



CONSERVATION BIOLOGY



**MSc Programme
Handbook**

**FITZPATRICK INSTITUTE OF
AFRICAN ORNITHOLOGY**

2025



THE FITZPATRICK INSTITUTE OF AFRICAN ORNITHOLOGY is part of the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and has a focus on research and post-graduate education. Although the Institute focuses primarily on ornithological research, the Conservation Biology MSc programme is broad-based, drawing on teaching expertise from across the academic spectrum at UCT and further afield.

Nestled on the slopes of Devil's Peak, UCT overlooks the cosmopolitan city of Cape Town. It is South Africa's oldest university and is Africa's leading teaching and research institution. It ranks among the top 200 universities in the world (160; Times Higher Education 2023 listings). It has more than 22,000 students and attracts a large number of international students – currently 15% of the student population, increasing towards a historic ~20% as we recover from the pandemic.

The university has a strong tradition in conservation research. Situated in the heart of the Cape Floristic Kingdom, it is well placed for research in two global biodiversity hotspots, the Fynbos and the Succulent Karoo. In a 2008 review, UCT ranked top among Southern Hemisphere institutions in terms of the impact of its conservation research, equivalent to the fourth-placed institution in North America.



introduction



Conservation biology is the study of how best to sustain and manage linked systems of people and nature. It builds on a range of existing disciplines, ranging from ecology and evolution to sociology and economics. Conservation biology is enormously important for human wellbeing because the impacts of human activities on the biosphere are significant and profound.

The master's programme in conservation biology was established at the FitzPatrick Institute in 1991 to educate

students and conservation practitioners in the fast-developing field of conservation science. The Fitz, as it is affectionately known, is housed in the Department of Biological Sciences in the Faculty of Science at the University of Cape Town. The Fitz promotes and undertakes scientific studies, mainly involving birds, that contribute to the theoretical and practical development of ecology, evolution, and conservation biology. The central focus of the conservation biology programme at the Fitz is an intensive master's degree comprising seven months of coursework and a six-month individual research project.

South African society has seen significant changes in the last 30 years; much of the resulting dynamism and openness to new ideas is mirrored in South African conservation. The discipline of

conservation biology is undergoing a similar paradigm shift, in which notions of preservation and paternalism are being replaced by an ethic that recognises the complexity of linked social and ecological systems and the critical need for solid interdisciplinary research. The FitzPatrick Institute is contributing to this disciplinary transformation through research and teaching, while also collaborating with others to support sound, action-oriented science.

aims & objectives

The aims of the Conservation Biology MSc programme are to produce graduates with a broad understanding of conservation issues and to provide them with the scientific background and tools to be able to analyse and solve practical, conservation-related problems. A synthetic, holistic approach to problem solving is encouraged through exposure to a variety of disciplines. Emphasis is also placed on developing oral and written communication skills. We have found that this broad approach to postgraduate education produces graduates who compete successfully in the job market and go on to make a difference in the field. Although emphasis is given to solving conservation challenges in an African context, students are provided with a broad-based education that will stand them in good stead throughout the world.

who is eligible to enrol?

Applicants to join the course must hold at least a BSc Honours (or equivalent qualification). Applicants will be drawn mainly from two groups: young people who have just obtained a degree and wish to become conservation biologists, and qualified, practising nature conservators who wish to update and/or expand their knowledge of the modern theory and practice of conservation biology. The course is intensive, and only a limited number of participants are accepted each year. Details regarding registration fees and approximate accommodation and living expenses in Cape Town are available on request. Prospective applicants should

apply to the Director, FitzPatrick Institute, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, South Africa, c/o Nqubeko Hlekwayo: fitz@uct.ac.za. Applications must reach this address before 31 August each year to be considered for a place on the course in the following year.

Applicants from outside South Africa are encouraged to apply early so that they have plenty of time to apply for funding and study visas. Applicants should please consult the Checklist for Applicants for the relevant documents and information that must accompany applications.

The **INTRODUCTION** occupies the first three weeks and includes orientation, an overview of conservation biology, and an introduction to the philosophy of science.

The **ECOLOGICAL CORE** includes modules in community ecology, population ecology, biodiversity basics, marine and freshwater ecology, conservation genetics, and invasion biology.

The **INTERDISCIPLINARY CORE** includes modules in spatial ecology and GIS, climate change, resource economics, societies and natural resources, urban conservation and conservation in practice.



structure of the course

The coursework component is intensive and exacting, but it represents a huge learning opportunity and the chance to interact with a wide range of excellent conservation biologists, both within and outside the university environment. The programme includes these seven months of intensive coursework and a six-month individual research project.

The coursework consists of a series of modules, each taught by experts in their field. Modules typically include lectures, practicals, essays, discussion groups, seminars and field excursions. Reading lists are provided. Emphasis is placed on African examples and case histories, but material is globally applicable.

Modules fall into three different sections: an introduction, an ecological core, and an interdisciplinary core. Each module lasts between one and three weeks. The coursework component of the course starts in mid-January and is completed by the end of August.

From September to mid-February the following year, students conduct and write up a research project, culminating in a paper, on a research topic chosen by the student and supervised by a member or members of the academic staff. The research report is in the format of a manuscript suitable for publication, which should facilitate the dissemination of results. These research reports are not

equivalent to dissertations produced for the award of an MSc based on a thesis alone.

Modules are examined in April–May and August–September. Exams are ‘open book’ and emphasize the solving of practical problems, with the full range of resources available to students. The MSc degree is awarded to students who achieve grades in excess of 50%, and it is awarded with distinction if grades exceed 75% for both the coursework and project components of the course. There is a minimum requirement of 30% for the first examination for students to be allowed to continue with the course.

provisional coursework outline (subject to change)

Ecological core modules provide a foundation for the interdisciplinary core, which place conservation in context as a human-oriented discipline.

WEEK	MODULE NAME	LIKELY CONTENT
1 (13 Jan)	Orientation Gabriel Jaimie	Meet each other & the department; recap some basic skills
2	Conservation in context William Bond	Conservation in a global context
3	Philosophy of Science William Bond Leadership 1 Wendy Foden	Limits of hypothetico-deductive science, less predictable social/ecological interactions, emergent properties.
4	Biodiversity Basics Susie Cunningham	Units & functional importance of biodiversity, basic evolutionary processes, macro-ecology
5–6	Landscape Ecology & GIS Jasper Slingsby	Key concepts (scale, heterogeneity, stratification) and their application in conservation planning. Key skills, especially GIS
7	Freshwater Conservation Jeremy Shelton	Limnology, nitrification, freshwater resource management
8–9	Climate Change	Climate change and its importance for people and ecosystems
10–12	Resource Economics Jane Turpie	Ecosystem goods & services valuation (field based) Links to livelihoods & poverty Over-harvesting Pricing & globalisation – subsidies, easements
12–13	Biological Invasions Sebataolo Rahlao	Biological impacts of invasions, issues surrounding management, legislation.
14	Population Modelling Colin Attwood	Extinction risk, threat categories. Analysis basics. Demography and PVA
15–16	Marine Conservation William Froneman	Fisheries management at local and global scales, MPAs, issues surrounding marine conservation, marine ecology
17	EXAM 1	

WEEK	MODULE NAME	LIKELY CONTENT
18	HOLIDAY	
19–20	Conservation Conflicts Justin O’Riain	Human-wildlife conflicts, practical application of conservation methods, restoration & mitigation, asking the right questions
21–23	Community Ecology & Field Camp Robert Thomson & Mike Cramer	Biological diversity, interspecific competition, niche concepts, trophic cascades, ecosystem engineers, some models
24–25	Conservation & Society Gladman Thondlana	Governance, institutions, livelihoods, land tenure, social networks, management & implementation, resource access. Ethical/cultural valuation. Environmental law and policy.
25–26	Restoration Ecology Mlungele Nsikani	Issues surrounding restoration of biodiversity.
27	Project planning 1 Claire Spottiswoode	Refine project ideas, develop proposal-writing and critical-thinking skills
28–29	Conservation Genetics Jacqui Bishop	Genetic diversity, forensics, non-invasive sampling Gene flow and phylogeography
30	Project planning 2 Arjun Amar	Assess project feasibility, develop experimental/project design skills
31	Urban Conservation Dalton Gibbs	Maintaining biodiversity in an urban environment, planning and challenges.
32	Conservation Leadership 2 Wendy Foden	Leadership strategies for conservation, conflict resolution, project & financial management, conservation politics
33	EXAM 2	
34	Research project starts	



selection criteria

We accept only 12–14 students each year into the Conservation Biology MSc programme. There are often 2–3 times this many applicants, resulting in competition for places. In addition to academic ability, preference is given to candidates with experience in the conservation arena, particularly in an African context. Because of the intensive nature of the

programme, students spend a lot of time working closely with their peers. Having students from a diversity of backgrounds contributes significantly to the success of the programme. Consequently, we strive each year to select students that combine a mix of youthful enthusiasm and mature experience, as well as a mix of students from developed and

developing countries. The ideal class comprises roughly one third students from South Africa, one third from the rest of Africa, and one third from the rest of the world.

Since its inception, > 300 students have graduated from the CB programme from more than 30 countries.

checklist for applicants

Applicants to the course should include all the following documents and information with their application. Please note that applications must reach the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology by **31 August** to be considered for the following year.

- Start by doing an online application to UCT. Then submit the following to the Department (address details below):
- Completed Departmental Application Form
- Full curriculum vitae giving permanent address and telephone/fax numbers, date of birth, full names, nationality, educational history up to present date, employment history (if any) up to present date, details of computer systems and software packages used to date, and details of any research publications.
- Names, addresses, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of at least two referees who can comment on your academic ability, suitability for postgraduate study, and also give a confidential personal evaluation of your sense of initiative and computer literacy.
- Undergraduate academic transcript showing marks for each course taken in each year. This should be a photocopy of the original, but the photocopy should have an original stamp certifying that it is a true copy of the original transcript. Certified copies of transcripts of any subsequent postgraduate qualifications should also be included here.
- A certified copy of the original degree certificate (and any subsequent qualifications mentioned above).
- A certified copy of an original TOEFL or PTEEP certificate or other English qualification if English is not your first language.
- A 1–2 page typed motivation outlining why you chose to apply for a place in the CB programme, what your long-term career aspirations are, and how you think the successful completion of the course will benefit those aspirations.
- A letter of application addressed to the Director, FitzPatrick Institute
- The application fee is R100 for students from South Africa and SADC countries and R300 for all other students. Students who are currently registered or who have previously graduated from UCT do not have to pay an application fee.

Further information: <http://www.fitzpatrick.uct.ac.za/fitz/researchstudy/conservationbio/applicants>

Address your application (or any queries) to:

Ms Nqubeko Hlekwayo, FitzPatrick Institute, University of Cape Town,
Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa

Tel. (+27-21) 650 3291/2896, fax (+27-21) 650 3295

or e-mail: fitz@uct.ac.za

information for international students



All applicants except South Africans and permanent residents of South Africa will need:

- A valid passport and study visa. Note that you cannot obtain a study visa from within South Africa.
- Medical insurance.
- Proof of English proficiency if English is not your first language (TOEFL test or equivalent)
- A proven ability to support yourself financially and to settle your fees.

International student fees apply for the Conservation Biology MSc programme. For advice and further details, international applicants are welcome to contact the FitzPatrick Institute's Administrator at fitz@uct.ac.za; alternatively, visit the university's International Academic Programmes Office (IAPO) website (www.iapo.uct.ac.za).

funding opportunities

The full course fees are set by the university at the beginning of each year. For South African students, course fees for 2024 have been set at R72 187,20. International students additionally pay an international fee and levy on top of this. Updated fees information and amounts can be obtained from Nqubeko Hlekwayo: fitz@uct.ac.za.

Students are strongly advised to seek funding well in advance of the beginning of the course. Many bursary and scholarship opportunities close very early: in mid-year for the following year is quite normal. You may need to apply for a bursary before you complete your application for the course, and certainly before you hear about acceptance.

Some potential funding options are listed below. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list and students are strongly encouraged to also search for other scholarship options.

- South African students are strongly encouraged to apply to the NRF for a master's scholarship (generally closing in July of the year before study): <https://www.nrf.ac.za/nrf-for-post-graduate-students/bursaries-scholarships/>
- South African students should also apply for funding from UCT's post-graduate funding office (PGFO): <https://uct.ac.za/students/fees-funding-postgraduate-degree-funding/postgraduate-degree-funding-overview>
- Limited funding is offered by the NRF and PGFO for international students
- African students should consider applying to the Mastercard Foundation for a scholarship: <http://www.mcfsp.uct.ac.za/>
- African women (including South African women) may be eligible for a scholarship from the Shannon Elizabeth Foundation (these are highly competitive): <https://shannelizabeth.org/our-initiatives/youth-empowerment/>
- Zimbabwean, Zambian and Malawian students may be eligible for a scholarship from the Beit Trust: <https://beittrust.org.uk/beit-trust-scholarships/>



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