

Royal Botanic Gardens

Kew

Inspiring futures

William Milliken



Tell us about your job

I am a Research Leader in Diversity and Livelihoods. I work in the Natural Capital and Plant Health Department.

Why is science important in your career?

I am interested in conserving biodiversity, recording the knowledge of indigenous communities, and supporting their livelihoods. This doesn't necessarily require science to achieve these – indeed at one point I considered making documentaries or working as a journalist. I spent several years working as a consultant. However, I recognise that science is crucial to my career, and to my (small) impact on the world.

What is your average work day like?

In the past I spent time in tropical forests, collecting data. I then returned to Kew to identify the plants, and used the data to produce books and scientific articles. Then I returned to the field. I have spent a lot of time managing projects, raising funds, teaching, managing staff and dealing with bureaucracy. Some of these I like, and others I don't. I still write papers and books. Currently I am planning to return to the field and to the indigenous communities.

Did you go to university? If so, what did you study? If not, what did you do after leaving school?

I studied Natural Sciences at university, including botany, zoology, and geology, among others. This was because I could not decide what I wanted to be in the future – my first job after university was as a zoologist, but by accident I ended up collecting plants in the Amazon.

What sort of personality traits do you have that help you in your career?

- A good grounding in science (through school and university).
- Enthusiasm for working in the field
- New ideas and approaches
- Cooperation and communication
- Writing clearly and succinctly
- Running and managing projects from the ‘front-line’

What helped you get your role at Kew?

I have worked at Kew four times over the past 30 years. The first time I had spent a year collecting plants in the Amazon (for a Royal Geographical Society expedition) and was then employed to identify our collections at Kew. By that point I had some practical experience in botany, and I think my enthusiasm was obvious to Kew staff.

What advice would you give to someone considering a career like yours?

Scientific research can often take years to see results - you need to be committed! I suggest that you find a way to get real botanical work in the field or laboratory. If you can come up with new scientific ideas or approaches, all the better. My work involves ethnobotany, working with local or indigenous people and collecting their knowledge. If you want to follow this career, then broadening beyond botany (e.g. into anthropology) would help.

What do you want people to know about your work?

I have worked with many other scientists, for many years, at Kew, who are fantastic, encouraging and innovative people (mostly). That is why I am still working at Kew.

Working at Kew requires you to think about the impact of science on the world. How can you contribute? Considering deforestation, global warming and the destruction of biodiversity, how can your scientific work improve it?

Want a career that grows?

Build your skills in science, technology, engineering, art and maths to give yourself a chance to blossom in a career like one of these varied and exciting jobs at Kew.

You could make a real difference to the world.

For further information: www.kew.org