

An Email Interview with Dr. Packard

Editor's Note: This is the text of a response to an interview request from a high school student, written 6/14/99. You may listen to a more recent audio interview with a reporter from the College Station Eagle at <http://wfsc.tamu.edu/jpackard/products.htm>

Q. Is it acceptable to you to be acknowledged by name in my paper, or would you prefer to have your name left unmentioned?

A. Thanks for asking! Yes, you may acknowledge me by name. If you need details about my position, address, research experience, etc. they are all listed on my resume.

Q. Thank you for taking the time to help me with this project.

A. It's a pleasure! I believe in the importance of encouraging people in your position to pursue a career in science and to understand better the role of scientific research in our society.

Q. What exactly does a career in animal behavioral studies involve?

A. I would encourage you to go to the web site of my professional society, the Animal Behavior Society. They provide good answers to this question.

Q. What caused you to choose this as a career?

A. When I was a sophomore in college, I read Jane Goodall's book "In the Shadow of Man". As a kid, we always had lots of animals around the house and I was fascinated by them. I spent wonderful summers at my uncle's cattle ranch in British Columbia. I knew there was more to nature than looking at slides through a microscope in biology class, or cutting up a fetal pig in anatomy. I thought..."is it really possible to make a living doing what one loves to do, watching and learning from animals?" That started me on the path.

But then I distinctly remember when it was that I decided to follow it as a career. I was sitting next to a pond in the moor at the Max Plank Institute for Behavioral Studies in Seewiesen, Germany. Four goslings were nestled under my sweater, their necks tucked over my side just like the wild goslings tucked their heads under the wing of their mother. We had been for a lovely walk at the break of dawn when the goslings awoke next to my cot and let me know they were ready to go. They followed close at my heels along the scary path through the beech forest, and scattered out to find tasty sprouts in a clearing while I discovered new flowers, little jewels that had not been open last week. Spring was unfolding all around me. The goslings were growing week by week, losing their fluffy babiness, losing the egg-tooth on their bills, developing personalities, and exploring the world opening up to them. I felt so grateful for all that the goslings had taught me, and for this opportunity to work with one of the grandfathers of the study of ethology, Dr. Konrad Lorenz. I wanted to make this experience possible for other students.

My mentor, Dr. Lorenz, was honored with a Nobel Prize for his work, along with Dr. Niko Tinbergen and Dr. Karl von Frisch. If you want to learn more about the goose families and Dr. Lorenz, I recommend the following books:

- The Year of the Greylag Goose. by Konrad Lorenz. 1979. Eyre Methuen Ltd: London. ISBN 0 413 45820 2 (my goslings and I are in photo 112)
- Here Am I - Where Are You?. by Konrad Lorenz. 1988. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers; New York. ISBN 0-15-140056-3.
- Konrad Lorenz. by Alec Nisbett. 1976. J. M. Dent & Sons LTD; London. ISBN 0460 04215 7 (a photo of Sybille and me with the goslings is on the 6th page in the center section)

Q. What was your first job in this field? How did you get it? Did you enjoy it?

A: My first job was working as a volunteer intern at the Ethology Field Laboratory at Purdue University. It is now known as Wolf Park, and Dr. Erich Klinghammer is the director. You can read more about it at: <http://www.wolfpark.org/> How did I get it? I asked all over where I could go to study ethology during the summer. My brother was at Purdue. A friend of his friend told him about the Ethology lab. I volunteered! They paid enough money for groceries, and I stayed in an old farmhouse. I thoroughly enjoyed it. My job was to care for the animals and to raise 3 newly hatched goslings and a wood duck. I also observed some Puerto Rican ground doves and wrote an ethogram (dictionary of their behaviors) for later course credit at the college I was attending, Swarthmore College. Dr. Klinghammer arranged for me to get the job as an assistant on the goose project in Germany! I learned how important it was to volunteer, to gain skills and contacts for later jobs.

Q. What are some research projects that you have been involved in?

A. I have been very fortunate to work with species ranging from the Arctic to the Antarctic, and have visited Europe, Africa, Latin American, and Canada. The animals who have taught me so much include: geese, wolves, sea otters, manatees, weddel seals, dolphins, Amazon parrots, javelina, and deer. Check out the list at: <http://wfsc.tamu.edu/jpackard/products.htm>

Q. Were there any of these projects that you enjoyed more than others? What did you like or dislike about them?

A. I loved being in the outdoors, living under difficult conditions and learning from nature. My dream was fulfilled when I lived with a wolf pack on Ellesmere Island for six weeks, and learned about how the parents and their older offspring helped care for the new litter of pups. If you want to learn more about the wolves of Ellesmere Island, I would recommend these books:

- Wolves of the High Arctic. 1992 Voyageur Press. ISBN 0-89658-213-2
- The Arctic Wolf. by L.David Mech. 1991. Voyageur Press. ISBN 0-89658-163-2
- The Way of the Wolf. by L. David Mech

The only thing I disliked, was when a project ended, and I lost touch with the animals who had been my teachers. I wished each study could go on and on like Jane Goodall was able to do with the chimps in Gombe. I have so much respect for her being able to keep up such long term studies, now that I know how difficult it is.

Q. Is there any aspect of this career on which you spend more time than others?

A. I spend most of my time teaching college courses and graduate students who are learning to do their own research. This is very important to me, because they will be the ones to learn from the animals in the future, and to share that knowledge with future generations.

Q. Is there any aspect of this career that you enjoy more than others? If so, why?

A. No question, I enjoy being outdoors with the animals the most, even though that is a very small portion of my time. The last two summers, I was very fortunate to spend in the field on a study of the denning behavior of wolves in Yellowstone. To learn more about that project, check out:

<http://www.wolftracker.com/>

Q. Is there any aspect of this career that you find particularly difficult or stressful?

A. You'd think that as many lectures as I have given in classes over the last 15 years, that it would no longer be stressful to get up and talk in front of a group. But it still is. I still get butterflies before every lecture and feel badly when the lecture didn't go as well as I had planned. I guess its just part of being a shy person. I keep working at it, and "eat lots of powdermilk biscuits", as Garrison Keillor says. Sometimes, I don't live up to the expectations of my colleagues and students. That is also stressful. I enjoy working more with people who listen and are collaborative, than with people who are egotistical and territorial. It is less stressful now that I have learned collaborative problem-solving skills. If you are interested in learning such skills, check out the tips on: <http://www.tamu.edu/ethology/formPS.html>

Q. What sort of hardships or obstacles do you frequently encounter when working out in the field?

A. The usual: hunger, cold, exhaustion, heat, thirst, blisters, sore muscles, boredom, snow storms, lightening storms, wet clothes, mosquitos, chiggers, sunburn, sprained ankle of a coworker, infections, motors that don't start, batteries that die, cables that don't make good connections, radios that don't work at the check-in time, losing sight of the animals when they go over a hill where we can't follow because of bears.

Q. Have you had any experience in this career that you consider especially rewarding or memorable?

A. Many, many! I will tell you about the day that I met a new wolf on the Ellesmere Project. I was lying on a hillside, trying not to be too obvious to our friends, the wolves lying in the heather meadow below. They knew I was there. Occasionally one would raise a head, look over at me, maybe wonder why I had left the ATV behind, then tuck its nose back into its paws and snooze a while longer. Not much was happening to write down, so I started day-dreaming and watching the clouds scooting overhead. All of a sudden, I got a strange feeling, you know, the kind of feeling that something is nearby. I looked over and a shaggy white wolf was standing 10 feet away on the right! Assuming it was Alpha Male, I wasn't worried. He and the others often came over to visit. Sometimes we tossed them food tidbits to let them know we were friendly and considered ourselves part of the pack (only wolves who are a member of the family share food...it was sort of like speaking their language). So I talked to this wolf. Shyly, it cautiously crept forward, stretched its nose way out, and sniffed my boot. Then it flicked its head, the way a playful juvenile would do. Instantaneously, I knew this was not Alpha Male. He was too old and stodgy to do

that. I glanced down at the meadow. He was still lying there. Mom, Greyback and Whitey were all still snoozing down in the meadow. This was a new wolf we had not met before! This new wolf did not know what to expect from me. I did not know what to expect from it. As the wolf circled around me, I kept eye contact. I talked with it calmly, telling the wolf who I was and that it did not need to be afraid. It took one last long look at me, then trotted along the ridgeline. Whitey jumped up. She lowered her head in that stalking position that dogs assume when they are going after a car or a squirrel. She raced in the direction the newcomer had headed. They were behind a hill when they met, but I could hear yelping. We never saw that strange wolf again!

Q. What skills (mental or physical) do you think are necessary for success in this type of career?

A. Endurance, patience, flexibility, communication, faith in the goodness of others (even when they are cranky), and passion for learning from animals. I love collecting data, analyzing it and writing it up for publication. To be a professor, a person needs an analytical mind to work with computers and do the science (often tedious), combined with the mind of an artist, to see how it all fits in the big picture and to share that knowledge with others.

Q. What sort of temperament do you think is best suited for a job in this type of career?

A. A person needs to have lots of energy and throw themselves into their career. To be a professor, you have to live to work, not work to live. You have to be very diplomatic to get along with other people who are the same way and sometimes are too busy to be polite or think about what is best for the group as a whole. You have to have high self-esteem, because part of the game is questioning the validity of each other's research and practicing critical thinking skills. You have to get over the fear of failure and focus on doing the very best science you can possibly do. When you don't get funding for a project you really wanted to do, you have to be like water and flow around a boulder in a mountain stream. You also have to be an astute business person and market your services and products.

Q. What education or practical experience would you recommend to someone interested in this career?

A. Volunteer, volunteer, volunteer. Practice your skills of problem-solving with people and motors. Follow your heart and curiosity, they will lead you in the right direction for you. Plan on going to graduate school and getting a PhD, check out: <http://wfscnet.tamu.edu/academics/grad/index.htm>. Study hard, not just because someone else is telling you to, but for the sheer joy of learning. All along your path, cultivate: (1) what you know (grades and test scores), (2) who you know (your network of contacts to future opportunities), and (3) the common sense to put it all together with your interests, skills and family heritage. Whatever turns your path may take in life, if you follow your heart, you will be blessed with riches far greater than money could ever buy!