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There were a lot of things I loved about the SEJ conference – the friends, the food, the good times with my tribe. But there was something that left me a little worried, in large part because I have a connection with a younger journalist through the mentoring program: I don't think we're taking seriously enough the ability of journalists to actually earn a living.

During the sessions and throughout the conference, we all talked a lot about individual stories – finding the stories and the sources and pitching media outlets – or individual issues and regions of the country.

Those discussions are important—as are crucial topics like transparency, freedom of information, and the ethics of reporting.

But we need to face up to the fact that too many people working in the field of journalism – and in this case, environmental journalism – aren't actually earning a living. Many rely on spouses, partners, or other sources of income to survive. That makes me worry that we're not ensuring that journalists of the next and coming generations have a career and not just a passion or a hobby.

Meeting my mentee face-to-face made me realize it's hard to look young journalists in the eye and tell them there's a sustainable future for them in this field.

No matter how smart and hardworking my mentee is – and no matter how many fellowships, grants, and internships she tackles, doors she nudges open, or weekends she works – the reality is that after she graduates, she and her peers will have a hard time finding work that pays a sustainable wage and provides long-term security (never mind vacation days, a retirement plan, and health insurance).

Mid- and late-career journalists benefit from building relationships with younger journalists, not only to share their knowledge and get a boost of energy and pride – but to have someone to really consider and care about when they're going about their work and thinking about the future. Together, we need to work on how upcoming journalists – as a generation, not just as individuals – can really have a shot at a sustainable long-term career that not only serves the public and ignites individual passions, but pays all the bills. – **Laura Paskus**