

# Careers Up Close: Sonya Sachdeva on the U.S. Forest Service

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Sonya Sachdeva is a social scientist with the U.S. Forest Service, based in Evanston, Illinois. She uses research on moral decision-making and sociocultural influences to improve the human dimension of natural resource management.

- **Current role:** Research social scientist at the U.S. Forest Service, 2015–present
- **Previously:** Postdoctoral researcher, Northwestern University, 2012–2014
- **Terminal degree:** PhD in cognitive science and statistics, 2005–2010

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## Landing the job

After my postdoctoral position at Northwestern, I worked in the private sector for a bit, and that's where I honed a lot of the computational skills that I use currently in my work—programming, natural language processing, those types of things. And then over that time frame, I learned about this position through a flyer that came in my email—I think I still have that flyer somewhere. It sounded like the most perfect job description I could have written for myself, so I applied.

The federal hiring process is not easy. It was 6 months, I think, from finding out about the job to actually getting the offer, but it's been very worthwhile. A lot of the research efforts that happen at the Forest Service are very ecologically based, but our unit, People and Their Environments, is one of the few units that is completely comprised of social scientists or people who are working on the human dimension of natural resource management.

## **From basic to applied**

When I was a doctoral student, my primary area of research was looking at morally motivated decision-making and, specifically, the sociocultural influences on how people make decisions. Now my research is even more refined because so much of our work has a very explicit application focus. The whole dichotomy between basic and applied research is very blurry within the Forest Service. We are very practitioner oriented; we're thinking about how the work that we do can have an impact not just on our national forests, but on the broader public.

## **Scaffolding environmental stewardship**

One project we've been working on is in Jamaica Bay in New York. This particular bay is used by all sorts of local community members, including the local Indo-Caribbean Hindu population. In a lot of Hindu ritual practices, you need access to a source of flowing water, so they treat the bay as a proxy for holy rivers in India. In my postdoc, I'd done work with Hindu people who use the Ganga River for religious practices, so to find that same kind of instance happening here in New York City was just amazing.

We partnered with this local nongovernmental organization, Sadhana, that works to both foster these religious sentiments and, at the same time, alleviate some of the tensions that have arisen as a result of these practices. There have been local fisher communities, for example, and even people at the National Park Service who say that some of the practices may be damaging to the fragile ecosystem of the bay. In response, Sadhana has been doing a really fantastic job organizing monthly cleanups and using religious values to scaffold environmental stewardship practices.

Over the course of a year or so, we participated in these cleanups and interviewed a lot of the people there about their journey to becoming environmental stewards of the bay. That's probably the most application-focused research project that comes to mind because it was fully conceived and determined by the practices that were already occurring.

## **Public lands in a pandemic**

On a personal level, I don't know a single female working academic with young children who has not been impacted by the pandemic just in the sense of having less time to work. It feels like there are a lot of constraints these days and things that are pulling me in hundreds of different directions.

In terms of research topics within the realm of natural resource management, we're using social media to compare people's engagement with green spaces before and after the pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 has been unparalleled because we now see that the outdoors have become a place of respite

for people. In the absence of basically any other type of recreational activities, people are now flocking to the national parks, city parks, and all of the other green spaces. We've also seen youth engagement increase on all public lands.

## **Compassionate conservation**

The fellow scientists and researchers that I've met at the Forest Service are pretty amazing. Not only are they incredibly intelligent, compassionate, engaged people, but they just have this love of nature and trees and our forest that you would not believe. Many times, the people who do social science research are, by choice or not, confined to their lab environment, but that's not the case with the Forest Service. Every single person here is really committed to conserving our public lands, and that's just amazing to see.

## **Flexing federal funding**

There have definitely been some challenges in this. We don't have the same degree of flexibility that academic researchers might. Of course, that's kind of tempered by the availability of resources that we have and the fact that we're able to work with the entire system of the national forest, which is such an advantage. There are some challenges, though, in learning about the processes and systems that are in place. Another big challenge is that our funding is determined by Congress, and there has been so much uncertainty over the past several years.

## **Exploring experimental methodology**

On the Forest Service side of things, I hope to be able to do work that can inform policy and management decisions in more meaningful ways. In one of the projects that we're working on right now, we're trying to bring natural language processing into the ways that the Forest Service functions to make it more efficient, flexible, and responsive to the public's needs.

## **Eyes wide open**

Often, in a graduate program, everything is gearing you toward finding faculty positions, but there are a lot of other career pathways. I would encourage people to look on [USA Jobs](#), look at their local- and city-level parks departments or forest departments and organizations like the Nature Conservancy. So many organizations and public institutions are doing amazing research, and so much of it can be even more impactful, perhaps, than going the traditional academic route. Keep your eyes and ears open, and be mindful of these other opportunities.

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