



CIEEM

Issue 115 | March 2022

inpractice

Bulletin of the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management

ECoWs on Large
Infrastructure Projects:
Lessons Learned

Women on Site:
Reflections from the Field

Using Technology for
Ecological Surveys
During COVID-19

Five Practical Tips for
Ecologists Working on
Construction Sites



Working on Site

Women on Site: Reflections from the Field



Becky Bailey
MCIEEM
Temple



Sarah Ive
CEnv MCIEEM
Temple



Sarah Rochelle
ACIEEM
Temple



Celia Brailsford
Temple

Keywords: Clerk of Works, contractors, ECoW, experiences, feminism, site work

This article aims to start a conversation on how conditions and respect for female-presenting ecologists has changed on site over the last 15 years. Four ecologists discuss some of their experiences from their first years working on site as an Ecological Clerk of Works in order to see whether conditions are actually improving as much as we hope they are.

Introduction

Site work is an integral part of being a consultancy-based ecologist working in development and the role of Ecological Clerk of Works (ECoW) is often required by planning or licencing conditions to oversee biodiversity features and impacts on site during construction. Evaluating situations and implementing directly applied mitigation, including animal rescue, is invariably demanding, high-stress and fast-paced. Decision-

making has to be rapid, almost always while others stand close by, often less than patiently. There is no doubt that this is a skill that develops over time and it does not suit everyone. As women, however, issues on site can be more difficult, tainted by attitudes and preconceptions. The question is whether working on site has changed for women in recent years. Although we can't speak for all women on all sites, in this article four ecologists at Temple talk through some of the events of their first years on site.

We hope that these stories can open conversations around how everyone can work together to challenge issues and change site conditions so that, in another 15 years, there can be ECoWs who don't have similar tales to share.

Becky, 15 years ago

I don't remember it like it was yesterday, because there have been a lot of shifts since then, but I do remember being nervous. The senior ecologist on site was very helpful and talked me through everything. Each of us was treated as the 'green and keen' newbie that we were and it was everything I could have hoped for starting out in an ECoW role.

As for the contractors I was working with, sadly this was a different matter entirely. I'd worked in bars at university,

so I was used to 'banter', but this was on a completely different level. A lot of the contractors were staying on sites in caravans and I was frequently invited back for drinks when my male colleagues were not: there were lads' mags and calendars in the kitchens and welfare vans ... and don't get me started on the portaloos! I did my best to play along to a certain extent: I was sporty and could hold my own in conversations about football. That got me far enough that they would keep to the rules and engage with me. If I had to put my foot down and demand that they do what I told them, they had to listen. My use of an unexpectedly stern voice probably led to comments behind my back, but if they pushed me that far they knew I meant it.

However, the one situation that sticks in my mind as something that I really hope would *never, ever* happen now was a conversation over breakfast rolls about tattoos. When I was asked if I wanted to see this chap's new tweety pie tattoo, a vaguely affirmative response led to trousers, and undergarments, being dropped and a certain piece of his anatomy being wafted in my direction. I'd like to say it was the only set of male genitalia I saw on that site, but sadly not.

Sarah I, 10 years ago

I started working as an ECoW in 2012 and have mixed experiences of working as the only female staff member on site. My most positive times were from regularly working with an in-house highways team. This allowed me to develop good working relationships, build respect and foster an understanding from contractors about my role on site. I found that it helped them understand my role better when I encouraged them to ask questions and showed them the species I was there to help protect. The team regularly worked with female ECoWs, and knew that their job required them to have good long-term working relationships with all staff on site. I also found it helped promote further positive

behaviour when I provided written feedback to the team's managers about their professionalism, something which I think we often neglect to pass on.

In contrast, I've also dealt with contractors who have been aggressive or who have made sexual comments. I've been screamed and sworn at by those who saw my presence as a hindrance to getting the job done quickly and who objected to taking instruction from a woman. I've also had contractors discussing getting me a high-vis bikini after mentioning how uncomfortable it was working in full PPE during the middle of summer. When I first started, I often found myself trying to laugh off or ignore inappropriate comments like this, or trying to avoid situations that could cause conflict. It was only when I gained more experience and confidence in my role that I directly challenged this behaviour, firstly by discussing it as being inappropriate with the contractor and then by raising with senior management if it persisted.

In my efforts to promote the good and challenge the negative behaviour I've encountered on site, I hope it's made it slightly easier for other female EcoWs. But we still have a lot of progress to make.

Sarah R, 5 years ago

My first years on site were certainly interesting. It's difficult enough starting a new project with new people, let alone knowing that you will be the only female. While there aren't usually photos of half-naked women on the walls, it's still very much a boy's club. For me, the experiences I have personally had of most male contractors usually sit in one of two groups:

1. Group 1 – men who hit on you
2. Group 2 – men who treat you differently based on the assumption that you are a 'delicate little flower'.

Of the two, perhaps surprisingly for some readers, it is the latter group that infuriates me the most. It is almost a given to experience the former and usually there is an invisible line most will not cross; that is, the kind that involves a formal complaint to either their company or my own. I know where I am with this group, even if they are hard to deal with. The second group is more difficult. The assumption I struggle with is that I am 'effectively useless' and need 'looking after' or that I am unable to do my job if it involves anything dirty/

thorny/steep or any lifting at all. It is usually dressed up as kindness, with the expectation that I will be 'pleased' that I am being looked after like a child. A particularly memorable example was being told during an induction that it would be very sad for my husband (the one I don't have) if I died in a site-related accident. The underlying message was that I had no value apart from belonging to a man who didn't even exist. It is usually quite difficult to persuade Group 2 men that, yes this is my job and yes I am good at it.

Sometimes I seriously wonder if it would make my life easier to let them get on with their preconceptions about me, because it is very tiring trying to challenge inherent sexism while having a job to do. Before anything can change, first, the sexism and attitudes towards women in construction need to be acknowledged as endemic and, second, women's experiences should not be minimised or dismissed.

Celia, last year

I won't deny that working as an EcoW has been far from smooth sailing! I'm sure my fellow women in construction and I could shock you with our stories of site work, from light-hearted, sexist 'banter' to physical assault. Sadly, this narrative is not so different from other typically male-dominated industries and is rooted in the societal issues of sexism and gender equality. That said, my aim is not to scare people away from construction. I've found that it can be a great environment to learn and collaborate with some amazing people.

Helping to coordinate and lead teams across large, ecologically sensitive sites each day for 6 months was definitely a challenge, never mind trying to get my introverted self heard in a marquee filled with more than 40 people. However, I wouldn't change it for anything as it has really forced me out of my comfort zone. Society has literally taught us to be agreeable, so learning that it is okay to say no to people has been challenging! Thankfully, this does become easier with time. Although it can be tricky to navigate, I've found that maintaining good working relationships with my site team has allowed me to feel more confident when it comes to speaking up about any issues.

The construction industry is challenging and occasionally uncomfortable, but

I've had some really great times on site. The most rewarding experiences have been when I've had the opportunity to share my knowledge with other site contractors. I've been pleasantly surprised by the amount of interest shown in ecology once a site team understands my role. All of my experiences of site work have helped me to grow a great deal, both personally and professionally, and I hope I have shown just how much it has to offer.

Support for CIEEM members

Diversity and Inclusion Working Group: made up of staff and members, including a focus on gender-based issues (contact enquiries@cieem.net for more information)

Mentoring Platform: for those who would like to offer or receive advice from other women in the sector (www.cieem.net/mentoring-platform/)

Member Assistance Programme: where members can receive free and anonymous advice and support on a wide range of concerns (see the Members' area of the CIEEM website)

About the Authors

Becky Bailey MCIEEM is an Associate Director in the Ecology Team at Temple, specialising in post-consents work. Having worked in ecological consultancy for over 16 years, focusing predominantly on ornithology and white-clawed crayfish, she now manages teams of EcoWs on site, implementing mitigation for a range of protected species but predominantly great crested newts.

Contact Becky at: Becky.Bailey@templegroup.co.uk

Sarah Ives CEnv MCIEEM is a Principal Ecologist at Temple and has been working in consultancy for over 9 years. She has worked on a variety of schemes including those for highway, rail, housing and utility projects. She works on a wide range of different taxa, but her main interests are in hazel dormouse, badger and reptiles.

Sarah Rochelle ACIEEM has over 8 years' experience in ecological consultancy and, in particular, large infrastructure projects. She is a Senior Ecologist at Temple and has a broad range of ecological knowledge with particular interests including water voles, badgers, botany and ornithology. Current projects include flood defence schemes, local housing projects and a water vole habitat creation project.

Celia Brailsford is an Assistant Ecologist at Temple and has been working in consultancy for 2 years. She has worked on a variety of rail, housing and railway projects, providing EcoW services and conducting a range of habitat and protected species surveys. Currently a Qualifying member of CIEEM, Celia remains focused on becoming a generalist and working cross-divisionally within Temple.