

## Establishing a professional career that addresses the environmental crisis

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### **Abstract:**

Some of you may be wondering how you could focus your future social work career on environmental issues. Others may not yet see the connection between environmental issues and social work; I hope to clarify this for you in this essay. Wherever you are, it's a great place to start, and I'm glad you are pursuing a professional career in social work.

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### **Essay:**

Some of you may be wondering how you could focus your future social work career on environmental issues. Others may not yet see the connection between environmental issues and social work; I hope to clarify this for you in this essay. Wherever you are, it's a great place to start, and I'm glad you are pursuing a professional career in social work.

I am excited to say that Eco/Green/Environmental/Ecologically Conscious social work is becoming a very hot topic in recent years here in the United States as our society joins in the global, multidisciplinary dialogue on the environmental crisis. While this may be a hot topic, it is not a new topic because social work scholars have been writing about the connections of social work and environmental issues for decades. And when we examine the history our profession, we can see that since its emergence social workers have addressed environmental concerns. Indeed, many of the social problems encountered by the social work pioneers in the United States were directly related to the environment, such as unsanitary housing, unsafe work conditions, the lack of community garbage collection, and the lack of parks and green spaces for recreation. Social workers are still addressing these types of issues in their professional practice today.

Many contemporary social workers are addressing environmental issues as their professional social work practice. I have conducted research with several of them and have collected much of their insight as to why they think social workers should be working on environmental issues, what skills a social worker can offer to help address the environmental crisis, and, more specifically, how they found jobs using their social work skills to address environmental issues. I will try to sum all this up briefly in the following paragraphs, but please know that there is a

wealth of knowledge and resources out there, and, most importantly, that there are indeed ways for you to find jobs that will allow you to practice Eco/Green/Environmental/Ecologically Conscious social work.

Before we jump into social work specifically, let's first look at the environment as a whole, or the ecosystem in which we live, planet Earth. It's beautiful and has the ability to produce all it needs to survive and to use all the waste it naturally produces for fuel as it recycles it within the ecosystem. Now, as humans, we are one part of the ecosystem, and some people are striving to live in harmony with nature despite the changing world around them. Human and environmental well-being are inextricably linked, continually reinforcing and reshaping each other as time goes on. However, much of the human population has drifted far from harmony with nature because we consume and waste more than our planet can handle, either because the waste is too toxic or it far exceeds the capacity of our ecosystem to regenerate itself. Even all the efforts of sustainable technology cannot keep up with our current rate of consumption and waste.

When the environment is polluted, it typically gets dumped on people who are already oppressed. This happens because those who have power (in all its various forms) use their power to put the burden on others. Many people, especially those who are more directly dependent on the natural environment for their immediate survival and well-being, are indeed deeply impacted when there are environmental problems that become obstacles to meeting their needs. For instance, some people may no longer be able to consume their typical diet of fish if a local river is polluted, killing off the fish supply. Or people may become sick from toxic pollutants from a local landfill placed in their neighborhood. Environmental issues are undeniably connected to social justice issues for humans; this is often referred to as *environmental justice* or *environmental racism* in many cases. Additionally, many take the perspective that we must address the environmental issues from an ecological justice perspective, meaning that we should address the injustices that are being done to the entire ecosystem, not limiting it just to the injustices in human lives. Since we only have one planet, and considering that we are overconsuming and overpolluting, it means we are currently in an environmental crisis that we can no longer ignore. This environmental crisis demands the attention of every person on this planet, especially social workers.

Why social workers, you may ask? Social workers can offer skills, values, and perspective that can help with many aspects of addressing this crisis. For instance, they can act as a bridge and connect groups of people to work on similar environmental issues but who would not normally have thought to partner. They can work to ensure that all voices are recognized and heard at those discussion tables, and often social workers serve a key role in "translating" when individuals or groups are not speaking the same lingo (i.e., the scientists are not speaking in ways the community can understand or vice versa). Also, as social workers, we have the ecosystem model or a "person- and- environment" framework that can be a unique perspective in dialogues around environmental issues.

Generally, the person-and-environment framework is represented with concentric circles, with the individual being in the center of various systems. The basic idea is that you must take into consideration the person *and* the environment. The pioneers in social work understood that this included the physical environment. But somewhere along the line "environment" became limited

to social, economic, and political environments, and many social workers neglected the need to address the physical environment with their clients and communities. As social workers, we must shift back to our professional roots and embrace this original, expanded person-and- environment framework that includes the physical environment.

Many social workers are operating under this broader framework of person- and- environment and are addressing the environmental crisis as part of their professional practice. They work in an array of roles, at different levels of practice, with a wide variety of client populations, and in various areas all over the United States and in international settings. While some may be in “traditional” social work roles as therapists or working in direct practice with children and youth, others are in “nontraditional” social work roles such as a waste management program facilitator in a refugee camp, a director of community gardens at a city parks and rec department, an executive director of a community foundation addressing air pollution, or a director of a study-abroad college internship program focused on sustainability. The following paragraphs briefly elaborate on these examples from my current research.

One social worker started a nonprofit wilderness therapy program for youth. While they use nature as a therapeutic tool, they also teach how to care for the environment. For instance, they use llamas for not only carrying supplies on the trail, but they pair them so that each youth is responsible for his or her own animal. They are taught to care for it, and they often confide in it as they express emotions that they may have never voiced aloud. The social workers leading the programs also discuss with the youth the metaphors for life found in nature, such as how a stream that they have to cross may have hidden rocks or holes that must be navigated, or how a raging campfire could be like anger and how one can learn to control it.

A school social worker working with alternative high school students found a way to infuse environmental issues into her social work practice. She enjoyed exercising out in the natural environment while kayaking and hiking, and she wondered how she could tie the physical and mental health benefits into her work with her students. She saw an advertisement for a grant opportunity and partnered her students with her local watershed alliance to develop a rain garden around the water runoff pond on their school campus. This project not only beautified the school and addressed a real concern in their built environment, but also engaged students who were on the verge of dropping out for disciplinary or academic reasons and built their skills and developed a sense of ownership and pride in their school.

Another social worker wanted to work internationally, and she found a job overseas working at a refugee camp. Because of her social work skill set, she was put in charge of a program for recycling, compost, and waste management. She indicated that a refugee camp is like a microcosm for the world because it is a small space that has limited room for disposing of waste. They can’t just keep throwing things “away” as there is no “away,” and it all had to be kept in the refugee encampment, which caused many health problems such as the spread of preventable diseases. She partnered with several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), public health workers, and the refugees themselves to find the best options for implementing a program that would take care of the environment as well as the people living there.

One social worker had a personal love of gardening for the therapeutic value it gave her, and she studied the social and environmental benefits of community gardening during her social work education. When she graduated with her MSW, she saw a job advertisement for the city parks and rec department that was not specifically for a social worker, but she applied for it and successfully convinced them how her skill set could be useful in that job. She directs all the community gardening programs within a large city. While these gardens do address city beautification needs and some food access issues, the parks primarily serve as a place to build social networks and social capital for the residents.

Another social worker began volunteering in his neighborhood to use his skills as a social work group facilitator running focus groups on community health issues. Because of his volunteer work he was offered a job as the executive director of a large, multicity community foundation. One of his primary policy campaigns involves empowering local citizens to fight the placement of industries and high-volume transportation paths in their neighborhoods because these result in extremely toxic air pollution.

While one social worker was still a student in her social work program, she did an international independent study on environmental justice. After graduation, she eventually became the director of that study-abroad program, which places college and graduate students in field settings to learn hands-on about how their professions connect with sustainability and environmental justice.

Finally, another thing social workers are doing is helping their organizations “go green” by establishing sustainable office policies and sustainable event guidelines. That’s what I have been doing as a social work student at my university. And I have been seeking every opportunity to educate social workers and social work students on how the whole profession should embrace a more holistic, broader, person-and-environment framework that includes the physical environment.

I hope you now understand why social workers should be working on environmental issues and can identify some social work skills that are helpful in addressing the environmental crisis. I also hope you now recognize how you can integrate environmental issues into any social work job, or how you could position yourself to take on a wide variety of jobs that may not be specifically advertised as social work jobs, but may be perfect places to use your social work skills to address the environmental crisis. Ultimately, as you go out into your career as a social worker, I hope you will join me in encouraging others in our profession, no matter what job they hold, to embrace a professional response to the environmental crisis.