

The Environmental Sector: Fact v Fiction

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The increasing volume and complexity of European legislation, together with new environmental laws and regulations in the UK, have resulted in a corresponding growth in the environmental sector.

Around 400,000 people are employed within the environmental sector and over 17,000 companies identify themselves as operating within it. The sector currently has an annual turnover of around £25 billion¹; however, most businesses are still expanding with greatest growth seen in the environmental management/consultancy fields. This puts the environmental industry on a par with the aerospace and defence sectors, but with one important difference – it is still growing significantly year-on-year.

There are many misconceptions across society about working in the 'ecological part' of the environmental sector, and I challenge some of these below:

Myth 1. Ecology is not a profession and is not taken seriously...

This is probably the most common misconception. Many people have the view that it is not possible to earn a living, and indeed have a career in ecology. 20-30 years ago when the sector was in its infancy, this may have been the case, but now there is a plethora of careers available for those who are passionate about the environment. Opportunities for ecologists are diverse with employers ranging from local authorities, government agencies, industry, consultancy, teaching/research, to NGOs. Competition for employment in ecology is intense and the profession demands high levels of skills and commitment, but the rewards that come with this work provide great job satisfaction.

Myth 2. Ecologists do not get paid very much...

Historically, salaries in the ecological sector were very low, but this has changed. With the current growth and recognition of ecology as a profession, salaries now fall in line with many other similar professions. Table 1 shows the average salaries given by age group¹.

Myth 3. Ecologists are all volunteers who count butterflies at the weekend...

As well as paid positions, a large amount of biological recording in the UK is carried out by volunteers (of which there are around 200,000²). These volunteers are for the most part enthusiastic amateurs, and in some cases, are the country's leading experts on certain species. Field/practical skills are essential for entering the profession and volunteering can provide this experience. These practical skills are rarely gained through university courses so volunteering has become the means of gaining this essential experience. Most professional ecologists have initially done a period of volunteering to gain the necessary level of field skills before finding paid employment.

Myth 4. Ecology is a male dominated industry...

Contrary to popular belief, there is a fairly even male to female ratio throughout the

sector. In a 2007 survey of our membership³, IEEM found that 55% of respondents were male and 45% were female. Table 2 shows the age to sex breakdown of the respondents.

Myth 5. Ecology is not a real science...

Ecology is most definitely a science. Ecologists have to use sound scientific methodologies and techniques to gather data and analyse and present their findings/advice in a clear and understandable manner.

There is currently a major concern within the sector that a skills gap has arisen and is widening. This is especially noticeable with ecological field skills but also basic skills such as numeracy, and the ability to write a clear and precise report seems to be lacking in many job applicants. Field ecology has to be taught in the field by experts, many of whom are now nearing retirement. When this expertise disappears, some subjects (lower plants for instance) will be difficult to teach.

There are a huge number of colleges and universities running ecology/environmental management courses which can be quite baffling to students wanting to choose a relevant course to enter the profession. IEEM has produced guidance⁴ that outlines the field skills that an employer would expect a new ecology graduate to have. Students can compare course curricula with this guidance to identify those courses that will provide them with the necessary level of training in field survey skills. This guidance may also be used by course providers when developing new courses or when updating existing courses.

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Notes

¹ Threw L (2006). *Skills shortage keeps employers on their toes, Salary and Careers survey*. The ENDS directory. www.endsdirectory.com/index.cfm?action=articles.view&articleid=200601

² Lantra (2006). *Environment Conservation Sector Skills Agreement*. www.lantra.co.uk/employees-and-volunteers/environmental-conservation/info

³ IEEM (2007). *Membership Survey 2007*. www.ieem.net/members.asp

⁴ IEEM (2007). *What A Graduate Should Know: Field Skills*. www.ieem.net/studentpublications.asp

Table 1: Comparison of Average Salaries with Age

Age (Yrs)	Average Salaries
20-29	£23,000
30-39	£32,000
40-49	£36,000
50+	£41,000

Table 2: The IEEM membership survey response broken down by age and sex

Age (Yrs)	Number of responses			Percentage (%)		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
17 - 21	7	2	5	0.6	0.2	0.4
22 - 25	112	30	82	10	2.7	7.3
26 - 29	180	69	111	15.9	6.1	9.8
30 - 39	354	195	158	31.3	17.3	14
40 - 49	277	191	85	24.5	16.9	7.5
50 - 59	167	105	61	14.8	9.3	5.4
60+	35	31	4	3.1	2.7	0.4
Total	1129	623	506	100	55.2	44.8