

# Mentors Matter: Strategies for Selecting the Right Mentor

STEVEN J. COOKE\*

*Fish Ecology and Conservation Physiology Laboratory  
Institute of Environmental Science and Department of Biology, Carleton University  
1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario, K1S 5B6, Canada*

CONSTANCE M. O'CONNOR

*Aquatic Behavioural Ecology Laboratory  
Department of Psychology, Neuroscience and Behaviour, McMaster University  
1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, Ontario, L8S 4K1, Canada*

## Key Points

- Mentors serve important roles, both personally and professionally, particularly for early career professionals, where guidance and counsel from a mentor can encourage success.
- Strong mentors are exceptional listeners and have a willingness to provide advice, without dictating and while still allowing independent ideas.
- A mentee may have many different mentors throughout his or her life. It is the wisdom of an individual, and his or her willingness to share it with others, that makes him or her a mentor, rather than any specific regimented role.

## Introduction

Mentors have the potential to play a critical role in the development of fisheries professionals, both personally and professionally. This is particularly the case for early career professionals, where guidance and counsel from a mentor can encourage success in the short and long term (Welch 1997). Failure to find an appropriate mentor may result in a lack of support and encouragement needed to embark on a life-long career in fisheries.

So what are the characteristics of a good mentor? And how or where do you find such a mentor? Here, we tackle those two questions and provide examples from our own positive and negative experiences as mentees. More recently, we find ourselves also holding the role of mentor and are thus able to share experiences from that perspective as well. For context, Cooke has been in the professoriate since 2005 while O'Connor is a postdoctoral fellow. We preface this discussion by noting that we feel that it is entirely appropriate and encourage having multiple mentors to obtain balanced and diverse perspectives. Moreover, in the age of life-long learning, we propose that you are never too old or wise to benefit from a mentor. Although mentoring is recognized as important in fisheries (e.g., Kennedy and Roper

---

\* Corresponding author: [steven.cooke@carleton.ca](mailto:steven.cooke@carleton.ca)

1990; Kohler and Wetzel 1998; Jackson 2010; Larson 2010; Lang et al. 2010; Boreman 2012; O'Connor 2012), we are unaware of any detailed accounts of what makes a good mentor in the fisheries profession, which makes our discussion of value to early career professionals.

## What Makes a Good Mentor?

A report by the National Academy of Sciences et al. (1997) described a mentor as one who “seeks to help a student optimize an educational experience, to assist the student’s socialization into a disciplinary culture, and to help the student find suitable employment,” a definition that is specific to academic relationships. However, the *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines a mentor (noun) as “an experienced and trusted advisor,” which is equally relevant to academic and professional context. In the current discussion, we consider a mentor in this broader sense. Therefore, we also consider that a broad range of individuals can potentially benefit from mentorship. A mentee may be a student but may also be an early career professional or a professional at any stage in his or her career facing a new challenge. Although such definitions are informative in clarifying what we mean by a mentor and a mentee, they do little to identify the traits that are associated with a good mentor. In our opinion, characteristics of good mentors include compassion, fairness, and good listening skills (see below). A mentor at any stage in your career should engage you, learn about your career aspirations, help you identify your strengths and weaknesses, and provide opportunities to help you achieve your goals, while also helping you expand your thinking and horizons. In addition, strong mentors have a willingness to provide advice, without dictating and while still allowing independent ideas. Using our own experiences, we elaborate on some of the characteristics of good mentors: willingness to provide guidance, accessibility, ability to listen, supportiveness, ability to criticize constructively, compassionate, insightful, and attentiveness to psychosocial development. We present these traits as a framework to guide potential mentees seeking an advisor in either an academic or a professional context.

### *Willingness to Provide Guidance*

Mentors must offer guidance to their mentees. Mentors must have some kind of skill or knowledge, and they must be willing to and capable of passing this on to their mentees. While this concept seems a simple prerequisite of a mentor, the ability to teach skills is often harder than the acquisition of skills. Individuals have different learning styles (e.g., logical, aural, and visual) and different approaches to research (e.g., pragmatic, participatory, and hypothesis driven), and mentors may need to work quite hard in order to communicate their skills and knowledge effectively to their mentees. The best mentors are good communicators. That is, they are exceptional listeners, ask the right questions, share perspectives, and make genuine connections. Some universities and academic conferences offer workshops for mentors to improve as teachers, and these workshops can be very useful for both mentors and mentees. For us, some of our most important and memorable interactions with mentors focused on career guidance, especially when faced with multiple options, each with strengths and weaknesses. For example, Cooke received extensive mentoring support when he was looking to join the professoriate. His mentors provided him with the support needed for him to turn down his first academic job offer in favor of holding out for one that was a better fit.

### *Accessibility*

One of the most common problems with academic mentors is that they are busy and may have limited time available for individual mentees. Often the best mentors are also the ones

that have the fullest schedules. The best mentors are often the professionals that have been successful in their area, which translates into more commitments, including more mentees. However, a key characteristic of the best mentors is that they are accessible to mentees when the mentees need assistance. Different mentors may use different strategies to connect with their mentees, which can range from scheduling regular face-to-face meetings; staying connected through e-mail, telephone, or video connections; or using a combination of communication methods. With busy mentors, organizing group meetings may be useful. Regardless of the system used, it is important that a mentor respond to mentee concerns. Mentees can help improve this aspect of the mentor–mentee relationship by explicitly asking their mentor which method is best for maintaining communication.

#### *Ability to Listen*

It is critical that mentors truly listen to their mentees. Mentees will all have different goals and aspirations, and one mentee may want to learn very different skills than another mentee from the same mentor. For example, one student may be interested in how to engage in science advocacy while another may be interested in learning about experimental design, and another mentee at a different career stage may be more interested in negotiating work–life balance. A good mentor will take the time to discover what a mentee is hoping to gain from the mentor–mentee relationship and tailor his or her guidance accordingly. Along the same lines, a good mentor will take the time to listen to and understand mentee concerns. In this regard, it is also important that mentees clearly communicate their goals or any problems with their current academic or research programs. From the perspective of a mentor, we found that it is frustrating to discover that one of your mentees, especially a student or employee, has been having an ongoing problem or dissatisfaction that you were not told about. It can be challenging for mentees to discuss some issues, but good mentors will recognize the imperativeness of open communication no matter what the topic.

#### *Supportiveness*

Not all mentees have the same career goals and aspirations, and a good mentor will be sensitive to these differences. Many professors and professionals have an unfortunate tendency to blindly encourage all students down the same career path. However, the best mentors will attempt to use their knowledge and connections to help individual mentees achieve their individual goals, whatever these goals may be. For example, we have personally interacted with many mentors that have encouraged only an academic path, but not all students trained in fisheries have an interest in becoming professors or even staying in the profession for that matter. We have both interacted with mentees that although interested in fisheries, have also been keen on other career paths such as teaching at the elementary level, physiotherapy, or dentistry. Supportive mentors help mentees identify the path they wish to take and assist them in following said path. In some cases, that may mean supporting a path that takes them out of the fisheries profession or even towards seeking another mentor if that is what is best for the mentee.

#### *Ability to Be Constructively Critical*

There is an art to delivering constructive criticism because it is essentially balancing a combination of positive and negative perspectives. The best mentors are masters of this art and have the ability to gauge the cultural context (e.g., receptiveness of the mentee, relationship between mentor and mentee) and adjust their criticism accordingly. Without criticism, there

is no growth or development. However, criticism must be expressed in such a way that mentees understand where improvements can be made. Mentors must be able to clearly describe how work can be improved, and not just where there are errors and shortcomings. This may be one of the most important qualities of a mentor, since many mentees feel discouraged by poorly expressed criticism, begin to feel as if there is no way to please their mentor, and ultimately become unmotivated and perform poorly. The best mentors, rather than leaving mentees feeling discouraged, will inspire mentees to improve. Given that being critical is an inherent component of science (e.g., peer review, critical thinking), our mentors have also helped us to do so in ways that are not demeaning to others. For example, when serving as referees for journal articles, both of us are committed to being constructive and respectful, such that we do not deflate but rather inspire. Rather than stating, "My head is pounding, the English is so atrocious that I can't understand the paper," an alternative approach would be to say, "Given the value of clear and concise communication, we strongly encourage the author work with a more experienced writer to address some deficiencies with English." The latter example demonstrates the value of making such improvements and provides direction for doing so without making unnecessary demeaning or flippant comments.

### *Compassion*

For most mentees, especially students, their professional development is only a part of their life. As with the skills related to listening and support, mentors should be aware that priorities differ among mentees and between the mentor and the mentee. This does not mean that a mentor must become involved in a mentee's personal life; while some mentors may offer personal advice, other mentors may find it more appropriate to limit their advice to the professional sphere. In this regard, factors such as gender and age of mentor and mentee come into play. However, all mentors should be compassionate and understanding. Showing concern for a mentee's overall well-being, and making accommodations (e.g., extending a deadline) when necessary, is an important quality of a good mentor.

### *Insightfulness*

This characteristic of a good mentor is less tangible and less easy to define. From a mentor's perspective, this may be the most difficult quality to actively improve on since it incorporates many aforementioned skills, such as listening, guidance, and constructive criticism. Indeed, to some extent it is a composite of other characteristics. However, the best mentors will be able to change the way that students view their research and their professional career through insightful comments. The serendipitous nature of truly insightful comments is one of the main reasons that having multiple mentors can be so helpful. Through quirks of timing and wording, different mentors may be able to offer important insight on different aspects of a mentee's early career, and at different times. By having multiple mentors, a mentee is more likely to benefit from these insights. Multiple mentors mean more advice, but more important are the different perspectives. As noted before, a mentor is not there to make decisions for the mentee, but rather to empower the mentee by providing him or her with information and perspective. As with many decisions, there is rarely a clear right or wrong approach. The answer is always context-specific, with the mentee being a key factor in that context. We both benefited from insight from multiple mentors throughout our early careers. There was certainly no consensus, but the insightful and diverse perspectives enabled us to shape our own perspective. Mentors do not have a crystal ball; they are indi-

viduals, and the good ones accept when mentees decide on a different course than the one that they may have suggested.

### *Attentiveness to Psychosocial Development*

Psychosocial development is the development of personality and social attitudes (Kram 1985). The best mentors will encourage not just the development of a skilled professional, but also the development of a colleague who will contribute to the greater fisheries community. This can occur through encouraging outreach and participation in societies and committees. These larger communities both provide opportunities and can act as mentors in themselves, providing new ideas and inspiration for mentees. The best mentors in this case are those who lead by example. Mentees will admire mentors who are committed, passionate, and helpful to others and will be inspired to follow suit. Indeed, both of us have selected mentors along the way that cared about our development and success both outside of fisheries and in it.

### *Mentorship and Minorities*

In addition to career and life advice, mentors also play an important role in increasing ethnic and gender diversity in the natural resources (Lopez and Brown 2011). Finding a mentor with a similar background and life experiences can be the difference between staying in fisheries and picking a new career path, particularly for minorities in fisheries. As a female in fisheries, O'Connor has benefitted enormously from both male and female mentors, but female mentors have been particularly helpful in giving advice on issues such as work-life balance and being a female scientist in a male-dominated discipline.

## **How to Find a Mentor?**

The most common process to find a mentor is to communicate with a broad suite of professionals and look for those that have the traits of a good mentor that we have outlined above. O'Connor's (2012) article in *Fisheries* is aimed towards students seeking a thesis advisor and provides a framework for finding an advisor, including lists of questions to ask potential advisors in order to elucidate whether they have the traits of a good advisor. For example, it is important to speak both to the potential advisor and to current and former students in order to gain a balanced and fair perspective of the potential mentor. However, this process is not always straightforward, and mentors can also be found outside of traditional educational institutions (e.g., resource stakeholders, agency personnel) and outside the fisheries profession (e.g., community elder, athletic coach). It is unfortunately also the case that mentees will find themselves in a situation with a supervisor that they do not get along with or who is not encouraging their professional development. In this case, it is sometimes possible to switch supervisors in order to find one who is a better fit. It is also possible to use a network of mentors to provide the support that may be lacking from the primary supervisor. It is worth mentioning that one is not inherently a mentor just because he or she is a leader or supervisor, and a mentor need not be older or hold a formal supervisory role. Indeed, it is the wisdom of an individual, and his or her willingness to share it with others, that makes him or her a mentor. In some cases, mentors have found us; we have not gone out explicitly looking for mentors, but when we have identified someone with such properties and recognized their potential, we have embraced them as mentors. Identifying a potential mentor is about having respect and admiration for an individual. Quite simply, we cannot think of any mentors that we did not respect and admire first

for some reason before they assumed such a mentorship role. We have also had different mentors for different career stages, as well as different mentors for different aspects of our life (e.g., mentor for academic publishing, mentor for development of teaching pedagogy). However, what they have all had in common is that they have been good mentors and exhibited traits that we wished to emulate.

## **On Being a Mentor**

On occasion, we have had mentors that may not have realized that they were serving us in such a capacity. Indeed, when we think of the mentors that we have had and still interact with today, only a small number of them might themselves consider us to be their mentees. Perhaps that is a testament to the notion that some people simply are so natural at mentoring that they do not recognize that they are even doing it. We suggest that fisheries professionals with an active interest in serving as mentors consult the mentoring guidelines for wildlife professionals developed by Suedkamp Wells et al. (2005) or a more general document by Zachary (2002). Indeed, being a mentor enhances personal and professional development, such that both the mentee and mentor benefit enormously. We have found that mentoring is an underappreciated task, so when you have a good mentor, be sure to acknowledge their important role in your career and life.

## **The Future of Mentoring**

Mentoring is changing. For example, e-mentoring, where communication between mentor and mentee is mediated by computer or other electronic technology, is becoming more common (Bierema and Merriam 2002), even in natural resource fields (Kinkel 2011). Neither of us have had experience with such relationships aside from communicating via e-mail, face-to-face meetings (e.g., via Skype), or at least audio communication. However, these relationships may become more common in the future and, particularly with improving video communication tools, have the potential to be valuable and allow mentees to seek multiple mentors without geographic restrictions.

## **Conclusion**

Mentors matter. It has been our experience, after having mentors with a variety of strengths and weaknesses, that it really comes down to individual fit. This is especially the case when your choice of mentor may be only part of a larger decision regarding academic program, institution, research project, and personal or family considerations. A mentor can be the difference between an inspired student who goes on to become a great professional and an unmotivated student who drops out and seeks a different career path. Carefully selecting mentors who will have a positive benefit to your career and professional development is an important task, and given how critical mentors are, it is important to recognize and appreciate a good mentor when you are lucky enough to have one. Finally, those who find themselves in mentorship roles should be open to learning and improving their own skills as advisors and teachings. Mentors are useful throughout one's career, and for different aspects of one's career, and not just for those in the initial stages of their training. In some ways, we are all both mentors and mentees, and embracing the role and making steps to improve the mentorship experience will benefit the fisheries profession as a whole. We have both benefited from long-term relationships with a diverse suite of mentors that have helped shape our careers, character, and personas, and our own mentoring style.



## Acknowledgments

We thank the many wonderful mentors (too many to mention) that we have had along the way. Hopefully we can pay forward what you have done for us! SC is supported by the Canada Research Chairs Program. CO is supported by the E.B. Eastburn Postdoctoral Fellowship.

## Biographies

Dr. Steven Cooke is the Canada research chair in fish ecology and conservation physiology at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. His research is focused on understanding the ecology of stress in wild fish. He also has expertise in recreational fisheries science, biotelemetry, and inland fish conservation. Dr. Cooke is president of the Canadian Aquatic Resources Section of the American Fisheries Society and chair of the Sea Lamprey Research Board of the Great Lakes Fishery Commission. He is also editor in chief of the journal *Conservation Physiology* and an editor for the *Journal of Animal Biotelemetry*.

Dr. Constance O'Connor is currently a postdoctoral fellow at McMaster University in Hamilton, Canada. Her research focuses on addressing theoretical issues related to mechanisms underlying interesting animal behavior and applying these findings to more applied conservation outcomes. Dr. O'Connor is also a regular volunteer with organizations encouraging girls in science and promoting science and outdoor education for youth.

## References

- Bierema, L. L., and S. B. Merriam. 2002. E-mentoring: using computer mediated communication to enhance the mentoring process. *Innovative Higher Education* 26:211–227.
- Boreman, J. 2012. Developing a legacy through mentoring. *Fisheries* 37:531.
- Jackson, D. C. 2010. Mentoring: a synergistic multi-directional endeavor. *Fisheries* 35:4:47.
- Kennedy, J. J., and B. B. Roper. 1990. The role of mentoring in early career development of forest service fisheries biologists. *Fisheries* 15(3):9–13.
- Kinkel, D. H. 2011. Engaging students in career planning and preparation through ementoring. *Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Education* 40:150–159.
- Kohler, C. C., and J. E. Wetzel. 1998. A report card on mentorship graduate fisheries education: student and faculty perspectives. *Fisheries* 23(9):10–13.
- Kram, K. 1985. *Mentoring at work*. Scott and Foresman, Boston.
- Larson, E. R. 2010. Faculty and graduate student mentoring in the Hutton Junior Fisheries Biology Program. *Fisheries* 35:350–351.
- Lang, T., J. Tiemann, F. Amezcua, and Q. Phelps. 2010. The AFS Young Professional Mentoring Program: our experience as the first cohort of mentees. *Fisheries* 35:444.
- Lopez, R., and C. H. Brown. 2011. Why diversity matters: broadening our reach will sustain natural resources. *The Wildlife Professional* 5(2):20–27.
- National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, and Institute of Medicine. 1997. *Advisor, teacher, role model, friend: on being a mentor to students in science and engineering*. National Academy Press, Washington, D.C.
- O'Connor, C. M. 2012. How to find a good graduate advisor and make the most of graduate school. *Fisheries* 37:126–128.
- Suedkamp Wells, K. M., M. R. Ryan, H. Campa, III, and K. A. Smith. 2005. Mentoring guidelines for wildlife professionals. *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 33:565–573.
- Welch, O. M. 1997. An examination of effective mentoring models in academe. Pages 41–62 in H. T. Frierson, editor. *Diversity in higher education*. JAI Press, Greenwich, Connecticut.
- Zachary, L. J. 2002. *The mentor's guide: facilitating effective learning relationships*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

