A day in the working life: Dr James Walmsley

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A DAY IN THE WORKING LIFE

Dr James Walmsley

Educating tomorrow’s foresters is a multi-faceted vocation. In the latest of an occasional series of features showcasing roles within the industry, Bangor University’s School of Natural Sciences Forestry Lecturer, Dr James Walmsley, talks to Carolyne Locher on what his role entails.

Bangor University is located just to the north of Snowdonia National Park in North Wales and forestry has been taught here for 115 years. Of the 100 or so academic staff within the school, 12 directly facilitate forestry education. “We are an interdisciplinary school and students study a range of modules,” says Dr James Walmsley. “Members of staff range from foresters to those that see themselves more as tropical ecologists, social scientists, soil scientists and agroforesters.”

As course director, James – who views himself as a general forester – oversees five forestry degree programmes: three undergraduate degrees (BSc Forestry, MSci Forestry, BSc Conservation with Forestry) and two postgraduate, learning degrees (MSc Forestry and MSci Tropical Forestry). He likens his role to that of a spider crafting a web: liaising with colleagues and guest speakers; structuring study timetables for students and colleagues; writing new course modules; organising, leading and facilitating field trips and study tours; and responding to individual queries from colleagues, students, alumni, employers and other stakeholders.

As senior lecturer, James runs lectures, seminars and one-to-one tutorials, marks coursework and exams, advises on dissertations and assigns field trips for students across all years. “We have over 100 students studying across our undergraduate and postgraduate forestry-related degrees, with more than half studying at MSci level via distance learning,” he says. As part of his work, he creates a ‘to do’ list and an Outlook calendar for forward planning. “I plan my week on study tours. They are phenomenal.” Recent speakers include Shireen Chambers (ICF) and Gary Kerr (Forest Research) and Andrew Holland (Coforest). “They also organise regular volunteering activities as well as showcasing successful alternative management planning, GIS, ecology and the forestry profession.”

James working with distance-learning students in the Bobiri forest reserve (Ghana). This group was attempting to relocate model caterpillars that had been placed in the forest the day before.

Beginning his PhD in 2004, and given the freedom to devise his own research programme, he galvanised forestry lectures and field trips, catching up on the education he had missed. Completing his PhD in 2008, he only regret is the title: Forestry: ‘whole tree harvesting and wood ash recycling to forests: Case Studies in Upland Silva spruce in Wales’.

“Rather than ‘wood ash,’ I wish I had used the phrase ‘bio-ash.’ The word ‘bio’ was an invention that came after my PhD was published and, along with ‘bio-char’, seems to attract far more interest than ‘wood ash,’ he says.

An opportunity to organise the distance learning forestry programmes arose shortly after he completed his PhD. Seeing it, he rapidly expanded the programme, with student numbers increasing from less than 30 in 2009 to over 100 four years later. Becoming senior lecturer in 2016, he took on the role of course director for the undergraduate programmes. His teaching timetable varies from zero to 40 plus hours a week (on study tours). “The key skill required for a lecturer is communication. You can be the most knowledgeable expert on a topic, but if you cannot communicate clearly and you cannot excite, enthuse or interest a student, they will not engage.”

At the start of a degree, undergraduates use lecture theatres such as the Dinnin Library, which has “one of the best collections of forestry-related literature in the country” and Bangor’s state-of-the-art computing facilities. Students are introduced to the complexities of forests on regular visits to sites on Bangor’s doorstep, “breaking down preconceptions that all forests should be filled with native oaks, bluebells and red squirrels.” Tree identification is a core activity in the first semester and students rapidly master the identification of conifers despite initial nervousness.”

From the start, students are encouraged to create a parallel education alongside their formal curriculum, in keeping with their own interests. “The Bangor Forestry Students Association surpass all expectations, organising guest speakers pretty much every week. They are phenomenal.” Recent speakers include Shireen Chambers (ICF); Gary Kerr (Forest Research) and Andrew Holland (Coforest). “They also organise regular volunteering activities as well as showcasing successful alternative management planning, GIS, ecology and the forestry profession.”

During a 12-hour phone interview (with James in Ghana), Gary Kerr (Forest Research) was among the speakers. “I developed a live interactive quiz that enables students to participate anonymously via their phones, in real time. It allows me (and the students) to see instantly, for example, that 75% of the group feel confident answering questions on tree species identification, or that 80% are unsure of a term used in forest measurement.”

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The levels of herbivore predation in different forest types. On a global basis, herbivores such as caterpillars graze 70% of annual forest biomass growth. Understanding what predates on these herbivores, in different forest types, is one step in understanding, and then addressing, the problem.

Common both to UK and overseas study tours, we always meet and work with Bangor graduates; it’s unavoidable. It’s always a delight to see how the careers of a student I have taught has developed.”

Since his PhD, James has published 22 papers. ‘Stump harvesting for Bioenergy – a review of environmental impacts’ (2010) won him the 2010 ICF Silvicultural Prize and has since been cited by many researchers. Perhaps his proudest moment came in 2014, when Bangor University awarded him a Teaching Fellowship in recognition of his outstanding contributions.

“My role is very much concentrated on teaching and scholarship and I really enjoy helping them fulfill their aspirations,” he says. “One student has just published an article for Forestry Journal (Jemima Letts).”