

Helen Cooper

Content Editor at Monterey Bay Aquarium



What is your current occupation?

I'm a Content Editor for the Monterey Bay Aquarium. In this position, I write content for both the Aquarium and Seafood Watch's websites, email, SMS, and print magazines, with a focus on the Aquarium's science and conservation programs. The Aquarium's mission is to inspire conservation of the ocean, and we are involved with a lot more than the awesome animals you see when you visit. For example, I may write a web story about the status of tuna management for the Seafood Watch website or work with our policy team to create a campaign to reduce plastic pollution.

Beyond writing, I also help develop our content strategy (i.e., how do we use our website, email, etc., to accomplish our larger institutional goals?).

What is your educational background?

I have a B.A. in Government, and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. My graduate work was focused on the effects of ocean acidification on several key species including krill and coralline algae. My background in ocean science and marine biology is helpful to work in the Aquarium, but it also requires a lot of other skills including digital marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), google analytics, basic web design, and content strategy. I learned these skills mostly by listening to podcasts, reading lots of articles, taking a few courses online, and by starting my own blog. It was the combination of these skills and my science background that landed me my job at the Aquarium.

A key message for students is that the geoscience workforce is dynamic, and boundaries between sectors and occupations are fluid. How has this been true in your career?

Science communication is critical for any science organization — whether it's an environmental non-profit, university, energy company, or tech startup. It is also a skill that is highly transferable. Towards the end of my graduate degree, I started learning a lot about science communication and digital marketing. With the skillset that I was developing, I worked with a new climate-focused startup company, a small eco-tourism business, and now the Aquarium. In my current position, I work on policy issues, fundraising, education initiatives, and even retail. I think that adding the content creation and digital marketing skillset to my science background has opened a lot of doors for my career.

Where do you see your sector moving in future years? How would you advise students to prepare to be competitive job applicants and successful employees?

So much communication is happening online, and this will only continue in the future. Currently, the Aquarium focuses a lot on web and email communication, but trends change rapidly online. So, we've recently started communicating with some of our audiences via SMS. Our social media team recently launched a new Discord channel — a very rapidly growing social platform.

To be a competitive applicant for a position like mine, you need to be able to communicate science to many different audiences: the general public, funders, other scientists, policymakers, etc. That means that you may need to adapt your writing style depending on who the piece is for. As scientists, we don't learn the art of storytelling — writing a science paper is very different than writing something for the general public. If you are interested in science communication, consider taking some classes on storytelling or journalism.

Also, developing skills in a specialty area is very helpful — simply being able to write about science isn't enough. Do you like social media? Gain some expertise there. Do you like analytics? Learn all that you can about web analytics and performance metrics.

Build your own portfolio so that you have examples of your work. This may mean creating your own blog or finding opportunities to write for an organization.

What is the role of networking in your sector? Do you have advice for a student who is just beginning to build their network? What is the best way for students to get their foot in the door?

Like any sector, networking is important in my position. Even now, I find that networking within my organization is very important. We have several hundred employees, all doing very different things. But my job involves telling the exciting stories of things happening at the Aquarium to our audience. So by developing relationships with colleagues, I learn more about what's

happening behind the scenes in Animal Care or what new programs our Education department are developing. I can then share those inspiring stories with our audiences.

When I was first looking for a job after graduate school I found networking to be a very helpful way to learn about the different types of jobs available. I started by connecting with past graduate students from my lab who were a few years into their career. I asked them to chat with me about their path and current positions. I let them know that I was looking for work, and often they were happy to connect me with other people they knew. I also reached out to a few local professionals that had jobs that I found interesting. Not everyone will say yes, but some will.

I'd also recommend keeping up with news and trends in whatever sector you think you want to enter. Follow a few blogs or media sites in the industry. Are there any meetups of people in that industry or opportunities to volunteer? Are there ways to freelance or build up your portfolio?

What does a “typical” day of work look like for you?

A typical day for me probably starts with a meeting with my team to check in on the upcoming projects for the week. Then I may work on a story I'm writing for the website, then I'll review and provide feedback on any upcoming stories, emails, or texts that other team members have been working on. Then I might log in to Google Analytics to pull some metrics of how our web pages are performing before sharing that with my team. Later I'll meet with a colleague to work on the web pages we're creating to accompany a new exhibit opening at the Aquarium. Finally, I might brainstorm some ideas for what we can share on social media for a National Seafood Month campaign.

What is the best part of your job?

I love that I get to write about very cool things (hello deep-sea animals!) in hopes of educating and inspiring others to love the ocean as much as I do. It's also satisfying to see that my work is helping move the needle on some important conservation issues. For example, our campaign last summer got over 10,000 letters sent to legislators to encourage them to pass several bills into law to curb plastic pollution. Five out of six of the bills were passed!

I get to use my scientific background and analytical skills, but also get to be creative. In graduate school, I often struggled to write scientific papers, but find that writing for the web is really enjoyable for me. I'm also always learning and there is no shortage of new and different projects to take on. Plus, the team of people I work with is fantastic.

Do you have any other comments or advice for students looking to enter your sector of the geoscience workforce?

Don't underestimate the zoo and aquarium sector — these organizations have a very diverse range of jobs available including aquarists, water quality technicians, naturalists, research scientists, policy experts, graphic designers, writers, videographers, fundraisers, educators, and

many more. And because these are science-based organizations, they may be a good fit even if you don't go into a pure "science" position.

Connect:

www.linkedin.com/in/helen-cooper