



CIEEM

# inpractice

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Biosecurity Good Practice

Marine INNS in the UK:  
the Scale of the Problem

Threat of Invasive  
Common Green Iguanas  
to Caribbean Fauna

'Phase 1 for Bugs': Rapid  
Assessments of Potential  
Value of Invertebrate Habitats



**Biosecurity and  
Invasive Species**

Once you have your first position don't stop there! Keep growing your network – it can be a strong source of advice and guidance, both while initially looking for a job and throughout your career.

The ecology and environmental management sector is a small world. Getting involved in social media is a great way to network, get yourself known and hear about opportunities.

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## Career Profile

Interview by Ella Glover, member of CIEEM's Student & Early Careers Focus Group



**Name:** Laura Palmer MCIEEM

**Organisation:** Neath Port Talbot Council / Cyngor Castell-nedd Port Talbot

**Job title:** Biodiversity Officer / Swyddog Bioamrywiaeth

**Years in the sector:** 16

**How long have you been working in your current role? And has it changed in that time?**

Eight years—and loads, absolutely loads. In Wales we've had a flurry of new legislation and planning policy. We have to have a plan on how we're going

to conserve and enhance biodiversity in all our functions, and I wrote the Biodiversity Duty Plan [for Neath Port Talbot] under the Environment Act Wales. We had to change my job description to actually fit it in!

**Since the environment is a devolved issue, does Wales come up with its own legislation?**

Yes, and it's very different and a lot stronger in Wales. The Biodiversity Duty pertains to all public bodies, such as Welsh Water and the Police. As a Planning Authority when we give planning permission the applicant has to prove they've enhanced biodiversity. All authorities in Wales have actually got a letter from the Chief Planning Officer saying that you can refuse a planning application on biodiversity grounds—so it's a really strong backing.

**Do you experience much opposition to your work?**

We actually have a lot of support and since we sit in the planning team, the planners take it seriously when we ask for something. We've had a much better dialogue in recent years, for example with the people that do the grass cutting. We have some beautiful verges in Neath Port Talbot covered in rare invertebrates and last year it kicked off massively when some were cut. It's difficult because we can't just turn up and say "stop doing what you're

doing: do it differently" and for years it was just "no no no". But these days we communicate better and work with them, for example, I've written a briefing note saying how we could change the regime and help them to buy better machinery. We've got a lot of support in the community and some great botanists who are happy to show up on our behalf and if something goes wrong they'll ask "Why didn't you listen to the biodiversity people?"

**What does a typical work week look like for you (pre-pandemic of course)?**

I'm in the office a lot because most of what I do is comment on planning applications. Things like wind farms or household applications where, for example, they might have bats present. In Wales we have Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) and they're protected under planning policy. We get out to survey about 20 of these sites a year, to make sure each site is surveyed at least every 10 years. We also advise different departments; yesterday I was out on a flooding site where some vegetation needed cutting back and I advised them on when to cut back to avoid bird nesting season. We've also been looking at a lot of coal tips recently and colliery spoil sites are some of our best habitat—in the last few years we found a millipede new to science (which has been dubbed the 'Maerdy Monster')!

## I saw online that you do public talks and guided walks—could you tell me a bit more about those?

Yes, we do bat walks, in fact we often get asked to do them at Halloween but of course they're sleeping! We do bioblitzes on site where once a year we get different organisations to set up a couple of tents with wild cooking and some animals on display. Pre-COVID we did guided walks where we told groups all about the biodiversity in Neath. For Wales Nature Week last year our tech-savvy colleague organised a series of live events, so I did an hour of live bird watching from my garden and about 50–60 people tuned in!

## How has COVID-19 affected your work? And have you found that people are more appreciative of their outdoor spaces?

Working from home is weird but we still get out on site which is nice. We had a lot of money thrown at us at the end of the financial year and with just 6 weeks left to do projects, we managed to install some bat and barn owl boxes and a natural play area. I think lockdown has changed people's opinions: we're getting a much more positive response now. Some of the other offices have come around to understand why we've always been pushing this because suddenly they're appreciating their outdoor spaces. We've had a lot more queries from the public about things such as community gardens too.

## What project that you've been a part of are you most proud of?

Something I started in Cardiff is etching trails. We have these zinc plaques with raised images on that kids can rub crayons on, such as millipedes, bumblebees and butterflies. When I came to Neath I thought "*let's do them here too*". We're hoping to relaunch them and say "*here's some crayons, off you go*". It's such a simple idea—just cheap recycled plastic posts in the ground. I was also the main ecologist for us [Neath] and Swansea on the Tidal

Lagoon application in Swansea Bay which was absolutely massive—but I prefer to do an etching plaque!

## What inspired you to pursue a career in ecology and biodiversity management?

I did my BSc Hons Psychology with Theatre and Media Drama at the University of Glamorgan (as it was then), and literally the day after my graduation I went up to Anglesey to volunteer for the RSPB. I found out you could get paid to count puffins! So I went back the next year to point out puffins and drum up membership. When I was there, the MSc Ecology group from Bangor University came up and we told them about the site. I chatted to the lecturers who told me what they learn about in lectures and I thought "*I want to do this!*". I was eligible for the course so I applied and got onto it for the following year, and that was that really.

The reason I wanted to work in local government was when the Cardiff Bay Barrage happened I thought "*I can't really complain because I wasn't there, but if I can be the kind of person helping to make that decision and make it go well, I want to be a part of that.*"

## Do you have any tips for new ecologists?

Make sure you know what country you're in! Because one day you might get called up to do a survey in Wales and when you write it up, don't write down Natural England. Make sure you know what county you're in as well—it sounds daft but it happens a lot. Also make sure you're totally up to date on policy and local legislation especially if you're working on things that lead to a planning application. Obviously stick to the CIEEM guidelines as much as possible because they're the best!

You can't learn to be a planning ecologist, you just have to learn on the job. It's difficult to get experience in a local authority if you haven't had a role there before, so just try the best you can to gain some understanding of how the system works.

## What skills would you be looking for if you were to hire a new ecologist?

Definitely someone who understands the standard techniques for Phase 1 etc. Ideally someone who can use mapping software—we use QGIS because it's free and it's brilliant, so it's really helpful if someone knows how to use it. Volunteering is the main thing—just get out there, get the experience, understand what you're talking about. I'd recommend the Wildlife Trusts, BugLife, Bumblebee Conservation Trust and Butterfly Conservation, and doing transect walks with the Bat Conservation Trust. Volunteering with local organisations is great, but you're not likely to get the same level of experience and knowledge of the right techniques as working with some of the more established environmental organisations.

## Any other last tips?

Just get your face known! And volunteer for everything—it's fun!

## Thanks Laura for your time and enthusiasm!