

Why Become a Certified SWS-Professional Wetland Scientist:

A Perspective from the Academic World

A vast number, and probably the majority, of professions around the world have certification bodies responsible for ensuring that its representatives have the most current skill sets, legal knowledge, and ethical standards in the fast-paced and ever changing day to day professional world. Professions are responsible for setting the limits of its standards and reputation of its practitioners. Wetland scientists are no exception. And, as teachers and mentors of future wetland scientists, academicians are obligated not only to convey information and knowledge, but also should empower students with a sense of professionalism, morals, standards, and ethics they can carry on with throughout their careers.

As professionals, professors and college instructors must also comply with the expectations set out by their professions. To that end, the Society of Wetland Scientists Professional Certification Program (SWSPCP), originally a subsidiary of the Society of Wetland Scientists and now a completely independent organization, was established to meet the need and want by wetland scientists to monitor standards for its practitioners.

Unfortunately, while attending SWS annual meetings in the past, one of the most common questions that we have received from senior, and junior, wetland scientists has been “what would adding the letters PWS after my name do for ME?”. Unfortunately, this attitude misses the point. For most of us in the academic and research world, we are not asked to “display” our credentials on a continuous basis. Instead, our evaluations (and tenure reviews) are based on quality and quantity of our publications, number of grants we gather, and/or the number and caliber of students that we advise and mentor. Quite frankly, the letters PWS usually do not add to our evaluation criteria, but perhaps they should. As members of the academy with professional affiliations, such as SWSPCP, we need to do more toward demonstrating the importance and relevance of professional certification; but that is an internal matter for us to debate.

But what about our students? These are the young people interested in wetland science and management that will follow behind us. Many of these young people, both undergraduates and graduates, often intend to enter a corporate world other than an academic one. These include local and federal agencies, consulting firms, and K-12 education, among others. While in most of these cases their academic achievements will tend to get them their position, once settled in, most of these positions do not offer the possibility of mentoring or peer reviewed publication. Instead, they rely on the employee’s achievements while on the job. More and more, we are seeing employers of consulting firms, regulatory and permitting agencies, and advisory groups asking for, and rewarding, their employees for achieving their PWS or WPIT (Wetland Professional in Training) certification. Therefore, as academicians, we need to take a much broader look at what having the PWS after our name means. Instead of seeing a benefit “...for ME”, we need to start thinking of what it does for our students and all of the young wetland scientists that follow behind us.

First and foremost, being a PWS sets a positive example. If our students see that we, their advisors and mentors, have taken the time to obtain their PWS, they will see early on the value of PWS certification and becoming a recognized member of a group of wetland professionals.

Second, since PWS or WPIT status is determined by showing that one has obtained a high level of wetland education and work experience, it gives our students something to point to as an achievement to be presented to the working world. This is something both the student and advisor can be proud of.

Finally, obtaining PWS or WPIT certification sets the stage for our non-academic-bound students to remain active and progressing in the field of wetlands science and management. Continuous certification requires remaining up-to-date on wetland issues; the re-certification process actually outlines how a student may do so. As most of these students become members of our ever-growing student family, it is good to know that those who do not enter our academic world have another outlet to forward their education.

So the real question shouldn't be "What will having PWS after my name do for ME?", but "What will having PWS after my name do for my students and the young scientists that follow me?" We would hope that you are convinced that this question has a satisfactory and compelling answer. We need to show our students the way by becoming an active member of a group of academicians, consultants, managers, and regulators that care about the future of wetland ecology and management.

We invite you to become a SWS-Professional Wetland Scientist.

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