



# A Career Guide for Conservation Biology in Africa: Questions and Answers for Beginners

## What is conservation biology?

In the face of global environmental degradation and alarming loss of biodiversity, all disciplines in the natural sciences have been provoked to a call of duty in recent times. Whether it is the entomologist, primatologist, hydrobiologist, zoologist, geneticist, ecologist, forester, botanist, or ornithologist; many have been motivated to take up the crisis discipline conservation biology.

The Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) defines conservation biology as a mission – oriented science that focuses on how to protect and restore biodiversity, or the diversity of life on earth. The FitzPatrick Institute University of Cape Town, South

Africa, which runs a MSc programme in conservation biology, states: conservation biology involves identifying threatened species, ecosystems and ecological processes, and developing appropriate measures to reduce the effects of particular threats.

The anthropogenically induced threats to species, habitats and the environment are real and obviously leading to an ecological catastrophe. Like medical research, conservation biology deals with issues where quick action is critical and the consequences of failure are great (i).

## Who is a conservation biologist?

A conservation biologist should have a basic foundation in any relevant field of the biological sciences, e.g. ecology, evolution, biogeography, biodiversity, microbiology, environmental management. However, she or he must draw from a broad range of tools from the humanities; sociology, economics, political science, geography, law etc. Conservation biologists should be highly motivated, have a good sense of humor and optimism to effectively pursue a

challenging mission to protect and restore life on earth.

## Is conservation biology a viable profession in my country?

Conservation biology is a discipline that meets a universal need. There is hardly any country on earth that escapes the need to protect and restore life within its locality. A sensible look at trends will easily reveal that conservation biology will be needed for a long time to come. There are myriad tasks to be accomplished to ensure biodiversity survives in perpetuity. Your responsibility will be to scan as much existing information as possible on the biodiversity in your locality and then explore prospects for conservation. With the world now a global village, it is possible for you to reach out to a wide array of international auspices to aid you in your conservation work. Conservation issues cut across national borders and there are active networks of conservationists in different parts of the world. An African network of professionals can be located at <http://www.conservationbiology.org/Africa>,

the Africa section of the Society for Conservation Biology.

## **Do I have economic security as a conservation biologist?**

The conservation biologist works in service institutions; academia, research institutions, non-governmental conservation organizations or regional government natural resource agencies. The issue of economic security as in any other discipline largely depends on personal proactiveness. Stephen Covey puts this so well: "Your economic security does not lie in your job; it lies in your own power to produce – to think, to learn, to create, to adapt. That's true financial independence". Another thing to note is that there is the personal satisfaction and spiritual fulfillment you get working as a conservation biologist and the accompanying prestige of a noble profession.

## **How can I become a conservation biologist?**

The first good step is getting organizational affiliation. You can start by joining a local

non-governmental conservation organization in your region. Through such organizations you can get resource materials to educate yourself and a vantage to participate in conservation fieldwork. Furthermore, afford yourself the opportunity of international auspices by joining the network of global conservation biology professionals where you will receive mentorship, topical information and guidance (see <http://www.conservationbiology.org/Africa>).

In the development of your career as a conservation biologist, you can apply for short courses (see <http://www.tropical-biology.org>) and graduate programmes in conservation biology (see <http://www.conbio.org/SCB/Services/Programs/> and <http://www.fitzpatrick.uct.ac.za>).

## **Can a woman be successful as a conservation biologist?**

Conservation biology has no gender bias. In fact some of the world's greatest conservation biologists today are women. In some African countries, such as Namibia, about 70% of the conservation biologists and biodiversity scientists are women of

great talent and passion. Remember that the winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize, Professor Wangari Maathai, is an African woman conservation biologist! There is an increasing elite of young women that make up the profession internationally. The Society for Conservation Biology Africa section has initiated a support programme for young African women in conservation. Please e-mail Phoebe Barnard ([barnard@sanbi.org](mailto:barnard@sanbi.org)) and Beth Kaplin ([bkaplin@antiochne.edu](mailto:bkaplin@antiochne.edu)) for more information, and how to benefit from this programme.

For further enquiries on conservation biology, mentorship, support and opportunities, e-mail Stephen Awoyemi ([awoyemi@tc-biodiversity.org](mailto:awoyemi@tc-biodiversity.org)).

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**Society for Conservation Biology  
(Africa Section)**

<http://www.conbio.org/africa>

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