



James Clayton

OUTDOOR OFFICER



**Adventurous careers await future
Environmental Conservation Officers**

by Captain Timothy Huss



Years ago I would thumb through my dad's copies of *Outdoor Life* and *Sports Afield*, curious about the hunting and fishing stories within.

My father introduced me to these outdoor pursuits at an early age, and I loved reading about other sportsmen's adventures. Inevitably, a small ad in the back of these publications would catch my eye— "Live a life in the outdoors; become a game warden." The accompanying photo of an officer holding a cougar or some other ferocious-looking game animal really thrilled me. As a young boy who spent much of his time wandering around the oak-brush plains of Long Island, and clamming on Great South Bay, I loved the thought of making a living in the outdoors.

When high school was drawing to an end, I found myself applying to colleges that offered curriculums in wildlife management, soil and water conservation, forestry, and other related topics. Four years later, upon graduating from SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse, I applied and took the state civil service exam for Environmental Conservation Officer (ECO).



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The day I was offered an ECO position was one of the most exciting of my life. As my assigned veteran, ECO Mike Berrio, helped me complete the process of getting fingerprinted, sworn in, and outfitted with uniforms and police hardware, I realized I had little idea of exactly what an ECO did. It didn't take me long to find out that the job was a lot more complex than I imagined, and sometimes a lot more dangerous.

One of my first assignments was patrolling Long Island's marine district. I hadn't been on the job long when I found myself in a boat at night chasing illegal clambers on the waters of Great South Bay. It was pitch black, and there we were speeding after poachers. My heart was pounding, I was concerned, but excited at the same time. I loved what I was doing, and felt like I was doing something meaningful—protecting the environment and its natural resources.

Over the next few years I discovered just how varied the job could be. My work on Long Island exposed me to a range of issues, including protecting endangered species, enforcing hunting and fishing regulations, protecting wetlands, enforcing air and water quality regulations and proper pesticide practices, and doing some basic police work. I never really knew what each day would bring. One day I would be checking duck hunters along Long Island's shoreline and the next I'd be investigating the unlawful disposal of a regulated waste, or the unregulated filling of a protected wetland. For me, that diversity made the job more interesting and rewarding.

Talking to fellow ECOs around the state made me aware of the diverse natural history, and social and political dynamics found in New York State, as well as the variety of other duties being performed by my colleagues. For instance, ECOs in rural areas of upstate are most often involved in fish, wildlife, and other natural resource issues, from nuisance bears to timber theft. In contrast, ECOs in New York City are more likely to be involved in air and water quality issues, perhaps checking emissions on diesel trucks, or enforcing laws regulating solid waste. On the other hand, these same ECOs may also find themselves involved in stopping the illegal trade of protected endangered species in exotic markets.

ECO's must fulfill a variety of roles, from patrolling New York's waters on jet skis to recovering illegally poached animals like black bear. An ECO can find him or herself checking hunters or tire dumpsites or vehicle emissions one day, and helping with wildlife conflicts the next. It's all part of the ECO's job and what makes it an exciting and rewarding career.



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Sometimes, work and patrol areas overlap and ECOs from various regions of the state work together on a case. Perhaps it's illegal clams and other marine species that show up in upstate markets, or illegally taken bears from upstate that show up at a taxidermist on Long Island. Such cooperation illustrates the camaraderie among ECOs—we are a single group working together toward a common goal.

Occasionally ECOs are called on to lend a hand in work that is seemingly outside their duties. In World War II, for example, ECOs assisted the FBI in a number of tasks—from investigating mysterious parachute landings to rounding up saboteurs. And in 1980, ECOs assisted with security at the XIII Olympic Winter Games held in Lake Placid. More recently, ECOs have aided with emergency operations associated with TWA Flight 800, the 1995 wildfires on Long Island, and the tragic events of 9/11. Since 9/11, officers are more often tasked to assist fellow law enforcement agencies in homeland security efforts.

Being an ECO allows me to be part of a proud heritage that dates back more than 125 years. Initially called Game Protectors, in 1880 Governor Alonzo B. Cornell appointed the first eight men to the job. While the original focus was game protection, primarily via catching poachers, these first officers also enforced laws protecting streams from pollution, and were authorized to bring legal action against all violators. Over the years, more environmental duties were added, and in the 1960s the job title changed to Conservation Officer. In 1970, the then Conservation Department merged with facets of the State Health Department to form the current Department of Environmental Conservation. At that time, the role of the Conservation Officer changed dramatically and the job title became Environmental Conservation Officer. At the same time, ECOs were also given broader powers, and their legal status was modified from peace officers to fully empowered police officers.

Today's conservation officers continue their predecessors' mission to protect New York State's resources and environment with the same dedication and passion. It takes hard work to become an Environmental Conservation Officer, but in return, you will find yourself in a fascinating and rewarding career. I'm proud to be an ECO and it's something I've enjoyed for many years.

Captain **Timothy Huss** is the chief ECO on Long Island. He has served with DEC since 1977.



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Becoming an ECO

Your career as an Environmental Conservation Officer can be exciting and fulfilling.



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Duties

ECOs are sworn police officers who protect natural resources by enforcing the Environmental Conservation Law. They investigate complaints, conduct patrols, and meet with school and service groups, the regulated community, and hunters' and anglers' clubs to promote compliance with environmental conservation law. The K-9 Unit aids in search-and-rescue operations, and in the apprehension and arrest of violators. All ECOs carry a firearm.

HEADS UP...

The Environmental Conservation Officer Trainee examination will be given on November 14, 2009. Applications are due by October 13, 2009. For details, check out Civil Service's website at: www.cs.state.ny.us/jobseeker/public/stateexam.cfm.

You can also sign up at the Civil Service website to receive automatic e-mail notifications of upcoming examination announcements.

Qualifications

To become an ECO, you must first pass a written civil service exam administered by the Department of Civil Service. This exam is generally given only once every few years, so don't miss it.

Based on test scores, candidates are placed on an eligibility list. If selected, they must pass a medical physical, a psychological screening and an agility test. Candidates are then interviewed by a board. If a candidate is hired, he or she must then complete a 26-week training program at DEC's Basic Training School for Uniformed Officers. The academy emphasizes police skills as well as the technical aspects of environmental law enforcement, and includes many hours of classroom instruction, firearms training, police vehicle operation, and physical fitness. Upon graduation from the school, recruits are assigned to the Field Training and Evaluation Program. Here they work under, and are evaluated by, a senior officer. When the program is completed, the trainee is given his/her first assignment in their own patrol sector.

For more information about a career as an ECO, visit www.dec.ny.gov, or www.cs.state.ny.us and search for "Environmental Conservation Officer."

Civil Service Exam Requirements

To be eligible to take the ECO Trainee 1 test, an applicant must have:

1. Bachelor's or higher level degree, including or supplemented by 18 credit hours of qualifying course work (such as natural resource conservation, environmental studies, and natural science); or

2. Associate's degree, including or supplemented by 18 credit hours in qualifying course work, and one of the following:

a. one year of experience in freshwater or marine sciences, wildlife sciences, environmental engineering, environmental technology or forestry; or

b. one year of experience as a police officer with Municipal Police Training Course certification, or as a certified federal law enforcement officer (a certified Peace Officer Training Course does not satisfy this requirement); or

c. two years of active United States military service with an honorable discharge.