

naturejobs

**THE CAREERS
MAGAZINE FOR
SCIENTISTS**

The eight speakers in a careers session at last week's annual meeting of the Ecological Society of America in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, might have had different jobs, but they all agreed on their basic motivation: curiosity. "I still do what I did when I was 13 years old, which is to jump into ponds and see what's in there," Mathew Leibold, an ecology professor at the University of Texas, Austin, told a crowd of about 40 graduate students and postdocs. Nevertheless, the paths to their respective careers, which ranged from academic to conservation scientist to government researcher, varied wildly.

Charting a successful course in ecology requires the same insight and expanded skills set as in any other scientific discipline. Bryan Brown, formerly Leibold's postdoc, joked that he "dissed" his mentor — who spoke before him — by leaving a fellowship involving data analysis for the opportunity to get his hands dirty. "I love being out in the field," said Brown, who is now an assistant professor of aquatic ecology at Clemson University in South Carolina. He added that picking up computational skills in Leibold's lab helped to make him more desirable in the job market.

John Orrock, assistant professor of biology at Washington University, St Louis, noted that expanding your skills set helps widen your job search — but that activities outside research are equally important. He encouraged the session's attendees to get involved in conference organization, committee activity and community ecology. "Participate in every aspect of ecology," he said. "The act of being engaged can get you into a full-time researcher position."

Like the panellists, almost all scientists pursue their chosen fields because of their curiosity. That inborn inquisitiveness can help them to secure grants, publish papers and obtain tenure. But curiosity can also lead to tunnel vision, when researchers forget to expand their skills outside their comfort zone. Expanding the realm of what to be curious about is a good move for scientists in all disciplines. Forcing yourself to care about things that don't immediately interest you can provide opportunities to spend more time on the things that do.

Paul Smaglik moderates the Naturejobs Nature Network career-advice forum.

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