American Psychological Association

Pursuing a Career in Climate and Environmental Psychology

ALL ABOUT CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT

How does the physical environment — whether it's a day spent hiking in the wilderness or cooped up in a poorly lit office — affect your mood? That's a research question for environmental psychologists.

What about the effect we are having on the environment? Climate and environmental psychologists study ways to promote pro-environment behaviors in each of us from household recycling to large scale public policy.

When this subfield of psychology began almost 40 years ago, environmental psychology was mostly concerned with offices, homes and urban areas, exploring how people worked and interacted within these environments. Now, this work is expanding significantly.

As we grow more concerned about humanity's impact on the climate and natural world, the research that environmental psychologists conduct is shaping norms and policies that can preserve the globe for generations to come.

Climate and environmental psychologists seek to improve the interactions of people with the world around us. They work in areas as varied as human responses to natural and technological hazards, conservation, environmental perception and cognition to loneliness, stress and design.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Climate and environmental psychologists work in nonprofit organizations, government agencies, businesses and nongovernmental organizations. They often apply their expertise to fields such as urban planning, environmental and interior design, and climate change. Those interested in academia can teach in social or developmental psychology programs where they apply psychological theories to environment-related behaviors.

Environmental psychologists are often researchers who investigate how people work with and respond to the world around them. Their research might ask why some people choose to recycle, what motivates people to adopt environmentally positive behaviors and why certain surroundings make people feel happy and productive.

Climate and environmental psychologists don't necessarily work in office settings; many work outside or at zoos, parks or within the community. Many work to reverse the problems of pollution, climate change and loss of biodiversity.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

The path to becoming an environmental psychologist usually follows these three steps:

1. Obtain an undergraduate degree in psychology
2. Get a master's degree in the subfield if offered
3. Earn a doctoral degree, usually a PhD

There are only a few graduate programs that focus on environmental psychology. However, each program has a different orientation — for example, architectural or ecological. Be sure you learn about each institution's focus before applying to make sure you're headed in the direction you want.

Students enrolled in a program that doesn't have an environmental focus can often apply their environmental interests to thesis or dissertation topics.

For students wanting to pursue a career in environmental psychology, it's important to augment your psychology course work with subjects such as environmental science, cultural geography and natural resource management.

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WHAT YOU CAN EARN

Salaries for environmental psychologists depend upon geographic location, work setting, educational background and job experience. APA's 2007 salary survey found that:

- For psychologists in research positions, regardless of focus, the median annual salary was $90,000.
- For psychologists in research administration positions, the median annual salary was $110,000.
- The median starting salary for doctoral-level research positions was $65,000.

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