

Countryside Careers – four decades of change

Everyone in countryside or environmental work today probably just accepts that contracts tend to be short-term, are funded by more than one organisation, pay well under the national average income, require a Criminal Record Bureau check, some experience and a third-level academic qualification. But please do not think that working in the countryside was always like this.

'Way back in the late 1960s, when I were a lad and volunteering in the Cairngorms with the RSPB's Operation Osprey, I found what no Careers Advisor had suggested: a meaningful future in countryside management and interpretation. I recall one spellbound visitor who stood in the Public Hide (little more than a wooden shed in those days) and looked around at the information posters, the sales desk and at the magnificent birds on their eyrie just a short distance away. In an awe-struck whisper the visitor asked: 'But how did you get them to build their nest just in front of the hide?' Clearly, there was a lot of countryside education to be done and I wanted to be involved.

That was about 40 years ago. Since then I have been employed by another conservation charity, then by a new town commission, then a county council, then self employed as a freelance ranger and, for the past 12 years, in a position with a unique overview of something like 35,000 countryside jobs. I have noticed numerous changes over the years, but I sometimes wonder if they really are 'improvements' on the old ways.

Pay has come a long way from the early 1970s, thank goodness, with some posts now paying c£20,000 / year, equivalent to £400 / week – a far cry from the £800 / year that I (and others) used to earn in my first Ranger job. True, the cost of living was lower then, but not by that much! Dedication to the job and a mutual loyalty between employer and employee were important in those days, but prospects were limited and there were very few jobs.

In the good old days it was normal for a person to keep one job for life, but total job security always carries a risk that some staff may become 'dead wood' over the years. Even if they do less and less work, they still get paid as normal. This was particularly true of local government and the nationalised industries. In the 70s and 80s government funding was cut, cut and cut again to force all these organisations to become 'more efficient'. Gone were the days of 'A Job for Life' and in came the Short Term Contract and the Project Officer.

'Brilliant!' said the employers. No more dead wood and cheaper too, without the long term costs of sick leave, superannuation, etc. Except, of course, that everyone on a short term contract has to start looking around for another job once they are past the half-way point, or even resign in desperation to grab another job which still has a little bit longer to run. Once short-term-ism takes over, continuity and loyalty are lost as Projects and Project Officers come and go at an alarming rate. Who benefits? The bureaucrats, of course. Is it any more cost effective than the old way? Probably not, since the cost of any actual project is usually boosted by another 40% for all of the 'admin' involved.

With continuing financial cutbacks no single organisation could afford a whole Project Officer, so now several organisations club together to fund one job or one project. All the funders insist on having their logo on everything to show their involvement, but just how many partner organisations does it actually take to manage one bit of countryside? In 12 years of publishing the Countryside Jobs Service the current record is held by a local authority which insisted on having 11 (yes, eleven) different logos on their ½ page display ad for just one vacancy. There was hardly space left for any job details!

I would suggest that the true efficiency of any project is inversely proportional to the number of logos involved. All this multi-funded money would be much better spent on actually conserving the Lesser Spotted Marshmallow, not being diverted into paying for all the phone calls, agendas, meetings, minutes, reports, travel, accountants and auditors required to get several different organisations to agree that conserving it is probably a good idea.

The silly thing is, of course, that many of these multi-funding partners are themselves government departments, or government funded bodies. Thus sufficient government money to do the job is first distributed to lots and lots of different government bodies, agencies and quangos until none of them have enough money, and then they all 'liaise' together to try to re-assemble enough of the money to actually do the job required. Is this really better than 100% funding from just one department? A simple

way to start reducing the number of funders (and the accompanying bureaucracy) would be for government to limit all of their grants to a minimum of 25%, so that there could never be more than four government bodies funding any single project. Rocket science it is not.

Compulsory Competitive Tendering was introduced in the 1980s, with all central and local government required to award contracts to the cheapest contractor. It may sound like a good idea, but when applied to school dinners over several years we now know the inevitable results of this policy are Turkey Twizzlers and the highest childhood obesity rates in Europe. The countryside equivalent of this story is that it's much better to pay a bit more for a good hedge, path, wood or wall which will last a long time, rather than a cheap, quick and shoddy job that will have to be remedied before too long.

Health and Safety. Need I say more? Which local authority was right: the one that used a hydraulic cherry-picker to collect all the conkers from the trees and put them on the ground for the kids to take, or the one which just felled all the Horse Chestnut trees to avoid the possibility of being sued?

The good news is that for the past five years more than 5,000 paid UK countryside and environmental jobs have been advertised annually, which indicates a much greater interest in the whole subject. Pay is much improved but job security is reduced. Bureaucracy has increased, funding is getting tighter and the fear of litigation is now all-pervasive. Is the situation better than it was? On balance, yes. Is the situation improving? Probably. Is the situation improving fast enough to cope with the world's environmental limits? I don't know but I hope so. The answer is partly up to you and I wish you every success...

Niall Carson recently retired as Editor of the Countryside Jobs Service (www.countryside-jobs.com).

[1143 words in total. I will ask Kerryn, new Editor at the CJS office, if she can email you a recent photo].