



'Green-collar' workers joining jobs revolution

Jobs in the sustainable economy are booming and there are plenty of ways to plant yourself in the middle of it, writes Megan Byrne.

WE WALK through it every day and yet many of us barely give it a moment's thought. It is the air we breathe, the water we drink, the ground we stand on and the weather at our backs.

It is our environment and it determines our very livelihood – but not just physically. An increasing number of Australians are forging environment-focused – or “green-collar” – careers for themselves, boosting their financial subsistence and job satisfaction while playing a part in securing our planet's future.

While some people feel that the green revolution is recent – a response to the effects of droughts, floods and fires, and films such as *An Inconvenient Truth* – Mark Lister, the group manager of corporate affairs at sustainable business solutions organisation Szencorp, says his company has promoted environmentally sustainable business and economic practices since 1983.

“There are several cost-saving and productivity benefits of changing the way we do things so they reduce the impact on the environment,” he says.

“We work on the theory that sustainable practices can't be adjunct to business. They should be a fundamental part of the business model. Leaders are now recognising that the model we have can't continue.”

The profile of sustainability has taken off in the past two or three years, Lister says. Australia's ratification of the Kyoto Protocol in 2007 boosted green practices and businesses in Australia, and in February, US President Barack Obama said his \$US787 billion (\$1.08 trillion) eco-

nomic stimulus package was “laying the groundwork for a new, green energy economy that can create countless well-paying jobs”.

The Australian Conservation Foundation and the Australian Council of Trade Unions agree that the rapidly growing green economy has the potential to expand employment opportunities but say there is a significant skills shortage.

However, the wide range of courses and training programs available means that anyone – regardless of age, profession or experience – can take advantage of the booming green economy.

Completing an environmental degree can provide the necessary skills for a green career.

Monash University graduate Genevieve Ackland began a job as a carbon research assistant at Greening Australia just months after completing honours in environmental science. Ackland, whose honours project investigated carbon stocks in South-East Asian tropical forests, says she wouldn't have got the job without honours.

Completing my thesis gave me the experience I needed for this job,” she says. “I thought I'd end up in environmental consulting – I didn't even know there were jobs in this area, or that you could earn a good living working for a not-for-profit organisation.”

She says she finds her work – which involves data collection and modelling from various forests and plantations around the country – extremely fulfilling.

“My job substantiates my work and financial requirements but it also meets my own personal conservation goals working for an organisation that has made a difference and has got clients interested in investing in the future has boosted my morale.”

But you don't need a degree for green-collar careers – there is room for apprentices and trainees.

WPC Group brings together

employers and people interested in jobs in renewable energy, energy and water efficiency and water management, through its Greenskills apprenticeship and traineeship program. Its chief executive, Nick Wyman, says green has gone mainstream.

“We've received a lot of interest from employers and prospective employees and have set up panels of employers in Victoria and NSW who are getting people into jobs within the green economy,” Wyman says.

“We have everything from building and construction companies that are retrofitting office buildings to large multinational corporates with in-house sustainability programs.”

Wyman says the demographic applying for the program is quite different from what was originally expected.

“When you think of apprentices, you think of 17- to 24-year-olds. But we've been overrun with people from all different backgrounds and age groups looking for an opportunity, like people in their 30s looking for a career change,” he says.

Even tradies are making their presence felt in the green economy.

The Master Plumbers and Mechanical Services Association of Australia has been running a green plumbers' program since 2001, teaching them about solar hot-water systems, water-efficient technology and natural wastewater treatment systems.

More than 10,000 plumbers worldwide have now completed the program. One of them, Tim Dickinson, says more people are asking whether plumbers are green.

“There's real opportunities when you can promote yourself as being environmentally aware,” Dickinson says.

“I get a lot of satisfaction from advising my clients on sustainable options that meet their needs.”

It is clear that jobs in the green



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economy are sustainable for both the environment and the employees – making a difference.

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