BEST MAMAS CONTEST

ESA’s Public Affairs Committee announces a contest for the best MAMAS (Maxims, Analogies, Metaphors, Anecdotes, Similes) to communicate ecological knowledge

First Prize: Full refund of Memphis Annual Meeting registration
Second Prize: One year ESA membership and online subscription to journals
Third Prize: ESA t-shirt and travel mug
Best Student Prize: One-year ESA membership, includes Frontiers journal

Background:

Explaining the complexity of ecological systems to policy makers and the public is challenging for ecologists. The Ecological Society of America’s Public Affairs Committee is hosting an evening session that will address the use of analogies, metaphors, anecdotes, etc. to explain complex ecological principles. The session will include seasoned ecologists with a flair for using MAMAS, and will center on the best submissions received via this competition.

To participate:

Entries should be no more than one page in length and should feature your favorite Maxim, Analogy, Metaphor, Anecdote, or Simile as it relates to the science of ecology. Please indicate the source (whether it is your own or if it is credited to someone else) and the context in which it has been used effectively (e.g., during a radio interview; before a Rotary Club; in a lecture hall). Submissions should include full name and all contact information. ESA student members are especially encouraged to participate in this competition.

Members of the Public Affairs Committee will presort all entries and the top 10–30 finalists will be highlighted during the Annual Meeting Evening Session, “Ecological Analogies, Metaphors, and Anecdotes” on Tuesday. Prize winners will also be announced.

The Goal:

We hope to create an online database, searchable by topic, which will be available to all ESA members for use in outreach activities. All sources of the best MAMAS will be acknowledged.
Definitions:

Maxims—a pithy statement of general wisdom, e.g. “where there’s smoke, there’s fire.”
Analogies—comparing similarities between things otherwise unlike, e.g. “hot is to cold as fire is to ice.”
Metaphors—implied comparison, e.g., “All the world’s a stage.”
Anecdotes—Personal experience/story.
Simile—an explicit comparison, e.g., “Her tears flowed like wine.”

Maxims, Analogies, Metaphors, Anecdotes, Similes to Communicate Ecological Knowledge

Here are the winning entries of the MAMAS Contest held by the Public Affairs Committee at the ESA Annual Meeting in Memphis. Richard Pouyat, Vice President of Public Affairs, hopes to organize another one next year with the long-term goal of compiling a lexicon of sorts that all ecologists can access online. The impetus was to better equip ecologists with ways to explain the complexities of ecology and ecological systems to policy makers and the public.

Dear ESA MAMAS Contest Participants:

First off, thank you for taking the time to participate in the recently held ESA MAMAS Contest. We had about 20 people submit entries, many of them multiple. The Society’s Public Affairs Committee selected the winners that were announced at the well-attended Evening Session at the ESA Memphis Meeting.

It is our hope that this is just the beginning—the Committee plans to organize a similar contest and event for next year’s ESA Annual Meeting. As a contest participant, we wanted to go ahead and share the winning entries and honorable mentions with you today and have reproduced them below.

Again, thanks for participating and we hope we see the enthusiasm for this effort continue to grow.

Nadine Lymn
Director of Public Affairs
Second Honorable Mention:

Submitted by Katie Griffith (Ph.D student, University of California, Santa Cruz)

Credited to: Dr. A. Todd Newberry (Emeritus Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Professor, University of California, Santa Cruz)

On observing nature:

There are two oceans, water and air. We are benthic creatures, crawling on the bottom of the atmospheric ocean. Birds are aerial fish that swim among and over the reefs we call bushes and trees.

First Honorable Mention:

Submitted by Olyssa Starry, Water Biologist, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection

On environmental challenges associated with the global nitrogen cycle:

Another tool for analyzing scientific metaphors involves investigating how they are reciprocated in science and society (Russell). Think about the social implications of calling N added to the soil “fertilizer.” How do you know when you’ve added enough?

Third Prize:

Submitted by Candan Soykan, Arizona State University

Credited to: Lee Basnar of the Sierra Vista Herald and/or hydrologist Richard Koehler

An aquifer is a bank account:

Rain and snow are deposits, and water uses are withdrawals. Plants, animals, stream flow, and human uses rely on account withdrawals. When deposits exceed withdrawals, life is good. If deposits decline, then so too must withdrawals, or else the account will run out.
Second Prize:

Submitted by Ryan Utz (student, University of Maryland Appalachian Laboratory)

Credited to: Dr. Kyle Hartman, West Virginia University

On the challenges of a salmon trying to reach adulthood:

Imagine you are in your car and attempting to move from the center of Morgantown to I-68 (the interstate at the edge of town). Now let every traffic light you encounter represent a threshold in your life stage; if you hit it while it is red, you’re dead, but if it’s green, you progress to the next life stage. Only if you move from the town center to I-68 hitting nothing but green lights do you survive to adulthood. Those are the odds faced by a salmon fry; growing to a parr, avoiding fry predators, attaining smolt size, various stages of migration, all of these represent traffic lights. The vast majority of individuals will eventually hit a red light somewhere along the way, but a select few make it all the way and survive to adulthood. An extension of this idea (I may take credit for this) is that environmental conditions can dramatically affect your chances. Driving at night (when lights stay greener longer and traffic is low) or right after a basketball game (when traffic is horrendous) will affect your chances of making it green all of the way. These two scenarios may be likened to absence of predators, and competition due to the overcrowding of your cohort, respectively. One may easily imagine that this idea could be applied to a returning and successfully spawning adult salmon.

First Prize:

Submitted by: Bill Varettoni, (Doctoral Program, Maryland School of Public Policy, College Park)

Credited to: Bill Varettoni

On species diversity:

In explaining the role of species diversity to my 11-year-old nephew, I told him that all living things, including us, rely on each other for existence. He knew about the food chain, and pointed out that animals could always change their diet to eat something else if their “bug of choice” dies out. I told him that was true to a point. I told him we are all in a giant game of Jenga. You can remove a species here, one there, and maybe get by—but the system will be less stable. But the longer you play the game while removing pieces/species, you are risking collapse.”