

UKWCT Student Exchange Programme

Tom Smith

The UKWCT student exchange programme is in its infancy but already it has made a difference to up and coming conservationists.

The programme has been supported by funding from Bacardi, so students who may not be able to afford the trip can apply for financial help. On the other side, the project in Bulgaria gets much needed help; it's a win/win situation.

Tom Smith is currently studying a part-time Masters in Ecology and Environment at Lancaster University. For his dissertation he wanted to investigate the effect of large carnivores on temperate ecosystems. Having successfully applied for the UKWCT's student exchange program, he spent six weeks at the Balkani Wildlife Society Large Carnivore Project. In this special report Tom tells us of his experience.

The project is run by Elena Tsingarska and focuses on investigating the ecology and behaviour of the wolf population in the West Pirin Mountain range. The area is absolutely stunning; the village is surrounded by snow-capped mountains and the amount of plant and insect life is breathtaking. The area is ideal for wolf and bear populations. The project provides educational services on large carnivores to the local population. They have two captive wolves and a captive bear that act as ambassadors for their species, giving people the chance to meet what are usually very elusive creatures. This helps to break down prejudices and raise awareness of issues facing carnivores in the area. The wolf project is closely linked to the



Tom with Vucho in Bulgaria

Semperviva project, which works towards the protection and reinstatement of local, rare breeds of goat, sheep, horses and livestock guarding dogs.

Every day I would feed the bear and wolves and make sure they had enough water. I built up a good relationship with the wolves over the time I was there which was a great honour. A strict code of hierarchy must be followed when making contact with the wolves. When I first met Vucho, the eldest, he only allowed me to stroke him on the side of his mane but as the trust built up, mainly by feeding them, he was comfortable enough for me to stroke the top of his head. The wildlife in general was fascinating, most of the time I was so excited I felt like a kid again, looking under rocks and walking through the woods and meadows. We worked in the field, radio tracking a young male, who was fitted with a radio collar last autumn, giving important insights into the movements and activities of wolves in the area. I also helped with the general maintenance around the farmhouse and enclosures and a variety of jobs that needed to be done such as milking the sheep. The way of life is very down to earth and at times can be tough, but the people I met were very hard working and believed in what they were doing.

The experience working in the field will be invaluable for my research and future work.

I learnt about wolf ecology and how to conserve them and about the social problems and conflicts that surround large carnivores. There is a big divide between hunters and the people working towards the conservation of the wolf. Not only do they see the wolf as a pest and shoot them on sight, they are also against the livestock guarding dogs. These dogs are essential to reduce livestock damage and human-wolf conflict. While I was working on the project, two of these dogs successfully chased away a full size bear. They are very effective and should be promoted wherever carnivores threaten livestock.

Elena invited me to sit in on a workshop, working towards the creation of a national wolf management plan for Bulgaria. At the workshop I met many people working to save the wolf and other carnivores and the connections I made will be very useful when I go into the field again.



Tom tracking a male wolf in Bulgaria

The trip also taught me about myself and which direction I would like to follow in my career, confirming that I will continue to work in the conservation industry but more specifically in temperate climates. It has also firmed up my belief in the importance of carnivores in ensuring the balance of an ecosystem. The workshop highlighted the importance of addressing social issues to achieve conservation goals; however I still think that I will be focusing on the ecology side of the industry.

I would recommend the exchange trip to anyone interested in ecology and conservation.

It can be very hard work but is extremely rewarding. It is a great opportunity to see how conservation works in the field and learn how people from a different background approach similar, and very dissimilar, problems. It has been a wonderful experience which I will never forget.

Tom Smith