

Faculty Spotlight

Joshua Lawler

Associate Professor, School of Environmental and Forest Sciences



Beneath Josh Lawler's laid-back demeanor is a heavy-weight scientist who is helping solve some of the most pressing environmental issues of our time. His work touches on climate change, how we use our landscapes, and the goods and services ecosystems provide for the benefit of humans.

One thing that's clear is Lawler—associate professor of environmental and forest sciences—wants his work to matter in the real world. He runs a lab in UW's College of the Environment that addresses conservation issues and how some of the world's plant and animal species will react and adapt to a changing environment. For example, he and a graduate student recently published a paper indicating that nearly 10% of North American mammals will be unable to move to suitable environments fast enough to keep up with a changing climate—and that number soars up to 40% in some areas in the Western Hemisphere.

Lawler wants his work to lead to solutions that allow for the continued prosperity of humans that goes hand-in-hand with a thriving environment. As such, he engages in conservation planning activities, which include developing models that decision makers can use when evaluating different policy pathways and outcomes. Another way he provides insight into the value of a healthy environment is through his research on ecosystem services—meaning, those 'free' services a

functioning system provides, like clean water, building materials, and protection from natural disasters. For some scientists, this is a new way of thinking about science and how it applies in the wider world.

"Although the research itself is gratifying," says Lawler, talking about what he hopes to be the impact of his work, "it is critical that we go one step further, engaging with people who make decisions about how we use natural resources. The types of questions we are answering and the tools we are developing can help with those decisions." Lawler regularly connects with agency heads and non-profit organizations to bring science to the table—which is something he encourages his graduate students to do as well.

"It's exciting to do this kind of research, because conservation practitioners, resource managers, and policy makers are asking for it," says Lawler. He thinks one of his next big steps will be to focus research on the connection between human and environmental health. Not only is a healthy environment good for economies and the bottom line, but for the health and well-being of people too.

His work is possible through multiple partnerships and entities that can benefit from his research. These include the US Department of Defense, the US Department of the Interior, and groups such as the Packard and Wilburforce foundations.

Photos: Courtesy of Joshua Lawler

