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New Moore Foundation Funding Supports UCSB Ecology Synthesis Center Embarking on a New Era

Whether it's illuminating the causes of California's exceptional plant diversity, dispelling the myth that jellyfish blooms are increasing throughout the world's oceans, or identifying key pathways for introduction of non-native forest pests into the U.S., UC Santa Barbara's National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis (NCEAS) is always at the expanding frontier of ecology research.

And those are only recent examples of the ambitious endeavors undertaken by NCEAS since its 1995 inception. In fact, the center itself was considered an innovative advancement at the time, and has since inspired similar synthesis centers worldwide.

All of which makes NCEAS's latest project perhaps its most intriguing yet: making over its successful model by broadening its reach to directly include the potential users of scientific information -- non-governmental organizations (NGOs), policymakers, and resource managers -- in the process itself.

New funding from the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation will enable NCEAS to do just that. A \$2.4 million, three-year grant will help cover the center's operating costs through 2015 -- and see the launch of new initiatives to ensure its viability, and relevance, far into the future.

"The Moore Foundation has worked with NCEAS over the years and has a deep appreciation of the work we do. This grant is the largest and most important we have received from them," said center director Frank Davis. "This will allow us to engage in exciting new initiatives while developing additional sources of support. More than 5,000 researchers have collaborated on NCEAS projects, and we still have an important role to play in tackling the environmental challenges that are too big for any one institution."

Created by the National Science Foundation (NSF), NCEAS was launched in response to pleas by ecological researchers who saw a need for meaningful synthesis of scientific data. The new center bucked the scientific tradition of solitary lab or fieldwork, instead assembling interdisciplinary teams to tackle problems at a broader scale. By sharing existing data for synthesis and analysis, teams of scientists created new pathways to discovery. And by providing the best informatic resources and a stimulating environment for immersion in collaborative synthesis, the center spawned an incubator of scientific research that has altered the way ecological science is conducted.

NCEAS is seizing new opportunities with the support from the new Moore Foundation grant. While promising to stay true to its core values -- synthesis chief among them -- the center is expanding its mission. Central to that expansion is a charge to embrace use-inspired science challenges for the benefit of nature and the well-being of people.

Enter NCEAS' latest initiative, a soon-to-launch partnership with The Nature Conservancy and the Wildlife Conservation Society called SNAP: Science for Nature and People. Meant to address environmental protections as a means of securing food, energy, and water for people across the planet, SNAP will tackle some of society's most challenging problems such as maintaining freshwater fisheries faced with hydroelectric development, protecting and restoring wetlands for coastal defense, and devising resilient and productive agricultural systems.

"The goal of Science for Nature and People is to address the overarching issue of how you conserve nature and, at same time, meet essential human needs," Davis said. "We'll be bringing scientists together with policymakers and practitioners, and other experts from academia, to engage in the process of discovery that results in solutions. We're trying to create a new model -- a global center of excellence -- to meet those needs and create real solutions for our conservation challenges."

NCEAS will soon be issuing an open call for proposals on behalf of SNAP, as well as recruiting postdoctoral candidates for SNAP Research Associates.

"This is an exciting place to be," Davis added of NCEAS. "The new direction we're moving is going to make it even more interesting."

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† Middle image: Dispelling the pervasive perception that jellyfish blooms are increasing in the world's oceans, an NCEAS-conducted study found there is in fact no robust evidence or proof of such an increase over the past two centuries.

Credit: Seacology

†† Bottom image: NCEAS research revealed that the remarkable diversity of California's plant life is largely the result of low extinction rates over the past 45 million years.

Credit: Jenn Yost

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