

SSWG Mentoring Program

About the SSWG Mentoring Program

Conservation social science research is integral to conservation effectiveness. However, students who want to use social science methods as part of their research, especially those in interdisciplinary labs, can at times struggle to find the right experts to guide them. Conservation social science students may also be challenged in identifying appropriate careers paths after completing their studies. Further, BIPOC (black, indigenous, and other people of color) community students, LGBTQ+, and female students pursuing conservation social science face systemic barriers and inequities to achieving their goals.

To counter these challenges and increase support for conservation social science students, the Student Affairs Committee (StAC) of the Society for Conservation Biology's Social Science Working Group (SSWG) runs a Conservation Social Science Mentoring Program, to pair experienced conservation social science professionals with students and early-career researchers (ECRs). The first iteration of this ran in 2020-2021 with 30 mentee-mentor pairs, who reported many benefits and generally very productive relationships. Feedback allowed SSWG to refine the process, and we hope to make this second round even more successful.

The overarching aims of the mentoring program is to build relationships and improve support networks between those that study, research, and/or practice conservation social science, and raise the profile and robustness of social science within the broader conservation community. By connecting students with mentors experienced in social science, the program will not only support students in their application of social science research methods but also aid them in preparing for a conservation social science career, whether that be in academia, government, nongovernmental organisations, or the private sector. This program will also provide opportunities, if requested, for students of BIPOC communities and female students to be mentored by BIPOC mentors and/or female mentors willing to share their experiences navigating barriers during their conservation career.

Goals:

1. To help provide students guidance on how to gain a better grounding in the theory and practice of social science within conservation
2. To help build networks within the conservation social science community
3. To raise the profile and robustness of social science within conservation
4. To help BIPOC, LGBTQ+ and women navigate barriers in conservation and academia

What is mentoring?

Mentoring

Mentoring is a professional relationship in which an experienced person (the mentor) assists another (the mentee) in developing specific skills and knowledge that will enhance the mentee's career and personal growth.

What mentoring is:

- A voluntary process in which a mentor gives time to help a mentee to develop themselves, with confidential, non-judgmental and constructive support
- A mentor can be a sounding board
- A mentor has usually previously faced similar challenges that the mentee is currently facing or will face
- A mentor is often a senior person in the same sector but not in the same management line
- A mentoring relationship can start out as an informational interview

What mentoring is NOT:

- Being introduced to someone who will give you a job
- Being coached by someone doing exactly what you want to do
- A way to sidestep a diligent and inclusive recruitment process
- Being given an unfair advantage
- A replacement of supervision, appraisal or PDR
- A replacement for support in the case of harassment or grievance

The SSWG Mentoring Framework

SSWG mentoring program

Our SSWG mentoring program will pair postgraduate students and ECRs engaged in conservation social science with people experienced in the field, potentially outside their current research or professional networks. The mentor may give advice to students on how to develop key skills and areas of knowledge, advise them on career paths and build their networks. It is not expected that the mentor becomes an advisor in a formal capacity, but instead answers questions and points the mentee to appropriate resources for them to develop their understanding of the field. If a mentor contributes towards development of research knowledge/skills, the relationship could also include the mentee's primary supervisor who should be made aware of the role of mentor and be part of discussions regarding research directions.

The particular areas of focus will differ from partnership to partnership, depending on the requirements of each particular mentee, the mentor's capacity and what will be helpful and appropriate. Expectations, time commitments and areas of support should be agreed explicitly between all parties at the start of the relationship. However, the Conservation Social Science Mentoring framework, described below, sets out the potential skills and knowledge areas that mentors may help mentees to develop.

1. Career management
 - a. Access to a mentor that works in a career using social science within a conservation context provides a great opportunity for students to gain an insight into potential career paths
 - b. This is not meant to be a substitute for the mentee conducting their own research into different career paths, including on the forthcoming SSWG resources page, but rather to provide them access to advice on the sectors that the mentor has experienced
 - c. This insight could come from the mentors' contacts as well as the mentor themselves if the student would like to find out about other careers
2. Social Science Research Skills and Knowledge

- a. Students and potentially their supervisors may benefit from the input of a conservation social science professional to improve the student's social science research, especially if the student has not had specialist training in relevant theory and methods. In this case a mentor can direct the student towards appropriate resources. In this case, the student's supervisor should be part of the initial discussions so that they are aware of the input of the mentor.
- b. If this type of mentoring is sought by the mentee, there should be a conversation at the beginning of the relationship regarding acknowledgment of the mentor's input (e.g., their expectations for co-authorship on a manuscript if a high level of support) or ensuring both mentor and mentee have shared expectations for the level of involvement in research advising sought/able to give
3. Support for BIPOC, LGBTQ+ and female students
 - a. A BIPOC, LGBTQ+ or female mentor can help provide guidance and support for navigating barriers in conservation and in academia
4. Networking
 - a. The mentor will be able to put the mentee in touch with other people in the social sciences to help with career or skills related questions based on the specific needs of the mentee

Information for mentors

What can a mentor expect?

A mentor will be a professional, who will take on the role of guiding, advising and facilitating a defined aspect of the professional and/or personal development of a mentee. They will provide support to the mentee to enable them to try out new ideas and will also challenge the mentee when they think this would be beneficial. A mentor is not expected to take direct action on behalf of a mentee.

Mentees should feel able to express their concerns as well as discuss their ideas and aspirations during mentoring meetings. They must feel assured that their confidentiality will be respected and that their discussions will not be reported back to their line manager or any other party without their agreement. For the relationship to be effective, it needs to be built around mutual trust and respect.

Roles of a mentor

During a mentoring relationship a mentor is likely to take on a number of different roles. These will vary depending on the needs of the mentee, the particular situation, and the mentor's areas of expertise. No one role is more important than another. Potential roles include acting as a:

- Sounding board for testing ideas
- Challenger, playing devil's advocate and encouraging different ways of thinking
- Facilitator, helping the mentee to access new opportunities and key people
- Adviser
- Motivator
- Role model
- Expert
- Source of organisational knowledge

- Source of feedback
- Confidant
- Coach, helping the mentee to improve a specific skill

Attributes of a mentor

A mentor will:

- Have volunteered to act as a mentor and be committed to the process
- Be able to dedicate sufficient time to making the mentoring relationship a success (usually one to two hours every 3-4 months)
- Be prepared to share experience and pass on skills to others
- Be able to gain the trust of other people

Expectations of a mentor

The mentor is not expected to be an expert on every subject they are asked about, but will:

- Listen actively
- Ask open and appropriate questions
- Make suggestions without sounding prescriptive
- Keep in mind the stated objectives of the mentee
- Summarise and reflect in their own words
- Share personal experiences, stories and case-studies
- Maintain a long-term perspective
- Offer guidance and encouragement
- Respect the importance of trust in the mentoring relationship
- Appreciate the differing experiences and needs of their mentee
- Minimize directive advice and instruction
- Recommend approaches to research the problem for themselves

Mentors are ***not*** expected to solve mentee's problems for them, but, by listening and questioning, mentors should help mentees to reflect upon their own progress, clarify issues, and help them towards resolving their own problems.

Mentors should not, nor should a mentee ask them to:

- Tell their mentee what to do
- Play the role of their accountant, lawyer, sales rep or parent
- Make assumptions about their needs
- Assume responsibility for their success or failure

Benefits for a mentor

While the focus of the mentoring relationship is primarily on the development needs and opportunities for the mentee, there are also benefits for the mentor, including:

- Provides an opportunity to give something back
- Enhances job satisfaction, by helping others develop and fulfil their potential
- Develops closer bond with the conservation social science community
- Develops management and leadership skills

- Encourages self-reflection and a fresh perspective on mentor's own work

Information for mentees

What can a mentee expect?

- A mentee needs to be clear about what they would like to achieve from a mentoring relationship and be prepared to take responsibility for making things happen. The success of a mentoring relationship depends very much on the mentee driving it forward.
- A mentor may not be able to help a mentee with all of their objectives and in some cases it may be appropriate for a mentee to have an additional mentor (who offers different skills and expertise) following the conclusion of a first mentoring relationship.

Role of the mentee

A mentee is expected to:

- Approach the relationship with a clear set of objectives
- Be clear on your needs and proactively share those with your mentor
- Be committed – for example, attending planned sessions and taking actions agreed with their mentor
- Own and take responsibility for the content of each discussion
- Be willing to learn and to challenge their own views, assumptions, behaviours and ways of working (self-awareness) and making appropriate changes
- Be open to new ideas, absorb new language, terminology and concepts
- Discuss issues as openly and honestly as possible
- Ask for and receive feedback
- Express gratitude and thanks
- Reflect on the session, and capture your thoughts
- Review and celebrate progress at the next meeting

A mentee should not:

- Expect your mentor to solve all your problems for you or do work that you should be doing yourself
- Expect your mentor to find you a job
- Shy away from new learning experiences
- Avoid talking about problems or anxieties because it makes you seem less than perfect

Benefits for a mentee

- Allows sharing of issues and ideas in a confidential and impartial environment
- Improves and builds self-awareness and confidence
- Provides the opportunity to learn from a role model
- Offers support with succeeding on the course, and career development advice
- Develops various transferable skills, particularly communication

Training and resources

SSWG workshop

To kick-off our mentoring program SSWG hosts an online training workshop for mentors that uses the experience of both administrators and previous mentors of the program to provide advice and guidance on how to manage a mentoring relationship, to make it healthy and productive for both parties. We envision participants will: 1) better understand and appreciate the commitments required of mentors to maximize the connection they will develop through the program, 2) be more familiar with key concepts that could help to drive a successful mentoring relationship.

Other resources

There are different forms of guidance available for mentors and mentees. Interested mentors can watch a **free online training course** providing advice and tools to help you be a successful mentor:

- [Being a good Mentor](#) by Ellen Esher on LinkedIn
- [How to be a good mentor and mentee](#) by Emilie Aries on LinkedIn

The StAC mentoring team will also be available to answer any queries about the practicalities.

Advice if your mentee mentions personal problems or discrimination

Personal problems including mental health. Whilst it is likely that mentees will discuss personal problems with family/friends/colleagues, they may bring up such problems with you if they feel comfortable doing so. In that case, please be as compassionate as possible. If you do not feel comfortable discussing these issues with them, kindly suggest that they talk to someone else. Mental health issues do not discriminate based on gender, income or ethnicity. They are complex, and people differ widely in their conditions and responses. It is important that these struggles are met with encouragement and support if they are raised. If the student is experiencing mental health issues, encourage them to be familiar with the resources their institution offers. Many universities provide counselling services, hotlines, and a variety of other resources to their students, faculty, and the surrounding community.

When discussing careers, there is a chance that your mentee has come across discrimination based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion or something else. Again, please be compassionate and if you are not able to help them then please direct them to someone who can or appropriate resources, for example:

USA-<https://www.apa.org/topics/discrimination>

UK-<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/law-and-courts/discrimination/taking-action-about-discrimination/before-you-take-action-about-discrimination/>

The matching process

Mentors and mentees apply to the program by completing a questionnaire that provides information on what they are looking to get out of the program and what expertise/experience/knowledge they have to offer. This will include general categories of mentoring objectives that both mentors and mentees can select. StAC will identify potential matches for each mentee and make matches on the basis of the information provided. The specific areas on which a mentee is seeking support will be

matched against the skills and experiences offered by prospective mentors. Mentees are also able to specify that they would like a female, BIPOC or LGBTQ+ mentor. StAC will make every effort to make matches based on these requests, but we cannot guarantee that this will be possible for everyone. Preferences as to geographical or educational background will also be taken into account, although again no guarantees can be made.

The mentee should identify where they have an existing personal or professional relationship that could compromise the usefulness of the mentoring relationship. If after the first meeting the mentor or mentee do not believe this to be a productive match, we will try and find an alternative mentor for the student.

Mentor-mentee relationship

Frequency of contact

Each mentor-mentee relationship will be different, depending on the requirements of each mentee, the capacity and experience of each mentor and the mentees' supervisor, who may already have the capacity to provide some guidance in particular areas. The requirements of each mentee will vary. Some may be looking to move into a career as a social science academic or researcher, and others may just want guidance with how they can develop their knowledge and skill base. It is therefore difficult to prescribe the number of meetings needed to make a relationship effective. However, to give some guidelines approximately 3-4 meetings over a 12-month period may be appropriate, although more or less frequent meetings may be organised. Contact over email between meetings, suggested to be monthly, is also encouraged.

Start of the relationship

At the start of the relationship, it is the mentee's responsibility to make contact with their mentor. The first meeting should include an agreement on future ways of working together. There should be an explicit discussion of expectations, in terms of contributions, time and acknowledgement. Setting objectives:

- First email contact between mentor, mentee and supervisor within two weeks
- Set up first meeting to decide upon some key objectives within the first month of the relationship. These will match with the general objectives laid out in the initial survey but lay out further details and timescales. The three parties, particularly the mentee, should think about what they want to get out of the relationship before contact starts.
- Discuss the ambitions, interests, skills or gaps in skills, motivations and priorities of the mentee in order to frame discussions and create realistic short, medium and long-term objectives
- If the relationship is to include the mentor helping with research, this first meeting should include a conversation regarding recognition of the mentor's input, whether this be inclusion in the acknowledgement of papers, co-authorship, or something else

Contracting - It is important that, at the outset of a mentoring relationship, both mentor and mentee agree upon what they expect of each other. A good way to ensure this is to have an agreed note that covers the ground rules for the relationship. A brief and straightforward template that can be customised is available in Appendix A.

The mentor and mentee should discuss this note at the first meeting. Topics to cover could include:

- Mentee's objectives for the mentoring relationship

- Areas for discussion – eg. course-related, career planning
- Confidentiality
- How often to meet and for how long (eg one hour once per month)
- Where and how to meet (Face to face or FaceTime/Skype/Zoom/Teams)
- Communication between meetings (how much and by what means)
- Who keeps records and of what

Ongoing relationship

We suggest that mentor assignments could last one year and objectives are set that are appropriate for this length of time. This will vary and timescales should be negotiated at the beginning of the relationship. Subsequent meetings might include:

- Reflection on professional progress
- Provision of feedback
- Identification and exploration of problems and any development needs
- Identification of information needed and ways of acquiring it
- Action planning
- Review of progress against the objectives agreed in the mentoring agreement

If possible, we would encourage mentors and mentees to stay in touch even after objectives have been achieved.

Suggested timeline

- 2 weeks from pairing - First contact is established first meeting organised, including platform (Skype, Teams etc). Brief discussion over email on the background of each participant, the knowledge and experience gaps they present, and the rationale for the pairing
- Month 1 – First meeting. Key objectives are discussed and decided upon. Agreement is reached as to the recognition of mentor's input if necessary. Regularity and method of contact is agreed
- 6 weeks - StAC will check in after 6 weeks to ask if everything is progressing as planned
- Month 2 – 12 – Relationship proceeds according to objectives and plans set out.
- Month 6 - Evaluation survey after 6 months to allow StAC to ask what participants thought was beneficial about the program and what could be improved
- Month 6- 12 - Once objectives have been achieved, ongoing contact to provide mentee with another person to go to for guidance, alongside supervisors

Remember

Meet face-to-face for the first meeting. Try using Skype if you are in different countries. Personal contact is really important and will make conversations and setting expectations much easier.

Plan 4-6 sessions. Mentoring is intended to be more than a one-off chat; it works best as an ongoing dialogue and 3-4 sessions is a suggested minimum, as it gives you time to learn more about each other's interests and to revisit topics as well as explore them in more depth. Perhaps map out some loose ideas you might want to talk about over the course of several sessions, so expectations are clear.

Treat it as more than a question and answer session! This is a common pitfall. Some of you will have very specific questions and once they are answered it can be easy to see that as the end of the mentoring. Please allow yourself some space to identify new topics as you go, including those

mentors might suggest – they have a wealth of experience to share with you. Ask about the future.

Be respectful of each other. Please be aware that alumni are volunteering their time to help, and students are in term time, so treat each other’s time as valuable. The purpose of mentoring is to act as guides rather than experts with ready-made answers, too, so appreciate the explorative dimension of mentoring as a chance to get/offer a different and longer-term perspective on personal development and career.

Mentors are not replacements for supervisors or councillors. Please have realistic expectations of the issues that they can help you with, and the time that they are able to commit.

Ask open-ended questions. A lot of the insight in mentoring comes from the ability to explore around a topic. For example, rather than asking “should I do this?”, consider asking “what do you see as the pros and cons of this choice?” or “have you ever made a choice like this and on reflection what would you have done differently?”.

This is about more than your research. If you and your mentor/mentee have similar research interests, it can be tempting to spend a lot of time describing these, as opposed to chatting about your planning and reflecting and decision-making. Try to focus on what you have learnt and can share from your own experiences.

Appendix A - Template Mentoring Agreement

Name of Mentor:

Name of Mentee:

Overall purpose of the mentoring relationship and key goals:

Preferred practical arrangements for meetings (location and frequency):

Contact arrangements between meetings (telephone/email and frequency):

Arrangements for monitoring/recording progress and concluding the relationship:

Confidentiality

We agree to keep the content of these meetings confidential, unless otherwise agreed in relation to specific actions.

Signature of Mentee and date:

Signature of Mentor and date: