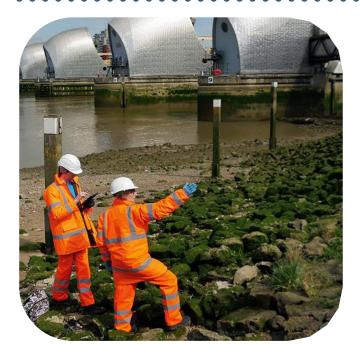
Katie Boon Technical Advisor for Flood and Coastal Risk Asset Management –

Royal Geographical Society with IBG

Advancing geography and geographical learning



Job title: Technical Advisor for Flood and Coastal Risk Asset Management Organisation: Environment Agency Location: Tonbridge, Kent. UK

How did you get to where you are now?

I chose to study Physical Geography at Durham University. I never intended to get a job in a sector relating to geography, however, throughout my degree I became more open and excited to the idea of seeing where geography could take me in the work place.

After university I applied to the Environment Agency, not really knowing what it involved but felt I had nothing to lose. A year and a half later, I had embraced the work and training available and was successful in gaining a promotion and the opportunity to undertake a part time Master's in Flood and Coastal Engineering over two years. I have just completed my first year and hope to have successfully achieved the degree by next September. This will assist me in obtaining another qualification with the Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management (CIWEM).

What do you do as part of your role?

The North Kent Asset Performance Team focuses on the life cycle of flood risk assets, including earth embankments, seawalls, pumping stations, flood storage reservoirs and control structures that are located on main river watercourses within the North Kent catchment area. Our team undertakes regular assessments of the condition of these assets to enable us to identify, plan and commission works. My responsibilities are very varied and include: identifying and bidding for future works; project management; maintaining close relationships with all internal teams, consulting prior to works and taking action to enhance knowledge on all environmental aspects that require attention; responding to Flood Risk Activity Permits (FRAP); using ArcGIS software to visually present projects; and proactively engaging with significant stakeholders.

Alongside this I am also a Category 1 Responder as a Flood Incident Duty Officer which involves providing 24/7 flood support every six weeks, utilising software to monitor rain and tide levels to aid quick and effective decision making.

What skills and characteristics do you need for this role, apart from geographical knowledge?

Project works require clear communication between multiple internal Environment Agency teams and with external stakeholders. Good organisational skills are also essential for effective project management as funding for projects are restricted to one financial year. Prioritising projects requires strong decision making skills, and this can be tested when you are dealing with an incident response, where the decisions you make could impact the damage caused to properties as a result of a flood event. Leadership is also important to have when chairing meetings, organising events or delivering training.

How does geography feature in your work/ what difference does it make?

The geographical knowledge I gained during university has become critical in informing my decision making when carrying out an incident response. It has also given me a holistic understanding on a range of aspects including biodiversity, groundwater and geomorphological processes.

The field skills I gained while studying geography have transferred to my current role, especially during site visits. I also regularly use GIS to present the different types of works we are delivering to the assets in the North Kent Catchment, and it is a very useful tool for modelling and providing a visual form of communication to external stakeholders.

What is the most interesting or enjoyable project you've worked on, and why?

The greatest opportunity that was opened up to me is my involvement with the Thames Estuary Asset Management 2100 (TEAM2100) team. This was formed as a result of the Thames Estuary 2100 Strategy, which focuses on managing tidal flood risk in the Thames estuary to the end of the century and beyond. The plan is trying to overcome one of the greatest challenges that we face in flood risk management; climate change. It is incredibly interesting to understand in detail how we have determined flood risk management decision pathways for the next 100 years, including factors such as the future required defence levels and timings for intervention. I find it a privilege to be involved in such an important strategy and to know that I am assisting in making a difference to protecting London in the future.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to go in to this career?

1. Don't become fixated on graduate roles. Be open minded to all opportunities and don't feel you have to get a graduate role because that is what people do when they leave university. Explore different routes to understand what you think may suit you. If I had narrowed myself to just graduate jobs, I would not be in the role I am today. 2. Understand the needs of the career you want to pursue (if you know this in your final year). I had no interest in staying at university to study a Master's as I was ready for a routine job and earning my own money. However, I did soon find that many of the jobs I was applying for were mainly focusing on sustainability which unfortunately often required a Master's. As a result I got rejected from a lot of places. I learnt that if you do know what you want to specialise in, it is worth investing time into exploring whether a Master's is likely to be necessary. 3. Accept rejection and make the most of it. It is almost inevitable that you will receive some rejection when applying for jobs. My advice is to look at this positively and use it to your advantage. Do everything you can to contact the interviewers to gather feedback on your performance. This will give you the information you need to go in more confidently next time... and it might just land you your dream job.