

Career Sheet: Coordinator of a Nature-Based Landscape Organisation



Bas Van der Veken, Coordinator of a Nature-Based Landscape Organisation

I am Bas Van der Veken, holding a master in bio-engineering (forestry and nature conservation) at KULeuven University, Belgium. For my PhD research, I investigated the relation between (expected) climate change and ranges of forest plant species throughout Europe.

Since 2009, I lead the NGO Regional Landscape Kleine and Grote Nete (the names of two main rivers in de region) that works on improving nature and landscape quality in the region together with partners from governments, agriculture, nature conservation, tourism, heritage, etc.

Since 2020 I am also the president of the 16 regional landscapes in Flanders (Belgium). Before I worked as a scientist at KULeuven University and was Head of Nature and Techniques at an NGO combining nature management and social integration.

In my free time as a volunteer, I am one of the managers of nature reserve Landschap De Liereman in northern Belgium.



OVERVIEW OF THE JOB

My job mainly consists of initiating (convincing people and partners of all kinds, finding budgets, ...) and coordinating projects focussing on ecological restoration or landscape quality on different scale levels, ranging from local (planting trees, greening playgrounds and public places, restoring ponds, ...) to regional scales (e.g., using nature-based solutions for restoring an entire river valley system).

I, therefore, coordinate a team of about 15 colleagues (landscape architects, biologists, engineers, communication specialists, ...) since we are trying to apply an integrated approach to all our projects. So, people of different backgrounds and skills have to work together (which makes the quality of the projects higher).

As a regional NGO, we always try to use a bottom-up approach and let inhabitants, farmers, etc. participate in the process to get support for the final goals.

So I need to combine my scientific background with skills in communication, finance, politics, social sciences, ... which makes it really interesting.



WHAT INSPIRED YOU

As a child, I was already passionate about all living things walking through the forest with my parents and our dog. I liked watching documentaries like National Geographic and people like Sir David Attenborough, Jane Goodall and others. Both at high school (biology, chemistry, ...) and at the university

(ecology, forestry, ...) I was lucky to have some really inspiring teachers and professors, some of them became really close friends until today.

Today I see a lot of young people being aware and taking responsibility for the major challenges our society faces in the coming decades, so I'm also inspired by them!



TYPICAL WORKING DAY

This is probably the best part of my job: there is no typical working day!

I can be in the field in the morning discussing the restoration of a river valley and have a meeting in Brussels with the Minister of Environment about new legislation in the afternoon. Other days I'm discussing new projects with my colleagues or work on my NGO's administration or budgets (not my favourite part of the job).

I always wanted a lot of variation in my job and working at three levels really makes this happen: on a national level (mainly policy), a regional level (mainly projects) and a local level (mainly nature management) as a volunteer in the nature reserve.



STUDY & CAREER PATH

After a rather general education at high school (studying Latin and math; there was no STEM at that time) I was sure about studying sciences at university, but until the last day, I was doubting between medicine and bio-engineering. I chose the latter because it had the broadest scientific program.

During the first years of my engineering program, I found out being in the field solving problems like the climate and biodiversity crisis was more my cup of tea than really specific work like e.g. in a laboratory. So I chose a specialisation in forestry and nature conservation and later, as one of the first persons in my university working on climate change at that time, I made a PhD on shifting range edges of forest plant species.

After a short period as a scientist working on sustainable agriculture and later working for NGO's in nature conservation, I could start a new NGO in the region where I live, working on local, real-life solutions for the global problems we face today. Starting alone in 2009, we now are 15 colleagues who share a passion for our region and the environment.



KEY SKILLS

Curiosity: To be a great Coordinator of a Nature-Based Landscape Organisation, curiosity is a key skill. *“It’s necessary to understand how the planet works, how people think, and combine both to find solutions to current problems.”*

Empathy: Coordinators of a Nature-Based Landscape Organisation spend most of their days liaising and collaborating with many people from different fields. Therefore, being empathic with their needs to find a solution that fits both environmentally and socially is essential.

Diplomacy: When working and communicating with a diverse variety of people from different backgrounds, diplomacy is a required skill. *“You need to talk to stakeholders, farmers, nature conservationists, etc., to find solutions to environmental problems.”*

Administrative skills: Not only Coordinators of Nature-Based Landscape Organisation spend their days in the field or meetings, but also do they deal with projects’ budgets. Being knowledgeable in administration and finances will help you carry out your tasks.

Leadership: Managing a big team requires leadership skills. Your team needs your support and leadership when launching new projects and encountering unexpected problems. Nurturing healthy relationships with your colleagues will assure the future of the organisations’ projects.

Flexibility: Coordinators of Nature-Landscape Organisations are people with strong flexibility and adaptability skills. Your daily tasks will range from local activities such as planting trees, to convincing stakeholders and dealing with budgets.



CAREER PROSPECT

Quite a lot of jobs (which is one of the main reasons I chose a broad scientific program in the first place) such as:

- Governments, the private sector and NGO’s working on technologies and/or nature-based solutions
- Engineering
- Teaching, what I do as a guest professor
- Academic or private research
- Politics
- Etc.



CHALLENGES

There are quite a few challenges in my job, including convincing policymakers to choose nature-based solutions and finding enough budget. Luckily the rising awareness about biodiversity and climate helps to see the importance of ecosystem services, both the general public as policymakers.



YOUR ADVICE TO STUDENTS

Follow your passion! A career in science is not always easy and failing is part of it (you learn most of these failures by the way). But if you are passionate about what you are studying or working on, it is way easier to persevere. We will need all kinds of scientific skills in the future so don't be afraid to choose what you're interested in the most.

Dream big! If you want to save the planet, you can. The best solutions will be born from a cocktail of scientific skills and optimism/enthusiasm.

Have fun! Working hard on serious matters doesn't mean you cannot have fun doing it. The friends I made at university or now my professional network I use on a daily basis.



YOUR ADVICE TO TEACHERS AND PARENTS

How can teachers and parents support their students / children?

By letting them follow their passion(s); by being realistic about the problems we face but positive about the future; by giving equal chances e.g. gender.



LEARN MORE

My LinkedIn profile:

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/bas-van-der-veken-20a77115/>

My organisation's website (in Dutch):

<https://rlkgn.be/>

Website (in English) of all regional landscapes in Flanders (Belgium):

<https://www.regionalelandschappen.be/regional-landscapes-flanders/7993>

Website of the nature reserve Landschap De Liereman:

<https://www.deliereman.be/>