



Spotlight on Environmental Careers: Environmental Law Attorney

Remember the Dr. Seuss fable, *The Lorax*? In the face of environmental devastation caused by unchecked development and greed, only the Lorax is willing to take a stand to defend nature and “speak for the trees.” Like the Lorax, people who want to defend the earth from catastrophic challenges like climate change, ecological systems collapse, and food and water scarcity should consider a career in environmental law. Creating a more sustainable and resilient planet takes dedicated earth advocates with a passion for justice.



Environmental law attorneys, photo from usnews.com

Becoming an attorney, including an environmental law attorney, takes years of hard effort. First, you must complete an undergraduate degree from a college or university, then study for and take a special exam called the LSAT. After that, you must apply and get accepted to a law school. Not all schools have programs in environmental law, so narrow down your choice of schools for application. It’s a rigorous and very competitive endeavor, but should you get accepted, then once in law school, you will select a field of interest. Depending on your focus, the course work in law school involves a mix of classes that focus on the science, economics, politics, environmental justice, and law of the specialty.

Upon graduation, the next step is a rigorous test called the bar exam. Every state requires lawyers to be licensed and requires taking a state's bar exam, passing a professional responsibility exam, and being admitted to the state's bar association. Environmental attorneys have rewarding careers in governmental agencies, non-profit organizations, or private law firms - working to further the causes like sustainability, conservation, and environmental justice.

One up and coming area of specialization is **climate change**. Climate change is the perhaps the direst environmental and social issue of the 21st century. As global temperatures soar and carbon levels in the atmosphere build, disasters from flooding, fires, drought, warming oceans and severe storms are off the charts. Sound laws and policies will be critical for governing mitigation of, adaptation to, and environmental justice reform surrounding climate change. Lawyers specializing in climate change need to know legal strategies for justifying and defending decarbonizing the economy. They must be able to evaluate policies and develop laws and regulations surrounding things like renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, carbon capture, and implementation of reimagined local food systems. Attorneys are needed to critically examine controversies and sustainable initiatives at the local, state, regional, national, and international levels and apply existing federal laws, such as the [Clean Air Act](#) to them. In addressing climate change, attorneys must understand the limitations of existing laws and be able to help shape and defend new laws and policies.



Another example area of Environmental Law revolves around **water resources**. With increased drought, plastic and other forms of pollution, sea level rise and fracking, water has become an area of great controversy and high demand. The field of water rights and quality needs laws and policies that defend the sustainable use and fair distribution of water. Sometimes this revolves around existing water laws like the [Clean Water Act](#), but often it means defending policy and new legislation for fair use of water as a publicly held and shared resource.

Specialization in **land use** is yet another example. This area of law deals with things like smart growth, sustainable development and planning, zoning, land preservation, watershed protection, wetland protection, and affordable housing. It also includes flood hazard mitigation, energy and land use regulatory decision-making, permitting, endangered species, real estate, and farmland and wild lands conservation strategies and policy.



BP Deep Water Horizon oil spill disaster, 2010. Many Environmental Law attorneys were needed. Photo from noaa.gov

Activity: Learn more about becoming an Environmental Attorney

As the three examples above show, there are numerous possibilities of how to focus a career in Environmental Law. Read [this](#) Sierra resource to see just one perspective.



If you do an online search for Law Schools that provides Environmental Law as a specialty, you find many choices. [Rutgers University](#), [Pace University](#), [UCLA-Berkeley](#), [Georgetown University](#), [Tulane University](#) and [Vermont Law School](#) are just a few examples* of the many U.S. schools that provide Environmental Law programs. Canadian Law schools like the [University of Toronto](#) and [University of Ottawa](#) are also an option as Environmental Law is established there.

Take a deeper dive by choosing one law school from the list above or your own search and explore the programs and courses that are offered in the journey to become an Environmental Law attorney. For instance, [Vermont Law School](#) has a robust Environmental Law program. Click the link above for Vermont Law School link page and scroll down to view the other environmental specializations available at the school. There are many choices like Food and



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Agriculture Law, Climate Change Law, Energy Law, Environmental Justice Law, Land Use, Water Resources, etc.

Click on any of the areas of specialization that interest you. Read the description and review the list of courses that are offered in the specialty. Check out some of the courses that interest you most in more detail. This exercise will give you an overview of the kind of requirements related to Environmental Law. Of course, every law school is different and will have their own requirements and courses.

Investigate Environmental Law degrees offered in other countries. On a global scale, where are these schools located? Do you see a relationship between the countries that offer Environmental Law degrees to their efforts in natural resources, sustainability, and conservation endeavors?

Maybe law school is not something that you see in your future. What other careers can assist Environmental Law attorneys conduct their work? What other careers work in partnership with environmental law?

Additional Questions

1. If you can see yourself becoming an Environmental Attorney someday, then which specialty interests you the most? Research more about that specialty online and at other law schools.
2. Maybe law school is not something that you see in your future. What other careers can assist Environmental Law attorneys conduct their work? What other careers work in partnership with environmental law?

**Note: The schools listed in this activity are being used as examples for informational purposes only; they are not endorsements of any of the law schools.*

NJ Student Learning Standards

Investigating careers in legal studies aligns with the New Jersey Department of Education's Student Learning Standards.

21st Century Life and Careers

Mission: 21st century life and career skills enable students to make informed decisions that prepare them to engage as active citizens in a dynamic global society and to successfully meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century global workplace.

Vision: To integrate 21st Century life and career skills across the K-12 curriculum and in Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs to foster a population that:

9.2 Career Awareness, Exploration, and Preparation

This standard outlines the importance of being knowledgeable about one's interests and talents, and being well informed about postsecondary and career options, career planning, and career requirements.



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Additionally, these science standards also apply to a career in Environmental Law:

Science 4-ESS3: Earth and Human Activity

ESS3.A: Natural Resources ♣ Energy and fuels that humans use are derived from natural sources, and their use affects the environment in multiple ways. Some resources are renewable over time, and others are not. (4-ESS3- 1) ESS3.B: Natural Hazards ♣ A variety of hazards result from natural processes (e.g., earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions). Humans cannot eliminate the hazards but can take steps to reduce their impacts. (4- ESS3-2) (Note: This Disciplinary Core Idea can also be found in 3.WC.)

Social Studies - Geography, People, and the Environment

Human Environment Interaction Human-environment interactions are essential aspects of human life in all societies and they occur at local-to-global scales. Human-environment interactions happen both in specific places and across broad regions. Culture influences the locations and the types of interactions that occur. Earth’s human systems and physical systems are in constant interaction and have reciprocal influences flowing among them. These interactions result in a variety of spatial patterns that require careful observation, investigation, analysis, and explanation.

Human and physical systems are in constant interaction and have a reciprocal influence on one another. • Human settlement activities impact the environmental and cultural characteristics of specific places and regions. • Political and economic decisions throughout time have influenced cultural and environmental characteristics. • Long-term climate variability has influenced human migration and settlement patterns, resource use, and land uses at local-to-global scales.

For more curriculum connections contact Kate Reilly, Manager of Education at Duke Farms, at kreilly@dukefarms.org.