

The importance of feeling valued

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When you begin thinking about leadership and conservation, the concept of serving others – as Barry describes in his podcast this week – is perhaps not the thing that springs to mind first. But as I think back over the fifteen years I've been working in conservation in a professional capacity, I firmly believe it is one of the most important traits any conservation leader needs.

So, what does serving others really mean in a conservation sense? One of the most rewarding roles in my career to date was running the Rutland Osprey Project. My first full summer in the role was 2006 when I was 24 years old. At the time we had a team of around 75 people who helped monitor an Osprey nest on private land close to Rutland Water, known as Site B. We had a 24-hour watch on the nest while the birds were sitting on eggs and then daytime monitoring from 6am until 8pm once the chicks had hatched. Many volunteers signed up for a regular shift and thoroughly enjoyed following the progress of the Osprey family over the course of the breeding season.

The next summer a pair of Ospreys decided to nest on the nature reserve for the first time. Suddenly we had to double our efforts – we decided that it was important to have a 24-hour watch on both nests during the five-and-a-half-week incubation period, and then to continue to monitor both nests until the birds set-off to their African wintering grounds in early September. The volunteers who signed up to monitor the Manton Bay nest on the nature reserve would also double up as 'meeters and greeters' for the many visitors we expected to visit specifically to see the Ospreys. It promised to be a very different experience to the peace and tranquillity of Site B and I wondered how easy it would be for us to cover all of the shifts. In spring that year I felt well and truly out of my comfort zone and riddled with self-doubt. Having first got involved in the project as a schoolboy volunteer in 1997 I had been involved for ten years, but I was now managing a team of five seasonal staff – all of whom were considerably older than me – and, with the recruitment we had undertaken over the winter, over 125 volunteers. It was quite a daunting prospect and I also worried that, given my age, people wouldn't take me seriously.

I shouldn't have worried. The summer was a resounding success – a total of five young Ospreys fledged from the two sites, 30,000 people visited the Manton Bay nest on the nature reserve and we covered every single volunteer shift from March until September. What pleased me the most though – particularly given the worries I had at the start of the year – was a real togetherness that developed among the staff and volunteer team. Looking back now, I think there were two really simple things that we did, that made all the difference. Firstly, we phoned every volunteer before their next shift. This was quite a laborious job, and, I'll be honest, quite often it was the last thing I wanted to do, but it gave us an opportunity to update everyone in person on the latest news – and this was particularly important for the volunteers who were talking to the members of the public. It meant that those people who were turning up for a shift when the visitor centre wasn't staffed, knew exactly what was happening and felt confident when talking to visitors. The second thing was to make sure that we contacted every volunteer at least once – and ideally twice – during their shift. All this required was a simple phone call to find out how things were going and to thank the person at the end of the shift for their help, but it's amazing what a difference it made.

It seemed to me that these two very simple acts ensured that everyone who volunteered that summer felt valued. They felt part of a team and that we were grateful for the time they were giving up to help. The other very interesting development was that we found it far easier to fill shifts on the nature reserve than we did at Site B. After some initial reticence, we found that people enjoyed sharing their experiences of watching the Ospreys with other people. Some were initially nervous that they wouldn't be able to answer all of the questions they were asked; but with some simple

training and a bit of reassurance from myself and the other staff, everyone was fine – and I think many relished the fact they were trusted to be the face of the project for their four-hour shift. At the end of season party – held that September to say thank you to the volunteers – I read out a selection of comments from the visitor book, all of which referenced the warm and friendly welcome visitors had received from the volunteers.

My point with all this is that serving others doesn't need to be difficult. Sometimes the smallest and seemingly most insignificant acts, can be more powerful than you could possibly imagine. By making our Osprey project volunteers feel valued with a couple of simple phone calls, we built a team of people who were totally dedicated to the cause – and who were the most brilliant ambassadors for the work we were doing. It made what had been a very memorable summer all the more rewarding.