Fields of Dreams
The top colleges for studying natural resources and conservation

BY DAVID KLENDA

Being green is no longer a fringe interest. It’s a mainstream concern among real estate developers and manufacturers, as well as economists and scientists.

A degree in the field of natural resources and conservation often focuses on biology, ecology, chemistry, geology and statistics. This education is a good fit for careers that include park rangers, fisheries managers, wildlife biologists, researchers and grant writers for conservation organizations. Students could round out their education by including a minor in computer programming or business, allowing them to take on careers designing mobile apps that help consumers remember to recycle, advise businesses on how to build sustainably or develop cleaner transportation.

For those looking to find a program, a good place to start is College Factual, which provides rankings for the best schools. These rankings are based on hard statistics such as student-to-faculty ratio, freshman retention, graduation rates and average salaries of graduates.

Here are the top 10 schools to study natural resources and conservation:

1. VIRGINIA TECH
   Blacksburg, Va.
   The goal of the College of Natural Resources and Environment at Virginia Tech is to advance the science of sustainability. For instance, one professor is studying the use of drones to measure hard-to-reach data on nature reserves. Programs extend from the southwestern Virginia campus to the Amazon to find science-based solutions for land management problems. Most of the teachers — 88 percent — are full-time. At a total net cost of about $21,000 per year (for everything from tuition to books) for in-state students, Tech is a great value as well. crne.vt.edu

2. TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY
   College Station, Texas
   The Department of Ecosystem Science and Management at Texas A&M is involved with a wide range of projects including the study of genetic markers in pine trees, controlling invasive plant species, food sciences and ranch management. Researchers and students use technology such as LIDAR and laser sensors to study forest ecosystems, changing water levels, land use and carbon storage. The school’s location in east-central Texas gives students access to a wide range of ecosystems, including the Gulf of Mexico and the Chihuahuan Desert, which crosses the Texas-Mexico border. The student population of more than 48,000 undergrads offers a truly big playing field with many opportunities for cooperation and cross-studying. essm.tamu.edu

3. UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA
   Gainesville, Fla.
   The School of Forest Resources and Conservation at the University of Florida gives students experiences that only the southeastern U.S. can, such as; internships to help restore the Everglades or field study dives in the Caribbean. Those in the program study a range of subjects, including aquaculture, forestry and geomatics (surveying, GPS and other forms of mapping). Students also learn how to use prescribed fires to protect homes and national forests. sfrc.ufl.edu
OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY
Corvallis, Ore.
The College of Forestry at Oregon State has a strong distance-learning program, with about 70 students earning online degrees in natural resources conservation in 2015. The natural resources program emphasizes the critical relationships between humans and the environment. The program is interdisciplinary, combining liberal arts and science with traditional environmental studies. The education is designed to be flexible with room for students’ personal interests. forestry.oregonstate.edu

MICHIGAN TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY
Houghton, Mich.
The School of Forest Resources and Environmental Science at Michigan Tech understands that the heart of every environmental problem is proper ecosystem and natural resource management. The school, located in the state’s Upper Peninsula, provides an ideal location for field-based work. Michigan Tech owns a 5,500-acre research forest to demonstrate management techniques. mtu.edu/forest

NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY
Raleigh, N.C.
Students at the College of Natural Resources at NC State not only study the theories and science behind environmental stewardship, they get their hands dirty, too. Those enrolled in the Paper Science and Engineering program and Sustainable Materials Technology program design what the future will be built from. And the Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management program allows graduates to interact with people and make a difference. Also highly-ranked is the Chemical Engineering program, which teaches how to manage components of the modern green world. caes.ncsu.edu

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS
Davis, Calif.
The College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences at UC Davis is expertly positioned to give students a range of career possibilities. Students have the opportunity to work with the brightest technological minds and help them be greener. UC Davis has long been a huge influence in California agriculture. Its Viticulture and Enology Department works closely with the wineries in Napa and Sonoma valleys. The school’s proximity to Sacramento, natural refuges such as the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area, and facilities like the Student Farm and Russell Ranch make it an ideal place to study agricultural, environmental and social needs. caes.ucdavis.edu
UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE
Durham, N.H.
The Department of Natural Resources and the Environment at UNH dives deep into nature, not only in the northeastern U.S. but also globally. Students have been studying the effects of sea-level rise in local salt marshes in addition to learning about the life of New Hampshire loons. Students also travel to Grenada, Ireland, New Zealand and Portugal to learn how local ripples can cause global waves. UNH is also a top-ranked school for social work, enabling its students to learn how to understand and guide the social and family effects of environmental science. colsa.unh.edu/nren

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY
Fort Collins, Colo.
The Warner College of Natural Resources at CSU specializes in producing graduates who can provide sustainable solutions to natural resource conservation and management problems. Its dual degree in Natural Resource Management and Economics empowers its students to find solutions that make financial sense. Students in this program are required to complete one summer of fieldwork, and career counselors help turn this fieldwork into full careers. warnercnr.colostate.edu

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
Athens, Ga.
Georgia’s Warnell School of Forestry & Natural Resources creates leaders in conservation and sustainable forest management by teaching them the latest ideas and technology for real-world applications. Study-abroad programs enable students to work in Brazil, South Africa or Costa Rica. UGA is a leader in conservation medicine, which is concerned with the interface between the health of humans, wild animals, domesticated animals and the environment itself. At least 94 percent of the school’s entire freshman class stays on for a second year. warnell.uga.edu

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