

Ecologist

Study how living things and the places they live fit together, then tell people what happens when that breaks.

TYPICAL PAY

\$82,220

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$53k to \$140k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

4 to 6 years

after high school

DEMAND

Moderate

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

No

anyone can do it

WHERE YOU WORK

Consulting firms, state and federal agencies, universities, land trusts

How you get there

- 1 High school diploma** Grade 12
Biology, chemistry and statistics matter most. Get outside a lot: volunteering on a trail crew or a bird count is real experience.
- 2 Bachelor's degree** 4 years
Ecology, biology, wildlife science, environmental science or natural resources. Take statistics and a mapping course, because data skills are what separate you from the crowd.
- 3 Field seasons and internships** During and just after college
Summer technician jobs with a state agency, a national forest or a university lab. Two or three of these is the normal price of a permanent job.
- 4 First permanent job** 1 to 2 years after graduating
Environmental consulting, a state agency, a land trust or a federal science center. Consulting hires the most new graduates.
- 5 Master's degree, if you want to lead** 2 years, optional
Two years, usually funded by a teaching or research assistantship. Most senior ecologist and project manager roles quietly expect it.

Pros and cons

- + You work outside in places most people only visit
- + Only a four-year degree needed to start
- + Your findings shape what gets built and what gets protected
- Years of seasonal jobs before anything permanent
- Pay is below other science careers with the same schooling
- Funding swings with politics and budgets

Optional boosts

GIS (geographic information systems) mapping. Statistics in R. Plant and bird identification. Wetland delineation training.

Good to know

The word is younger than the railway

Ecology was coined in 1866 by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel, from the Greek word oikos, meaning household. He meant the study of nature's housekeeping: who lives where, and on what.

A forest in New Hampshire found acid rain

Scientists at the Hubbard Brook Experimental Forest had been measuring the chemistry of rain and streams for years when the numbers showed the rain was turning acidic. That long, boring record...

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Environmental Scientists and Specialists, Including Health (19-2041.00)
Ecological Society of America: certification requirements
Colorado State University, Warner College of Natural Resources
USAJOBS, the federal government's official hiring site

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/ecologist>



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