

# Rachel Cochran

Environmental Project Manager



## Who am I?

I am an Environmental Project Manager with 13 years' experience in the environmental management industry. I have worked in the public sector at the UK Environment Agency, collecting water samples from the River Thames, and have supported the Mayor of London by contributing to the development of the London Air Quality Strategy. More recently I have worked across Asia as an environmental consultant, based in Hong Kong, and now lead a team of impact assessment practitioners at the sustainability consultancy ERM in Johannesburg, South Africa.

I am Chartered Environmentalist (CEnv) and a Chartered Scientist (CSci) (UK qualified), a full member of the Institute of Air Quality Management (MIAQM), Institute of Environmental Sciences (MIES) and an Associate Member of the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment (AIEMA). I have also recently been recognised as a Professional Natural Scientist by the South African Council for Natural Professional Scientists.

## What do I do at ERM?

I am a Principal Consultant leading a team of impact assessment practitioners. Our work is focused on reducing the environmental and social impacts associated with large infrastructure, urban, natural resources and power development schemes across the whole lifecycle. We support organisations in removing risks from their projects by undertaking independent Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) and Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs). Through this process we are able to work with the organisation to identify potential risks associated with the project and minimise and manage these risks through the application of mitigation & control measures at the design stage. Often the organisations seek external finance for their developments and so the EIAs/ESIAs are produced to demonstrate compliance not only with national regulations, but also the funder's guidelines (e.g. the World Bank Guidelines or the International Finance Corporation Guidelines).

Many of our projects are in the power sector and working in Africa means that renewable energy projects (including wind, solar and hydropower) are increasingly important across the Continent. I travel regularly with work and love having the opportunity to visit new countries and meet new people. I have visited Ethiopia, Malawi, Namibia and Zambia working on transmission line developments, solar photovoltaic (PV) projects and at sugar distillery mills. When I was based in Hong Kong I worked in Myanmar, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, China and Vietnam..

## What was my geography education?

I owe my interest in geography to a fabulous teacher at my secondary school, Mrs Lee. She was passionate about geography and the outdoors and passed her enthusiasm onto me. She arranged for various ex-students working in industry to visit us and tell us about their interesting and exciting careers. I realised that geography skills could be widely applied across a variety of different professional sectors. I studied A level Geography and then did a BSc in Environmental Geoscience at University College, London. Our first week at University involved us orienteering across the Peak District in the typical autumn weather of cold and rain, a great learning and team-building experience, and the first of many field work projects. After my undergraduate degree I went onto study an MSc in Environmental Technology at Imperial College London.

Getting out into the field was a key component of all my studies, and was a great chance to apply the theory learnt in the classroom. Getting lost in the Lake District or walking for miles in a coastal marsh in Greece can be a real bonding experience and you quickly learn to trust your colleagues and the value of working together as a team.

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## How do I use fieldwork in the job that I do now?



the project is to be developed.

In my current role as Project Manager, I lead a team of specialists into the field to collect baseline data to help understand the context of the project development. By gaining a real & practical understanding of the existing environmental and social conditions we are then able to assess the potential impacts and develop appropriate mitigation measures to minimise these impacts. As such, depending on the project type, we go into the field to monitor the presence of birds and bats for wind farm projects; look at the terrestrial and aquatic ecology (flora and fauna) for 'greenfield' and coastal development sites; monitor air quality and noise baseline conditions; and conduct interviews and undertake stakeholder engagement with the local communities where

Organising a team of specialists to undertake fieldwork in sometimes remote locations is not without logistical challenges, and we have had instances where the monitoring equipment has been stuck in customs whilst the team are waiting for it in the field, and trying to source electricity for air quality monitoring and needing inspirational thinking to use a solar power source as the solution! These are wonderful learning opportunities and nothing beats gaining first-hand experience of the project site and surrounding environs. As an added bonus it is a great opportunity to visit somewhere new and learn more about people, their culture and the environment in which they live.

## What inspires me about geography and fieldwork?



The most rewarding part of my job is being able to get out into the field and apply my geography fieldwork knowledge first hand. One of my best experiences was travelling from Dhaka to Bhola in Bangladesh; we travelled overnight on a launch barge down the Meghna River and I got to see the country from an entirely new perspective. When we got to Bhola the local people were incredibly helpful and knowledgeable and we were able to undertake our baseline monitoring without any problems. The people were just as fascinated by me as I was with them! I feel very fortunate to be able to do fieldwork in my everyday work and know that I will have

many more interesting opportunities to apply this practical knowledge in future projects.

## What tip would I give to someone thinking of following a geographical-related career?

I had a fantastic, inspirational teacher and have had several mentors who helped me along my way on this career path. If you think you are interested in developing a geographical related career talk to your teachers to find out more about it. Be prepared to get stuck in when it comes to field work, team work and learning your way. Volunteer at your local conservation group or community initiative to gain some on the ground first-hand experience. Recognise that your first job may not be your dream job, but is the first and probably most important step on the journey to get you to where you want to be. And don't forget to have fun along the way!