



'The first thing I did was network - in person': How I shifted my career from tech startups to nature conservation

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Workforce 2030: Sophie Locke, conversation lead at the Blue Marine Foundation, reflects on navigating 'very steep but equally rewarding' learning curves in her career journey to date

Sophie Locke is conservation lead at the Blue Marine Foundation, having first joined Europe's largest marine conservation NGO in 2018. In her role, Locke seeks to build effective nature protection models and inspire the public to support ocean habitat conservation and sustainable management of the world's seas. She previously worked for the Environmental Protection Authority as a graduate consultant and ecologist, and holds an MSc in climate change from King's College London.

BusinessGreen: What was your previous career, and how did you get into it?

Sophie Locke: I've been working in the environmental sector for just over ten years. This has ranged from tech start ups to consultancies and now an NGO. Like many who end up in this sector, I came here due to my love of the natural world, animals and a drive to leave things better than how they were found.

What attracted you to your current career path?

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I moved into the NGO space for several reasons. The most obvious is the clear sense of purpose and alignment with values, alongside international exposure. Secondly, working with limited resources can be challenging – I soon found myself facing very steep but equally rewarding learning curves. I'm able to contribute to impact across a multitude of spaces, from research to political advocacy, often with a strong sense of teamwork and enough freedom that fosters personal growth. Finally, working for a marine conservation NGO felt needed. I could see the immense funding gaps and challenges facing us in the pathway to secure a healthy ocean, so it felt like a meaningful step forwards.

What was the first step you took towards changing your career?

Finding a full-time position in the conservation space can be challenging. The first thing I did was network, in person. I attended events, spoke to experienced individuals and looked to form connections with those who had secured careers that inspired me. Humans are social creatures – I'm grateful for tech allowing us to work on such a global scale, but I really do value opportunities for face-to-face conversation and curiosity.

What does a typical working day look like for you?

It might be a cliché, but no day is the same. Some days it's whittling away on comprehensive technical reports that aim to demonstrate an abundance of evidence for conservation action for government audiences, another could be mapping shark telemetry data with project partners. In between that are many meetings, often with driven and incredibly inspiring individuals around the world who might be supporting our mission or perhaps we're working together to plan dive surveys to support new protected areas. The diversity and pace can make you a bit dizzy, but it's certainly never boring.

What do you enjoy most about your current job?

The steep learning curves I mentioned earlier. The pace of the ocean conservation sector is fast and resources are scarce. There is so much to do and we have a looming 'deadline' – the '30x30' target under the Global Biodiversity Framework. I'm really enjoying pulling everything I've learnt together from almost eight years with the Blue Marine Foundation to form convincing arguments and project proposals to drive change. This means merging environmental economics, policy, science, political advocacy, media and so much more all together, often within frameworks of national and international commitments. A faster answer would have been participating in queen conch dive surveys with our brilliant partners at the St. Vincent & the Grenadines Environment Fund.

Are there any skills or experience gained in your previous career that support your current role?

Yes – being comfortable with fundraising, a rapid pace and ambitious goals from working in a start-up; rigour and exposure to environmental policy from consultancy work; understanding of offshore renewables from a research project I completed right out of university, and more generally, just continually building my confidence to put myself out there and keep absorbing knowledge. Most critically, a reduced fear of failing (often, but always forward). It still scares me to fail, but I've recognised how essential it is, especially in a complex space such as conservation. It's how we learn and continue to improve.

What are the biggest misconceptions about your job, or working in a 'green' industry?

That you'll be in the field all day long, or that you need a multitude of science degrees and a PhD. Field opportunities do exist of course, but for me personally, a lot of the work that drives decision-making is centred around project management, facilitating meaningful discussions and providing technical support to our partners – and that's great! And while I have an MSc, you don't necessarily need science degrees (or specifically in my case, a marine biology degree) to work in this space. Our team is composed of brilliant individuals who are journalists, lawyers, accountants, media experts, fundraising specialists and more.

What were the biggest challenges you faced in changing careers?

Job availability. Unfortunately, finding a full-time position in the NGO space, especially in ocean conservation, can be difficult and requires a lot of tenacity. The political climate at the moment adds to this challenge – rollback of environmental protections and funding cuts have hit the environmental sector hard, including NGOs. Large philanthropists are stepping up to help this work continue in some regions and other sectors, like the

environmental/conservation tech space, continue to grow and provide alternative job opportunities in related sector.

Did you need to gain additional skills, training or qualifications for your current role?

I ensured my technical skills (primarily relating to geospatial mapping) were up to date and I've learned an immense amount throughout my time at Blue Marine Foundation. This includes exposure to legal and policy skillsets that I didn't cover during my degrees or previous jobs.

Has moving into a 'greener' career changed your outlook on life?

Of course. It's hard not to view my day-to-day activities under an environmental lens. This has its own challenges - we have seen a huge rise in eco-anxiety and it's something our team discusses often. There is pressure on conservationists to be 'perfect' in their everyday life and this can be quite damaging, especially looking at the scale and complexity of the challenges- we are attempting to resolve. On a more positive note though, I feel a huge sense of gratitude and happiness that I'm able to commit most of my time to a cause that is so vital for everything on this planet. There is so much beauty and so many magical moments you are exposed to when working in conservation, both in terms of people and communities that you meet and of course the wildlife and habitats we work to protect. I couldn't trade that for anything else! Working in this sector also makes you realise how many people do care - about a better world, equality, fairness and a healthy, thriving planet. It can be a tension between hope and despair, but it's a healthy challenge to therefore keep yourself motivated and move forward alongside your community or team.

Is there anything you know now that you wish you'd known when you started out?

We're all trying to figure this out, together. It'll be more complicated than it looks. You'll worry about not having enough technical training or experience. The reality is that there's a wealth of knowledge out there to draw from and it's the motivation, curiosity and openness that counts. You'll also need to broaden your horizons from just working with a conservation mindset - you'll need to quickly engage with other industries that are vastly different, from energy and finance to insurance and politics. The conservation community is brilliant so don't be afraid to engage, ask questions and simultaneously support the up and coming generation who want to work in this space.

What advice would you give to someone looking to change career paths into a 'green' job or industry?

Find someone (or many people) who have the job you want and talk to them. Ask how they got there, what events to attend and what skillsets they're looking for now. If you've studied something totally different, there are hundreds of free courses available online to give a taster of the content you may need to become familiar with. Follow job boards/communities and be open to different routes inwards.

What could companies and the government do to make it easier for people to upskill or switch to greener careers?

It'd be great to see subsidised training and retraining programmes in technical skills we need in the environmental space, such as data science, renewables and GIS [Geographic Information Systems]. Ensuring internships, graduate programmes and early career opportunities are also fairly paid is vital, especially for individuals coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. It'd also be great to see environmental literacy, sustainability and broader skillsets relevant to 'greener' careers embedded into school curriculum and university degrees.

- *Do you want to discuss your shift into a green career as part of BusinessGreen's Workforce 2030 campaign or nominate a colleague to feature in our new series of Q&As? Email Michael.Holder@IncisiveMedia.com for more details.*
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