

Celebrating the past, embracing the future

One hundred years – wow! The Ecological Society of America (ESA) is thriving, and the state of the Society is strong. Our centennial is a cause for celebration, but major milestones also invite reflection on our past and future. Science and culture were vastly different when Victor E Shelford took the reins of the Society in 1915 as its first president. Yet, the fledgling ESA grappled with issues that are surprisingly contemporary, such as articulating the disciplinary scope of ecology, acknowledging human influences on ecosystems, and considering whether to provide unbiased, policy-relevant science or to advocate for environmental issues. President Shelford helped integrate the disparate specialties of botany and zoology, reached out to other disciplines, and promoted the need for rigorous ecological studies at multiple levels of organization; he even anticipated studies of social–ecological systems. In the policy arena, Shelford was concerned about resource scarcity, pollution, and the need to preserve natural communities, although his forceful advocacy triggered a backlash from some ESA members against political activism. These early themes remain with us, but much else has changed. How should ESA navigate the start of its second century?

The professional demands on ecologists at all career stages have increased and intensified, even when compared to the recent past. As always, ecologists must be well trained scientifically; able to ask and answer good questions; proficient in analysis and scientific communication; and deeply knowledgeable about their study systems. However, today's ecologists must also communicate effectively to varied audiences, using multiple forms of media; collaborate on multidisciplinary teams; curate and share their data; and rapidly assimilate novel data sources as they become available. Keeping abreast of the scholarly literature remains a challenge, securing research funding is tough, and embracing new technologies (including means of communication) requires more time than is available. Furthermore, we must meet these demands while navigating a reasonable work–life balance in a 24/7 culture. Early-career scientists feel these demands acutely, but established scientists are no less affected.

ESA's mission (to promote ecological science through our journals and meetings; raise public awareness of ecology; strive to increase resources for conducting ecological science; and ensure appropriate use of that science in decision making) remains vital amidst these rapidly changing times. ESA publications and conferences will remain central to our mission. It is increasingly difficult for scientists to find the best papers because global scientific output is now doubling every nine years. High standards and rigorous peer review mean that our journals are respected sources of outstanding research, and with the Society's forthcoming publishing partnership, all members will have complimentary online access to all the journals. ESA meetings will continue providing the venue for the face-to-face exchanges that are so important for scientific progress, but the ways that ESA supports ecology and ecologists must continue to evolve.

How can ESA best serve its members in the years ahead? This question will receive much discussion during the coming year. For example, ESA could identify new ways to assist professional ecologists at all career stages – accelerating rates of change in the scientific enterprise make this a high priority. Fostering improved science communication is also vitally important, given the degree to which science has become politicized in the US. Enhanced ecological literacy is urgently required and depends on effective communication to diverse audiences, including youth, journalists, civic groups, faith communities, and elected officials. Excellent communicators are made, not born, and ESA can help ecologists improve this critical skill. Funding for ecological and environmental research has always been competitive, and support for research ultimately depends on societal values. Attempts to stifle research on politically controversial topics must be forcefully countered, and ESA could redouble its already strong advocacy for the role of science in environmental decision making.

ESA's presidents have provided exceptional leadership for a century, and it is my privilege to serve as we begin our 101st year. It is humbling to follow in the footsteps of many esteemed ecologists, but for me it's also a special honor to succeed two of my mentors: Frank B Golley (1976/77), my graduate advisor, and Eugene P Odum (1964/65), my postdoctoral advisor. As we mark our centennial, it is exciting to look ahead. ESA is my primary professional society, and I have been a proud member since graduate school. As we begin our second century, ESA must remain the nexus for US ecologists. Together, we can sustain ESA's longstanding tradition of excellence by learning from our past, building to our strengths, adapting to change, and embracing the future.



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