

Interview with Dr. Lisa Feldkamp, a science writer at the Nature Conservancy



by Monica Gates, 02/21/2018

Dr. Lisa Feldkamp is a science writer for the Nature Conservancy's [Cool Green Science blog](#). She's had an intriguing career path, and earned her PhD in Classics before going on to write for the Nature Conservancy. I sat down with her recently as a blog writer for Beyond Academia, interested in how she got to where she is, and what her job as a science writer is like.

--- The job of a science writer at the Nature Conservancy

"The exciting part of my job is writing for 'Cool Green Science'," Lisa says, when I ask her about what her job entails. "I'd say the coolest part is that I get to learn about different ideas all the time because I'm covering different types of conservation science stories. One day it could be a story about why we need to thin forests, in addition to planting new forests. Another day it might be something like: the ringtail is a really cool animal that lives in the United States. I've never heard of them before, and I got to see one while I was traveling, and they're amazing—everyone should know that they exist!"

She tells me that one of the misconceptions of her job is that she travels a lot—she only does one reporting trip per year. Though "I did get to go to New Jersey last year and handle a bat; I learned about the process of catching and examining a bat and reporting all of the data about it," she says enthusiastically.

However, writing doesn't make up the majority of her work. "The writing and the occasional travel is maybe like 10% of my job. 90% is the same kind of deskwork that you might end up doing anywhere. I manage the backend of the blog, and that involves a lot of entry of posts, and making sure that the server is okay, and being there to help troubleshoot anything that goes wrong. I'm the person who manages the credit card that pays for everything, and I do the social media, so that's a lot of adjusting image sizes and coming up with one good line to put up on social media for a variety of social media accounts. I also do outreach, which is really important. I send the emails to various places that I think will be interested in our stories, and try to get them to share them on social media or in their newsletters. All of those things I do for all of our stories, not just my own stories."

I know she's a senior science writer, which is why she manages other people's posts and has a number of additional duties. Still, her role seems quite diverse! "When I first started, my boss at the time would ask 'can you do this?' And I'd tell her that I'd try it, so I ended up doing a lot of things. I also manage the science pages of Nature.org, and my job is a lot of content management and outreach as well." She often works from home, and cites the flexibility of her job as a definite perk.

How many people work at the Nature Conservancy, I ask? She doesn't know the exact number, but says that there is something like 400 scientists working for the Nature Conservancy worldwide. Are they PhD scientists? "There's a variety. Some of them are PhDs, most of them have Masters degrees, and there might be a few in there who have Bachelor's. There are a lot of different scientists working for the Nature Conservancy, including now a growing number of social scientists. We're trying to make sure that what we do for nature also benefits people, because that makes it all more sustainable. In order to do that well, we've found we need social scientists to help get that human element right."

--- Motivation across fields

One of my favorite parts of meeting with Lisa was hearing about why she's pursued the path she has. In her history, you can see her continual interest in Classics, on the one hand, and wildlife, on the other. She pursued a Bachelor's, Masters, and PhD in Classics, but during her PhD she held a second job working in the library at the National Wildlife Health Center, and now she works as a writer at the Nature Conservancy. I found it uniquely pleasing to listen to her describe her relationship with both, and how she has arrived where she is.

"It was kind of bread crumb trail," she says, describing her path. "In high school, I became interested in why Western civilization is the way that it is. I started out being mainly interested in British literature—that's what I read a lot of in high school as a pastime. Then in college I was asking what was it that was influencing British literature, and one of the things I noticed is that I saw Latin quoted all the time, and was really annoyed that I couldn't read it. So I took Latin. And I got pulled in, because I think for a lot of Western culture the roots of it do go back to that time period. I'm sure you can dig even further back, but as a human with only so much time I didn't ever make it to Egypt, or the even deeper roots of Western culture. I was particularly interested at the time [in the question] of why we are so patriarchal."

"It was kind of a split in my life whether I was going to pursue Classics, which I fell in love with, or—I had always loved journalism about wildlife, so one of my original desires was to be a reporter for National Geographic, because that was my exposure to wildlife. My job is kind of like what I thought that that would be, when I was young—a writer for National Geographic. It's not as much travel as that, but it's probably the closest thing that exists."

"[My interest in Classics and conservancy are] somewhat linked in that my favorite thing in Classics was almost always poetry about animals. My PhD was on Theocritus, and he was writing mostly about shepherds, so it's a little more about domestic animals... but there's a wilderness in the background to those poems that's kind of scary and interesting. In a lot of ancient works, I always found this perspective on nature, how it seems so threatening and like it could take over at any moment. Whereas it feels in the modern world like we've completely dominated nature in most places, and in fact we're at risk of losing it, and we really need it now. Part of what I was looking for was how we got from that, to this, and I never really answered that question but I think it's an interesting one."

This description feels delightful to me. One of my additional favorite quotes from Lisa is describing why she enjoys her job. "Beyond the best part of working for the Nature Conservancy

which is that... we're doing a good thing, and you can feel good about getting up in the morning, because we're working to protect nature and trying to do it in a way that also benefits people."

"Is this the most important thing you would want to do with your time?" I ask her, because that's always one of my favorite beliefs to find in people, when they hold it. "In an ideal world."

"It is probably the most important thing I would want to do with my time, and I love my job and feel good about it, and especially with the skillset I have I think it is the best possible thing I could be doing. My kind of silly ideal jobs are either being a British detective because I also love British mysteries, or... have you heard of musk-oxen? Or having a herd of musk-oxen, because I think they're adorable." She laughs. "It used to be sheep. I used to want to be a shepherd like Theocritus, but I learned about musk-oxen maybe about a year ago through my work and then I figured out that some people keep them in the same way that you might keep sheep..."

--- Interviewing scientists from a humanities perspective

One of the transitions that most stands out on Lisa's resume is that of a humanities PhD to a science-based career. I asked her whether she thinks of her job as a STEM job—meaning, a career based on the Science, Technology, Engineering, or Medical fields. However, Lisa finds that "my job is kind of a humanities one. Even though I talk to scientists, I'm still writing."

"I wouldn't really say that my job is a STEM job. I love that aspect of it, it's so fun to pick their brains and learn from scientists. But I wouldn't say that I've transitioned from humanities to STEM. I'm still more a writer, and what I find important is to always have a real scientist check my work. Because as a writer, and as a person who's trying to understand the science but who isn't an expert, I might say something that is inaccurate on my own."

Curious, I ask if talking to people in STEM is different from talking to people in humanities or social sciences.

"I don't really think it is. It's the same if you're trying to talk to an expert in anything: they're going to say some things that are over your head... you need to have good questions to ask. You need to double check your understanding, say 'if I say this, is that—I know it isn't exactly what you said, but what you said is going to be over other's people's heads too. If I put it this way, is that still close enough that it gets across what you're saying in a way that other people are going to understand it, without using the accuracy?'"

This is interesting to me. "So you do that during the interviews, trying to frame it for public audiences?"

"Yeah, I do. I start to, anyway. Then as I work on the post, I keep on checking back with them."

I ask my final question on this topic: "Are most of the people in science communication scientists? Or humanities / social science people?"

“I think it’s a pretty good mix right now. I think it’s starting to trend to more scientists. Which is great in a lot of ways; I think that way they do have more of that expertise, as long as they’re also good at writing and good at remembering what other people aren’t going to get. Scientists might need to do the opposite, actually, and have someone look at their work and ask, ‘okay, how over your head is this?’.”

--- Advice for securing a job in a different field

The rates of PhD graduates who become academics is startlingly low, and the majority of PhDs take alternative careers. Lisa said that she’d wish she had known that she wasn’t going to get a job in academia at the beginning, so “I could prepare myself mentally: ‘I’m doing this for the love it, and not hoping for a job.’”

“But on the other hand,” she adds, “I would do it over again. If I had to do it over again, even knowing that I wasn’t going to get a job as a professor, I would still do it because it was such a great experience, and I learned so much. I had to work a second job but I did get a stipend, I was able to pay my rent and I got to spend seven years just immersing myself in classics, which I love.”

Still, she says, “because of [the low statistics of PhDs going into academia], it’s important to have other options besides academia in mind, and to think about how you’re going to present yourself as good at the skills that they want, instead of presenting yourself the way you would for an academic job. Those are going to be very different. For example, thinking of things like: I can do outreach because I understand [and took PhD classes on] gift exchange, or I can write this kind of thing because I’ve written this other type of thing. I have good project management skills, and I have good time management skills, because I wrote a dissertation or I had to write a lot of papers to a deadline and I did it. Thinking about how your academic skills transfer to business skills. I say “business skills” even though I’m in the nonprofit world because it turns out they’re actually very similar in the skills that they’re looking for. I think the same is true of government work.”

“People who go into government work should know that the requirements for a government resume are completely different than for anything else, and you will want to talk to someone about how to write a government resume. It’s a unique skill. And people going into nonprofits, the business, the corporate world, or even freelancing, should probably see if they can find someone to talk to about how to present themselves, even if it’s the career office at the university that you went to. There are some people who specialize now in this. I know I follow a couple of people on LinkedIn who will help you make that transition, in terms of taking things from your CV and putting them on your resume in a way that makes more sense for non-profit or corporate work.”

“I think that PhDs really do have a lot of the skills that corporate and nonprofit and government world want. I think they’re just not always very good at saying that they have those skills in a way that the corporate and non-profit and government world understand.”

She says that though she's always lived paycheck to paycheck, she also recommends volunteering if you have the time, since "it is a wonderful way to build new skills, or to start seeing how the skills you have transfer. Also, to start learning the lingo of how people talk about those skills in a different setting."

Another thing that Lisa found was important to talk about in securing her job was her experience outside her PhD, at the National Wildlife Health Center. Lisa worked there for six out of her seven years of her PhD, since she finds that stipends for PhD programs, especially humanities PhDs, don't cover the costs of living. She said in the summer she'd work 30-40 hours a week, and during the school year it could be anywhere from 10-20. She says that this job "was a little more connected to the wildlife realm, and I worked at a library there. When I was applying for the ACLS Fellowship, I actually didn't have my dissertation advisor as my main letter of recommendation for that fellowship. I had my boss at the National Wildlife Health Center, because she knew a lot more about the work that I did that was more relevant to the kinds of things that I would be doing for the Nature Conservancy."

On a larger scale, she says that there are programs for PhDs who are looking to make a change, especially visible through blogs, and that fellowships like the ACLS Public Fellowship program can help make that transition.

--- Finishing up

Lisa finishes our conversation by drawing the connection between her PhD and her current job. "I learn about new things on this job, which is the part of research that I enjoy. I enjoy the learning. And I like writing about it in a way that I feel is helping people learn. What I feel that Cool Green Science does—our tagline in fact is "Smarter by Nature"—our goal is to help people be smarter about nature. When I write, my goal is to teach people something in a fun way."

"I do want to emphasize that [Cool Green Science](#) is an amazing blog and people should read it," she says, smiling. "If people are interested in what I do, a good way to learn about that is to just to read what we're writing."