BRITISH ECOLOGICAL SOCIETY CAREERS CONFERENCE, February 2015

Summary of key issues and advice relating to careers in policy

A presentation was given by a representative from a Think Tank called ‘Policy Exchange’ (www.policyexchange.org.uk/) on the topic of ‘Ecological Careers at the Science – Policy Interface’ However, most of the information presented could apply to Think Tank work in general, not just ecology. This report contains the following:

1. Speaker Biography
2. What are Think Tanks, what do they do?
3. What the work is like
4. How to get into the sector
5. Further Resources (organisation directories, jobs, internships)

Please Note: The information provided below is transcribed from notes taken during the event. Where possible, links have been provided to relevant online information so that readers can verify the information in this document. Dr Calum Leckie, UCL Careers Consultant

1. Speaker Biography

The speaker’s career path consisted of two years in an ecological consultancy after a Bioscience undergraduate degree, which was then followed by a PhD. The speaker then secured work experience with a law firm and also attended lectures on environmental law. This was followed by a three month part time placement with a Member of the European Parliament. Her current position was actually found using a social media site (Twitter).

2. What are think tanks and what do they do?

Think Tanks are research and advisory organisations and are thus a ‘step along’ from academia. They tend to be pretty small, with 5 – 10 people in an organisation being common. They may or may not be charities depending on their political affiliation and how they are funded. Some Think Tanks have one policy area focus, others have many (e.g. Policy Exchange).

Think Tanks are in many respects similar to consultancies, although the level of similarity depends on how they are funded. If the Think Tank is also a charity it has to be independent and therefore not work along a consultancy model. If it is not a charity, there is no such constraint on being paid by a client to conduct research and analysis, but that affects its reputation for objective research. Potential applicants need to thoroughly research the structure and funding of Think Tanks to ensure they’re working for one they are comfortable with. An additional difference is that a Think Tank first comes up with an idea and then
approaches interested organisations for support and funding (Note from CL: whereas Consultancies advertise their expertise and organisations approach them with an issue that needs a ‘solution’)

The political affiliation of a particular Think Tank, or their philosophical approach to problem solving, can affect the way that they approach policy topics. For example, Policy Exchange (which is an independent charity which doesn't have a political affiliation), uses ‘right of centre’ approaches to problem solving and thus emphasises more the role of market forces, whereas The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR, http://www.ippr.org) is left of centre and thus they emphasise more ‘statist’ policies. The speaker stated that an advantage of working in a Think Tank is that they give you more time and space to think outside the box, albeit within reason – there are still deadlines that have to be met!

There are a lot of Think Tanks around that cover energy but fewer that do work on the natural environment. Examples of some think tanks:

- IPPR http://www.ippr.org
- DEMOS http://www.demos.co.uk
- Fabian Society http://www.fabians.org.uk
- Reform http://www.reform.uk
- Institute of Economic Affairs http://www.iea.org.uk
- Green Alliance – Has a natural environment work strand: http://www.green-alliance.org.uk
- The Institute for European Environmental Policy http://www.ieep.org.uk

3. What the work is like

A typical project might start with the brainstorming of an idea which is followed by the development of a research proposal. The actual research may involve talking to stakeholders, conducting literature reviews and novel analysis. Reports are then written which are submitted for external review followed by publication and a ‘media hit’. A key next stage is ‘Advocacy’ – getting ‘by in’ on the report recommendations from MPs, Civil Servants, the press etc. The aim is to get a ‘Policy win’. One thing to bear in mind is that reports are going to be read by non experts. The process can typically take from three to six months.

4. How to get into the sector

The speaker presented a list of top tips to help you get into this area:

- Read the news! Note: Most Think Tank reports are free to download.
- Relevant work experience and internships are very important (note: Policy Exchange pays minimum wage for its internships)
- Social media is key (for gathering information and sourcing job opportunities). The speaker strongly suggested that you create a LinkedIn profile (www.linkedin.com) and also used Twitter.
  - Note from CL regarding LinkedIn: you can search for relevant interest groups in your policy area of interest. Joining such groups, and engaging in intelligent discussion, can drive useful contacts to your profile
- Keep an eye on specific select committees relevant to your policy area of interest e.g. The Environmental Audit Select Committee, the EFRA Select Committee http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/ - Note: researchers can always respond to the ‘Calls for Written Evidence’ with the possibility of appearing before a select committee to give evidence.
- Sign up for RSS feeds on relevant policy topics such as environmental policy bloggers and journalists e.g. Mark Avery, Miles King, and also blogs from Think Tanks themselves.

5. Further Resources
- **UCL JobOnline**: Use the ‘Government & Politics’ and ‘Internship/Placement’ search filters for relevant work experience opportunities. [http://www.ucl.ac.uk/careers/jobs](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/careers/jobs)

- Careers Library ‘careerstagged’ has lots of info on think tanks (note: your UCL username & password is needed): [http://www.careerstagged.co.uk/resources/think%20tank/all/popular/1/all](http://www.careerstagged.co.uk/resources/think%20tank/all/popular/1/all)

- **Guardian Guide to UK Think Tanks**: [http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/sep/30/list-thinktanks-uk](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/sep/30/list-thinktanks-uk)

- **Work for an MP**: [http://www.w4mp.org/](http://www.w4mp.org/)