



CONTRIBUTIONS

Commentary

Some Reflections on ESA: Then and Now

As ESA celebrated its 90th year, and on the occasion of the ESA meeting in Montreal, I was asked to reflect on some of the major changes that have occurred in our professional Society during the last few decades. I decided not to offer a full historical account, but instead and because of first-hand knowledge, I will focus on some of the major changes that have occurred since I was ESA President in 1981–1982. I will discuss briefly six features that have changed dramatically during these 24 years:

1) The general membership has increased from slightly over 6000 in 1980 to more than 9200 currently, and is growing, representing an increase of ~50% since 1980. There were 307 members in 1916–1917. At the end of 2004, members' affiliations were categorized as 66% academic, 13% government, 5% nonprofit, 6% consulting, and 11% other.

I quote from my President's Report published in the *ESA Bulletin* in 1982 for the year 1981–1982:

“Last year when I took this office I suggested that the 1980's represent a critical period for ecologists, ecology and the Ecological Society of America. This conclusion stemmed from:

- reduced funding for research and jobs
- enormous pressures on natural resources from waste disposal (e.g., toxic chemicals), from

land clearing and development (agriculture, forestry, urbanization, mining, etc.), from recreation, air pollution, etc.

- potential loss of ground on environmental regulation
- threat of unthinkable ecological devastation from nuclear war.” (...some problems just don't go away!!)

Some other major changes that have occurred in ESA since 1980 include:

2) Applied Ecology

There was a huge controversy in the early 1980s about forming a section on Applied Ecology. Great concern was expressed by many members that applied ecology was not appropriate for the ESA! Now, this Section is very active and has become the second largest section in ESA with more than 620 members.

3) The Washington Office

Again, quoting from my report in the 1982 *ESA Bulletin*: “My top priority was to promote a component of public outreach for ESA, our so-called ‘PRESENCE IN WASHINGTON’.” I appointed Dr. Ralph Good from Rutgers University-Camden to chair the Public Affairs Committee and bring a definitive report about whether we should form an office in Washington, D.C., or not. Ralph and his Committee did a superb job, and again, from the *ESA Bulletin* in 1982:

“In many regards, today's annual meeting is

truly an historic event. Officers and members of the ESA have been proposing some kind of a voice or presence in Washington for at least 20 years. The topic regularly appears in the reports from Presidents over the last several years. I am happy to report that on 8 August 1982, the Council approved funds and administrative support for a person in Washington to represent the interest of the Ecological Society of America...". As a result, staff was hired and an office was established.

Today's ESA Presence in Washington is an active and important part of our Society's activities. Many ESA Presidents, particularly since 1982, have worked hard to support and advance this agenda for an active ecological presence in decision-making and public policy.

Back to the *ESA Bulletin*:

"I also report that I made a visit to Dr. John Slaughter, Director of the National Science Foundation, on behalf of the Society. I tried to stress the important role of ecological concepts and data in national affairs. I pointed to the unique position of NSF in supporting research in Systematics, and the value of long-term ecological research."

1982 *ESA Bulletin* 63(4)

This brief history is not to indicate what I did in 1981, but to indicate how far the Society has come in only a quarter of a century, and the effective role we currently play in public policy.

Some of the programs we now take for granted, took much effort to initiate. BUT, we can and we must do even better!

The ESA needs to be a clear, powerful, unbiased, and professional voice for ecology in public policy issues (at local, regional, national, and international venues). No longer are environmental problems based only or solved only at local levels (e.g., CO₂ and mercury transported in the atmosphere). We have a critical need for strong scientific leadership at the

highest levels, unlike what we have at present. Maybe most importantly, truth and ethics do matter!

4) Sustainable Biosphere Initiative

This program was started in 1992 and now has expanded and been incorporated into the Science Programs Office. The goal of this office is to promote the integration of ecological science into management and decision-making by government agencies and the private sector at all levels. Projects of the Science Office fall into four major categories: Society Activities; Support to Science—Policy + Management; Scientific Conferences; and Publications.

5) Two important new journals were initiated during this quarter century: *Ecological Applications* (first issue in 1991) and *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* (first issue February 2003). These journals have greatly expanded the coverage and reach of ecological issues, and by all accounts are very successful in communicating ecological knowledge. Personally, I am sorry to see less prominent use of *Ecological Monographs*. I believe that the pendulum has swung too far toward the "Least Publishable Unit," or how many papers can be obtained from a particular study (Likens 1989). It is interesting to note that *Ecological Monographs* (5.0) currently has a higher "Impact Factor" than *Ecology* (4.1). And, *Issues in Ecology* has been a successful effort to summarize scientific, ecological knowledge on current, major environmental topics in peer-reviewed and nontechnical language, and to point out relationship to policy and management.

6) Education

I was almost totally unsuccessful in providing the leadership necessary to initiate a viable education program for ESA. Members seemingly were not interested in doing more than teaching their various classes and/or supervising their graduate students. An Education Section was established in 1988, and since the early 1990s ESA's education activities have been innovative, strong, and growing.

All of these six major changes are related in many ways and have made our professional society more relevant, and particularly more popular and attractive, particularly to young scientists, and, I believe, the public.

Major challenges

1) Unfortunately, there is little or no “memory” about the history of ESA’s large and robust progress passed on as the Society’s leadership changes over time. I argued in 1982 for a two-year term for President. I would still make this argument.

2) As the world changes (and currently it is changing very profoundly and rapidly), organizations need to be responsive. Probably never before has there been a time when there was a greater need for a strong,

vibrant and aggressive ESA.

3) We need to maintain the highest standards of scholarship and ethics in our science.

Literature cited

Likens, G. E. 1982. President’s report. *ESA Bulletin* **63**(4):361–364.

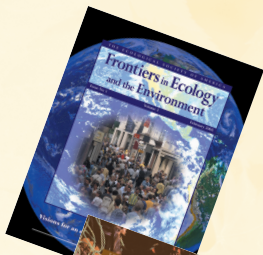
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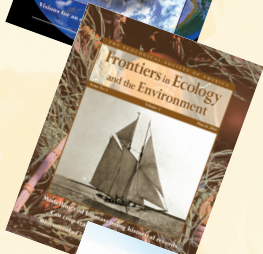


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– Roger Hnatiuk, Emeritus Member of ESA

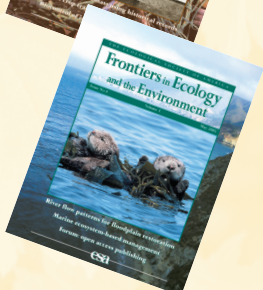


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