



Ecological careers in nature-based non-governmental organizations



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A parcel of land in northeast Ohio recently came into the crosshairs of a natural gas pipeline company. Land owners on either end of the proposed route had already signed contracts. The first difficult decision was to realize that the goal was negotiating to minimize the impact on the fragile wetland the pipeline would be crossing, not stopping the project. While gathering data on river water quality, wetland plants, and amphibians, a bald eagle's nest with eaglets was found perched high in a sycamore near the proposed route. Data in hand, a team from The Wilderness Center went to the table and succeeded in negotiating the pipeline route away from the nest and mostly away from the wetland. Finally, the agreement stipulated that they drill the pipeline tunnel well below the river. Local resource management experience provided the seat at the table, scientific knowledge provided the basis for negotiation, and communication skills allowed this non-governmental organization (NGO) to mitigate impacts in the midst of a fierce economic headwind.

If you want to save the world, work for an NGO. Seriously, there is no better job...to do the job. NGOs are ideal employers for people who want to apply what they've learned to improve how we conserve and manage nature, deal with the ongoing biodiversity crisis, and adjust to climate change. Many choose NGO careers because NGOs protect nature more directly than universities and advocate for nature more directly than government agencies.

In addition to the mission-oriented benefits of an NGO career, the career opportunities and pathways in nature-based NGOs are incredibly diverse. Many, such as the thousands of large and small land trusts, own land or manage conservation easements. Others specialize in working with communities to help people better protect their natural resources. Still others may primarily function in areas less relevant to ecology and biodiversity, but work on environmental sustainability and hence hire ecologists. Finally, some work in the realm of policy to advocate for change – others collaborate with decision makers and some act as watch dogs to ensure that governmental decisions do not harm the environment. There

are myriad NGOs hiring ecologists – the key is to choose one whose mission matches your own.

One key point to bear in mind is that jobs within NGOs are even more varied than NGO missions. Small NGOs tend to hire people with a specialized discipline but ask them to work across a variety of disciplines; hence, many NGO ecologists end up working outside ecology. In contrast, large NGOs employ a variety of skilled professionals – ranging from accountants to lawyers to business managers to communications and policy specialists – as well as ecologists!

If you're looking for a career with a nature-based NGO, keep these considerations in mind: first, NGOs are mission-driven (eg "WWF's mission (is) to conserve nature and reduce the most pressing threats to the diversity of life on Earth"; www.worldwildlife.org/about). As an NGO professional employee, you must be committed to the mission, and because fulfilling the mission is funding-dependent, a major focus for many NGO professionals is to interact with members, donors, and foundations to seek support. NGO professionals are almost never far-removed from fundraising. However, this is an opportunity to inform your work, as well as your life outside work. This should not be seen as a deterrent; the very process of fundraising can be fun and rewarding. It places you in contact with interesting people and forces you to hone the message of why your mission matters.

Second, although some NGOs do research, it is rarely the main focus. Most professionals with research skills will be asked to dedicate much of their time to implementation of existing knowledge to facilitate outcomes, often using the research of others as the knowledge base. Research careers in the NGO world do exist, but they are relatively rare.

■ Attributes and skills valued by NGOs

The skills and attributes you will need to be successful are varied. Many lie outside normal academic training. To succeed you will need these skills.

Know a discipline: Given the highly competitive nature of NGO jobs, being good at a core discipline (eg ecology, environmental economics) is absolutely vital. Technical

skills (eg GIS, database management) are also highly valued. Hiring is done to fulfill a professional need; knowledge and skills are the key attributes to fulfill an NGO need.

Communicate: Working with people is a critical function of nearly all NGO jobs. Communicating the mission to funders, stakeholders, policy makers, media, and the general public is a daily task. Although NGO professionals, like anyone else, may see some meetings as time-sinks, they recognize that meeting with people is the environment in which they get their work done. They also write proposals for funding, author position papers that strive to influence policies, comment on management plans, and speak to a wide variety of stakeholders. Being able to demonstrate solid communication skills is essential.

Participate: Written and oral communication skills are not sufficient by themselves. We have entered the era when the effectiveness of nearly all environmental decision making is improved through stakeholder engagement (Cheruvelil *et al.* 2014). The ability to collaborate and/or negotiate in diverse group settings is key.

Lead: Logically following from working with groups is the need for leadership skills. Whether it is leading a set of project volunteers or thousands of employees within a multinational NGO, the ability to demonstrate facility with leadership can be a make-or-break point in an interview. Every group project or paper in college is a leadership opportunity – look at interpersonal interactions as a leadership opportunity; hone skills, and signal leadership readiness.

Manage: From making strategic decisions to balancing budgets to managing people (Barlow *et al.* 2016), the capacity to manage a project to successful implementation is an important and highly valued skill. Student projects, term papers, and dissertations are opportunities to manage (Blickley *et al.* 2013). Taking classes or gaining experiences that help you think in a business-like manner is likely to help you get that job at an NGO!

Innovate: NGOs are constantly changing, reviewing, and revising strategies. Being able to see and seize opportunities is not only a personality attribute, but also a skill. There is, in fact, a science of innovation (Johnson 2010), and understanding how it happens and how to deal with it are valued in the NGO setting.

Network: The NGO world is tightly connected. Getting involved in activities that link you to others will foster your ability to get hired and be successful. Networking has vertical (getting to know thought leaders) and lateral (developing a strong peer group) aspects. Be mindful of both types of opportunities.

■ Developing and conveying skills

There are many ways to cultivate these varied and valued skills (Blickley *et al.* 2013). It is essential to recognize that skills training takes valuable time away from gaining disciplinary excellence. As a consequence,



Figure 1. Jeffrey Corney, director of The Wilderness Center (a northeast Ohio nature center and land conservancy), talking with local community members about one of the natural gas pipelines being constructed in the region, and its potential impacts on farmland and natural areas.

people seeking NGO careers should engage in deep self-evaluation: What drives you? What kind of an NGO do you want to work for? What kind of a job do you want? Second, we recommend profiling your experiences to see where you have genuine achievements you can point to in your resume and where additional training would be most valuable (Muir and Schwartz 2010). We find that students too often use a resume or CV solely to report prior jobs and degrees. These documents provide an opportunity to feature capabilities. Be active in taking steps to gain the required skills and experiences that create the professional you want to be. There are courses on leadership, negotiation, communication, and innovation both inside and outside academia (Figure 1). Also, look to your target NGOs as a way to develop skills. These organizations are often seeking help, and volunteering for one can provide: (1) exposure to skills that they value, (2) practical experience working within an NGO, and (3) a network of professional contacts. Then use your resume to tell the story of what you can bring to an employer.

Finally, we would like to settle concerns that have been expressed about work–life balance in NGOs. Edward Abbey famously counseled environmental activists not to “burn yourselves out” from the constant pressure to save the world. This has not been our experience. While it is unwise in any job to work too many hours, take set-backs personally, and burn out, we can’t imagine spending our work life on something less important and fulfilling!

References and author biographies may be found in the online version of this article at <http://onlinelibrary.com/doi/10.1002/fee.1509/supinfo>

doi:10.1002/fee.1509