



CIEEM

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Early Career Ecologists: Time to Root Out Exploitation in the Consultancy Sector

“ For an industry that is allegedly compassionate about the environment, it can be quite brutal in the way it treats its greatest assets. ”



CIEEM has been actively involved in the promotion of welfare for its members and has recently updated the *Good Working Practices* guidance (available in the members' area of the CIEEM website). Recent *In Practice* articles such as Owain Gabb's *What We Look for in an Early Career Ecologist* (September 2020) provide an excellent insight for the student considering a rewarding career in ecological consultancy.



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There is, though, an elephant in the room, and it is one that has concerned many in the industry and still seems to be prevalent in a small but significant section of employees. There are consultancies both small and large that are exploiting early career ecologists on both summer contracts and first jobs by prolonged exposure to antisocial and challenging hours, placing profit and function way above well-being, safety, personal development and true sustainability.

This article could be alarming for an early career ecologist to read, and it has been rightfully pointed out that a lot of companies of all sizes have policies that seek to protect the well-being of their staff. However, that is all the greater reason to put pressure on those who place profit above welfare to stop risking lives and undermining the profession.

As the 2021 survey season approaches, it is an opportunity for this community to strengthen a commitment to create a supportive and sustainable workplace for early career ecologists. In order to do this we have to shame those consultancies that see such practice as a necessary baptism into the industry, and to meet their profit margins, to think again.

I was asked to write a blog (www.cieem.net/graduate-ecologists-and-their-exploitation-in-ecological-consultancy-by-marcus-kohler-mcieem/) on this in 2020, having raised the issue at the 2019 CIEEM AGM. Recruitment

interviews have brought this matter repeatedly to my attention. This article is constructed from both responses to that blog and my own interviews with early career ecologists.

Ecology is not the first profession to succumb to exploitation of junior staff; look at the hours that young doctors and lawyers undertake. But exploitation creates a toxic culture that breeds poor practice, poor mental health, limited professional development, the capacity for serious mistakes, token ecological appraisal and the chance of causing a serious accident and endangering lives.

Some examples of graduate experiences:

- *"We had to go and do nocturnal surveys and we were expected to drive two or more hours to a different site and then undertake a dawn survey."*
- *"We also had to go and do nocturnal surveys that were as far as three hours away and not have a hotel booked, so we had to drive straight back after."*
- *"During peak season we'd be out almost every night of the week, and still be expected to produce reports during this time. We'd still have to go and do reptile/PEAs during the day as well."*

This is exploitative, dangerous and illegal. In the blog I pointed to the opportunity to make a case under the Working Time Directive (WTD) which sets out the right to fair working conditions, limiting working to 48 hours a week and, crucially, ensuring sufficient rest time between work, especially when working antisocial hours. Putting to one side for a moment the issues of being a 'temporary worker' or how very tough this would be for a new person in their first job, I was alerted to the practice of ecologists being asked to opt out of the WTD. A Twitter poll registered 37 votes to 10 on UK

ecologists being asked to opt out of the WTD, and was described as "common and widespread". The CIEEM *Good Working Practices* guidance states:

"The limit on working hours is to protect employees from becoming so tired that they are unable to work effectively and to protect the employer from the liability for accidents that may occur as a result of tiredness. Employers can ask employees to choose to opt out of the Working Time Directive for a temporary or permanent period, but an employee cannot be unfairly treated or dismissed for refusing to do so. Requests to employees to opt out should be exceptional and should not be used by employers to cover a lack of staff resource for the work being undertaken."

A senior ecologist with one company described the approach as this:

"New employees are pressured into signing an exemption from the WTD. Whilst they would probably deny it was pressure, you are given it at the time of your induction and expected to sign it there and then... I could accrue TOIL in lieu of payment."

What I also found from the blog was a strong response and more examples of exploitation and, sadly, some pretty entrenched use of such a policy. There appears to be very little training by some consultancies. Another example:

"At my last job we only went out with a senior ecologist for our first survey, then we did all the rest by ourselves. This includes PEAs and Preliminary Roost Assessments, of which I had no prior experience. This means we'd be doing PRAs without a licenced bat ecologist, which I did bring up to the senior ecologist but he said it was fine unless we found a bat."

This is so wrong on so many levels. How can it be expected for early career ecologists to develop with so little training? How can the consultancy be confident of the quality of the work? These practices could easily lead to criminal breaches of wildlife legislation and are certainly not contributing to the sustainable development process. Do these consultancies care? Is an early career ecologist going to know how to find a bat in a building or recognise or even understand the nuances of appropriate ecological interpretation?

The effects on early career ecologists from such practices are multiple: demotivation, extreme tiredness and social isolation. These effects can easily lead to depression and long-term health issues. At the very least, such an absence of professional support and practice can lead to a cynical approach to the profession. I received several responses to my blog from those who had left the industry for these very reasons, as one commented:

“This was an issue when I started in the industry nearly 10 years ago, and it’s still ongoing. I believe this to be the core reason why we struggle to hire more senior staff – because by the time a lot of ecologists reach that level, they have had enough.”

Consultancies could argue that this approach enables efficiency and a viable pricing mechanism, and on one level I agree. Exploitation has always been the cash baby of the unscrupulous. Consultancies that undertake such practices drive down the value of the profession and the delivery of effective, informed ecology. It has no place within an industry based around principles of sustainability and well-being.

As one ecologist commented:

“It’s the perennial problem of trying to get work by bidding low and then sending out your lowest paid member of staff to carry out the surveys, alongside trying to get them to maximise their working day, all whilst keeping the costs down by not providing accommodation.”

One experienced ecologist re-told their experiences with a large company, which conveys effectively the dilemma that early career ecologists face:

“Monday morning saw me drive from Kent to the office to meet the team to get to Gatwick to fly to Glasgow, where we picked up the hire cars and travelled to our accommodation. That evening we started 4 nights of dusk/dawn surveys on trees. At 10 am Tuesday–Friday we field assistants all sat down and did sound analysis from the dusk/dawn surveys until lunch time,

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with tutoring from the senior ecologist. Each afternoon Tuesday–Thursday we either set out a reptile survey or carried out a reptile check. We had a free hour or so before dinner then it was out for a dusk/dawn again. After sound analysis on Friday morning we would drive back to Glasgow airport, fly back to Gatwick. It was very tiring but ... it was incredibly difficult to get a foot in the door when I left uni – and probably more so now – so I took the 6 weeks work back then with no question. But would I want another graduate to go through that? No. It’s not a nice introduction into the industry and many of the assistants I worked with during those 6 weeks left ecology before ever getting properly started.”

Perhaps the most alarming response was from a senior manager who tried to address the issues:

“[M]y predecessor on a site project was a graduate ecologist who was working 16–18 hour days on the project (it was supposed to be a 10 hour day) without any extra pay or TOIL. As a graduate with no ECoW experience, she was working herself sick trying to do a lot of things that were someone else’s problem. The last time I spoke with her she was no longer working in the industry.”

This article cannot for legal reasons name names, although it is fair to say that some arise repeatedly. It cannot also vouch for the authenticity of such comments, although it is written in every faith that they are genuine, and

the sources are too varied over too great a time period not to be so. Although there appear to only a few larger companies that are doing this there are also a few smaller companies growing their influence with such practices.

Ecological consultancy has come a long way in the last 30 years: it provides a fulfilling and rewarding career and an intellectual journey, but it’s important to be aware that these practices are present. You are within your rights to raise these issues. Perhaps it will need a representation of a group of you, but use the CIEEM guidance and contact the secretariat for advice if this practice is taking place.

Now, of all times, given the difficulties that young people have faced with prolonged, enforced isolation at their most social time of life, we really have to raise the flag. This practice has to stop. As one senior ecologist said to me:

“For an industry that is allegedly compassionate about the environment, it can be quite brutal in the way it treats its greatest assets.”

Want to help?

Interested in being involved in further discussion around addressing exploitation of junior/freelance ecologists and environmental managers in the industry? Get in touch via enquiries@cieem.net.

About the Author

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