

Eucan Poland Experience 2010

In August 2010 I volunteered on a 2 week conservation project in Poland. The work mainly involved habitat management, which included the removal of trees encroaching on swamp land, in order to encourage the growth of the smaller plants which butterflies need. I am an English teacher, I have no experience in the field of conservation, and I dislike creepy crawlies, although I hoped this trip might help me get over that fear. I applied to go because I like to learn new things and see new places, and hoped the trip would provide relaxation, fresh air and good memories. Instead of talking through the trip a day at a time, I have tried to write my report as a reflection on the positive aspects of the trip for me, and how it helped me to grow as a person.

The project was run by The European Conservation Action Network. This organisation was established in 2007 by The Kingcombe Trust, a charity based at The Kingcombe Centre in west Dorset. It is dedicated to conservation and environmental education (Reg. Charity no. 1054758), in association with the Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation. The project is funded through the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme and has partners in France, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Belgium, Poland and Romania. Further information can be obtained from www.kingcombecentre.org.uk or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559/mobile: 0044.7981.776767.Email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk).

5 ways in which I benefited from the Eucan Poland Experience

During my trip to Poland I discovered:

- 1 An increased appreciation of wildlife**
- 2 That environmental conservation is a complex issue**
- 3 That different management styles suit different people**
- 4 That Poland is a spectacular and changing country**
- 5 That my life is good and I'm a lucky person**

1 An increased appreciation of wildlife

My favourite work day was on the last day at the kissing swamp. The normally upbeat Nicola was struggling a bit with homesickness so Nigel, the project leader, let the two of us take a break from the practical work and go and do a little count of butterfly species. For the next half hour I felt quite a connection with nature, and a sense of peace came over me. Nicola taught me lots about butterflies and their habits and how to identify them, and we got away from the noise of the machinery for an hour. Having never bothered to take the time to look at butterflies before I was quite surprised by how easy it was to identify them

and how calming it was to watch them, and I will definitely do it again. I also hope to do a mini butterfly project with my school pupils next year, so perhaps ironically as a non-insect person I might help inspire a future entomologist as a result of this trip! Later in the week a Marsh Harrier gliding low, a flock of storks circling, and the bubbles of a beaver near its dam all provoked a similar feeling of genuine awe and appreciation of wildlife which I hadn't experienced before.

2 Environmental conservation is a complex issue

I have never studied environmental conservation or habitat management and assumed it would be a simple matter, with clear results from a clear task. I was surprised to discover that this wasn't the case at all. When Nigel visited a swamp he had cleared the previous year he was shocked to discover that where trees had been cut down not only had they grown back but they had multiplied. This of course questions the validity of habitat management if it is not sustained and for me opened my eyes to the complexity of decisions that must be made in the field. I found it de-motivating, working for a purpose that seemed fragile and a drop in the ocean, but some colleagues inspired me with their enthusiasm and their belief that doing something is better than doing nothing. Certainly I have learnt that in the future when local environmental management is planned, I should be more aware that issues are not black and white, and try to be more open minded about the range of possible responses to an environmental problem.

3 Different management styles suit different people

Having been offered my first school management position this year, the timing of this trip made it an excellent opportunity for me to observe the different effects of styles of leadership on different group members. Upon my return I have been able to reflect on what I experienced and I hope that the lessons I learned in Poland will help me in my first leadership role in school. Personally, much as I admire his vast knowledge and energy, I found Nigel's bluntness was sometimes rude. It was interesting to see that some people liked his forward approach and even admired him for wearing his heart on his sleeve, whereas for me it made me very defensive. As the trip wore on we had occasional thaws in relations, but there was always a clash about to happen, and for me this prevented me from truly relaxing during the trip. I think the timing of this experience was perfect. I can see that some of my colleagues will want a blunt approach and some will prefer to be handled more softly, and so the experience has taught me a useful and timely lesson.

I also felt very much the bottom of the class and talks often went over my head. Even rules which to others were apparently simple, such as when gloves were required, were new to me, as a newcomer to this work. I think that perhaps if a leader is an expert in his or her field, he or she might overlook the need to

explain such basic information, so as an expert in my field it was a timely reminder that on my return to school I should not assume anything about others' starting points. I hope I will be able to prevent colleagues from feeling out of their depth, as a direct result of having felt uncomfortably ignorant in Poland, and this will help me do my job well, and so I am grateful for this aspect of the experience.

4 Poland is a spectacular country

Warsaw was a fascinating city and the lakes area in the North East of the country was beautiful. On our day off, kayaking in silence on the river with a good friend was an almost spiritual experience. Seeing an elk up close and personal felt surreal, as did relaxing on the roof of Warsaw University Library while the city bustled below. Gazing across the city and the incredible flatness of the land from the top of the Palace of Culture was a fitting end to the trip.

My appreciation of the country was multiplied by the fact that Poland seemed to be changing before our very eyes. The aspects we found charming, such as the pony and traps, and the crooked old ladies bent low by firewood, are dying out, as Poles strive for mobile phones and modern cars. This made me feel privileged to have witnessed Poland when I did, as although I plan to return, I imagine the country will change significantly over the next few years. Spending time in rural Poland also made me a little more able to empathise with Eastern Europeans working in Britain, although it would never really be possible to put myself in their shoes. I have a few friends from Slovakia and Poland and I hugely underestimated the culture shock they must have gone through on arrival in the UK, and since my return my increased respect for their ability to cope with such a contrasting environment has led to deepened friendships.

5 My life is good and I'm a lucky person

I enjoyed several moments and have some happy memories, including the spectacular tornado and rainfall, the pony and cart ride, the sauna by the river, the lake swimming, the elk, and the kayaking. I also made a friend for life in Nicola, with whom I laughed and cried and sang and talked about the meaning of life, and who I am sure will still be making me giggle for many years to come. She also inspired me to believe that your own life is not over when you become a Mum and if you want your children to live life to the full, you have to show them how it's done!

However, overall the trip was not really what I expected it to be, especially the work, and the main benefit to me was that the experience greatly increased my appreciation of the life I live. I was keen to come home to things that I would previously have taken for granted, such as being able to make a cup of tea whenever I want! I was looking forward to seeing my lodger, who having lived with me for 3 years is also a friend, and I realised how lucky I am to have found

someone so easy to live with in harmony. I was quite emotional upon seeing my friends, knowing that I could be who I am and be listened to and loved. I even almost looked forward to school restarting in September: I love my pupils and my colleagues, I believe in what I do for a living, I'm good at it, I'm mentally challenged every day, I have the opportunity to be creative and to make my own decisions, and I'm paid well to do it. I'm full of admiration for those colleagues in Poland who work or hope to work in conservation, in what seems to me to be a physically exhausting, complex and thankless task. I wouldn't do it for five times the salary, and so without meaning to be disrespectful to those who do, I have a new found appreciation for the fact I have found my niche and have a job I love.

Conclusion

I enjoyed many moments of this trip and so I'd like to thank the funders for the opportunity to visit and work in another country. Personally it did not encourage me to pursue further conservation volunteering or a career in the field, as I did not enjoy the tasks and felt uncertain about the sustainability of the work and its importance in the grand scheme of things. However, it did help me realise that there is a lot of challenging and important work to be done, and that there are many dedicated people working in the field. It also encouraged me to look at the world with fresh eyes and for that I am very grateful.

Sally Thomas