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On the Beat: Career Path

## Palynologist Discovers Tiny, Telling Treasures

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Pollen might be the bane of your existence, but it's a highlight of Sophie Warny-Bart's.

Warny-Bart, 35, is a palynologist, or a scientist who studies pollen grains, the fossils of which can yield important clues about the vegetation and climate of long-ago eras.

"It is like being a detective except that you solve environmental problems instead of crimes," she said. "Cores of sediments are like treasure chests. Each time you select some rocks or sediments from a core, and you process them, you never know in advance what you will find. But you almost always find something intriguing."

Only a handful of universities support palynology research, including Louisiana State University, where Warny-Bart is the education director and an assistant professor of research at the school's Museum of Natural Science. This limits the overall number of jobs available, and it makes for a fairly tightknit group of researchers. The American Association of Stratigraphic Palynologists, founded in 1967 to promote the field, counts about 800 members worldwide, according to the group's Web site.

Supported by grants from governments and the oil industry, palynologists tackle questions about such topics as the diets of prehistoric societies, as well as the location of valuable oil and gas deposits.

Of course, the field has its share of drudgery. Sometimes all that painstaking work yields nothing. This risk is greatest for palynologists working in remote locations such as Antarctica, Warny-Bart said, where the vegetation was reduced to almost nothing when the continent became fully glaciated. "It takes a lot of patience for palynologists working in these extreme environments."

-- Mary Ellen Slayter

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