
Why study Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences?

Emma Hargrave

Student at the School of Earth and Environment, University of Leeds



Emma Hargrave won the 2009 GEES Student Essay competition, and her winning entry is below. The full list of winners and runners up can be viewed at <http://www.gees.ac.uk>

Telling people I do Environmental Science is always met with an increasingly predictable look of confusion, followed by a quick change of subject. Either people don't know what this strange degree entails or they immediately assume I'm a "tree hugger" that fights for protection of badgers.

Actually, I don't blame them. I somewhat stumbled on the degree after flicking through hundreds of prospectuses and eventually finding it in the "related degrees" section of geography. Without sounding clichéd, this was quite simply a life-changing moment, as studying environmental science has presented me with countless opportunities.

Environmental science is a relatively new and relevant discipline and this is what makes it so exciting. You'll soon find that dynamic issues covered in lectures appear in newspapers the next week, whilst lecturers are so passionate about their speciality you feel compelled to actually do the extra reading. Indeed, studying environmental science will allow any student to compile the perfect CV, in a way that not just ticks the right boxes, but also allows personal growth and fulfilment. A bold statement perhaps, but let me explain.

One of the main skills an employer looks for is the ability to work well in a team. What better way to practice this than through the joy that is field work. You'll soon realise that this will entail being cold, wet and wishing you had bought that extra pair of gloves to prevent the onset of frostbite. Whether this involves taking 300 noise measurements at a wind farm, or crossing a marshy threshold with only two pairs of waders between six, the skill of team working is soon picked up. Indeed, week-long field trips in isolated youth hostels are the perfect setting for the beginning of lifelong friendships.

The ability to adapt and cope with different situations is another skill high on employers' lists and a necessity in everyday life. As environmental science is an interdisciplinary degree, there is

prolific opportunity to build on this. Geologists, physicists, mathematicians, chemists, biologists, social scientists, philosophers and economists all marvel the wonder that is the environmental scientist – the scientist that moves across all subjects, breaking all boundaries. Maybe I'm getting a little carried away, but my point is that environmental science is a discipline that requires knowledge in all areas, allowing new and useful perspectives. Take for example land degradation in the Kalahari Desert. Sustainable solutions can be found, not just by analysing the soil, or just by studying local behaviour, but by combining both physical and social knowledge.

The biggest problem of studying environmental science is perhaps for the very reason that makes it so interesting. With such a broad range of disciplines and issues covered, how is one supposed to decide which to specialise in. As the end of second year approaches students frantically pour over their notes in an attempt to make a decision on their dissertation topic. It's not a lack of interest in the subjects but rather too much interest in everything. Those lucky few that have already decided their lifelong ambition is to study micro-invertebrates in upland streams are very much envied.

Such is the passion that environmental science instils in its students. I challenge any environmental scientist to say they haven't felt passionate about one issue in lectures. Something as seemingly mundane as heather moorlands can spark furious debates, whilst the effects of climate change are so far-reaching that everyone is influenced. Not only do students feel passion, they feel motivated to change things. Symptoms such as compulsion to turn off all lights, re-use plastic bags and lobby councils to reject airport expansion are often experienced. Friends and relatives may notice changes in the student's behaviour, with increased interest in rock formations, and constant attempts to predict the weather.

I feel privileged to have such an interest in my degree. Friends on other degrees are bewildered when I'm motivated to write a 2000 word essay on the Montreal Protocol or get excited at the thought of visiting the Eden Project. They often complain of their dull lecturers and their monotonous presentations. In contrast, the variety of lecturers within environmental science is enough to enthrall any hung-over student at nine in the morning. From ecologists with nose piercings to highly intelligent researchers with names on a Nobel prize, you are sure to be inspired. It is not uncommon for such lecturers to create an enthusiasm for a particular career. When a researcher tells of his near-death experiences in an African rainforest you cannot help but want to follow in his footsteps.

Career opportunities are endless for environmental scientists, especially in this time of environmental awareness. Companies are scrambling over each other to hire the most qualified graduate to oversee their environmental impact. With the effects of climate change already affecting the UK, councils are creating armies of sustainability officers and ever more money is being invested into new technologies. Some environmental scientists seek the adrenaline rush that can only be gained through flying through storm clouds in reinforced aircraft. Or how about working on a tropical island, helping local communities to cope with the onset of rising sea levels?

In trying to conclude why one should study environmental science I find myself lost for words. How do you write down on paper how a degree can create so much passion and dedication? How do you explain the effect it has on your personal beliefs and values? Quite simply environmental science is not just a degree, it is a lifestyle – one that I could not recommend more highly.

Emma Hargrave

