

Case Study: Botanist - Alan

What do you do?

I spend most of my time teaching people about the environment. I work for a regional conservation body in a national park, guiding children and students through nature walks and supervising the environmental field centre to help teach people about nature and the environment.

What is your background?

After finishing my biology degree, I went to live in Australia and was very lucky to end up assisting research at a university botany department. This gave me the experience I needed to pursue my career when I returned to England.



What characteristics do you need to be successful in your job?

In my job, it's important to be imaginative because I always have to find new ways to communicate with people about the environment in an interesting and effective way.

For botanists who focus mainly on research, instead of working with the public like me, patience and perseverance are crucial characteristics. Long-term study of complicated issues in minute detail requires these attributes.

What other jobs could you do using the skills from this job?

A botanist could go into any profession involving experimental design and statistics, for example, medical research. Managing plants or crops is also a possibility. Some examples include turf management in golf courses, forestry, horticulture and tree farming.

What changes will there be in the future?

I believe that the demand for people in botany will increase. Food and crop science, forestry and genetic engineering are all related areas that are now expanding.

Advances in computer technology and genetic engineering will also affect botany in the future. Computers save scientists a great deal of time by speeding up the calculation of statistics and other time-consuming work.

In addition, genetic engineering saves time by allowing us to manipulate plant characteristics.

Instead of waiting for several generations of plants to grow before we learn the results of our breeding experiments, we can now select the characteristics we want, based on a plant's genetic structure.

This will have an enormous impact on the way scientists work in the future, and also on the food and medicine available to everyone.

What are the biggest challenges in your job?

What I find most challenging about being a botanist is the administrative side of the job.

I love the science, nature and communication that are involved in my work but I find things like budgeting, committee work and job appraisals boring. Even the best jobs have their dreary aspects.

Are there many opportunities to enter this career?

It is more competitive now than it was when I graduated. Finding a position may be difficult, but it is still a growing field. Some things to consider if you want to become a botanist are good communication skills and experience in fieldwork.

Genetic engineering will continue to be a big area, and a good one to enter. If you are considering a position like mine, then you should increase your communication skills as much as possible, and get experience in writing, radio and TV.

What do you like about your job?

I like working with people. I work with teachers and students. I'm very passionate about the environment, so I'm lucky to be in a position to raise people's awareness of issues like global warming and acid rain.

What do you dislike about your job?

I dislike administration work like forecasting and managing budgets.

What advice would you give to someone interested in your career?

Botany is a good thing to study because it can lead to a variety of careers, including outdoor fieldwork, lab research or a role in higher education.

A day in the life

8:30 am - 9:00 am

Arriving at the office: checking email, going through my in-tray, reading through proposals and approving or rejecting them.

9:00 am - 10:00 am

Attending supervisory meeting: assigning tasks to staff members at the field station, finding out what work is left to be done.

10:00 am - 11:00 am

Meeting with representatives from the school board to plan forthcoming field trips to the centre, meeting with a company representative who wants to plan a corporate group visit for an 'eco tour' at the centre.

11:00 am - 12:00 pm

Speaking on the phone about forthcoming TV, radio or newspaper promotions of the centre.

12:00 pm - 1:00 pm

Eating lunch with the staff, informally discussing projects.

1:00 pm - 2:00 pm

Taking a group of adults and children on a nature hike: pointing out plant species and explaining the experiments and projects going on at the centre.

2:00 pm - 3:00 pm

Meeting with the staff to discuss supervision of the site trails and buildings, walking outside with maintenance staff to discuss these issues.

3:00 pm - 5:00 pm

Researching information for programme development, for example, on biomimicry - looking at how humans and businesses can imitate natural systems to function better. This research involves reading books and articles, taking notes and requesting more information from colleagues.

5:00 pm - 5:30 pm

Checking email again, finishing administrative tasks in the office.