



# Conservation Action Network (CAN)

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## ***BUILDING PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY TO NURTURE INTEREST & CONSERVATION AWARENESS AND ACTION***

The past year found many primatologists struggling more than usual to balance work, teaching, research and conservation projects. As we address our human challenges, primates and other animals continue to suffer from serious conservation threats. For those interested in finding accessible channels through which to inspire conservation action in primate conservation and *in situ* capacity building, here we encourage thoughtful approaches in what to teach students here at home, and how to engage with and support our partners overseas. We offer simple actions requiring relatively minimal effort that can be woven through your teaching and research programs.

**How can we contribute to an academic legacy of research and teaching while also supporting the conservation of species that make our careers and personal missions possible?**

With 65% of primate species facing extinction, every primatologist must act to mitigate the extinction crisis. As primatologists, we should not underestimate our unique position, not only as teachers and researchers but also as mentors, conservation advocates, and even activists. In contact with both people and animals, we comprehend their close connection. In habitat countries, many of us develop networks through which we support the development of in-country conservation leadership. In our own country, we connect with thousands of young individuals through the courses we teach, public lectures we give, and the interns we train. In short, we have access to students and young professionals nationally and internationally, human capital with potential to gain professionally from our in-depth experience and expertise, and with abilities to apply their new knowledge to conservation-related priorities.

The proposed actions in this letter can build the professional capacity of students and young professionals, including primatologists, biologists, ecologists, and conservationists. We offer implementable professional development actions—some of which can be accommodated during the current reality placed by COVID restrictions. Through our capacity-building efforts in Asia, Africa, and Central and South America, we bring experience organizing workshops with field and classroom components to train in

research, professional development, and leadership. We influence in multiple ways, including by teaching conservation, facilitating the creation of small conservation groups, guiding students seeking conservation focused careers, and encouraging students to vote. Consistently, we have seen our engagement yield results, with mentees continuing on to formal degree programs or taking positions in conservation and environmental organizations.

Below we offer actions that can be adapted for any audience. The first section applies to both habitat and nonhabitat country individuals, and the second primarily targets a habitat-country audience.

## GENERAL ACTIONS FOR ALL

### Mentoring

**Mentorship is a foundational component in helping others to progress in their professional capacity.**

Today's environmental and social reality demands that we mentor holistically, with the aim to inspire the development of civically and environmentally minded citizens. We advocate elevating mentorship to the highest professional priority with an eye toward identifying students, young professionals, and colleagues to coach, guide, mentor, and train. Holistic mentorship implies transferring skills and competencies, but also openly sharing our hard-won experience, our professional stories, both positive and negative, and offering honest guidance and connection.



Sylvia Atsalis mentoring by training in resume and cover letter skills to participants of the Student Conference on Conservation Science at the American Museum of Natural History, N.Y.

For this level of mentoring to be effective, it should be intentional, focusing on the needs of mentees, with mentors providing tailored value-added feedback to questions posed by mentees. Feedback can include implementable actions and suggestions for specific initiatives that mentees can take to increase awareness, advocacy, and engagement.

Mentoring young adults, as the future protectors *and consumers* of natural resources, is part of an integrative approach to our role as educators, trainers, and capacity builders.

It is often a long-term commitment. However, micromentoring, short specific, well-defined help over a short period of time, can also be effective in the support toolkit. Offering targeted knowledge and assistance to young adults at critical moments of their lives can promote their professional lives. For example, when applying for a new job, negotiating a collaboration, applying for funding, or submitting a conference presentation, targeted assistance can boost student confidence and success.

## Professional Development Resources

Academicians may not always instruct students in professional development and career skills, even though they have valuable experience and knowledge to share. While students in the U.S., for example, often have access to career centers, career resources in habitat countries may not exist. All students can benefit from our guidance.

Thus, as part of a teaching curriculum, consider incorporating advice, short workshops, or short modules on career-focused skills that help to enhance future professional confidence. Start by formalizing what you already know how to do:

- create a [resume](#), a [CV](#) or write a [cover letter](#)
- [create a LinkedIn profile](#)
- [design presentations](#)
- write an abstract, create a presentation (Hailman & Strier 2006)

A more ambitious program can also include:

- strength assessments (Rath 2007)
- networking & informational interviewing (Muller 2012)

Additional resources for these and other basic skills are often found through university career centers, or as simple courses on [Coursera](#), a massive open online course (MOOC) platform that offers some free or low cost options. Consider inviting career center personnel to pitch their services to students, perhaps offering them time to discuss a particular career training topic.

## Professional Networking on LinkedIn

*Encourage students as well as habitat-country colleagues to create LinkedIn profiles.* Habitat-country students and colleagues will benefit from creating international networking opportunities on LinkedIn.

LinkedIn is the largest professional platform through which to boost presence, find jobs, [join career relevant groups](#), [follow conservation/environmental forums](#), post content including conservation related actions and initiatives, and [benefit from international networking opportunities including the ability to conduct informational interviews](#). LinkedIn is free to join.

Conservation organizations such as Conservation International or PanAfrican Sanctuary Alliance have profiles on LinkedIn, making it an easy way to follow their activities and to conduct outreach to current and past professionals in these organizations.

## Create List of Sharable Professional Stories

*To inspire young adults toward sharing your engagement with conservation, nurture the relationships by building rapport.* Begin by sharing professional stories and struggles with mentees, highlighting lessons learned in the process. One of us noticed considerably more connections with students when she began sharing the story of how she overcame financial challenges to gain access to higher education. If recounting a compelling story is not a natural talent, start by creating a list of professional stories from which to draw. They can be introduced through informal chats, and in lectures and presentations. Make shared stories as personal as is comfortable, with the goal to incite conversation and questions.

Understand that you can be a role model to young adults

Many good resources on [meaningful storytelling](#) are available. They differ in the terminology, but every meaningful story follows an arc that includes these components:

Situation + challenges encountered + actions taken to overcome  
challenges + results & outcomes + lessons learned.

To deepen the meaning, you may illustrate how overcoming a challenging situation eventually led toward you developing a lasting professional competency that helped you in your career. Select [professional competencies](#) are listed and defined as they relate to the career space by National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE):

- Critical Thinking/Problem Solving
- Oral/Written Communications
- Teamwork/Collaboration
- Information Technology Application
- Leadership
- Professionalism/Work Ethic
- Career Management

## Environmental Watch Groups/Eco Clubs

*Offer to help create and facilitate an environmental group (e.g. an eco group) with habitat and nonhabitat country students and young professionals; combining the two demographics is exciting for both, highlighting a common passion for conservation and creating an environment where peers of different cultural backgrounds are fighting for a common cause together.* Communication is best done using a variety of free platforms, such as Messenger, WeChat, and Whatsapp, all easy ways to engage target audiences. Zoom (using individual and institutional access) is another frequently used tool that makes video conferencing and communication easy.

Organize informal professional development meetings, which can also include scheduled talks or presentations by your network of primatologists, biologists, conservationists, and activists. Under your mentorship and facilitation, eco group members will feel part of a larger community. Eco clubs themselves can put on low to no-cost virtual events attended by larger networks.

## Grants & Fund Raising

Students may be interested in undertaking professional initiatives but require funding. *Be prepared to offer a step-by-step guide to applying for funding for education or research.* Organizations such as the [Association of Zoos & Aquariums](#), [Disney Conservation](#), the [Society for Conservation Biology](#), and [Conservation Leadership Programme](#) include such information and samples of successful grant applications on their websites.

## Gain International Experience

*Share scholarship and funding opportunities* (e.g., for international students, [Erasmus fellowship in the EU](#) and [Fulbright](#) scholarships, and for U.S. students, [Boren](#) awards). International experiences help students gain different perspectives and expand professional networks.

## Encourage Participation with Conservation Organizations

*Encourage students and other mentees to engage with local and international conservation chapters/organizations.* Organizations such as [nature museums](#), [environmental alliances](#) and other [organizations](#) offer presentations and lead conservation initiatives and activities. Demonstrate to mentees the benefits of joining professional societies with low to no-cost student and habitat country membership. These can be local, national, or international, the [American Society of Primatologists](#) being one of them.

## Conferences

*Jumpstart student professional development by promoting their attendance to scientific conferences that focus on nurturing students.* The [ASP annual meeting](#) is a great start for students and it offers low cost student options as well as student networking opportunities. For more general topic conferences, two impressive opportunities, which include funding, are [SACNAS](#) (Society for the Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans for Science) and [LSAMP](#) (Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation; look for your local chapter). Both are student-focused and inclusive for all, undergraduates and graduates. Presenting at conferences focused on the student experience is less intimidating than some of the conferences academicians typically attend, while still boosting professional competencies through the experience.

Overall, conferences help students to enrich their [presentation](#) and [communication skills](#). Faculty mentors should encourage students to attend by discussing how conferences enhance confidence, help develop professional networks for present and

future opportunities, and build community with like-minded individuals (as with SACNAS and LSAMP). The latter may be especially important for students who may be otherwise marginalized. Attendance at conferences is often overlooked as important to professional development, but experience has shown that it is critically important to student professional development. Introducing students to fellow colleagues at other universities is critical to increasing their broader networks. Students also have the opportunity to interact with mentor judges, peer presenters, and sometimes attend programming geared specifically to their needs. Moreover, there are regional primate conferences that encourage student participation and student presentations, e.g., the [MidWest Primate Interest Group](#) and [Northeastern Evolutionary Primatologists](#) or the [APALA \(Archaeology, Physical Anthropology, Linguistics and Archaeology\) Undergraduate Conference in Canada](#).

## **Making Responsible Personal Choices**

To encourage conservation mindfulness, do not hesitate to *call attention to the importance of personal choices*. With some creativity, issues surrounding [diet](#), [transportation](#), and [general consumerism](#) can be interwoven in relevant sections of lectures. Encourage students to keep weekly personal commitments. For example, ask students to [identify sustainable palm oil sources](#), explaining why this action may assist in protecting orangutans and conserving forests from monoculture plantations. Encourage them to support passive fundraising for ASP via [Amazon Smile](#).

## **Create Outreach Database & Maintain Relationships**

As students and other mentees move on, it's useful to maintain a regularly updated database. *Be proactive about maintaining relationships with these young mentees*. Stay connected via LinkedIn, but also use your personal list. A personal list expands your network and can be used for outreach purposes including updating about research and conservation initiatives which they can share in their new positions.

# **HABITAT-COUNTRY PROFESSIONAL ENGAGEMENT**

## **Presentations**

Habitat-country students may not have the opportunity to engage with international scholars, let alone educators and potential mentors with an interest in their professional development. Therefore we encourage that you *consider offering a few lectures at a local university or at an NGO in a primate habitat country* on a topic of your expertise. To build professional development capacity, incorporate your origin story, i.e., why and how you entered your field of choice, and include your passion for conservation. Students and young professionals will be inspired to consider their own conservation mission and career path. Always be mindful that when speaking to an international audience, you may need to speak clearly, a bit more slowly, and avoid using idioms. As mentioned earlier, for a compelling presentation, share professional successes, failures, and lessons learned from varied experiences. Your approach can make a difference. A conversational presentation, rather than a strictly formal one, may open the door to



questions about the presentation topic as well as encourage approachability for those participants seeking mentorship or who have career-related questions.

## Workshops

*Organize interactive workshops/panels/sessions focused on conservation.* For example, in The Gambia, local stakeholders and international researchers participated in a [one-day workshop focused on Temminck's red colobus conservation](#).

Start by identifying local partners and what information and skills are needed. Create objectives for the event, and invite speakers/trainers who can help meet those objectives. Consider ways to reduce or eliminate language barriers by working with a translator, and provide funds to cover transportation, food, and participation. Find guidance on developing workshops/panels/sessions that can be shared with students and professionals at [USAID](#), [Convention on Biological Diversity](#), and researchers at [Cornell University](#).



Attendees of the Temminck's red colobus monkey stakeholder workshop, hosted by Jennifer Cramer (USA) and Mawdo Jallow (Gambia) in Abuko Nature Reserve, The Gambia in June 2019.

## Volunteer

Local conservation organizations, zoos, botanical gardens, museums, and faculty departments can use additional support and expertise. *Offer to serve as a grant liaison, reviewer, editor or translator.* Establishing relationships with local organizations can also serve to reach community members. If planning a workshop or other event, volunteering in local organizations gives access to potential participants and attendees.

## Networking events

Simple low-cost networking events promote building connections, and maintain ongoing dialogue around themes of tension, e.g., [pet trade](#), [depiction of primates in photographs](#), or current conservation policy issues. Habitat countries often have low-cost catered food and spaces for rent. Thus, *it is relatively easy to invite students/university partners, and environment/conservation-oriented NGOs for a relaxed, informal networking event along a broad conservation theme pertinent to the country*. Breakout groups with [ice breaker activities](#) can be hugely successful in [getting people to open up or think creatively](#) about the themes. Follow-up ensures success; share ideas aloud and follow up with a summary email with suggestions.



Sylvia Atsalis discussing graduate school options with students and young professionals at Paramaribo Zoo, Suriname.

## Sharing Resources & Materials

Journal subscriptions are expensive. One way to overcome this obstacle of access of science journal resources is to *create an external hard drive with conservation, primate, and other relevant journal articles to be distributed to field assistants and students*. The American Society of Primatologists offers a free subscription to the *American Journal of Primatology* for those in habitat or developing countries with a [free membership](#). Guidebooks and other written resources can be donated to create a local conservation library. Gear can also be donated to students eager for field research. Donations of binoculars, packs, boots, moisture-wicking clothing may go a long way toward stimulating the career of a budding researcher. Consider finding [outside donations](#) to purchase gear for habitat-country students and young researchers.

Finally, remain open to opportunities for collaboration with habitat-country students who can assist and be included in co-authored papers or conference presentations. Along similar lines, when students are unable to join field study programs full time, invite them to attend for a few days; even short term engagement with a researcher willing to [micromentor](#) can reveal future potential.



**IN SUMMARY**, we all have resources, strengths, hard and soft skills, areas of expertise, and numerous professional experiences. Sharing this collection of tools intentionally can help to build conservation-oriented professional capacity. Our action letter has provided strategies and examples to use depending on individual situations and capacity. We hope that in implementing capacity-building actions, ASP members will see the fruits of their investment in the lives of the young people they mentor. Reach out to us for questions, resources, or to brainstorm on strategies that support tomorrow's conservation leadership.

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## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

**HOW TO STUDY AN ENDANGERED SPECIES**

**HOW TO USE LINKEDIN TO NETWORK**

**HARNESSING THE POWER OF STORIES**

**MENTORING**

**NETWORKING AND INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING**: Muller, A., (2012), Coffee Lunch Coffee: A Practical Field Guide for Master Networking.

**PRIMATE LEARNING IN ACTION**, a collaborative project aimed at spreading knowledge about primate cognition, behavior, and conservation.

**STRENGTHS**: Rath, T. (2007), Strengths Finder 2.0. New York: Gallup Press.

**WRITING SCIENCE**; Hailman, J., & Strier, K. (2006). Planning, Proposing, and Presenting Science Effectively: A Guide for Graduate Students and Researchers in the Behavioral Sciences and Biology (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.