

PURSUING A CAREER IN ECOLOGICAL CONSULTANCY

1. What does an ecological consultant do?

Ecological consultants are responsible for undertaking a range of activities in relation to the assessment of the ecological values of a location. In general, these assessments relate to proposed development activities such as residential, industrial and mining constructions. They may also be to provide information on the ecological values of areas to a range of stakeholders. Assessments are necessary because there are a range of legal obligations established under state and federal environmental laws that need to be considered when an activity will result in an impact on the natural environment.

Ecological consultants may also be asked to:

- ❑ design, implement and monitor the effectiveness of ecological management plans;
- ❑ provide expert ecological advice in court cases, to independent commissions of inquiry, parliamentary groups, urban planning groups and at local council meetings;
- ❑ peer review work conducted by other ecological consultants; and
- ❑ train others in university or TAFE courses, conferences and workshops or on-the-job.

An ecological consultant will be involved in a variety of interesting activities such as field surveys, use of geographic information systems (GISs), consultation with clients and stakeholders, interpretation of environmental legal documents and preparation of reports and management plans just to name a few.

There are a range of standard documents written by ecological consultants including flora and fauna reports, environmental impact assessments, opportunity and constraint reports, species impact statements, vegetation maps, vegetation management plans, threatened species management plans, fire management plans and peer review of development applications.

2. Main industry sectors in ecological consultancy.

Ecological consultants work with a variety of organisations:

- ❑ Federal and State government departments such as environmental protection agencies, conservation agencies (e.g. NSW Office of Strategic Lands), land management agencies (e.g. NSW Office of Strategic Lands) and catchment management authorities.
- ❑ Local councils undertaking assessments of property in parks and reserves; critical review of development applications; application or development zoning.
- ❑ Large developers of residential, industrial or mining projects.
- ❑ Law firms that deal with environmental and planning issues.

- ❑ Community groups who require expert advice on ecological values and management e.g. environmental action groups, bushcare groups.

3. Qualifications and Experience

(a) Qualifications

The usual minimum requirement is a degree (or equivalent) in a biological science from a recognised (government-accredited) tertiary institution. Most ecological consultants have at least a B. Sc. (Hons) degree, some with higher degrees (M. Sc. or Ph.D).

A few people who have a relevant diploma in applied science from a TAFE College (e.g. Dip. Biol. Tech. or Dip. Appl. Sc.), and who have worked for several years as a scientific officer or field assistant in a biological discipline, have also been successful as ecological consultants.

Degree certificates that are purchased on the internet from “non-accredited universities” or diploma mills are not recognised by government authorities and the environmental consultancy industry in Australia.

(b) Experience

Many graduates think they are readily employable as ecological consultants once they have completed their studies. In most cases this perception is **WRONG!**

As an ecological consultant you are expected to provide expert advice and efficient services to your clients and government authorities. Therefore, you will need relevant business and scientific skills that have not necessarily been acquired from a tertiary education. Some of these skills are prerequisites for employment as an ecological consultant, others will be acquired during on-the-job training.

A prospective ecological consultant should have:

- ❑ relevant tertiary qualifications;
- ❑ an understanding of environmental planning and assessment processes and the parties involved;
- ❑ research skills: fluency in web-based data, information sources and office computer software;
- ❑ good database management and report-writing skills;
- ❑ good client liaison skills and the ability to work efficiently as part of a project team;
- ❑ the ability to meet tight deadlines while still maintaining a high standard of work; and
- ❑ (usually) a current driver’s licence.

Field ecologists should also have proven experience in flora and/or fauna and habitat survey and recording techniques, including the ability to identify plant and/or animal species and their habitats. Database managers must be proficient in the use software for data storage and analysis (biostatistical packages) and presentation of data (e.g. GIS software).

Predicting potential ecological impacts of development or activity proposals, and recommending how to reduce or avoid them, are specialist skills that are usually learned early in ecological consultancy. Therefore, a good knowledge of threatening processes and the ecological requirements of species and communities is a highly desirable attribute when applying for a job as an ecological consultant.

4. Applying for a Job as an Ecological Consultant

(a) Where to Look

□ General Job Seeking Sites such as:

Australian JobSearch www.jobsearch.gov.au/

SEEK www.seek.com.au

CareerOne www.careerone.com.au/

MyCareer www.mycareer.com.au/

AllJobs www.alljobs.com.au/.

□ Environmental Job Seeking Sites such as:

NRMjobs www.nrmjobs.com.au

Enviro Jobs www.envirojobs.com.au

Environment Jobs www.environmentjobs.com.au

Environmental Jobs www.environmentaljobs.com.au

□ Websites of environmental consultancies. Many companies advertise job vacancies on their websites. Some also invite you to send them your *curriculum vitae* so that they can invite you to apply for a job when a potentially suitable vacancy becomes available.

□ Websites of relevant professional associations such as the Ecological Consultants Association of NSW (ECA) www.ecansw.org.au, Environmental Institute of Australia and New Zealand www.eianz.org and Ecological Society of Australia www.ecolsoc.org.au. These sites advertise job vacancies, provide information about the ecological consultancy industry and some provide contact details of environmental consultants.

□ Professional networking sites such as LinkedIn. These sites allow you to promote your qualifications and experience to targeted audiences, interact with environmental consultants and learn about current environmental issues and the ecological consultancy industry. These sites also advertise job vacancies.

□ Employment sections of newspapers and other periodicals.

□ Recruitment Agencies. Some job seekers use professional recruitment agencies who have established extensive networks within a broad range of employment sectors.

□ University online bulletin boards sometimes advertise jobs, fix-term internships or work experience positions for undergraduates (university vacation periods) or new graduates.

(b) How to Stand Out From the Crowd

There is a good chance that a job which is advertised widely will attract a lot of applicants. Here are some tips to help you stand out from the crowd:

Qualifications. Good grades and higher degrees will usually move your application towards the top of the pile in the initial job selection process.

Relevant Work Experience. Consultancies often prefer to employ people who have had previous work experience as an ecological consultant or field ecologist. Try to gain relevant work experience during university or TAFE vacations; some tertiary institutions that run applied environmental science courses team up with industry groups to provide this experience as a course requirement.

If you are a recent graduate without relevant work experience, you may like to offer to work as a volunteer for a short and defined period of time. This may be difficult for you financially at the time, but it is a way to demonstrate first-hand your workplace capabilities to a potential future employer.

(c) Preparing Your Application

Do your homework before submitting a job application. Research the company and the type of job advertised. Job descriptions often identify someone you can contact for further information about the position. Use that opportunity to ask intelligent questions to find out more about the job.

Your letter of application must always address the selection criteria that are in the job description. Provide relevant details under sub-headings that relate to each criterion. A form letter that is used for all job applications is not acceptable because it demonstrates that you have not thought enough about the advertised job, as well as an apparent lack of interest. Your letter should be comprehensive, but succinct.

Each job application should include your *curriculum vitae* (cv) or *resume*. The *cv* should summarise information about your educational qualifications, list additional training courses you have completed, relevant work experience (job titles, employers, projects, dates of employment), relevant publications (if any), and the names and contact details of at least three professional referees.

If possible, ask someone who is familiar with environmental or ecological consultancy to review your letter of application and *cv* before you submit it to the potential employer.

Always submit your job application by the advertised deadline. A key component of all consultancy work is the ability to meet numerous deadlines. A late job application may create doubt in the mind of a potential employer about your ability to do this.

Always inform your referees that they have been nominated in your letter of application and provide them with a copy of the job description. This will assist them in providing a reference if the potential employer or employment agency contacts them about your application.

(d) The Job Interview

If you have made it to the interview stage, then you are on the shortlist of job applicants for the position. Ensure that you turn up to the interview on time and dress smartly.

Prepare for the interview by going over your letter of application, refreshing your knowledge of the company and the advertised job, and identifying questions that you would like to ask the interviewers – the interview is just as important for you to learn about the company and the job, as it is for the interviewer(s) to learn about you.

You may be called for a second interview. This is usually an indication that the potential employer cannot decide between two applicants and needs further information, or there is a need to clarify additional issues that have been raised in the job selection process.

(e) Additional Hints

If you wish to talk to someone in the workplace about ecological consultancy, organise an appointment beforehand. Owners and managers of ecological consultancies are busy people they and may take some time to respond to unsolicited inquires (emails, postal letters, phone calls) for a job or work experience opportunities.

Be honest about your capabilities and work experiences when applying for a job in ecological consultancy this will avoid the embarrassment of being employed in a job for which you are not suited.

5. Career pathways in ecological consultancy

Ecological consultants usually start as members of a team that provides assistance to the Project Manager/Senior Ecologist. In most consulting companies there will be a structure that allows for the movement of a consultant from Project Officer/Ecologist to that of Senior Project Manager/Senior Ecologist.

There are a number of avenues for ecological consultants to improve their skills and ensure they remain up to date with current practices and ecological knowledge. Following these avenues will be important to a consultant's career pathway.

6. Ongoing Training & Accreditation

Not everything you need to know can possibly be covered in a tertiary degree or be provided by your employer. While your employer will probably be proactive in providing training in the use of their business systems and OH&S you will be responsible for identifying and chasing opportunities for acquiring additional ecological skills and business management skills. A variety of courses are available in field survey methods, use of GIS software, first aid courses, 4 x 4 courses, workshops and conferences that are run by various organisations, either government, private or professional. These training opportunities should take several forms:

Direct interest: Learning opportunities can be tailored to your interests (e.g. assessment of microchiropteran bat populations or eucalypt identification). Skills learned can be used

directly in your daily activities. Some consulting companies will support their staff acquiring these skills.

Indirect interest: You should also be on the lookout for opportunities which broaden your general ecological skills. For example, while you may have little interest in undertaking bird banding or orchid identification, having a basic understanding of these topics will allow you to understand relevant literature and manage projects which require these investigations.

Business skills: Although most ecologists groan at the mere thought of spending time learning business skills, (such as understanding and negotiating contracts, project and people management) these provide the basic building blocks for life as a consultant.

Safety: Training courses in the area of safety should be tailored to the skills you require in the industries you are working in. As a minimum you should receive training in first aid and four wheel driving, with other training being added should the need arise (e.g. working in remote locations).

Accreditation: During your career, legislation will vary and requirements to meet certain standards within the industry will change (e.g. BioBanking Accreditation, AusRivas Certification). Participation in these schemes, where appropriate, is recommended to broaden your skills base and to ensure that you remain up to date with within the industry requirements.

7. Setting up your own consultancy business

Working for yourself has many advantages but before going out on your own there are a number of factors that you need to consider.

- ❑ Do you have the depth of ecological experience necessary to provide clients with scientifically robust advice?
- ❑ Are you sufficiently knowledgeable with regards to providing sound advice within the legal frameworks?
- ❑ Have you worked on a wide range of projects that have given you sufficient experience across several industries and project types?
- ❑ Do you have sufficient standing and connections within the industry to allow you to attract clients?
- ❑ Do you have strong connections with colleagues in the consulting community who will be able to assist you with advice or provide you with services that are out of your area of expertise?
- ❑ What type of business do you want to have? Do you want to be a sole trader or do you want to employ other ecologists?

On a more personal note you need to be honest about your ability to be self-motivated, your ability to work independently and to meet deadlines on time and on budget. If you need direction from above to identify requirements for a project and to spur you on to get the project completed then perhaps you aren't ready for working independently.

Keep in mind that you won't necessarily earn a 'steady wage' each week, especially during the development of your business, and this may present challenges if you have a mortgage and dependents. Have a definite plan in place to procure work and remember that chasing the next job should always be an ongoing process even when you are busy on your current project load. Cash flow can only be guaranteed if you diligently invoice and chase timely payment so unless you are confident enough to do this you should reconsider working for yourself. You must ensure that you have best-practice business systems in place to protect you and your clients. This advice can best be provided by an accountant and solicitor with experience in setting up small business. It is also essential for your business to have adequate insurance cover (professional indemnity, public liability and workers' compensation insurance) from the outset.

Additional advice can be sought at various websites and by talking to colleagues in the ECA, e.g.

<http://www.business.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx>

<http://www.ato.gov.au/businesses/content.aspx?doc=/content/69534.htm>

Remember you are setting up a business that will provide advice that your client is going to rely on either personally or within their business. It can be a very challenging experience that requires long working hours as you will be responsible for all facets of the ecological work and running a business. However, if you strike out on your own with sufficient expertise it can be richly rewarding and one that is well worthwhile.

8. Relevant professional societies/associations

There are number of professional organisations to which consultants can belong. These organisations provide valuable information on recent research, conferences and training options. Some relevant organisations are:

- ❑ Ecological Consultants Association of New South Wales - <http://www.ecansw.org.au/>
- ❑ Ecological Society of Australia - <http://www.ecolsoc.org.au/>
- ❑ Australian Systematic Botany Society - <http://www.anbg.gov.au/asbs/>
- ❑ Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales - <http://www.rzsnsw.org.au/>
- ❑ Environmental Institute of Australia and New Zealand - <http://www.eianz.org/>
- ❑ Australian Marine Sciences Association - <http://www.amsa.asn.au/>