

Summary of the Closing

Plenary Lunch

Annual Meetings of the Ecological Society of America commence with the Opening Plenary Session, Welcome Mixer, and the Scientific Plenary and Awards Ceremony. These events set the stage for the coming week by introducing the meeting's theme, familiarizing participants with the local culture, reuniting old friends and colleagues, and honoring recent contributions to the field. However, the oral and poster presentations, symposia, workshops, scientific field trips, and special sessions are so numerous that it is impossible for participants to leave the Annual Meeting with a summary of everything that occurred. In an effort to summarize the week's events and formally conclude the meeting, the Closing Plenary Lunch was added to the schedule in 2003. The Closing Plenary Lunch features a panel of prominent senior ecologists who provide their insights into what the meeting has meant to them and what we may expect from the future. Questions and comments from participants are encouraged. Participants dine at small tables, with prominent ecologists and ESA leadership serving as table hosts. This is an especially excellent opportunity for graduate students to meet prominent ecologists and ESA leadership on a more intimate level than might otherwise be possible.

The 2006 Closing Plenary Lunch was held at 11:30 am on Friday, 11 August, and featured a panel of five prominent ecologists: Joan Ehrenfeld, Lars Hedin, Alan Covich, Svata Louda, and Steward Pick-

ett. (Osvaldo Sala was also scheduled to speak, but had to leave the meeting early due to increased security measures at U.S. airports). Many of the remarks focused on the meeting theme, "Icons and Upstarts in Ecology," and the discussions were especially insightful because the panel comprised experienced, senior ecologists who were qualified to comment on changes that they observed in the field. Steward Pickett noted that the theme was unusual because it was provocative, and people actually paid attention to it. Indeed, people did pay attention, and the Closing Plenary featured extended discussions around the definitions of "icon" and "upstart." Joan Ehrenfeld cited the Oxford English Dictionary, which defines an icon as "a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol, especially of a culture or movement; a person, institution, etc., considered worthy of admiration or respect," and an upstart as "one who has newly or suddenly risen in position or importance; a newcomer in respect of rank or consequence; a parvenu." Steward Pickett stressed that icons and upstarts should not be used to refer to people, because this reinforces the myth that science is done by individuals. Thus, there seemed broad agreement that icons are the ideas, concepts, and approaches that represent the field of ecology, while upstarts are new ideas, concepts, and approaches that offer an alternative and challenge the current icons. Upstarts can eventually become icons themselves, and this cycle of icons and upstarts is the mechanism that drives scientific progress.

Upstart ideas, concepts, and approaches are risky, however, and this unfortunately restricts their prevalence in ecology. Svata Louda pointed out that a scientist has two options upon finding unexpected results. The first option is to somehow make the results agree with existing icons (e.g., discard data or recast the question), or the results can be used to challenge the assumptions of the icons. This can lead to the creation of an upstart, and Louda suggested that this type of risky science be more encouraged at ESA, because it leads to new questions and hypotheses and has the potential for a major advance.

The 2006 Annual Meeting demonstrated a substantial increase in the sophistication of questions and approaches, as noted by Lars Hedin. Questions are being asked, not in isolation but in a broader perspective, and the sessions featured a broad diversity of approaches and a good linking of theory and data. We are also seeing a coming of age of new tools. Stable isotope techniques, for example, were formerly found only in stable isotope sessions, but we are now seeing these techniques being used in sessions focused on a range of topics.

ESA is approaching its 100th Annual Meeting, and there were concerns and recommendations raised by

both panel members and participants in the ensuing discussion. Kerry Woods noted that there are many constituencies within ESA that are not represented in the Annual Meeting sessions, ESA journals, or ESA administration, all of which are dominated by large research institutions. For example, David Ehrenfeld suggested that natural history is receiving less attention than in the past, both at the Annual Meeting as well as in ESA journals. However, Program Chair Kiyoko Miyanishi pointed out that the content of both the Annual Meeting and ESA journals are based on submissions from the Society's constituency, and encouraged ESA members to submit session proposals or manuscripts. There was also discussion on how to better link ecological research with allied fields, such as the geosciences. Lars Hedin pointed out that many of the topics addressed at ESA are also being addressed by groups like the American Geophysical Union. An up and coming challenge for ESA will be to reach out and encourage interdisciplinary collaborations with these allied fields.

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