

What does it mean to be an environmental health campaigner?



Quest interviews Rico Eurpidou from the non-governmental organisation, groundWork, to find out more.

1. groundWork is a non-governmental organisation (NGO). What does that mean?

Being an NGO means that we are an organisation that is not part of government. We are part of civil society. To be an NGO allows us to maintain our values and integrity, show our donors how the money they give us is spent, and work in such a way that does not make a profit. All our funds support our work. And yes, I do get paid a salary to do my job.

2. Why did you decide to work for groundWork?

groundWork gives me the freedom and space to articulate all the things in life that matter to me when it comes to environmental health. Working for an NGO allows us to develop our own areas of interest and then advocate for environmental problems and issues in that space. For example, one of my interests is preventing people from being exposed to mercury in the environment. groundWork gave me the opportunity to do that.

3. What is the purpose of groundWork?

groundWork is a non-profit, environmental justice service and developmental organisation working primarily in southern Africa. It works in the areas of climate and energy justice, coal and a just transition to clean energy, environmental health, global green and healthy hospitals, and waste. groundWork is the South African member of Health Care Without Harm and Friends of the Earth International.

An important mission for groundWork is to advocate for vulnerable people. Vulnerable people are people who have not had all the structural factors that support healthy, productive individuals. For example, a child living in a township may not have the opportunity to attend a good school with all the facilities and resources, compared to a child living in a suburb who attends a school that has up-to-date facilities and resources and maybe even a fully operational science laboratory.

Moreover, the child living in the township may be exposed to more environmental factors that affect health, such as air and water pollution from nearby mining activities.

All of these factors lead to inequality and one child being more vulnerable to getting sick from pollution or not getting a sound education compared to another living somewhere else. groundWork strives to resolve structural and other reasons that lead to vulnerable people.

4. What is one of groundWork's greatest success stories?

To advocate for people living in a highly polluted area of South Africa, groundWork embarked on a campaign called 'The Deadly Air Case'. Even though South Africa has a very good constitution (Section 24 talks about the right to a healthy environment) and laws that serve to protect people and the environment from air pollution, often these rules are not properly put in place to make sure people are safe.

'The Deadly Air Case' has taken a special approach to focus on the rights of vulnerable people such as children and young people. In May 2021, after preparing a lot of reports and working with lawyers, groundWork went to court to lodge a case that children living in the Highveld area of South Africa are disproportionately affected by air pollution. In this first of its kind case in South Africa, the judge ruled in favour of groundWork and others in a landmark ruling that will help reduce air pollution and save lives.

5. What kind of training prepared you for working at groundWork?

In terms of formal training, I did an environmental science degree but then I realised I wanted to learn more about environmental health, so I did an environment health degree too. Environmental

What is environmental justice?

Environmental justice is about addressing inequality. The people who are most responsible for causing pollution, whether they are nations or corporations, companies, or industries, are generally least affected by the pollution and sometimes the least responsible for fixing the pollution problem. The people most affected by the pollution problem are usually the people least responsible for causing it, with the least number of resources and agency to do something about the problem. That's where environmental justice comes about – NGOs like groundWork stand up for those people affected the most by the pollution to ensure polluters are held responsible for the pollution they cause.

epidemiology is the study of the cause of disease, looking at the way people may be exposed to things in the environment that may make them sick. I needed to understand what causes environmental-related diseases, so I did a postgraduate degree in environmental epidemiology and another one in contaminated land management. Together, this helped me understand exposures, health risks and ways to prevent people from become sick.

As important as my formal training was the experience that I gained working in different jobs. I worked in a poison's unit and at an action research group looking at rural health. The action research took me into communities and helped me realise that I wanted to work in activism and advocacy. This would help me make a real difference in people's lives.

Thank you to Rico Euripidou for being interviewed by Quest



Rico Euripidou.

Unlock your true potential at UJ's Faculty of Science

with training for career opportunities in:

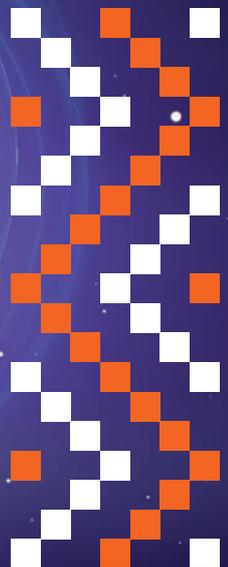
Actuarial or Numerical Sciences,
Life- or Physical Sciences,
Computer Sciences with a focus on
Artificial Intelligence or Cyber Security,
Earth Sciences,
Environmental Management,
or **Energy Studies.**

Our qualifications are accredited nationally and internationally, and our facilities are state of the art.

*Come join the university of the
4th Industrial Revolution and
reimagine the future.*

www.uj.ac.za/faculties/science/  UJ Faculty of Science  @science_uj  @UJScience

*A magnetar is an exotic type of neutron star, its defining feature that it has an ultra-powerful magnetic field.
Image: Jurik Peter / Shutterstock.com*



**The Future
Reimagined**

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

ASSAf Research Repository

<http://research.assaf.org.za/>

A. Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) Publications

D. Quest: Science for South Africa

2022-06

Quest Volume 18 Number 2 2022

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) (2022) Quest: Science for South Africa, 18(2).

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11911/241>

<http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11911/241>

Downloaded from ASSAf Research Repository, Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)