

Heather Bond

Environment Planning Specialist

**Royal
Geographical
Society**

with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning



Job title: Environment Planning Specialist

Organisation: Environment Agency

Location: Wallingford, Oxfordshire

How did you get to where you are now?

As a Canadian citizen, I completed my BSc. in environmental sciences in Ontario, shortly followed by a move to England for a MSc. in water science, policy and management. I had especial interest in ecology, water quality, nature-based solutions, urban water/wastewater systems and flood management. While in Canada, I worked for the Ontario and Canadian governments during the summers, collecting water quality samples and conducting other similar field work. I struggled to find work after completing my education but eventually took an internship with an international organisation in Paris. This allowed me to travel widely for conferences, and expand my professional network while helping write reports, work on communication strategies and organise events in the topic of water quality.

After 1.5 years, I hoped to move back to England, and was offered a position with the Environment Agency in the Thames region as a Flood and Coastal Risk Management Officer. Based in Reading, I worked with partners and the public to help reduce flood risk for residents in the area, as well as reviewing planning applications and flood risk permits. I expanded my knowledge of GIS and similar mapping software to update flood models. The EA is a large organisation with many growth opportunities, so after one year in this role, I took on a contract position for my current role.

Was there anything particularly useful that helped you to get into this role?

As the advertisement was only for internal candidates, it

was essential that I already worked for the Environment Agency. It is often advantageous to have an inter-disciplinary background, and as I was coming from the flood risk management side of the business, this was seen as beneficial to the water and land department, as I could bring my network and knowledge to improve the other side of the business. Previous experience with GIS as well as with water quality work also assisted me in securing the position.

What are you responsible for?

My current position as Environment Planning Specialist is part of the Thames area Integrated Environment Planning team. This is a small team of about 8 staff who work on water quality, water resource and planning around this.

I coordinate the local water quality monitoring programme, through active engagement with internal partners and area leadership. This involves identifying high risk areas and prioritising a large number of monitoring needs based on available resource. This is done on an annual basis, with quarterly reporting and continual adjustment based on changes.

I manage the local Catchment Planning System for Thames area to ensure the information is as up-to-date as possible. This system is an interactive database of information relating to water quality such as reasons for poor quality in a waterbody, objectives, and actions to address this in order to inform planning decisions. This also involves answering enquiries from partners and the public about any data from this system.

Finally, I act as the single point of contact to Thames Water for the Water Industry National Environment Programme, tracking a large number of environmental improvement schemes that are conducted by Thames Water. I review investigation schemes to ensure they are in line with our objectives and requirements of understanding why certain waterbodies are failing in specific elements (e.g. dissolved oxygen, phosphate). I also keep an eye on delivery of their improvement schemes to ensure these will be completed on time.

What skills and characteristics do you need for this role, apart from geographical knowledge?

You need to be able to work effectively independently (managing timelines etc) but also as a team, and be able to lead a team to deliver outcomes. The role does not require a specific knowledge-base, but demands a generalist approach to environmental planning and a coordination role of others who do have specialist skill-sets.

Excellent oral and written communication are

W: www.rgs.org/iamageographer

important as there is a lot of collaboration with others. It is also important to be able to manage and analyse large datasets, so experience in this and Excel/Access are helpful, as well as an eye for detail.

How does geography feature in your work?

As an environmental planner, I am reviewing maps of the area and waterbodies daily. Use of GIS and other mapping software is helpful to manipulate data geographically and understand trends in spatial information. I may download shape files of aerial images of a location to understand erosion and ground cover, in order to better understand the source of pollutants to a river. I also may locate a sewage treatment work and measure the distance to a waterbody that is failing for phosphates to speculate if it could be a cause. I also use maps to define monitoring locations. Both physical and human geography play a key part in my work.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

I enjoy trying to better understand our environment and then working with others to try to make it better. I appreciate that the EA is an evidence-based organisation, and we make decisions based on proven data, so I enjoy contributing to that data-set and then being part of the conversation to create change.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to go into this career?

It is useful to have an understanding of physical environmental sciences around water quality and quantity. Learn how to become proficient with ArcGIS, Excel, Access and other similar programmes. This role is also about speaking up, and taking charge, so practice leadership and initiative.

How do you maintain your knowledge and interest in geography outside of work?

I love to read, and always have one fiction and one non-fiction book on the go. Some of my non-fiction focuses on nature, travel and conservation/management. I also spend some of my spare time exploring my local nature, and when I do travel further afield, I am keen to familiarise myself with the environment there. I stay connected through work networks, and try to participate in one to two conferences each year.

Why did you choose geography?

I have always loved maps and understanding our world better, especially outside. Geography offers this to me in a professional setting. I am also in awe of the subject since it is so inter-disciplinary and requires a wide range of skills and knowledge. It offers potential to make positive impacts on our shared living space and contribute to a greener future.

*** This interview was undertaken in 2021 and was correct at the time of publication. Please note that the featured individual may no longer be in role, but the profile has been kept for career pathway and informational purposes.**