

Independent:

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The future's bright, the future's green

Environmental jobs are increasingly popular. But if you love nature it's an open field, says Alex McRae



There are many places a career in the environmental sector can take you. For Joanna Heisse, 28, that place is often outdoors, at dusk, with a bat detector to register the tiny creatures as they whistle past her ears. "They don't get in your hair, but they do flutter around you, checking you out," she says, laughing.

Bat surveys are part of Heisse's job as a conservation officer for the Environment Agency - one of the top employers attending Environmental Futures, a big environmental careers event, organised by the University of London today. There'll be workshops, question-and-answer sessions with environmental experts, speeches, networking opportunities, and a careers fair with stands by several large environmental-sector employers. And students will attend to find out how to secure their own eco-friendly dream job.

The careers event is the brainchild of Laura Brammar, a careers adviser at King's College London. "Last year, I organised a relatively small environmental careers forum and nearly a hundred students turned up. It made me realise that it's a growing sector, with more jobs coming through."

If you love nature, it's certainly a thrilling field in which to work, says Heisse, who has a degree in biology from Bristol and a Masters in nature conservation from UCL. As well as counting bats, she records the biodiversity in wetland areas around the Thames, and advises property developers on how they can build in a wildlife-friendly way. "I'm always learning new things about nature, and I can see the results of my work on the ground. Whenever I see a development go up with a 'green' roof, I can think to myself, 'I helped to make that happen'."

But because environmental careers are increasingly popular, there's a lot of competition. One way of getting ahead is to become a member of a professional association, says Lee Greenhill of the Institute of Environmental Management & Assessment (IEMA), which is also exhibiting at today's event. "To get a job, it's not what you know, it's who you know. We run regional events where you can listen to top environmental practitioners speak on hot issues - and afterwards, you could always be cheeky and ask, 'Are there any jobs going?'" Greenhill adds that membership gives oomph to a CV, and that IEMA's journal will keep you up to date - crucial for job interviews.

To get a foothold in the environmental sector, you need experience. David Murray, 24, is a project co-ordinator for StudentForce for Sustainability, which helps graduates get paid placements in the environmental industry. The charity helps to lift recent graduates out of the familiar catch-22 situation, where they can't get a job without experience, and can't get experience without a job. "You have to do some volunteering to beat the competition, but to pay off those student loans, you'll need a paid job." Murray did a degree in geography and then an MSc in environmental conservation management. He doesn't regret entering such a competitive field: "I'm doing what interests me and that I enjoy," he says.

And, as Adam Cade, chief executive of StudentForce, says, "he's getting his foot in the door". Cade, who started StudentForce 10 years ago, also helped to put together today's careers conference. He's sure the sector will keep growing. "We have 2,500 people registered with us, and 10,000 using our website [www.environmentcareers.org.uk]. There are huge numbers of engineering, physics and maths graduates wanting to work in the sector, but we're also looking for lawyers, economists, marketing and PR graduates."

Companies are keen to attract the talent coming out of British universities, too. WSP, an environmental consultancy firm that has grown in a decade from two to 630 employees, started recruiting graduates last year. "They were incredibly high quality," says Jeff Ingman, director of the company. "Now, one of them is busy writing the first ever environmental legislation for the Saudi government."

One thing is for sure - with students and companies alike becoming excited about sustainability, there'll be even more scope for a green career for those who want one. As Joanna Heisse says: "It is competitive, but it's not just a career, it's your life. And the environment is something that people feel passionate about."