



American Planning Association  
Making Great Communities Happen

## WHAT IS... ENVIRONMENTAL PLANNING?

The American Planning Association is an organization of planners and those interested in planning.

APA defines the purposes of planning as:

1. Helping to create communities of lasting value
2. Offering better choices for where and how people work and live
3. Engaging citizens, businesses, and civic leaders to play a meaningful role in creating communities that enrich people's lives.

The American Planning Association and its professional institute, the American Institute of Certified Planners, help planners, officials, and citizens by providing research, educational resources, practical advice and tools, and up-to-date information on planning.

**Environmental planners not only work to preserve and enhance the natural environment, they also seek to make cities and communities work with the natural environment. Cities and people have an impact on the surrounding environment, but they can also create new habitats for birds and animals and clean up contaminated rivers. Just about everything you do—from drinking a soda, to brushing your teeth, to driving to the movies—has some impact on the environment, and planners look for creative ways to lessen the negative effects and increase the positive.**

How much soda do you drink in a week? Multiply the number of cans or bottles you go through in a typical week by the number of people in your school and you've got a lot of trash to deal with! An environmental planner looks at this challenge and sees an opportunity for a recycling program. Your school has a parking lot; a planner could help install pervious or porous pavement so rainwater soaks back into the ground rather than being diverted to a sewage pipe as "runoff." A planner might also help you create a rain garden to help clean water naturally or plant a school garden to raise fresh vegetables. Reducing bad impacts on the environment is a major goal and finding opportunities to assist nature is another. You might think environmental planners are only interested in how much water you use when you brush your teeth, but all parts of the water cycle are important to them. Environmental planners help keep pollutants out of the drinking supply by regulating where things can be built and preserving unbuilt lands that are important to the water cycle. When planning for water, it is important to also know what to do with large amounts of stormwater, so environmental planners have many tricks or tools to keep the water clean and out of people's homes.

Environmental planners care about the air we breathe and plan programs to help improve air quality. For example, an environmental planner may plan for more trees to be planted in a new park or along a busy street. Trees are great to look at and make good homes for critters, of course, and they also help improve air quality. Environmental planning seeks to balance human needs with the protection of natural environments in order to improve our lives today and serve our needs in the future.

# MEET A PLANNER



**Megan Lewis, AICP, is an environmental planner who works in cities all over the country.**

**1. What is an environmental planner?**

Just like in planning overall, an environmental planner can be a generalist or a specialist. You can be someone who focuses on water issues, or solid waste, or wildlife habitats, or you can be more general and work on environmental compliance to make sure projects perform the way they are supposed to and comply with the law.

**2. What exactly does an environmental planner do?**

Lots of different things! Design projects so that they have minimal, if any impact, on the environment. Help identify places that should be conserved as valuable natural resources. Make sure projects comply with environmental laws and regulations, and help clients fulfill permit requirements.

In my job right now I'm focusing on two areas—helping the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service prepare Comprehensive Conservation Plans for two National Wildlife Refuges in Virginia, and helping communities in Illinois fix old factory land by designing and installing “green infrastructure” to manage stormwater and create natural landscapes.

**3. Why did you decide to be an environmental planner?**

I got interested in environmental issues when I was in college—I was an economics major, and I learned about the concept of “externalities”—those things that aren't accounted for on a spreadsheet like air pollution, or positive things, like open spaces. I learned more about pollution and contamination issues there, but more importantly I discovered land-use planning, and the idea of land conservation as a career. So I applied to graduate schools for planning that had strong environmental planning faculty, and ended up going to the University of Pennsylvania for my planning degree.

**4. What is craziest or funniest thing you've seen on the job?**

Early on in my career I was working as a junior planner in Philadelphia, and I had to go down to Washington, D.C., to do a site visit for an environmental assessment we were doing. It was for a fire station that had to be moved for a train extension. I did not have a car, so I remember taking the train down, getting into a cab, and having this taxi driver take me all around the various sites. I would jump out, snap my pictures, take my notes, and then get back into the cab. Some of the neighborhoods were a little rough, so it was nice to have someone along with me!

**5. How can a student get involved with environmental planning?**

It's important to ask yourself what interests you, and be as specific as possible. You can also get involved with on-campus environmental organizations, which is a great way to learn about what the issues are in the community.

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For more information about planning for a youth audience, visit the American Planning Association's website at [www.planning.org/kidsandcommunity](http://www.planning.org/kidsandcommunity) and the *Kids' Planning Toolbox* blog at <http://blogs.planning.org/kids>.

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