

Siobhan Sheridan

Environmental Scientist 'making a difference' with Irish Water



Everyday Siobhan Sheridan works to ensure the water we drink is safe.

When the Westport woman began her journey to becoming an Environmental Scientist the national conversation on climate change and biodiversity was a whisper and Irish Water wasn't even in its infancy.

But with Science Week upon us, the national utility's Drinking Water Compliance Analyst reflects on her role where she's proud "to be making a difference".

"The role is all about monitoring and checking for compliance, ensuring public safety and seeing how we can improve and move forward to make things better. It's the kind of job where you are making a difference in the area of drinking water which is something that affects people daily."

Siobhan might not have grown up on a farm, but she has always been interested in animals and the environment. Anti-litter projects in school caught her attention and when it came to fill out her CAO form Environmental Science and Earth Science kept jumping off the page to her.

"Growing up I always loved animals and had a real interest in nature and the environment; this was back in the 80s when biodiversity or environmental awareness wasn't talked about. It was just in me."

She's the first to acknowledge that her chosen university course - Environmental Science in University of Ulster – wasn't without its hurdles. The presence of subjects such as meteorology were a challenge and the five-hour bus journey home to Westport wasn't plain sailing, but she persevered.

With her degree under her arm, she emigrated to Australia for a year and enjoyed casual jobs and travelling. But when she returned to home soil it was time to knuckle down and she secured her first 'proper job' in a Mayo pharmaceutical plant. She started out in the Microbiology laboratory which proved to be stepping stone before being appointed to the Environmental Health and Safety Department as an Environmental Technician.

There, she carried out compliance monitoring for the EPA licence and looked after all hazardous and non-hazardous waste shipments taken off site.

"It was very interesting – it was my first job and I learned a lot, got great experience and it helped to build my confidence"

Then Siobhan replaced her lab coat with a duffle coat when she signed up for a one-year EU water management project. Her work focused on the Moy Valley Catchment with the data she collected feeding into the Water Framework Directive Project. She spent hours in Mayo's rivers and streams carrying out kick sampling to determine the quality of the water.

"It was all field work, which involved kicking the bed of the stream and using a net to catch invertebrates. These were then identified and used to determine how polluted or clean the stream was.

"In the summer it was lovely but, in the winter, it was very cold."

From there, Siobhan took a position as an Environmental Scientist with Tobin Consulting Engineers in Castlebar and not long after joining was seconded to Shell, working on the Corrib Gas Project for eight and a half years.

"It was a really interesting project and very different to anything I had done before. This was large scale construction in a very heavily regulated environment. There was no wriggle room, you just did it right. It was brilliant to be involved in a project of that size. The job involved site work, site audits, generation of environmental monitoring programmes, site environmental monitoring and regulatory compliance reporting."

She spent much of her time working on the pipeline and took to the water when Solitaire, one of the world's largest pipelaying vessels, was working off the Mayo coast.

"We had consultants carrying out acoustic monitoring in the water in order to ensure that noise levels were not going to impact mammals in water. On all of the boats there were marine mammal observers and there were certain things you couldn't do if a dolphin or seal came by - you had to stop work."

With the pipeline in situ, Siobhan relocated to the terminal at Bellanaboy and was there for the first gas flow in December of 2015.

18 months later, she joined Irish Water's Asset Strategy and Sustainability team before transferring to the North West Drinking Water Team. Her time is focused on quarterly Compliance reporting for the Health Service Executive and the local authorities as well as assisting with Drinking Water Safety Plan Reports and leading the Pesticide Use Policy Working Group.

While the compliance team continues to carry out trojan work, some aspects are out of their control with pesticides continuing to be an issue in some drinking water supplies. Irish Water is "relying on people to do the right thing", explained Siobhan

"Pesticides and run off from fields are something we can't control; It's definitely a challenge but we trying to get people to be more aware."

The mum of three is in favour of Irish Water's role in bringing an environmental focus to schools, raising awareness about the challenges the utility faces and crucially getting youngsters to play their part in creating a more environmentally friendly nation.

"Getting kids to think about conserving water and what they can and can't put into water and the importance of making sure it's clean and safe to use is brilliant. When they grow up knowing how to conserve water, not to leave taps running and mindful of water shortages, it becomes part of their lives."

"I think climate change has come to the fore over last few years and now everyone knows about it. 10-15 years ago, people were not as aware of the issues whereas now whether you believe in it or

don't believe in it you know about it. It's very much a major topic and people are talking about it and you'd hope making their own changes at home to do their own small bit. "

Siobhan is proof that those who follow a career in science can enjoy exciting roles in rural communities. From her home village outside Westport she has worked in a renowned pharmaceutical plant, on the largest energy infrastructure project in the country and her current role allows her to make a difference in the lives of thousands of people every day by ensuring they have clean, safe drinking water.