

Earthjustice has a great motto: “Because the earth needs a good lawyer.” People tend to equate environmental lawyering with working for Earthjustice or another environmental group like the NRDC. And that’s a great way that lawyers can help the environment. But it’s far from being the only way. In fact, groups like Earthjustice account for only a small fraction of environmental lawyers. Here are some of the alternative paths.

First, lawyers work at all levels of government on environmental matters. They help write regulations, bring lawsuits, and ensure that governments themselves comply with environmental laws. At the federal level, lawyers at environmental agencies like EPA and in the Justice Department are the most obvious examples. But lawyers doing environmental work are scattered across the federal government. And not just the federal government. State governments have their own cadres of environmental lawyers, and so do major cities.

Second, it’s important to keep in mind that environmental lawyering isn’t just about what we’re used to thinking of as “environmental law” like the Clean Air Act. Increasing numbers of lawyers work on clean energy issues at law firms or as inside-counsel. They help clean energy companies get permits, obtain funding, and cope with state and federal energy regulations. Other lawyers work on the buyer side, such as companies that want to procure clean power, or at energy regulatory agencies. This is a rapidly growing area of practice. Corporate law can also have an environmental dimension, because many businesses remain committed to reducing their environmental footprints (“ESG”).

Another area with growing connections to environmental law is land use law. Siting involves compliance with local land use regulations, and construction is increasingly subject to energy efficiency requirements. Land use lawyers also fight for in-fill developers, a necessary response to the threat of ever-growing urban sprawl.

Third, though this is sometimes honored in the breach, lawyers can play an important role in corporate compliance. Businesses can’t comply with rules if they don’t understand them; they can’t get valid permits if they don’t know what to ask for. And if rules are at risk of being broken, lawyers can play an important role in heading off violations and correcting them when they occur. We shouldn’t be naïve about this role - sometimes lawyers are part of the problem rather than part of the solution. But we shouldn’t be completely cynical about it either.

In short, the Earth not only needs a good lawyer, it needs many kinds of good lawyers doing many kinds of work. Whatever area of law interests you most, there’s no reason why you can’t be one of them.

