

A lunch date with your future: exploring non-academic jobs through personal interviews



Eileen Thorsos
University Program in Ecology,
Duke University, Durham, NC 27708
(ert7@duke.edu)

As a graduate student in ecology – cloistered in academia, trained and surrounded by academics – it's hard to imagine myself in a career that's not connected to a university. Nonetheless, in 2006, a quarter of ESA members held positions in government, consulting, or non-profit organizations (ESA 2006). What sort of jobs did they get? How did these non-academic ecologists get into their careers? What projects do they pursue? Are they happy? Would I be happy doing their job? To answer these questions, I conducted several informal interviews with ecologists who work outside of academia. Before these conversations, exploring careers away from the familiar academic structure overwhelmed me. Afterward, I felt proactive and satisfyingly knowledgeable. In this column, I chart a basic strategy for finding good interview subjects, making contact, and collecting the information you need.

This process helped me to crystallize vague concepts about non-academic jobs into tangible careers held by real people. Other strategies, such as talking to your career center and attending conference workshops, tend to be anonymous and unfocused, and therefore may not specifically address your needs. In contrast, during interviews, you can forge a friendly connection with your contact, develop a three-dimensional picture of a job and how it intersects with someone's life, and ask the questions that matter to you. Whether your priority is to balance career with family, explain science to the public, or focus on research, interviews allow you to probe the details of each potential career. By talking to ecologists in a wide variety of jobs, you can compare insider perspectives on each career path, and hone your job criteria by examining how you react to your subjects' experiences.

Step 1: Finding interviewees. Focus on finding people – not job titles – to interview. You may not have a clear idea of which jobs are out there, and by focusing on people, you'll encounter a broad sample of professions. For example, my interviewees held such positions as “USDA soil scientist”, “Forest Service ecologist”, “freelance restoration and conservation consultant”, and “reserve director for UC-Davis”. Other non-academic jobs include journal editor, land manager, and training coordinator with non-profits like The Nature Conservancy.

Use your social connections. Search your undergraduate or graduate alumni directory for people with ecology-related specialties. Many alumni directories are now

online, and this resource alone may provide you with sufficient names for your interviews. You can also check with your hobby group, honor society, church, or sorority/fraternity. Ask friends and relatives about the people they know. Contacting a stranger becomes easier when they might have lived in your dorm, sung in your choir, or watched movies with your aunt. This networking strategy locates people likely to connect with you through a common experience and establishes a friendly foundation for your interviews.

If your list is still not as long as you would like, expand your search beyond your social network. Look up a person featured in the newspaper for restoring a local ecosystem. Call local volunteer organizations that might include ecologists, such as a biodiesel cooperative or native plant and wildlife society.

Step 2: Making contact. When you first e-mail or call, be confident. Remember that people like to talk about themselves and will probably be flattered when you ask them to do so. Personalize your greeting, share something about yourself, and indicate personal connections. Ask to chat about their career at a time that is convenient for them. Some people like flexible times, but specific appointments are often more effective. Budget at least 1–2 hours. You'll often interview on the phone, but if feasible, ask to meet in person – say, over lunch. Exchange phone numbers.

Step 3: The interview. Now prepare your questions (I've included my own in Panel 1). Organize them, but expect the conversation to follow its own trajectory. When the appointed hour arrives, be prompt. Relax. Show your sense of humor and be spontaneous and personable. Notice what catches your attention. For instance, I learned that many consultants work mostly with non-scientists, whereas I thrive when I interact with scientific peers. Also, draw on your interviewee as a mentor for an hour. My contacts gave me useful advice that applies in any career: the USDA soil scientist and the UC-Davis reserve director emphasized listening to, and adapting their messages for, each particular audience. Several ecologists mentioned flexibility and patience as critical personal characteristics. The consultant recommended using graduate work to develop skills and contacts targeted to your goals. Take notes, so you remember such details later. At the end of the interview, thank your contact in person and by e-mail. This ecologist is now in your professional network, and you want them to remember you fondly.

With just a few simple steps, your interviews are underway. Success! You have a concrete list of job titles to inspire you, you are zeroing in on your personal career

Panel 1. Suggested interview questions

- (1) What is your job?
- (2) Describe the projects and activities you do.
- (3) What skills do you use? How did you develop them?
- (4) What routines do you have? How much variety? What is your daily schedule like?
- (5) What are your major responsibilities?
- (6) What is it about this job that keeps you interested?
- (7) What do you dislike or find dissatisfying?
- (8) What are the toughest problems, challenges, and decisions you face?
- (9) If you could, how would you change your job?
- (10) What was your educational path? Did it prepare you for your job?
- (11) What kind of preparation is important? How can one obtain it?
- (12) What are important personal characteristics for success/satisfaction in this field?
- (13) With whom (and in what kinds of jobs) do you regularly interact?
- (14) What difficult career decisions have you made? What helped?
- (15) What jobs are similar to, or otherwise connected with, yours?
- (16) How do you find job listings or entry-level jobs in the field? How did you find or create your job?
- (17) What do you wish you had known earlier?
- (18) Is there anyone else you recommend I interview?

Notes: Compiled from A. Doyle (nd) and Quintessential Careers (nd)

criteria, and you have specific information to illuminate the careers you've explored. Now, you have in hand the tools to evaluate potential careers that will fit your interests, skills, and requirements.

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Faculty response



Jeff Herrick
 USDA-ARS, Jornada Experimental
 Range, Las Cruces, NM
 jherrick@nmsu.edu

As one of Thorsos' research subjects, I can confirm that her approach to data collection results in an interesting and relatively efficient conversation. The prescheduled, structured interview communicated that she was concerned about making efficient use of both her time and my own.

I also agree with Thorsos' suggestion to "focus on finding people – not job titles". If you find someone with an interesting job, be sure to contact others before assuming that you can use the title to focus your job search; the same title can mean very different things in different organizations, and even within the same organization. Soil scientists who work for the Natural Resources

Conservation Service may be asked to spend much of their time conducting workshops and developing protocols, while US Forest Service, US Department of Agriculture Agricultural Research Service (ARS), and US Geological Survey scientists often have responsibilities that are virtually indistinguishable from those of university professors with 100% research appointments.

My own, less informative career exploration during graduate school also supports Thorsos' systematic approach. Based on a more limited set of interactions, I concluded that ARS scientists were mostly "boring old white guys", who did pretty mundane research – not the kind of work environment I was looking for. After beginning post-doctoral work (as a boring young white guy) at a university with an ARS laboratory, I learned that some of the individuals in my sample had pretty interesting careers, and that the ARS employs a highly diverse, creative, and productive group of natural resource scientists. Had I followed Thorsos' more structured approach, I think I would have had a better understanding of potential opportunities.

Although Thorsos' structured approach has several potential benefits, more serendipitous conversations can be equally valuable. Social events following seminars offer excellent opportunities for impromptu interviews. Be sure to begin by asking if the individuals would mind discussing their jobs, and be prepared to postpone the interview if they become distracted. When searching for subjects, keep in mind that the most obvious venues are not necessarily the best. For example, the federal scientist mixer at the ESA Annual Meeting is often poorly attended, because many potential participants are busy foraging and interacting with collaborators at other events.

Finally, I would add a few more questions to Thorsos' list, such as, "What criteria are used in your annual performance evaluations and for promotion?" My favorite question is, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" Graduate students are often surprised to learn that even those of us who are very happy with our careers continue to explore and consider new directions. I always have a 5-year plan – maximum. A friend now working as an international consultant told me that she rarely looks beyond 12 months.

In conclusion, I strongly encourage other students to follow Thorsos' lead, while keeping in mind that many of the same limitations that apply to ecological research based on small, non-random samples also apply to career investigations.

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