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Protecting special areas and species

Chantal Hagen has worked at Natural England (NE) for 20 years and is now building a team of specialists to ensure compliance with rules to protect special areas and species.

A PCS rep in EFRA Northern branch, she also represents members in the Rural Payments Agency, Forestry Commission and Defra.

What does your job involve?

As enforcement project manager I'm pulling together a team of specialist people to deal with our enforcement casework.

I advise colleagues doing the investigations about what the options are. We have powers around things like protected sites – for example, if someone damages a site of special scientific interest (SSSI) there are sanctions and tools available to deal with it.

We're also the enforcement body for breaches of species licences, which are issued for somebody to do, say, development work around a bat roost or great crested newt habitat.

If they cause damage or disturbance, we can take action to reduce the environmental harm and achieve restoration.

We often rely on the public to tip us off. We still mostly use advice based compliance rather than enforcement.

How and why did you get into it?

I did a zoology degree. During our 'year in industry' I worked at the UN World Conservation Monitoring Centre. It really lit a fire in me. I was desperate to work in the nature conservation field and in 2000 I was lucky to get a job in English Nature, as it was then. I've always been in the protected sites side of things, and have worked my way up through the organisation.

What are the ups and downs?

It's great working with the people in NE as they tend to be really experienced and passionate about getting good outcomes for nature conservation and wildlife. That is inspiring.

The downsides are there are fewer of us now and it can be quite challenging. Members are very concerned about the direction of NE and whether we have enough money to continue. People are struggling to get through their work and we've lost a lot of experienced colleagues.

Also, enforcement work isn't always seen as a priority and can be controversial – for example, if we are taking enforcement action against farmers on whom we may rely to deliver our biodiversity outcomes.

Are you active in PCS?

I'm a rep in EFRA Northern branch, covering Foss House, in York. I also sit on our branch executive committee and am a liaison officer with the group executive committee. The group covers more than just Natural England – here we have colleagues from the Rural Payments Agency, the Forestry Commission and core Defra, and I work with members in all of those.