

## **2009 Cal-IPC Symposium Career Workshop**

### **Leaders: Cal-IPC Student Chapter**

1 hour formal discussion with panelists followed by 30 minutes of open questions

#### **1. Please state your name, education level, employer, and job title.**

Doug Gibson (DG): San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy, Master's Degree, Environmental Science

Julie Horenstein (JH): California Department of Fish and Game, Master's Degree

Henry Gonzalez (HG): County Agricultural Commissioner- BS in Ag. Science and MA in Public Administration

Edith Allen (EA): Cooperative extension/University Professor- PhD Restoration Ecology

Fletcher Linton (FL): US Forest Service Forest Botanist – Masters in science.

#### **2. What is a typical starting salary for your job? What is the average pay for a seasonal employee? We do not need to know your personal salary, but ballpark numbers.**

DG: Interns unpaid. Internship is 20hrs/week for one year, \$12-15K. Education director 40-65K, Masters – yr long program

JH: Student assistant = \$11-15/hr (HR Office), [www.spb.ca.gov](http://www.spb.ca.gov) Working for state, Environmental Scientist = 40-60K/yr, Staff 60-70K/yr. Agency salaries are generally less than private sector but the trade off is that agency jobs generally have better benefit packages, stability and pensions.

HG: Office of Agriculture, salaries vary by county. Generally Ag. Aid requires high school degree and starts \$11-15/hr, Prof Ag. Inspect biologist requires a 4yr degree and has 3 levels of a career series: Deputy Ag Commissioner 45-90K/yr, Assistant for Ag. Commissioner 95-120K/yr, Ag. Commissioner 120-175K/yr. The later are also political positions.

EA: Extension- Land grant Universities have cooperative extension advisors and specialists, county level starts 50-100k/yr, campus cooperative extension is the same as professor salary 60-130K/yr. High job security.

FL: FS, BLM, Park Service: Bachelors degree can get you in as a Student Career Employee Program Intern. This places you in botany and invasive species positions. Full time positions are hard to get, but biologist starts at 30-40K/yr and works up from there. Seasonal employment is common for 20 something's running May-Oct 15-25K. Often you must be willing to move to climb the ladder to Crew leader or Program management. At this level biologist/botanists are considered GS-11 and make 50-75K/yr which is the highest position in the field. Once you are in a unit, you can move up to admin, but then your field time greatly diminishes. High job security at the permanent fulltime position level.

#### **3. Describe a typical day at your job? What are the best and worst parts of your job and what were you not expecting to deal with?**

DG: Monday surf, Wed. yoga... keep your people happy and your retention will be high. We pay high for a non-profit. You get some field time, interact with agencies, lots of meetings. Being able to manage people is critical and the skills of conflict resolution are important. I am responsible for bringing in grants which is stressful, but love the job.

JH: Department of Fish and Game I spend time on many things: regional office, field, state HQ = policy and administrative programs, mapping programs and regulations. In general, the regional offices are more field-focused and the state headquarters are more policy and administration-oriented. No day is the same and I like that, but a fair amount of time is spent on budget and department-wide or branch planning or reporting tasks (i.e. talking and writing about the work rather than actually doing the work). Daily tasks could include: reviewing grant proposals as part of the CA Weed Management Area Advisory Committee or participating in a conference call to develop regulation changes for private fish stocking (a potential vector for spreading invasive species). I also prepare reports describing how grant money has been spent on projects and manage grant budgets. Some time is also spent responding to inquiries about invasive species from consultants, staff, students and the public. Over time, our program works on everything from early detection to response to outreach. Unfortunately there are only two people in DFG doing statewide invasive species work, so we are spread too thin, which can be frustrating. There are other statewide invasive species management programs but they are either focused on one or two species, or a particular part of the state's infrastructure (e.g. water delivery, roads).

HG: Diversity of projects prevents me from being bored. Laws and regulations to protect agriculture. Maintain level playing field for farmers (business), quarantines (fed., state, etc.), enforcement, monitoring, inspection. Detection of invasive populations i.e. pheromone traps to capture flying pests (gypsy moth) to detect populations, at which time, we move from detection to an eradication project. I conduct surveys of suspect and known population locations which sometimes requires mountain biking or hiking (nice perk). Some challenging parts of the job involve public intersections and education. We also do containment, suppression, and export inspections too, as well as pesticide regulation- permits and monitoring is a big part of the job. I investigate complaints and enforce permit laws for pesticide use and conduct nursery inspections. As well, we do weights and measures work to check produce quality and correct quantities. I conduct citrus monitoring. There are a lot of programs and diversity. We figure out how to use the county budget to implement regulations at the county and local level (secretary of Ag.). Some revenues come from grower certification fees. I do get some choice in what to focus on as a policy setter.

EA: My day consists mainly of research and out reach: 2/3 research, 1/3 outreach. I conduct basic and applied research. I communicate with stakeholders about natural resource issues (parks, state, feds.). Often the job requires fielding phone calls from public. I submit many grants to fund research to Feds., NSF,, EPA,... Much work is done with county advisors. Outreach requirements can be in the form of workshops a few times a year for habitat conservation, planning, or for the public. I received many invitations to talk (1-2 per month). The job is intellectually stimulating and I can to some

extent choose my projects. The down side is the administrative stuff like meetings. Overall the job is very enjoyable.

FL: A typical day is not typical with 50:50 field:office. I might be supervising treatments in the field, writing budgets and reporting accomplishments, writing NEPA reports or ensuring we are following NEPA regulations. Much of the office work includes mapping, data base management and meetings. In the field I conduct surveys, monitor and train crews, and implement safe practice protocol. I'm happy if I get back to my truck and get home safe at the end of the day. I also work on rare plant habitat improvements, fire, timber, invasive species issues (detection, containment, eradication, and prioritization). Outreach/education is also a part of the job giving talks to the public i.e. CNPS and guided walks. It is a great way to inspire people. I enjoy that I work in the field because it feels like a vacation. The worst part of the job is the big planning process for management can be long and dense. I didn't expect to be required to do accounting and budgeting. I would advise getting accounting classes.

**4. What skills should one acquire to increase hire-ability? Are there certification courses required? Should we take special classes while we're still in school? What are some good ways to gain skills not received in school that will be requested in applications?**

DG: Know how to do everything (ha-ha). First, accounting is important as you will need to work with and write budgets, grants. It is very different from the university grant competition. You will need data management skills, GIS, IT (web skills very valuable), Photoshop, and people/conflict resolution skills. I notice that many students come out of college deficient in land management education. I am in the process of creating a land management certification to help fill the gap in qualified people to manage lands skills to help parks do analysis to acquire land, budget, keep in perpetuity. Also you need hands-on skills such as being able to build a fence. I typically see that many graduate students are too focused. You need multiple experiences; practicality is very important. Volunteering is a great way to get experience and get your foot in the door. Many of my employees were volunteers first and made themselves too valuable to let go so I had to hire them.

JH: Know that the biota will probably be different from where you came from, so you will need the ability to find the information you don't already possess. Showing the ability and motivation to "get up to speed" on the local biota and issues is important. A research background is important because you could be reviewing research reports or proposals. Experience in designing and analyzing research or monitoring projects can help you critically evaluate these documents. Classes in environmental law (CEQA, NEPA, CESA, FESA, or water quality laws) would be helpful. Taking a job in environmental consulting can be a crash course in environmental law and sometimes they will even pay for classes.

The ability to write clearly and concisely, using correct syntax, grammar and punctuation is very important. In some cases you may be writing for a less technically inclined

audience and in some cases, you will be writing for your peers. To increase these skills, you can take a business writing class (some are available on-line). You want to have a good attitude (the “I can do it” attitude) and contribute in such a way that makes you indispensable. Be independently driven and responsible. A number of peers have told me that they have found training in project planning or project management very useful, especially for complex projects involving multiple people or groups.

HG: Ag commissioner needs help in the summer months looking for disease. This requires walking of fields looking for symptoms. These seasonal positions can get you on the job training. Insect trappers are also a good place to start. Being bilingual will be a major plus as employees often need to talk with people native to Mexico (many dialects). Other important items to make your application stand out include: computer skills, university success, and attitude. Attitude is not on the application, and can’t be taught on the job, you just need a “go to” attitude. Once you have the job, be on time and follow directions. As for requirements, you need a 4yr degree and to take the state exam. In this field, training never stops, you will always be required and offered to take continuing education classes.

EA: County cooperative extension requires a Master’s although we are seeing many PhDs now applying for this position. The university level requires a PhD. The degree can be in any area of natural resources: restoration, forestry, fisheries, aquatic... All systems have invasive species to study and deal with. Skills or training of importance include: basic biology, ecology and botany, conservation, statistics, GIS, remote sensing (critical for landscape scale), writing (you could be writing grants as often as once a month and will need to write up your results). It is important to be able to communicate both on paper and in person. There is a great deal of outreach so comfort talking to people and a friendly personality is necessary.

FL: Studies should include: Biology, botany, natural resource management. For seasonal employment, good grades, consistency and persistence are important. You will need critical writing skills and be able to communicate effectively to write field reports and notes.

**5. Are there any tricks to the application process? (i.e. buzz words, CV vs. resume, etc.). What can you expect to negotiate for when interviewing/negotiating a contract?**

DG: “Strategic Plan” know this statement for non-profit jobs and use it on your resume. We receive tons of resumes so you need to make yours stand out. Format the resume with experience at the top and education at the bottom and only include skills and training that pertain to the job you are applying for. Two good books to read are: *Applying for Forces for Good*, and *Whole Communities*. Both will give you good key words to use in your resume. Definitely get outreach experience and practice presenting/writing at a fourth grade level so you can effectively communicate with a wide range of education levels.

JH: To get a state job, you have to get on the state lists. To do this, go to the state personnel board at [spb.ca.gov](http://spb.ca.gov) and apply for an exam. Exams may come up only once every two years or more frequently. To apply for an exam, get the bulletin and use action phases from the bulletin and feel free to define them broadly. For example, if the bulletin says monitoring experience, and you have experience collecting data, don't put collecting data, put monitoring experience. If the bulletin says public speaking, you could say that you had public speaking experience while lecturing to an introductory biology class. The first people reading your exam will not know that these skills are very similar and transferable; they are just looking for the terms that are used in the exam bulletin. The applications can be saved on-line, and tweaked for other exams. There is no resume in this process only the exam application. When preparing for the exam, use the required areas of knowledge and skills listed in the exam bulletin as a study guide. You will only get an interview if your score places you in the top three ranks. However, as people in the top three ranks become unavailable, the lower ranks move up. So while you may be in the sixth rank initially, within a year you may be in the third rank and receiving invitations to interview for specific jobs.

When you interview, use the internet to learn about the department and program that you are interviewing for. Be prepared for the universal question: "How has your education and experience prepared you for this job." Interview questions often include hypothetical scenarios to see how you might approach and solve a problem or accomplish a project. Good things to keep in mind when starting out to tackle a project: What are your goals and objectives? What are the opportunities and constraints (staff, money, equipment, scheduling)? Who should you communicate with about your project (sharing information, gaining necessary approvals, safety, avoid duplication of effort, coordinating use of equipment or staff time – many reasons to think this through). The interviewer will appreciate that you consider these issues.

If you have a requirement that is an absolute dealbreaker (e.g. "I cannot possibly accept this job if I cannot telecommute three days per week") then let the supervisor know up front, before scheduling an interview. If there is no flexibility on either side of that issue, it's best not to waste time on an interview. If it's not a dealbreaker, but a preference (e.g. some telecommute days, or office hours that are outside the norm) avoid discussing your preferences until you are actually offered a job. Frankly, if you value making a very good initial impression on the job and can wait to institute the preferences, minimize special requests until after six months or a year of being a reliable employee. A supervisor may be more willing to accommodate a preference after they have learned through experience that you are dependable, and that no one will need to do extra work as a result of the accommodation.

HG: You will need to submit a resume and it should be professional i.e. proofread it. Grammar errors = a bad sign. Show that you are willing to be flexible and leave not blanks on applications empty. Empty blanks tell us nothing and leave us guessing as to why you did not fill it in. If you have nothing to put in a blank, write N/A or unknown. If you do not have experience in a specific area, share an experience that demonstrates the quality we are asking about, like leadership or enforcement of rules. Before the interview,

do research on the county you are applying to and their crops and current issues. Such info can be found on the CDFA website. This shows you have interest and initiative. Remember that the bureaucracy is slow moving so the process can be long.

EA: Combinations of outreach and research experience are needed. Your graduate research fulfills the research aspect, but outreach is often lacking in many applicants. For outreach, work with Cal-IPC, give talks, attend local, state and national meetings. If your resume matches the job you have a shot. Also, have a job talk prepared. All university ext. positions require a one hour presentation on which you are judged for the position.

FL: We use resumes and applications. It is best to talk with people you want to work for so that your resume stands out. It is better to have a face to the name, but even phone calls make a difference. Get experience in professional research and volunteer. Be consistent and persistent. Get to know someone in the federal government. You can do this by volunteering for them and working seasonally to get your foot in the door.

### **Open Questions**

**Q: If I turn down multiple offers for a job, will I be removed from the state lists?**

JH: After three rejections, they may classify you as inactive on the list. When you get on the list and say you are open to all regions, be sure to call and narrow the range if you are not actually going to take a job in a certain region. You can also go voluntarily inactive if you are temporarily unable to move for a job. This allows you to reactivate at any time as long as the list is still active by writing a letter to the administrator in charge.

**Q: Do you always need a resume or is a CV better and how long should it be?**

DG: We want a resume, not a CV, and length doesn't matter.

**Q: How often are the SCAT positions available?**

FL: Openings depend on the park and when they need people. Sometimes they will need people to fill in where they have been unable to find a permanent employee, i.e. hydrology. To get a leg up, do field work while you are in school and get to know someone in the program you want to work for. Any position with the Feds. This may require you to move and live in rural areas. There are many applicants for this program so don't wait for a job announcement to come up. Get in there and get to know the people you would work for so they think of you when a job does come up. When I applied for my job, I looked at the list of biologists currently working for the agency and sent them my resume. I followed up with phone calls and volunteered. This networking allows you to get your foot in the door. You need to have to have all the skills *plus* something to stand out. Volunteering is also a good way to see what someone in the position you are interested in does and whether this is a good match for you

**Q: What is the master's job market versus the PhD? Are we at risk of being over qualified as a PhD?**

The stereotype of a PhD being overly analytical is the issue here. If you are not this stereotype, you will be fine. It is more important to be sure that you have made your practical skills clear on your resume. The state and feds hire PhDs if they fit the job and often there are research positions that require a PhD. That being said, also be aware that there is educational jealousy out there.

**Additional Advice:**

Shane Barrows (Catalina Island): Be able to answer the question “What do you want to do?” Of course none of us know exactly what we want to do, but have an answer for what you currently want to do. Not having an answer is a bad sign and having an answer gives the interviewer something to work with. You never know, you might get what you want if you ask for it.

HG: Be able to answer the question “Why should we hire you?” Not having an answer to this is not in your favor. Have questions for the interviewer at the end of the interview.

**Thanks to all our great panelists and participants!**