

What Does Production Ecology Involve? FAQs answered

What is the purpose of Production Ecologists?

We are part of the broader location services landscape, offering ecological surveys, compliance, and on-location ecological supervision. Our experienced team of Ecological Consultants have worked on over 30 TV and film productions with Production Houses and Film Studios, including Netflix, HBO, Universal Studios, Warner Bros, Lucasfilm, Sky TV, BBC, Channel 4, and S4C. We work with Location Managers and Location Scouts, as well as Creative Directors and other crew, helping them bring their visions to life whilst ensuring environmental compliance and safeguarding reputation.

What we do on each film project varies and is dictated by the needs of the specific site and project. We can assist at every stage, including scouting locations, tech recce's, supporting Location Filming Agreement applications and negotiations, working with statutory authorities for filming in designated landscapes, and full-service on-set ecological supervision. If you are working in or near protected sites and protected species, we offer full visibility of your compliance obligations and help you navigate them responsibly to achieve your creative visions. This can include planning stunts and special effects, and working with logistics and aerial teams on access and crew arrangements.

Essentially, we can become an extension of your team to help ensure that your filming progresses without unnecessary delays, hindrances, or unintended legal breaches.

When is a Production Ecologist required?

The involvement of a Film Ecologist in a project is intended to safeguard both the reputation and legality of the actions of responsible Production Houses and Landowners. Beyond the legal implications, there are compelling ethical and financial reasons why both filmmakers and landowners want a knowledgeable ecologist on their team during on-location filming. Particularly as legislation is not limited to sites with protected designations, where expert input is required, such as filming at a SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest).

Whilst sites with an SSSI, SAC, SPA, or Ramsar designation will have specific legal obligations, broader legislation such as the Wildlife and Countryside Act and the Environment Act apply everywhere. These acts cover wild birds, named animals, insects, and plants, but also (and more relevantly for location logistics and camera crews) areas where they feed, breed, and dwell. This means that all site usage, from footfall and toilet locations, through to drone usage, SFX and stunts, and waterbody use and access, needs to be carefully reviewed.

The legislation is complex and frequently updated, but it is not limited to wilful killing and destruction; negligence is an offence in most cases. Without being familiar with the details of the legislation, missteps are easily made, e.g., it is an offence to prevent a wild bird from using its nest. Lighting, mirrors, gas, smoke, and sound effects could all be regarded as being negligently used if not properly assessed. And the offence of introducing a species to an area extends to seeds that could be in the waste products of animals brought on set! And let's face it, no one needs to end up in the proverbial poo due to abandoned droppings on set!

Why are the regulations so much tighter than they were?

There are many reasons for this, not least that as humans we learn by experience. Health and safety on film sets has evolved over decades of practice, driven by legal, ethical, and technological factors. We have a duty of care to protect our team from harm and have learned from accidents that have ended or changed films, careers, or even lives. We also have a duty of care to the environments we film in and the species we impact. And the drivers are the same.

Legally, we must operate within environmental legislative requirements to protect named species and habitats. We are also bound by the terms of location contracts where landowners wish to protect the value of their location. Legal breaches can lead to delayed filming, revoked location access agreements, and/or fines or prosecution depending on the transgression.

Ethically, we all have an environmental duty of care. The immersive benefits for both audience and talent of the perfect location helps to create the iconic scenes directors aspire to. These striking locations are teeming with life, and our actions on site can have a lasting impact. The best sites are usually important to local communities, enthusiasts, and activists, who will protest and take to social media if they feel it is being damaged. This creates a potentially damaging and expensive PR situation for both you and the landowner and can cause filming permissions to be revoked.

Knowledgeably used technology can be an ally in achieving creative impact whilst causing minimal harm to the environment. It is for this reason that experienced, well-connected film ecologists can realise their value in the planning scenes and SFX.

In short, caring for the environments and wildlife we impact during filming is an inevitable outcome as the industry continues to mature, but it does not have to block creativity or spiral costs when approached pragmatically. Embracing this proactively will be congruent to planning for success, and avoid the cost, frustration, and risk of expending energy and resources trying to dodge the issues.



Impactful sites are often protected with a view to preserving valuable features and wildlife.

What licenses do I need for film compliance on-location?

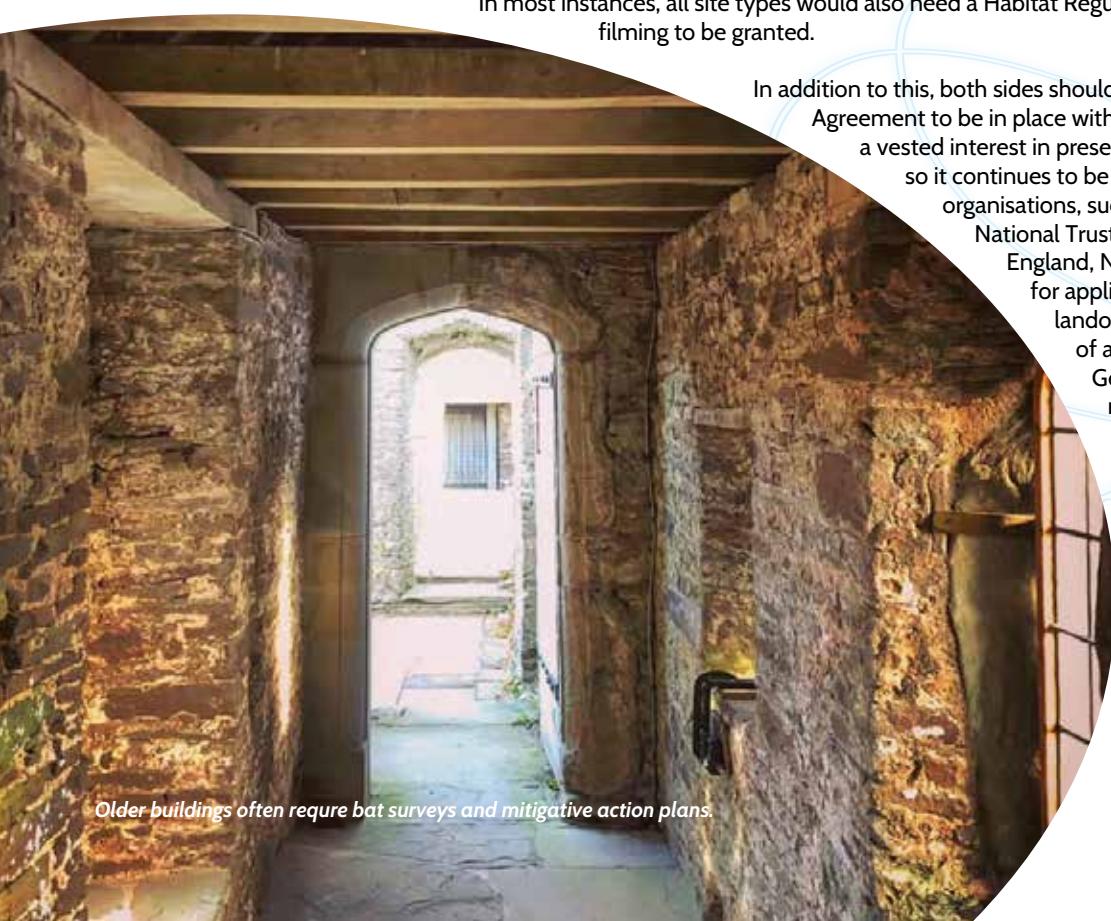
Licenses and permissions tend to fall into two categories: those demanded by the landowner, and those legally required. The two rarely conflict, but in the rare instance that they do, an experienced film ecologist protects a production house by keeping them on the right side of the law.

Where land is legally protected, e.g., SSSI, SAC, SPA, Ramsar sites, licences must be issued by the relevant regulatory body. SSSI's in England and Wales will require a Section 28E SSSI application stating precisely what you intend to do and how risks and impact will be averted and minimised. Scottish sites fall under the provisions of Section 13 of the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004. For the other land designations, you need to produce a comprehensive risk assessment mitigation document demonstrating that biodiversity has been considered.

In most instances, all site types would also need a Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA) for consent for filming to be granted.

In addition to this, both sides should insist on a solid Location Filming Agreement to be in place with the landowner. Most landowners have a vested interest in preserving the flora and fauna on their site, so it continues to be an attractive location. Many larger organisations, such as Local Authority Councils, CADW, National Trust, Natural Resources Wales, Natural England, NatureScot, etc., have agreement formats for applications in place, and these types of landowners often stipulate the involvement of an on-set ecologist to protect the site. Generally, you should expect to provide maps of where you want to film, information about proposed activities, timing and duration of filming, crew size, vehicle access, any changes to the environment, and drone usage amongst other information.

Finally, it is worth noting that legislation has a further role to play in filming compliance, for example, land in an area of outstanding natural beauty, additional permissions may be required, and it could be an offence to alter the landscape in any significant way.



Older buildings often require bat surveys and mitigative action plans.

How does an On-Set Ecologist impact a tight shooting schedule?

There is, of course, a time commitment in considering the ecological impact of filming, but done effectively, realistically, and with the right expert input, this planning prevents delays, stoppages and/or financial penalties once filming begins.

In fact, on many sites, you will find that collating the information to apply for permission to film is far quicker with the input of ecologists experienced in the filming process. They will work with location teams to identify unsuitable locations quickly and help prevent last-minute delays or costs.

Involving your film ecologists in tech scouts and tech surveys means they can collaborate with logistics, SFX, sound, lighting, drone, and camera teams to mitigate limitations to waterbody access, track placement, set construction, and lighting. This gives everyone the best possible insight into any constraints, with a key output often being location or department notes for call sheets.

As experienced on-set ecologists, we understand how the creative process evolves, meaning that plans change, but if not managed correctly, these changes can impact location filming permits. The specialist knowledge an ecologist brings to the team helps you work within the permits issued or identify where concessions might be granted. Having access to this knowledge as decisions unfold is invaluable for creative directors, and saves delays, spiralling costs, and transgressions.

We understand the cost and impact of delays, and the impact of having permits revoked due to breach. Just like your health and safety teams, we are a vital part of an on-location crew in natural environments. We will avoid delays unless there is a genuine threat of activity that could cause you to be in breach of agreements or the law. Besides, we have lost feeling in our fingers and toes on enough night shoots in the depths of winter to be sufficiently motivated to avoid unnecessary delays!



**PLEASE USE
DESIGNATED
PATHWAYS**

THIS IS A SSSI PROTECTED AREA – PLEASE USE DESIGNATED PATHWAYS THAT HAVE BEEN SIGNPOSTED ON SITE. IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS PLEASE ASK THE LOCATIONS DEPARTMENT.

WE APPRECIATE YOUR CO-OPERATION!

LOW TECHS

What is the impact to the production budget?

Resources are always stretched, and we understand how frustrating it is to spend budget on things that are not immediately evident on-screen. However, having a good ecological consultancy team helps you unlock natural locations that would not otherwise be open to you, and will mitigate risk, getting the best out of those locations responsibly.

Over the last 15 years, we have cultivated relationships with film industry providers, resulting in knowledge of how to cost-effectively troubleshoot the ecological considerations linked to common industry tools such as smoke and flame effects, set dressing, set lighting, and ATMOS. Planning with tech and logistics teams and contractors, and translating this to clear instructions for crew briefings and on-call sheets, can prevent costly errors, breaches, or delays. Having access to the right knowledge on set allows your teams to make quicker decisions and problem resolutions. What is more, every day is a school day, and we remain as passionate and curious about learning as the first day we set foot on a film set.

We operate using a blended day rate for our longer-term projects, ensuring that you have access to the right expertise at a consistent and pre-agreed rate, making budgeting simple. Ecologist costs are typically a fraction of the location fees (typically under 20%) and can save time on location. We are also typically more cost-effective than utilising location owners' teams and will only ever be present on-set when we are needed.



What are typical outputs for a film location ecological review?

We can produce evidence to support location filming applications and provide information to feed into location release forms. We can create resources to help brief on-site teams and summarise mitigation strategies. We are also more than happy to be involved in face-to-face or remote meetings or calls and to liaise with contractors on set. We have had clients who prefer to operate using chat groups and those who request input into the location notes on daily call sheets.

We are happy to discuss what has worked well for other clients or simply adopt your preferred style of operations. Whatever suits your team.

How do you assist Location Managers and Producers?

As a smaller, agile ecological consultancy, we are not tied to packages of standardised services, so we can support your location team throughout filming and beyond. Typically, our involvement level is based on specific site, project, and client requirements.

Many clients opt to save time and money by connecting at the Scout or Location Recce stages. We will operate within the terms of the Production House NDA to quickly eliminate locations that cannot accommodate your creative needs.

Once a location has been selected, habitat surveys, detailed mapping, and local records searches support film permit applications and can identify potential snags that need to be planned around. We can review filming schedules to identify how breeding/nesting/migration seasons might impact things like access, lighting, and aerial activity requirements. This helps you plan and will support location filming applications, demonstrating consideration of ecological protection.

Once a location has been secured, we can join location walk-throughs, scene and logistics planning meetings to ensure the correct resources are in place and that there are no unexpected delays once filming begins. We can also be on hand to brief your teams, feed into call sheets, and offer top-level training and information to Location Managers, Site Producers, or other crew and cast.

During filming, we are competent ecological supervisors on site, consultants to your crews and contractors, and guardians of reputation and budget, alerting to potential legal or location license breaches. We can collaborate with everyone from animal handlers to drone operators, caterers to cast, to ensure that schedules progress without disruption to your schedule or the local ecology.

How do your Consultants work on set?

We will take our guidance from you and your team and are happy to follow your lead. Above all, our team are mature and experienced professionals, who respect the concentration, passion, creativity, and attention to detail that goes into filmmaking.

We will agree upon a suitably unobtrusive working space where the relevant aspects of the set are visible, and endeavour to remain within it. We know what 'quiet on set' means, and we will respect call times when our presence is key to operations.

Where photos are absolutely required to prove that guidelines were adequately followed, we will ensure that they are pre-authorised, do not contain people, and are available to be vetted in line with your NDA.

We will ask for the primary point/s of contact to ensure that relevant information is fed back efficiently, aiding smooth operations.

What are your credentials?

All of our team members are fully qualified and licensed to work on the projects that they undertake. We have more than 16 years of experience and hold licenses to survey protected species including bats, dormice, badgers, great crested newts, otters, and more, and are proficient in UK Environmental Legislation, Ecological Compliance for Film, Protected Species Surveys, Mitigation Strategies, Landscape Mapping, and Countryside Access.

We have worked on location with the likes of Netflix, HBO, Universal Studios, Warner Bros, Lucasfilm, Sky TV, BBC, Channel 4, and S4C for both TV and film. We have £5m of public liability insurance and can provide detailed written quotes in advance as well as a range of reports and documentation for your peace of mind.

What information do you need, and who will see it?

Confidentiality is our utmost priority, and we will always insist on NDAs being in place ahead of sensitive information being shared. Initial surveys determine how much information is needed, but if there is a sensitive species or ecology involved, then we need as much detail as possible about your setup, logistics, activities, camera placements, alterations and temporary structures, special effects, lighting, sound, etc.

The more information we have, the lower the risk of an 'irrelevant detail' such as flame effects, too few toilets, or contaminated water safety equipment delaying you.

We have a small number of staff who process your survey work, all of whom have a clear understanding of the NDA obligations. Information will only ever be shared outside of an NDA if there is a legal obligation to do so, i.e., protected disclosures to the legally authorised body relating to safeguarding, threat to life, criminal offence/damage, etc.



Agreed supervision space on a recent on location film project

THE LOCATION MANAGER'S CHEAT SHEET

When do you really need an Ecologist on-location?

As tempting as it is to think that it is just the status of the location you choose that will decide whether or not a level of ecological consultancy is required, there are many things that can have an impact. Not everything will be relevant to every site, it will depend on what else is sharing your chosen location. This can sometimes only be revealed as part of a location survey. Here are some of our top areas for consideration:

1. Access for vehicles, tracks, cameras, cranes, rigs, and use of waterways. This can damage surfaces, block dens or nests, disturb or destroy feeding or breeding areas.
2. Landscape modification, brush clearance or large set builds. As above, these activities can change or destroy habitat being used by nesting birds or protected species.
3. Seasonality. Wildlife behaviour is highly seasonal, where a site might be suitable for large periods of the year, if it is a nesting site or on a migration route for certain species, it might be out of bound for parts of the year.
4. Lighting, sound effects, generators and night shoots. Bats in particular can be highly sensitive to artificial lighting and equipment that emits particular sounds or vibrations.
5. SFX and stunts. SFX and stunt teams have many techniques at their disposal that release chemicals, fumes, waste products, and debris into the surrounding environment. These things can be harmful to plants, wildlife or even aspects like soil pH and composition in sensitive environments.
6. Animals, plants, or organic set dressing. Invasive plants, seeds or insects can hitch a ride in droppings or other organic matter that might be left behind, and this goes for the humans on the crew as well! Additionally, many species are highly territorial the presence of foreign animal scents in an area can be disruptive to native populations.
7. Crew area, catering and bathrooms. Placement of these areas may require consideration, as well as the disposal of waste or spills. Even clean water could be problematic if disposed of in large quantities at sensitive sites.
8. Waterborne crafts, props or equipment. Waterways can be incredibly sensitive areas and items that have been moved from location to location can introduce pollutants, pathogens and other undesirable invasive species.
9. Flame, explosions and smoke effects. As well as the general health and safety concerns, structures that might look unimportant such as rockfaces or scrub can be important habitat that would be destroyed.
10. Aerial operation of drones, cranes, or scaffolding. Certain species of bats and birds, or ground based prey animals can be highly impacted by either having to navigate additional obstacles, or may regard these things as threats.

To discuss our location & on-set services contact:
 Leigh 07540 143784 / Leigh@spectrumecology.com