the rest of my life locked in a basement, writing letters to lawmakers.” Fortunately for my own life enjoyment, the answer isn’t that simple. In fact, the replies I got from prominent conservationists, who have spent their lives making a real difference, were hugely variable.

For the purposes of this blog, I’ll define a conservationist as anyone who dedicates a substantial portion of their time and/or resources to conserving biodiversity, single species, or habitats anywhere in the world. Yes, it really is that broad! As you’ll see below, you don’t have to be a scientist to be a conservationist. You can be an artist, a manager, an investor, an engineer, an organic farmer... anyone can pivot to make a real contribution to conservation.

So what should YOU do as an aspiring conservationist? I’ll walk you through the great advice I’ve gotten from a few of the conservationists I admire.

1. **Figure out where your passions and your talents lie. This might require trying a few different things: working a few different jobs, taking some specialized classes in college, or volunteering your time to things that pique your interest.**

“People make the biggest contributions when they do what they actually do best, not what they think conservation needs. So many people want to get involved in conservation but believe that means biology, radiotracking lions, doing a study, doing science. But conservation is politics, economics, awareness, education, law enforcement, socioecology, social justice etc. It is a mistake to think that conservation is biology, or that conservation science is [necessarily] conservation. If anyone wants to do conservation and make a big difference, then have a good hard look at your skills and use those skills to help – perhaps your skills are social media, writing, photography, teaching, making money, creating apps, using technology.... I pay attention when someone tells me they can create a digital game on protecting livestock, they can produce an app to monitor effectiveness of our environmental education programs, they can produce art on lions that we can auction, etc. So I would say do what you are good at for conservation – we need everyone.” – Colleen Begg, PhD, Managing Director of Mariri and Niassa

Carnivore Project, Mozambique; Director of TRT Conservation Foundation

“Get very good at doing something... Conservation as a whole needs truly competent and dedicated people from ALL sectors of society; the only method of conservation that works is integration with society, and for that, just about any profession well-exercised in a conservation area gets you there. As for a single answer, no one shirt fits all.” – Dan Janzen, PhD, Professor of Biology at the University of Pennsylvania and President of the Guanacaste Dry Forest Conservation Fund (Costa Rica)



ASPIRING YOUNG SCIENTIST AYLA KALTENECKER MEASURES THE HEAD OF A WHITE-BACKED VULTURE (*GYPS AFRICANUS*) IN GORONGOSA NATIONAL PARK, MOZAMBIQUE. MONITORING ENDANGERED SPECIES LIKE THIS CAN HELP ASSESS THE HEALTH OF THESE POPULATIONS AND HELP MANAGERS MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS ABOUT THEIR CONSERVATION.

2. **Find one place or one project that you can dedicate serious time, energy, and resources to.**

"Find a good problem and do whatever it takes, learn whatever skills it takes, to solve it." –Stuart Pimm, PhD, Doris Duke Chair of Conservation Ecology, Duke University

"Build serious resources (money, political position, technical expertise, social savvy, etc.), look around you for a large conserved wildland that is psychologically and logistically close at hand, and offer your abilities to it." –Dan Janzen

“Make a long term commitment. Commit your personal time and energy for a long time to a single place. You will not make a difference somewhere in a couple of years. Think in decades. How long does it take a tree to grow? How long does an elephant live? If you are inspiring a teenager and helping her with education, how long does it take for a 13-year-old girl to get her PhD? 15 years maybe?” - Greg Carr,

Oversight Committee at the Gorongosa Project, Mozambique

“Find a conservation calling – that animal, place, issue – that pulls at your heartstrings in a way nothing else does. This will be a project that you will chip away at probably for a long time, regardless of whether you’re getting paid. If you can make a big difference on one thing, that is a life well spent.” -

Morgan Heim, Photojournalist

3. Find collaborators; great partners can help you advance your cause in a number of different ways.

“Ask for money. When you believe in what you are doing, don’t be afraid to ask people for money to support you. There are a lot of people around with money but no time. You are helping them do philanthropy by taking their money and putting it to good use.” – **Greg Carr**

“We partner with scientists, activists, organizations, communities, [and fellow creatives] all the time on these projects. It’s difficult to make any progress without that... When you find good partnerships, you can act fast, access more resources, and scale up the impact, productivity, creativity and quality of your products. It becomes easier to think big, and that’s what conservation needs right now, whether you’re working at a grassroots level or with a big fancy campaign.” – **Morgan Heim**



ENGAGING LOCAL COMMUNITIES AS PARTNERS IN CONSERVATION IS CRUCIAL. HERE, AN EMPLOYEE OF THE GORONGOSA COFFEE PROJECT IN MOZAMBIQUE WALKS BEHIND A FRUITING COFFEE PLANT. THIS PROJECT AIMS TO GIVE PEOPLE ON MOUNT GORONGOSA AN ALTERNATIVE LIVELIHOOD TO SLASH-AND-BURN AGRICULTURE, WHILE AT THE SAME TIME UNDERTAKING REFORESTATION.

4. **Get out of the box. Conservation isn't only about the natural world; helping human communities can help conservation too.**

"Virtually all conservation issues facing the world today stem from the simple fact that in many places the human population has exceeded carrying capacity... In other words, there are too many of us. How can we fix this? Through education and women empowerment. To make a difference in conservation, devote your skills and time to helping women become masters of their own lives, especially in rural communities of the developing world. Join programs that give women tools and opportunities –

through education, through the ability to start and run their own businesses, through access to tools of family planning.”– Piotr Naskrecki, PhD, Entomologist, Photographer and Director of the E.O. Wilson Biodiversity Laboratory, Gorongosa National Park

5. **No matter who you are and what you’re doing, even if you don’t become a “professional” conservationist, you can make a contribution to conservation.**

“Regardless of career path, circumstances, skillset, you can best contribute to conservation by being a vocal, passionate advocate of nature. Speak loudly about the kind of planet you want and support what you say with your actions. Each and every one of us is able to contribute by educating, inspiring and encouraging those around us to do their part as well.”– Cristina Mittermeier, Photographer and Founder, International League of Conservation Photographers; Co-Founder, Sea Legacy

“The natural world and human societies are facing a collapse of historic proportions, there is no avoiding this fact today. Given this, we all share a moral and ethical imperative to act every single day, in very concrete terms and in ways that directly affect the conservation of both terrestrial and ocean territories – you are either part of the problem or part of the solution – it is very straight forward. You are an Activist or an Inactivist.”– Kris Tompkins, Tompkins Conservation and driving force behind Iberá National Park, Argentina

“Volunteer your time to help further the conservation mission of organizations you believe in, and be an ambassador for conservation among your friends and network.”– Joyce Poole, PhD, National Geographic Explorer and Scientific Director/Co-Founder of ElephantVoices

“Conservation needs to become part of real life, not a fringe activity, and for that to happen it has to move out of science and into lifestyle. We need to create a culture of conservation.” –Colleen Begg

“[Being a conservationist] means being an active citizen of the world, and assuming responsibility for humanity’s actions. I fear we will never grant enough space for other animals to go about their daily lives; we will continually grab resources from them that we ‘need.’ So I try also to reduce my ‘needs’–and use my neighborly jays as models. How little they need from the world! Trees for nesting; good soil and bushes for hunting insects, grubs, and seeds; a puddle to bathe in. Surely, we can grant them this much space–in return for the glimpses we get of other beings so like and unlike us; beings who, like us, laugh and love, and think and feel and experience the world; beings who we know now are our kin.” –Virginia Morell, Author of “Animal Minds: How We Know Animals Think and Feel”, and frequent contributor to National Geographic Magazine

6. **Your path might be a winding one, you might hit a few roadblocks or get a little lost, and that's OK!**

"Don't be afraid to make mistakes. Learn from them, change course, and keep going." -Greg Carr



RANGERS IN GORONGOSA NATIONAL PARK, MOZAMBIQUE PREPARE TO RELEASE A RESCUED GROUND PANGOLIN (SMUTSIA TEMMINCKII) IN GORONGOSA NATIONAL PARK, MOZAMBIQUE. ALL EIGHT SPECIES OF PANGOLIN ARE ENDANGERED DUE TO DEMAND FOR THEIR MEAT AND SCALES IN ASIA. LAW ENFORCEMENT IS JUST ONE WAY YOU CAN BECOME A CONSERVATIONIST.

For me personally, the path has definitely had a few curves. I've loved and explored nature since I could walk, but I started college thinking I wanted to be a photojournalist and a linguist. I dabbled in classes in photography, Arabic, and even sailing. A semester-long Wildlife Management program in Tanzania with the School for Field Studies brought me back to my passion for nature, and I ended up in the Conservation and Resource Studies major at UC Berkeley. Afterward, I spent a year working with

meerkats at the [Kalahari Meerkat Project](#) in South Africa, and another year managing a hippopotamus ecology project in Kenya. I then applied for graduate school and was accepted to the [Ecology and Evolutionary Biology program at Princeton University](#), and shortly thereafter received a Young Explorers Grant from National Geographic. For the past five years, I've been spending most of my time in [Gorongosa National Park, Mozambique](#), working on my thesis research. I'm defending my thesis next month, and I'll then be starting a Fulbright-National Geographic Digital Storytelling Fellowship, doing photography in Gorongosa. After that, I hope to go full-time into journalism and storytelling – especially photography, bringing me full circle to the path I chose as a college freshman hoping to study photojournalism. And that's just the streamlined version of the story – I didn't mention all of the random, unrelated jobs I've had, from retail sales to softball umpire to web designer to professional designated driver, just to pay the bills!

Along the way, I've leaned heavily on a few key resources to help me build my career. Here are some great resources for aspiring conservationists:

1. If you're looking for a temporary or permanent job in conservation:

1. My favorite job boards for conservation-related work are the [Texas A&M Wildlife Jobs Board](#), the [Society for Conservation Biology Jobs Board](#), the [Ecolog-L Listserv](#), and the [Warnell School of Forestry Jobs Board](#), and the [Conservation Job Board](#). Finally, [Primate-Jobs](#) is great for (you guessed it) primate-related jobs, and [Marci's Wildlife Jobs Board](#) has links to a huge number of resources, though a lot of them are dead ends.
2. During college, I had an amazing summer internship with the [Student Conservation Association](#). This program pairs high school students, college students, and non-students with various government agencies all over the U.S. to work for the summer, or longer, on conservation-related projects. They cover your costs, and offer you an Americorps Education Award of up to \$5,775 that you can use toward tuition, student loans, or other educational costs. I worked for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Vermont, surveying small mammals on Army Corps land. It was where I first learned how to do a biodiversity survey!
3. There are a number of long-term research projects like the [Kalahari Meerkat Project](#), the [Striped Mouse Project](#), [Mpala Research Center](#), and others that let you volunteer in exchange for covering your own minimal costs (or occasionally have paid job openings). The best way to find out about these opportunities is to ask contacts in the field and to keep your eyes on the job boards.
4. If you want to know what it's like to work for some of the major players in conservation, all of the biggest conservation organizations, like the [Wildlife Conservation Society](#), the [World Wildlife Fund](#), and [Conservation International](#) have their own "Careers" pages (where they

also often post internships).

2. If you're a student looking for field experience:

1. [The School for Field Studies](#) offers incredible semester and summer programs to countries all over the world, where they have long-running programs in conservation, culture, and the environment. As an alumna of SFS Tanzania '08, I couldn't recommend this organization more highly! Other organizations offer similar experiences, like the [School for International Training](#) and [Operation Wallacea](#). At the same time, make sure you do your research on these organizations – there are many predatory “voluntourism” organizations out there, especially those that charge many thousands of dollars for short trips of a week or two, who will take your money and give you little to no actual experience in return.
2. The National Science Foundation's [Research Experience for Undergraduates](#) program will link you to paid work as a research assistant at a number of sites all over the world.

3. If you have a great idea and are looking for support:

1. [National Geographic Grants](#) are awarded for exploration, research, conservation, education, storytelling, and technology, and many of the grants they give each year revolve around the natural world. Early Career Grants are for people with less experience in the type of project they are proposing; Standard Grants are for professionals with a lot of experience under their belts.
2. The U.S. Department of State [Fulbright U.S. Student Program](#) provides support for American Citizens to travel to other countries and carry out a research project (or a storytelling project, in the case of the [Fulbright-National Geographic Digital Storytelling Fellowship](#)). Fulbright also has programs for citizens from other countries to come and carry out projects in the U.S.

4. If you already have a career and are not looking to shift, but want to make a contribution to conservation, consider doing some of these things:

1. See if your local zoo has any conservation programs or research programs that you could volunteer for.
2. Set up monthly donations to your favorite conservation organization.
3. Look into ways to make your own life more sustainable.
4. Be politically active; vote, and write to/call your representatives when there's an important conservation issue on the table.
5. Talk about conservation to your friends and neighbors.
6. If you have kids (or relatives/friends' kids), take them outside as much as possible, and teach them about conservation.
7. Find ways to volunteer locally, on things like trash cleanups, citizen science projects, or conservation education projects. Look for local chapters of conservation organizations like the Audubon Society to find events like this.

8. Look for ways to volunteer remotely, i.e. by lending your talents as a web designer, fund raiser, grant writer, or whatever you might have to offer, to a conservation organization online. Many organizations have a link on their website for volunteer opportunities.

And finally, if it's conservation-related research you're interested in, here is some additional advice from my personal experience:

1. Most research jobs require a degree in a related field — depending on exactly what gets you excited, that could be a number of things. You might get a bachelor's degree in Ecology, or in Animal Behavior, or in Resource Studies, or in Environmental Studies; or in Forestry, Ecotoxicology, Environmental Law, or dozens of other fields. It doesn't *thugely* matter exactly what the subject is called — as long as you're taking classes that are related to the kind of research you want to do later. The most important thing is that you sign up for a degree that allows you to get field experience via field courses, research opportunities, or study abroad courses, which brings me to my second point.
2. You'll need experience in your chosen field, which you can get in a number of ways. At universities, there are often field courses which take you outside and teach you how to identify plants and animals, how to make scientific observations, and how to do research. There are also study abroad programs like the one I did in Tanzania. Finally, there are undergraduate research experience programs, either at the university or even on a national scale like the Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) program, which can take you anywhere in the country for research (field or lab) and even pays you for it.
3. The final really crucial thing is to network. Making connections is critical — I found out about both of my post-college jobs because of people I knew; they weren't advertised. It's really important to form close relationships with a few professors, post-docs, or graduate students who can write letters of recommendation for you or help you find jobs. Like in many fields, progressing as a scientist and conservationist in this field can have as much to do with who you know as what you know.
4. Read E.O. Wilson's fantastic book, *Letters to a Young Scientist*.

In summary: there are a lot of paths to become a conservationist, no matter your chosen vocation. I hope this advice will help you find yours! **Do you know of other great resources, or have ideas on how aspiring conservationists can make the biggest difference for conservation? Please share your thoughts in the comments section!**

For more, follow me on [Facebook](#) or on [Instagram](#).



A SCIENTIST WEIGHS MEERKATS AT THE KALAHARI MEERKAT PROJECT, SOUTH AFRICA. LONG-TERM ANIMAL BEHAVIOR STUDIES LIKE THIS ONE HELP BOLSTER OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATURAL WORLD SO WE CAN BETTER UNDERSTAND HOW TO CONSERVE IT.





MEET THE AUTHOR

Jen Guyton is a photographer with a background in ecology. She spends ten months per year living in Gorongosa National Park, Mozambique, and has worked as a biologist on three continents, including eight years working on wildlife and conservation projects in Africa. She's studied baboons in Tanzania, meerkats in South Africa, hippos in Kenya, and termites in Namibia. Jen recently received a Fulbright-National Geographic Digital Storytelling Fellowship to photograph in Gorongosa. She's also a National Geographic Explorer and Young Leader, an Associate Fellow with the International League of Conservation Photographers (ILCP), and has a master's degree in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology from Princeton University, where she is currently finishing her PhD. Before that, she earned a BSc in Conservation and Resource Studies, with an emphasis in Communicating Conservation in a Developing World, from the University of California, Berkeley. She has won several awards for her photography, including in the Wildlife Photographer of the Year, Nature's Best Photography, and Big Picture Natural World Photo Competitions. Her writing and photography have been published in a number of places online and in print. Facebook: www.facebook.com/jenguytonphoto Instagram: www.instagram.com/jenguyton Twitter: www.twitter.com/jen_guyton



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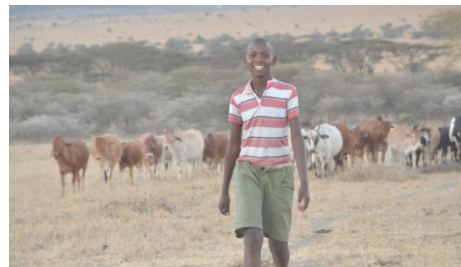
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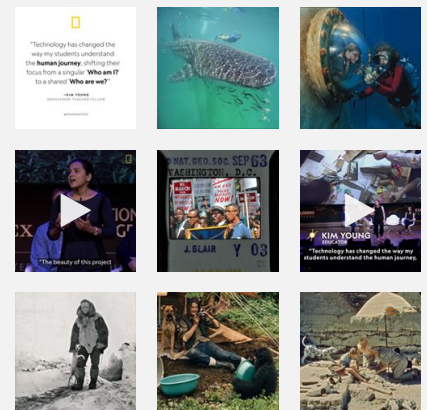
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Photo: Brian Skerry.

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"I can never imagine being bored; there's just so much to explore and not enough time to do it." Happy birthday to @SylviaEarle, legendary oceanographer and National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence.

Photos: Sylvia Earle, Bates Littlehales, @Brian_Skerry

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