

William Butterworth

Sustainability Consultant and Partner @ ERM



Who am I?

I have been a sustainability consultant all my career. Over this almost 25 year period I have worked on a huge range of projects for a wide variety of clients. All of this comes under the banner of a geographer because of the incredibly broad nature of what geography encompasses and the skill-sets that it has equipped me with;. My experiences have included taking soil samples from boreholes on colliery sites, surveying footpaths across military training ranges, implementing environmental management systems for housing associations, auditing factories and farms, providing regulatory advice and assessing risks across multiple sustainability topics. All of this is geography as far as I am concerned.

What do I do at ERM?

The first thing I did when I joined ERM was undertake audits of chicken farms across East Anglia. This was in the context of my client looking to acquire the business and we were undertaken a due diligence assessment looking at the environmental, health and safety aspects of the business. This type of transaction related due diligence work is what I have spent most of my time at ERM doing; advising clients on a broad spectrum of sustainability risks and opportunities to inform them when they are buying or selling sites or businesses. This has meant I have needed to understand contaminated land risks, environmental permitting requirements, product regulatory affairs issues, social and human rights in supply chains and then translate this into what it means for my client in the context of the transaction that they are proposing to undertake.



What was my geography education?

It is an old cliché that geography teachers also taught sport at school, although sometimes it was probably the other way round. For me I was lucky in that my geography teacher was a very good and inspirational teacher as well as being a great rugby coach. He was able to bring to life the formation of glacial U shaped valleys and Christaller's central place theory on a blackboard. Then the fieldwork started – pedestrian counts to define the central business district of my local town, and comparing depth and flow rates across a stream and canal in the same valley.

With this mix of human and physical geography it is not surprising that I went on to study a combined geography course at the University of Reading. The range of topics to choose from seemed almost endless, but in the end I focussed more on human geography courses – political geography and the study of colonialism, planning and development, a course on retail and plenty more.. However, I also went on field trips that encompassed these human geography aspects as well as the physical geography elements. One trip was to the Netherlands where we found the only hill in the country and surveyed cross sections of sand dunes along the coast to identify the impacts of wide blown erosion and the stabilising effects of grasses.

This broad cross section of topic areas was what appealed most and made my time a University a fascinating one. My dissertation was probably the thing that pointed me in the direction of my future career as it was on public participation in road planning, looking at the influence that the local population and other key stakeholders had in the plans for a bypass round Winchester, which happen to dissect some chalk grassland. This involved reviewing planning documents and planning law, interviewing a number of stakeholders and trying to establish whether they were able to influence the decision.

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How do I use fieldwork in the job that I do now?

My fieldwork activities have varied considerably over the years and is now more limited than it once was. In my role as a sustainability consultant I have been on site taking soil and groundwater samples to assess the potential for contamination; This required a basic knowledge of geology and the ability to describe soil types. I have also done lots of research work in libraries and now on line, principally to gather data on the history, environmental setting and the topography of sites. Through all of this work it has required the ability to apply the basic skills of research, site assessment, appraisal and reporting of findings. Now the closest I probably get to site work is at home bee keeping. This is a hobby I took up with conservation of this important ecological species in mind. The picture to the right is me collecting a swarm!



What inspires me about geography and fieldwork?

Every day I come into contact with some aspect of geography. It is this that inspires me most, although I am not sure whether it was my geography background that sparks this interest or whether I had the interest in the first place that guided me towards a career in which geographical understanding plays such a big part! What is clear is that my geography background led me into a career that has been hugely varied and provided me with the opportunity to work with some fantastic people around the world on a huge array of topics. Every day I learn something new or put my knowledge to work on a new topic area or issue – For instance, today it was Romanian environmental legislation and soil and groundwater impacts from a paper mill in the US - who knows what tomorrow will bring, but whatever it is, it will be some new, different and exciting.

What has been the most interesting highlight of my career so far?

The interest has come through the opportunity to get involved in a wide variety of projects. This has meant that I have had the opportunity to visit lots of factories making everything from undersea cables to food stuffs. I have also had the opportunity to learn about the processes that are involved in the extraction and winning of metals and minerals, and the manufacture of chemicals on which much of what we use every day is based. This understanding of what these facilities do, how they do it and how they manage the interaction with the environment and the people working there has been great fuel to an enquiring mind.

What tip would I give to someone thinking of following a geographical-related career?

As the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals start to play an increasing role in all our lives, and regulation and innovation responds to these challenges, as a sustainability consultant I have the advantage of working in a profession that is continuing to evolve. We find ourselves at the forefront of innovation in helping the world's leading organisations meet the huge challenges & opportunities that the human race is facing, such as climate change, increasing urbanisation, population growth, and rapid technological advances. This will apply to many geographical-related careers and therefore the need for our skill sets will open up many avenues for geographers to pursue their real interests and passions, and that need will not be diminishing any time soon. These are hugely exciting times to be a geographer.