

Career Sheet: Environmental Policy Advisor



Thomas Wellens (Environmental Policy Advisor, Cabinet of the Vice Governors of the province of Antwerp)

My name is Thomas Wellens, I'm 34 years old and I hold a Master of Science in biochemical engineering. Currently, I work as a Senior Policy Advisor Environment for the Cabinet of the Vice Governors of the Province of Antwerp, Belgium.

I give advice to the political leaders of the province concerning ecosystem restoration, environmental protection, and climate change. The red thread throughout my job is Nature Based Solutions (NBS).



OVERVIEW OF THE JOB

As an environmental policy advisor, my job comprises many different assignments. My main task is to make sure that our Vice-Governors, the decision-makers of the Province, use fact-based science and objective truths in their policy decisions; for example in the management of waterways, forest conservation, and landscape management. I also form a link between the local, provincial, Flemish and European governments as well as NGOs and the private sector.

On a day-to-day basis, I'm analysing and developing new policy positions on Nature Based Solutions with a focus on Ecosystem Restoration. This means making sure that our governments are working towards a liveable, climate-resilient future by investing in our forests, waterways and natural areas.

To accomplish this necessary ecological transition I work together with scientists and experts in the field, researchers at universities, and politicians making the decisions on all levels but also with private companies.



WHAT INSPIRED YOU

David Attenborough, one of the most famous and well-spoken science educators and documentary makers, has been a true inspiration for me. In his early career, he showed what natural wonders are on our planet but later on, he became an important advocate for restoring biodiversity, mitigating climate change, and protecting those natural wonders that he showed so well in his documentaries.

One quote of Mr. Attenborough has stuck with me since the day I heard it: "It seems to me that the natural world is the greatest source of excitement; the greatest source of visual beauty; the greatest source of intellectual interest. It is the greatest source of so much in life that makes life worth living."

I also have tremendous respect for my late grandfather who has shown me what it is to work with nature and respect it for its intrinsic value and beauty.



TYPICAL WORKING DAY

During a typical day, I speak, negotiate and work together with a lot of different stakeholders. To prepare for these meetings I research new scientific insights to incorporate in my policy advice and consult with and steer our provincial employees. I follow up on the management of the entire environmental department which employs around 350 people and has a 6 year budget of around 300 million euros.

Another day I would put on my boots and raincoat to visit one of our river valleys where we are restoring the natural flow of the river or a new forest that we are planting (I love forests). I talk with our experts and follow up to make sure that the projects succeed. Being on the terrain is one of my favorite moments of the week.

In short, I have to filter a lot of information from different experts and partners, summarize it and communicate it in a way that my bosses, the vice-governors, understand to make sound decisions.

During my working hours, but also in my time as a local politician, I give webinars, make presentations and write articles to communicate about how NBS and Ecosystem Restoration can help us transform society towards a durable and environmentally friendly future.



STUDY & CAREER PATH

When I was 12 years old I did not know what subjects to choose. One thing was for sure: I had an urge of wanting to know how natural processes work and how I could learn and influence those processes. Therefore, I chose science in high school which gave me a good understanding of the basics of how our natural world works.

After that I studied a Bachelor of Science in Biomedical Sciences at the University of Antwerp, a Bachelor of Science in Chemical Engineering, and a Master of Science in Biochemical Engineering at the Catholic University of Leuven. Complementary I followed the course 'Water and Climate Engineering' at the TU Delft.

After my graduation, I worked for a few years in the biomedical sector but I felt it was not my true passion. Every day after work, I was reading up on climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, water issues,... and I felt deep down what I've always felt: I want to give nature a voice in the political debate and be an advocate for the natural approach.

In my free time, I also followed an intensive education to become an alpinist (mountaineer) at Nature Friends International. When I'm in the mountains it helps me to truly connect with nature. Standing next to a massive glacier, makes you feel small and humble and it makes me realize that we are not the guardians of this planet but we are its guests and we have to learn from the natural world and treat it with respect.



KEY SKILLS

Active listening, social skills, collaboration, and people management: Since I work with a lot of different stakeholders with varying backgrounds and expertise, I need to show that I listen carefully to what they say/want, keep into account their emotions and make sure they are happy with what we discussed after the meeting. **Managing expectations** is a really important part of this process.

Critical thinking and problem-solving: One of the main things I learned at engineering school was to keep an open mind and be a critical thinker. Always make sure you understand what you are reading or what people propose to you. Don't always assume from the start it is correct or it is what you are looking for. Think for yourself and don't be shy to ask questions which help you to analyse the proposition.

Negotiation and persuasion: I have to persuade politicians. Not an easy job to do.

Presentation, writing, and nonverbal communication: To be able to accomplish the things I mentioned above, I need to communicate the intention of a policy proposal clearly so experts, politicians and civilians understand what it is about and what effect a certain policy measure will have.

Strategic planning, time management, delegating tasks, and leadership: Working as a policy advisor at a political cabinet takes a high level of physical and mental strain. To keep it balanced, I have to manage my time carefully and not be shy to delegate tasks to our employees. Leadership is not only influencing or steering a process by giving orders but also finding the right people that you trust to do the job for you.



CAREER PROSPECT

As an engineer I have a broad scientific background and skills as mentioned above which can be used in many different sectors:

1. Governmental institutions: managing ecosystem restoration projects, coordination, and writing of environmental permits, advising local municipalities...
2. Politics: being a politician yourself or advising politicians
3. Research or teaching: inspiring the next generation of future scientists or engineers
4. Private sector: Product development, consulting in the pharmaceutical sector, or starting your own business



CHALLENGES

Harnessing the power of nature is an extremely potent approach to deal with biodiversity loss and a changing climate. But it is still not widely used and accepted by our politicians and companies.

Instead of restoring our landscape, so we can give nature a chance to help us (for free!), they mostly invest in hard infrastructural solutions. These are very expensive, they take a long time to be

implemented and are not always very effective. This is partly because society is not fully aware of what NBS are, and what they can do.

So, the main challenge in my job is to make sure that the decision-makers are aware of NBS and Ecosystem Restoration as powerful tools to help combat climate change and prevent biodiversity loss.



YOUR ADVICE TO STUDENTS

Don't be afraid of making mistakes. Don't be afraid of taking a step into the unknown.

For instance, the project coordinator for one of our river restoration projects studied to become a musician but always had an interest in nature. After working for five years at a university he decided to switch careers and focus on learning more about nature and science and apply for the river restoration job. So it is never too late to choose a STEM or NBS career. But I would advise studying something like engineering, which will give you a broad understanding of different scientific fields and a wide array of possible career paths.

And remember: passion, commitment and hard work are essential to achieving your goals and dreams. You have to be invested in what you do and try to aim to become the best.



YOUR ADVICE TO TEACHERS AND PARENTS

Don't punish students / children for pursuing different subjects or interest areas other than what you've had in mind for them. Unconditional support and love from your family, no matter what you do, is an important motivator to become an expert in your field. Our society and natural world have gone through an extreme number of rapid changes (sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse) which leads to new professions and technologies that don't even exist today. Keep an open mind.

During my high school years, I had a chemistry teacher who was extremely passionate about science and teaching. She believed in my potential and showed me what was possible with hard work and determination. This motivated me to choose STEM education. With this, I mean teachers can have a big impact on the future of the students. So show your students why they have to learn mathematics, theoretical models or scientific laws. Show them real-life examples of their practical use. Don't be afraid to take them into a lab or outside the classroom. Show them the power of science and what it is really about.



LEARN MORE

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSb6TMvpzt8> – Dutch - An interview I gave as part of my election campaign during the Flemish Parliament elections. It encompasses my motivation for bringing scientific truths and objectivity to the political debates and why NBS and ER are wonderful and rewarding approaches towards a more sustainable and biodiverse world.

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/thomaswellens/> - My professional career page (LinkedIn) where I post regular short articles about our work and the implementation of NBS.

<https://www.provincieantwerpen.be/leefmilieu.html> - Dutch - The website of the province of Antwerp where you can find a lot of information concerning environmental policy and projects.

<https://bosgroepen.be/antwerpen/> - Dutch – The website of our Forestry Groups who are our toolbox on the terrain to manage and plant forests for the future.

<https://www.regionalelandschappen.be/regional-landscapes-flanders/7993> - English – The website of the Regional Landscapes who are our partners and go to experts to implement NBS on the terrain. Be sure to check this awesome video about the regional landscapes: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OhkauV_2YVY&t=17s, it is in English!

