

Transcript

00:00:00 Speaker 1

This is a recording made by Amy Burchmore on the 23rd of September 2025 at the National Botanic Garden of Wales.

00:00:08 Speaker 1

This interview is part of the Natur am Byth project Learning from Legends, which aims to capture the stories and experiences of those who have dedicated their lives to nature conservation in Wales.

00:00:18 Speaker 1

Today I will be interviewing Head of Terrestrial Nature Reserves at the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales, Lizzie Wilberforce.

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Lizzie, your career reflects a lifelong commitment to nature conservation in Wales, and so I would like to start off by talking about your current role as Head of Terrestrial Nature Reserves at the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales.

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Could you tell me a little bit about what your role entails?

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Sure, I'm relatively new into this role as part of my career, but it sort of builds on, I've spent a lot of my career in land management in different forms.

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And it's a position I absolutely feel privileged to have because I think there's so much opportunity in land management to make a visible difference, sometimes over the very short term.

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The Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales has got over 100 mainland nature reserves stretching across from Cardiff in the East up to Brecon and then across to sort of Aberystwyth area in the West.

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So it's almost half of Wales with that large number of sites scattered across it.

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So many different types of sites, such a varied landscape.

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so many different communities, different types of communities on their doorsteps.

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And we've got a fab team who have got loads of different skills, everything from heavy machinery to people engagement.

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So I kind of get to head all that up, I guess.

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I spend quite a lot of time doing things like grant applications and raising funds and things like that.

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But I still get to go outdoors and do botanical monitoring and think about management planning and the sort of strategic direction of our land, which is

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It's just really fun, no two days are the same.

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And I think it's just the kind of job that you're really lucky to have where you look forward to going to work in the morning.

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I mean, how many people can say that?

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Yeah, that's a lovely thing to be able to say.

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And this isn't your first role with the Trust.

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What were your previous roles that you had?

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Yeah, I've had quite a few different roles.

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So the Trust, the Wildlife Trust gave me my first career break in terms of paid employment and that was seasonal work on Skomer Island in Pembrokeshire.

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doing seabird work.

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So I did a season of that and then I started in Ceredigion as a nature reserve manager in Ceredigion, where I had about 20 odd nature reserves that I directly managed.

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And then it just kind of evolved over that time.

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I sort of acquired what we called at a time like wider countryside work, so conservation work in the county that was outside of nature reserves.

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Then I moved to Carmarthenshire in 2008 and picked up Carmarthenshire instead before I became a member of the senior management team.

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So I've also been conservation manager for the Western Area.

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Then I left the Trust for a while and I've come back in this role as head of Terrestrial Nature Reserves.

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So yeah, I've been lucky to sort of see my work evolve and that's one of the things you learn by doing and you learn all these new skills with each step of evolution.

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It's been great.

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And what is it about the Trust that keeps you coming back?

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It's just a really nice place to work.

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I think one of the things I've always loved about the Wildlife Trust and I

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I used to volunteer for my local wildlife trust growing up in Bristol, which was Avon Wildlife Trust.

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I think I was always attracted to them as a movement because they look at everything.

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They're not specific to one taxon and that work is needed as well.

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But for me personally, in my way of working, I'm not a specialist.

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I like birds, I like plants, I moth trap.

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So, a charity that looks at the whole spectrum of wildlife is naturally appealing to me.

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and as a volunteer I've done quite a bit of land management so I think it's that breadth and just they're kind of, they're very responsive as an organisation, they're pretty fleet of foot so they respond to opportunities quickly which means as a member of staff you get to be creative and bring some of your own ideas and you can slightly influence the direction of travel if you've got a clear vision for how something could be.

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So I think they, I like what they do and they're good employers in that respect as well.

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And that's not your only role at the moment.

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What else do you do?

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No, that's right.

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So whereas previously I'd worked with them full time, when I left the Wildlife Trust in 2020, I did have a little bit of a break.

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And then I started working two days a week for a Welsh charity, small Welsh charity called the Initiative for Nature Conservation Cymru, which we call INCC, INCC for short.

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So I work for INCC two days a week producing a magazine called Natur Cymru.

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So INCC publishes the magazine, but the magazine has content from anybody and everybody about conservation work in Wales.

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It's kind of non-partisan in that respect.

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So I love doing that and I'm still doing that two days a week.

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So when I rejoined the Trust, I joined three days.

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So I kind of divide my time between the two charities and the two roles now.

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Yeah, which is challenging at times.

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You like to keep busy.

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Yeah, absolutely.

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Yeah.

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And you've worked for the Trust for the most part of your career?

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Between your roles with the Trust, where else have you worked?

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Yeah, so in that gap, I was away five years or so.

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I did the INCC role with the magazine, but I also worked for Plantlife.

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I was the Plantlife Cymru lead, so I kind of had oversight of their work in Wales for that kind of five-year period.

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And, you know, it's always valuable to see the way different organisations work and different ways of working and obviously met new people and got to get

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much more in depth on some issues that were really interesting to me around botanical conservation and a different perspective on land management as well.

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So yeah, it was great working for them, but that was my main break from the Trust was those 5 years at Plantlife.

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And you've dedicated your career to nature conservation.

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When did this interest in nature conservation become apparent?

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Young, unlike some people, I can't put my finger on a single moment in time and say that was the thing, that was the moment.

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But I was definitely primary school.

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And I think because a lot of the interest came from my family, it was a sort of, it was always there in the background.

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So the whole family is sort of sympathetic to wildlife.

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But I think, yeah, I got a lot more interested in kind of like late primary school kind of age when I started.

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Yeah, it's a kind of age that kids start to get obsessive about things.

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Yeah.

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And that was mine.

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So very early on then.

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And

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How did you act on this interest as a child?

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I know you said you grew up in Bristol and you volunteered for Avon Wildlife Trust.

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Is that your first way of acting on this passion for conservation?

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In terms of actually making a difference, that probably was, yeah.

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I mean, I think before I left primary school, one of the things was, so my mum was a big factor in this.

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She's always been interested in wildlife.

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And I think when I was at primary school, she noticed that we weren't getting taught anything about wildlife.

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That's improved a lot now in Wales, certainly on the curriculum, but we just weren't being taught anything.

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And that was so different to her primary school experience.

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So she gave me a little plant book and I started drawing plants that I found and writing up things.

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I had a kind of botanical diary.

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So that probably started when I was like 9, 8 or 9, something like that.

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And I kind of, I think after that I started doing a bit of fundraising as well, because when you're at primary school you're always doing sponsored runs and that kind of thing.

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I thought, well, I'm going to do mine for wildlife.

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And then I was able to volunteer when I was 14 with Avon Wildlife Trust, which is something that you can't do now because of safeguarding and health and safety for very good reason.

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But it is also a little bit of a shame because it was hugely influential

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for me, that at 14 I could go out with Avon Wildlife Trust on a Sunday with all their adult volunteers and be treated like an adult, be given a bowsaw and go and do something that felt constructive and just feel like an adult.

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And then you think, I could do this for a living.

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So I think probably when I was about 14 and I started doing that, was the first time that it turned from an interest and that sort of like recording and drawing and

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learning to identify things into actually doing something about it, doing something with the information.

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Yeah, but I was lucky I could do it at 14, like on my own.

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That's a, yeah, I'm grateful for that.

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So you said school, there wasn't really much option to spend time in nature.

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No, not really.

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I mean, I can't think of doing anything like that at primary school.

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And I was in a classic Victorian

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City Primary School where the playground was literally a square of tarmac, where the kids and normally boys, sorry, boys kicking tennis balls against the walls that then ricochet into your head and all these kind of things.

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I do remember there was a tiny little patch of grass around the back of the old red brick schoolhouse that we weren't allowed in because we'd make a mess, you know, keep the kids off the grass.

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But they did have some, I used to collect the rose hips that fell out of it and we had some big fir trees

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on the other side of the really high wall and I used to collect those and I used to make things.

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So I guess I was making the best of what I had.

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But school was not a wildlife rich environment, no, sadly.

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So you went out volunteering and trying to be in nature outside of school.

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And then did you volunteer up until you moved away to go to university?

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Yes, pretty much.

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So I think I was with Avon Wildlife Trust for a good two or three years and

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After a year or two, they let me co-lead the work parties, which was amazing.

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I mean, I couldn't drive the minibus or anything, but at sort of 15 or 16, they were letting me do tool safety talks and things, which I had no idea at the time quite what good career experience and how unusual that was.

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So I was very lucky that they had that level of faith in me to be vaguely sensible at that age.

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and I think then I stopped doing that while I was doing my A-levels because I'd got the bird ringing bug through volunteering on Skomer.

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So I did residential volunteering on Skomer Island and that was with the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales.

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Even though I was still living in Bristol, I was doing that residential volunteering from 16 to 18 and I'd seen people doing bird ringing.

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So I started doing bird ringing on Sundays instead in Bristol.

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So yeah, just another really lucky that, you know, one opportunity leads to another or another idea and you kind of build your network and

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so I kept on doing that until I went to university.

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I didn't do so much volunteering when I was at university because I was a little bit more of a social animal than I have been at other times in my life.

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Maybe spent my time a little bit more doing that.

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But yeah, volunteering's always been a big part of my life for sure.

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Yeah, it sounds like you got lots of experience from that at a very young age, maybe more so than most other people in conservation.

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So you went to university and what did you study in university?

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Yeah, I did Environmental Biology undergraduate and then Mycology and Ecology PhD, both at Aberystwyth.

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So it's 6, 6 1/2 years in Aberystwyth University.

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Yeah, Environmental Biology was a good course for me.

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I honestly chose it.

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I knew I wanted to go to Aberystwyth,

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My mum had grown up in West Wales, so she always used to bring us to Wales on holiday.

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And it's often the thing with kids, isn't it?

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If you grow up in the countryside, you want to go to the city.

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I grew up in the city and I wanted to go to the countryside.

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So I thought, well, I know West Wales, I love it, I'll go west.

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Really wanted to go to Aberystwyth.

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Looked at biological sciences and picked the course that had the nice photograph, which was a Fly Agaric.

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And yeah, didn't ask for chemistry, even though I had chemistry A level, because that told me the course was probably more applied, which is what I was looking for.

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So

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So that was the kind of slightly poor 18-year-old me choosing my course.

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So you knew what university you wanted to go to before you'd even seen the courses.

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That's maybe the other way around to the way that some people do it.

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But that's, yeah, it's really nice that you knew that Aberystwyth is where you wanted to go and then you could make your decision from there.

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Maybe it narrows down your decision.

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Yeah, I think it made it easier, actually.

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I mean, I did apply to some others as well, but Aberystwyth, I think it was,

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It was probably one of my lower entry thresholds, but it was my first choice just because where I am is very important to me.

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The ability to get out into the countryside, especially if you don't drive and don't have a car, having countryside on your doorstep is important to me.

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So yeah, I think I've been quite lucky in my life that I've kind of sort of known what I wanted in a way that made me, made some difficult life choices.

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Some of my colleagues had a lot of trouble, colleagues or peers at the time had trouble choosing, but I was pretty set on what I wanted to do.

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That's really helpful.

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And was there a particular area of biology that you were interested in or the environment?

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Not especially, just because I've always been a generalist, even though even from the beginning, I guess I started with botany.

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I think UK habitats generally, like, because I've been volunteering already for quite a long time and I'd had experience with Avon Wildlife Trust of how conservation bodies managed habitats, you know, I'd help with coppicing, reed bed management and things.

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So I'd kind of had the lived experience.

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There is a little bit of an issue in conservation that maybe we're not always as evidence-led as we should be.

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We tend to be anecdotally driven or we follow the patterns set by our predecessors.

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You know, compared to some sectors, we maybe don't always go back.

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So, you know, that kind of going back to the evidence, it was nice to understand the theoretical background behind what I'd already observed on the ground.

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But I mean, it wasn't like I had a particular desire to specialise.

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Conversely, I do remember sitting in my mycology lecture in my first year thinking, who on earth wants to spend a whole life studying fungi, which was deeply ironic, given that three years later that is what I chose to do for my PhD.

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So yeah, I can call it a learning curve.

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But I don't know, the more things you look at, they just get interesting, don't they?

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The more you look at anything, the more interested I become.

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So yeah, I'm going to die a generalist.

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So did you decide to stay and do your post-grad again because you wanted to stay in Aberystwyth?

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Do you know it comes back to the same thing of being a little bit, well, I suppose partly making opportunities, but partly luck.

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So by the time I was in the third year of my undergraduate degree, I'd done two or three whole summer seasons between university years on Skomer, mostly in a voluntary capacity, but helping the researchers.

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So like I'd spent one summer

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working with Durham University, tracking weight gain in Manx Shearwater chicks.

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And I was living in the research quarters there with PhD students from lots of different places.

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And I noticed that whilst they did complain a little bit about their subject occasionally, they more often complained about the university politics and when their supervisor wasn't helping them.

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And in Aberystwyth, I'd already worked a bit with Gareth Griffith, who's the mycologist there, and I just knew he was really good to work with.

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So that was a major part in my decision at the time.

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The subject's interesting, I know I can work with Gareth, he's great, he's supportive, he's really enthusiastic about his subject.

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So everything kind of came together with that.

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really.

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And I still work with Gareth.

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I've worked with him through my work in the Wildlife Trust.

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I still work with him.

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I worked with him when I was at Plantlife on mycology.

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So that's been a sort of lifetime professional link that I made, which has been great.

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So you went to university in Aberystwyth and then you've sort of taken root in Wales ever since.

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What is it about Wales that made you want to focus your career here?

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Partly familiarity.

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I mean, as you go through the years, you get to know places.

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I'd been in Aberystwyth for quite a few years.

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I got to know the countryside around there and I'd sort of built a network of people who I knew and kind of understood the regional politics a little bit, which is, I suppose it's partly driver, but it's also just the way it goes.

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Like that's where your greatest strengths are, that's where you tend to get the opportunities because you've got that experience to bring to the table when you're applying for jobs.

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But I think I've always just loved it here.

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It's after growing up in the city and wanting to work in a place where you can still, you know that wildlife is declining, you know there are problems, but you can still sense the hope and opportunity.

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And I think we've been lucky in the past with Welsh Government as well that they are quite behind the environment in policy terms.

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You know, they've been a supportive

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government over my career at least.

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So it's just lots of things came together really.

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I just love the place.

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I obviously later on met my husband here as well.

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So yeah, I put roots down fairly quickly.

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Yeah, it's a lovely place to take root for sure.

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So what was your experience of starting your career in nature conservation in Wales?

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How did you get your foot in the door?

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I think I would say not easily, but probably my experience was easier than many people's, partly because I did already have that experience behind me before I was on the point of having to find a job for financial reasons.

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I don't think I realised quite how much of an asset that experience would be at the time.

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I just did it because I wanted to do it.

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So when I finished my post-grad, I was trying to

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stay in Wales and look for Wales as long as my money would last kind of thing.

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I did a little bit more voluntary work with Avon Wildlife Trust in Bristol in between as well.

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And yeah, I applied for a lot of jobs that I didn't get a look in and I remember at one point I applied for a job where I thought this is the closest match to my skills that I'm possibly going to find.

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If I don't get this job, I'm doomed.

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I got interviewed but didn't get the job.

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so I think we all have those low points where you think, oh gosh, I'm never going to get anywhere with this, despite my experience.

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There's always those things that you just, the bits of experience you need, that trap, that catch 22, I can't get this experience till I get a job and I can't get a job to get the experience.

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So yeah, I did have a, but in my case it was only a few months, you know, which is quite short compared to a lot of people who want to work in conservation.

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But eventually I did get the career break with the seasonal post on Skomer.

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And then just a few months after that ended, my first and it was a fixed term job on a lottery funded project with the Wildlife Trust in Ceredigion.

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Yeah, and I was just lucky that came up and lucky that it, I think, because they knew me, because I'd done a lot with them, that really helped.

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And actually going back, so when I was a student in Aberystwyth, one of the things I was able to do was join, the Wildlife Trust have these kind of local volunteer groups with committees in different parts of their patch.

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And there was a North Ceredigion section, it was called at the time, local volunteer group.

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And they let me join their committee.

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And for one year I chaired it as well when I was still a student, which again, they were showing huge faith in me to do that at that age.

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but it gave me some of that sort of procedural experience and understanding of how the trust worked as a charity, not just the delivery end, which I think probably helped.

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Yeah.

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So yeah, I mean, it was not straightforward to get into conservation, but I think those things of like personal contacts and local experience eventually

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I was just lucky that the right job came up at the right time, which is all any of us can do is just wait for the stars to align a little bit for us.

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Yeah.

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And you've said previously that managing land can throw the unexpected at you.

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Can you tell me about a time in your career when maybe this has happened and things haven't quite gone to plan and how did you navigate that?

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I think I have had some really unusual scenarios to contend with over

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the course of my career in land management and it really is land management, sometimes through projects that you're trying to do and sometimes through the wholly unexpected interventions of other people who use your land.

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Things I never thought I'd do in conservation, so I got into conservation because of a love of wildlife.

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I think maybe 10 years ago when I had a kind of managerial responsibility for the Pembrokeshire Islands, Skomer and Skokholm,

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and then you find yourself suddenly worrying about the fact that a septic tank is full and you don't have a way of emptying it.

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Or, something like the concrete supporting a septic tank, you're worried about the age of it.

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So, you know, managing sites brings all this kind of infrastructure.

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Infrastructure turns up all sorts of problems.

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Or your livestock escape.

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So, you know, you get a call late at night from somebody saying, oh, your water buffalo are running down the drive and on their way into the village, can you do something about it?

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so I think that's the amazing thing about land.

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And then, you get the, maybe less nice things around anti-social behaviour on land that you have to contend with.

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Over the years, we have had criminal activity happening on reserves or we've had to engage with the police and things like that.

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So I think, and whilst not all of those things are good, that level of unexpectedness means that, again, even when you've known a piece of land for 10 years, something unexpected can still happen.

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and that's a big motivator day-to-day.

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So I think more than anything else in conservation, land brings that element of unpredictability.

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It keeps you on your toes.

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It really keeps you on your toes.

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And is there a particular site, you've had lots of sites over your career and lots of different projects, is there a particular site or project that stands out the most?

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I'll pick two if I'm allowed to pick two.

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So I've mentioned Skomer a few times already.

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That one definitely stands out for the opportunities that I gained there.

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My mum used to take us when we were young just overnight to stay and I started volunteering there when I was 16 and I think that stands out because that's where I really found my tribe.

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That's where I met

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sort of a lot of students who are volunteering and I could see what they were doing and I kind of, having been the absolute nerd at school who was interested in wildlife that nobody else was interested in, suddenly there was like loads of other nerds.

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I'm like, wow, I'm not the only nerd who likes wildlife.

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So I think that's a really formative experience and I learned so much there.

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So from a sort of selfish point of view, I would probably pick Skomer.

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From a kind of conservation point of view, I would pick Carmel National Nature Reserve in Carmarthenshire, which is a site that the Wildlife Trust took on in about 2013.

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Not because I've been so personally involved in it, but because it had such a long history of threat from quarrying.

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There were huge campaigns that the Wildlife Trust and many others and a lot of local residents were involved in to try and save it in the 90s.

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It was managed for a long time by the Grasslands Trust before they unfortunately disbanded as a charity and then the Wildlife Trust took it on as a nature reserve in 2013.

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So I think Carmel is a significant site for me just because of that history of the organisation and the amazing story about a site that was important for wildlife that was saved in the face of potentially devastating development threat and to be able to go to it now and

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to see the work that the Trust has done there to kind of restore the meadows, or to continue the work to restore the meadows, working with partners, it's just, it feels like an epitome of what conservation land management can achieve, which is really rewarding and kind of gives you hope.

00:24:05 Speaker 1

Yeah, that's quite an amazing success story actually at Carmel.

00:24:08 Speaker 1

Yeah.

00:24:09 Speaker 1

And what would you say, reflecting on your career, what would you say your greatest achievement has been

00:24:17 Speaker 1

for nature conservation in Wales.

00:24:19 Speaker 2

That is a really tricky question.

00:24:21 Speaker 2

I think most people would find that a tricky question.

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You know, you can easily pick things like the sites that you helped to secure for conservation or the big projects that you've done.

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So I mean, I suppose I was quite involved in the Mid Wales Red Squirrel Project for a long time and did a lot of fundraising and project management work there that sort of helped kind of

00:24:46 Speaker 2

establish a long-term commitment, you see what I mean, from sort of in that area to red squirrel conservation.

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So there's a few things like that I reflect on and think, you know, if you really think about what's happened there, you think, gosh, yeah, actually, you know, probably pleased with my contribution to that.

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Realistically, I think in the long run what I'm really most happy about is the opportunities that I've had to support other people.

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And I remember talking when I was early career to CEO of another Wildlife Trust who said something very similar.

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I think especially as you get into a management role that takes you slightly more away from the front line, you can see that when you get the opportunity to help someone up the career ladder or to support someone who's early career or to support volunteers and just give them that extra bit of help, the kind of ripple out effect of making the time to do that and you're kind of around long enough to see what those people go on to do.

00:25:44 Speaker 2

that's amazing.

00:25:46 Speaker 2

There's people working professionally in the academic sector now in conservation who I remember helping when they were teenagers who were asking like, what's this?

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Or, they were part of a watch group and they came out on a site visit.

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And yeah, I think that's probably, in terms of impact in the long run, the effect you have on other people probably slightly outweighs the effect that you can actually have on conservation as an individual.

00:26:09 Speaker 1

Yeah.

00:26:10 Speaker 1

On that note of helping people on their first steps, for anyone listening back to this interview that is trying to get their first job in conservation, do you have one piece of advice that you would give to them?

00:26:23 Speaker 2

I'd have two.

00:26:26 Speaker 2

So I think the smaller one possibly is just don't be dispirited when it doesn't happen because it is as much about luck as it is about you, that first opportunity.

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So persevere.

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But in terms of more constructive advice, I think building your network of contacts is really important.

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Getting to know people, talking to people, building relationships with people who are already working in different parts of conservation because it just does so many things.

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Conservation in Wales is quite a small community of people and we all kind of, we all support each other.

00:27:04 Speaker 2

that carries on through your career so that the relationships that you build will be mutually beneficial for the rest of your career.

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But it will also give you that different perspective.

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Other people look at conservation and problems in different ways and if you're fascinated by birds but you reach out and build relationships with people who are botanists, you will learn to see things from a different angle and that's always helpful.

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And there is no denying that it

00:27:29 Speaker 2

It does also, if people know you and know what you like, you will be memorable to them if you end up being interviewed.

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I think it's just the way the world works.

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Like, it's really important.

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And I think also if you reach out to people and build those personal networks, it shows that you're proactive.

00:27:47 Speaker 2

Conservation, you have to have a certain amount of, you've got to be a bit of a self-starter and have initiative.

00:27:52 Speaker 2

And when you reach out to people to build relationships with them, you're showing that.

00:27:56 Speaker 2

So I think getting to know people and working with different organisations and trying to find out who's doing what and trying to understand other people's perspectives is really important.

00:28:07 Speaker 1

Yeah, again, yeah, networking in conservation and I'm sure in most jobs it's just important to find your way into the field.

00:28:17 Speaker 1

So my final question of the interview is,

00:28:23 Speaker 1

one about the future of conservation and wildlife in Wales.

00:28:28 Speaker 1

And I was wondering what makes you feel most hopeful about the future of nature conservation and wildlife in Wales?

00:28:36 Speaker 2

Yeah, I think it's a difficult thing being a conservationist because you're surrounded all the time by evidence that makes you pessimistic.

00:28:45 Speaker 2

But you can't keep going unless you're optimistic in the face of a huge amount of evidence to the contrary.

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So I think anybody in conservation, it's not a good time at the moment, policy, money, the messages coming out of governments of all colours, parties of all colours are less pro-environment than we've seen for a while.

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But I think in spite of all of that, the thing that really encourages me is just the absolute joy you see in people's faces.

00:29:16 Speaker 2

when they have a really good wildlife encounter, kids always, but it can happen with adults too.

00:29:22 Speaker 2

when you're working with kids and they are just beside themselves that they found a worm in the mud and they're picking it up and giving it a name, or often when you're on the coast maybe and you see some porpoises or some dolphins and you show them to somebody who didn't know that we had cetaceans on the Welsh coast, that

00:29:39 Speaker 2

just reaction, like when their eyes light up, you think that love of the intrinsic value of wildlife.

00:29:46 Speaker 2

we spend a lot of time professionally talking about the financial value of wildlife or how it supports human systems, because that's one of the tools that we have to try and persuade governments that something's important.

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But to be able to see that kind of just love of the inherent value of something amazing when you're talking to people,

00:30:06 Speaker 2

means that there's always going to be those building blocks.

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Those are the people that are going to go on and defend our wildlife.

00:30:12 Speaker 2

So I think the fact that, even when things do feel really dark, the fact that you can take kids out and they will get excited about creepy crawlies in the mud, yeah, that's the future, isn't it?

00:30:22 Speaker 2

So I think that probably is the thing that gives me most hope, especially when other things don't feel so optimistic.

00:30:28 Speaker 1

That's a lovely way to close off the interview and it's been lovely talking to you and hearing your story of your conservation career in Wales and thank you for your time.

00:30:39 Speaker 2

Thank you.