

Olivia Millard: Building New Skills and Networks



Olivia Millard, The Nature Conservancy's director of conservation partnerships and learning for the Asia Pacific region, has kept two overarching goals in mind since college: to work in conservation and to expand her horizons by seeing the world and learning about new cultures. Her current job is a perfect marriage of the two, she said in a recent interview, but each job leading up to this one allowed her to build her skill set and, just as importantly, to strengthen her professional network.

Millard earned a bachelor's degree in environmental conservation but felt she lacked the "polish" and marketable skills she needed to land a job in the conservation field. She considered getting a master's in biology, but after touring some graduate school biology labs and talking with grad students, she decided she was more interested in conservation policy than field work. Instead, she applied to law school, with an eye toward eventually becoming an environmental lawyer.

Upon graduation, Millard accepted a job with a top corporate law firm, deliberately taking the non-conservation-related role as an apprenticeship in order to become familiar with the business world. After two years in corporate law, she began interviewing with several environmental law firms, but quickly realized she was interested in a collaborative, rather than confrontational, approach to conservation and gave up the idea of a career in law.

Aware of the Nature Conservancy (TNC), and intrigued by how its mission dovetailed perfectly with her goal to work in conservation, Millard applied for a job as executive director (ED) of the organization's Lower Hudson, NY, chapter. When she joined, the chapter was on autopilot, with no new initiatives planned. But over the course of 10 years as ED, she established several new preserves to protect globally rare species (including the Neversink River Preserve, which is now a cornerstone property for the Delaware River Program). She also made the chapter one of the first to raise money for international partners.

Millard describes her next move as a "stopgap" job with TNC's Boulder, CO, chapter. Although the job was not a perfect fit with her interests or skills, she said taking the position allowed her to gain some key fundraising experience, which she felt she needed to be a well-rounded senior nonprofit executive.

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About two years later, her reputation for collaboration and her strong professional network opened a new door. A colleague from one of TNC's New York chapters called to ask if she would be willing to help set up a learning exchange program for TNC chapters. Millard seized the opportunity to once again join her love of conservation with her desire to immerse herself in different cultures and helped launch the TNC Fellows program. The Fellows program, which quickly became a critical component of the organization's learning culture, promotes staff exchanges across international lines. Millard ran it for seven years—bringing coaches and mentors from the US to work with TNC partners and staff in Asia and the Pacific—until moving into her current director role.

Millard says that the guiding principles behind her career moves have never been about moving up. “Instead,” as she put it, “They have been about finding personal fulfillment through my job. So I tend to choose jobs based on who I will be working with and what I will be doing, rather than where it will place me in the organization. And now I have this great job where I work with extraordinary people in amazing places. I get to broaden my horizons and help build local conservation capacity, in a job that I couldn't have dreamed of when I started my career.”

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