Meet Healy Hamilton
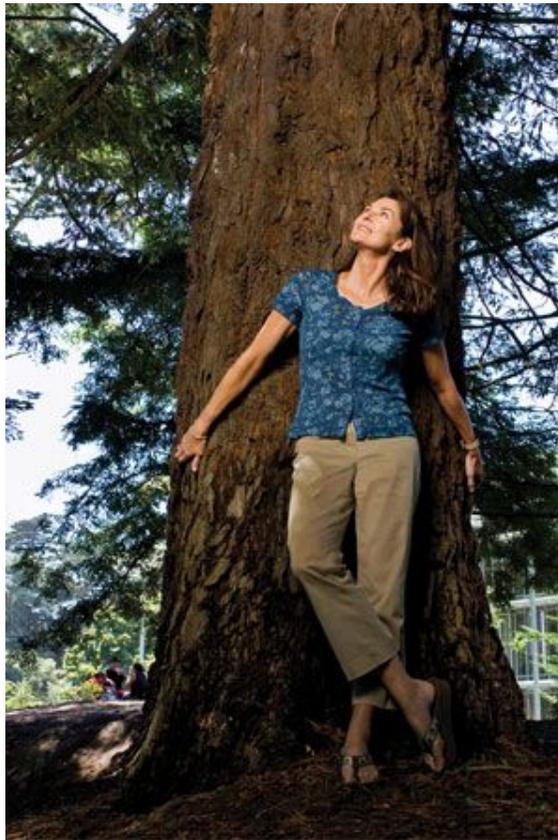
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Healy hugs a giant, coastal redwood, Sequoia sempervirens

Age: 47,
Stomping grounds: San Francisco Bay Area, California,
Job: Biodiversity scientist who studies redwood trees

From diving for seahorses to studying some of the planet's largest trees, Healy Hamilton, PhD, describes the research she conducts as a biodiversity scientist as "schizophrenic." But no matter the size of the subject, the goal of Healy's lab and field time is always to understand the geographic ranges of key

species, figure out how climate change might affect them, and use that information to manage and conserve our planet's biodiversity. Healy took a break from her current project with the Save the Redwoods League to tell Women's Adventure what she loves about her job.

What sparked your interest in redwoods and biological diversity?

The first time I ever ran away from home, I camped out for a night in Muir Woods [National Monument in California]. It's a very spiritual and formative place for me. Many years later I helped develop a method for looking at how climate change affects the geographic distribution of target species. The redwoods are a conservation icon, and a lot of people care about them, but their range has been reduced to a very narrow strip of California coastline. Working with the Save the Redwoods League allows my methodology for forecasting climate-change impacts on biodiversity to directly inform the organization's conservation strategy and change the future of redwoods "on the ground."

What's a typical day at the office like for you?

My lab in the California Academy of Sciences is an amazing place—there's an aquarium, a living roof, and a four-story rainforest, and I work with an amazing group of highly motivated students and staff. But I don't actually get to go out and climb redwood trees—I look at how climate change affects biodiversity via computer models. We run thousands and thousands of potential climate models in our target species' ranges and apply data sets from a wide range of experts. For the redwood project, I also visit different parks and forest sites and take GPS waypoints where I see seedlings and saplings. This isn't a required part of the research, but the lab work inspires me to get out into nature, commune with the forests a little, and understand the organism better.

What do you love about your work?

The more you learn about life on Earth, the more questions you have. Intellectually, studying biodiversity is an infinite landscape. As you continue deepening your knowledge, it gets more and more interesting, more and more fascinating. It's like Alice in Wonderland. You fall into an alternate universe—but it's right here, it's all around us! My problem is that I can't stop working, because what I do is so meaningful to me.

What's the most surprising thing for you about your job?

How hard I work and that I never get sick of it. It's not the normal model—for most people, life starts when they walk out of the office. But for me, recognizing how much we depend on biodiversity in our everyday lives is my inspiration—it's every bite of the food we eat, it's the medicines in our cabinet, it's construction materials, and even our recreation. Working to conserve biodiversity is who I am, not just a thing I do. I'd also say that it surprises me, in a wonderful way, how many amazing people are working so hard to make this world a better place and to save the diversity of life on Earth. *"You can never know it all, but the more you learn about Earth's diversity, the more you appreciate it."*

http://www.womensadventuremagazine.com/stories/profiles/meet-healy-hamilton/