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Kat Beheshti earns early career distinction for contributions to coastal science and resource management

The coasts are inherently dynamic regions where the processes of land and sea interface. Ecosystems, such as estuaries, beaches and kelp forests are front and center in many of the dramatic changes currently unfolding. It’s these important yet threatened habitats that UC Santa Barbara ecologist Kathryn (Kat) Beheshti has focused her career to understand and protect.

Beheshti’s research has earned her the attention of the Coastal & Estuarine Research Federation (CERF), a nonprofit, non-partisan organization aimed at advancing our understanding and stewardship of these ecosystems. CERF has honored Beheshti with its Cronin Early Achievement Award, which recognizes coastal ecologists who have shown great promise during the first six years after earning their doctorate.

“I am incredibly honored to be a recipient,” Beheshti said, adding that some of her biggest science heroes have won the award in the past.

“Calling back CERF President Linda Blum to hear that I received the award was a moment in my career that I felt immense pride for the work that I lead solely because I think it matters, not because I think I'll be noticed for doing it.”

Beheshti’s research bridges fundamental science and applied coastal management. She studies how plants and animals respond to newly created or restored habitat. She also investigates the timescales involved in these restorations and how to maintain healthy habitats that can readily adapt to a changing world. Understanding these processes, she said, enables us to effectively steward these ecosystems and the resources they provide.

Beheshti has already built an impressive career applying ecological insights to conservation, restoration and resilience-building efforts. She joined UCSB as an assistant researcher following a California Sea Grant Fellowship with the Ocean Protection Council, where she worked on sea-level rise and coastal resilience initiatives.

In 2022, Beheshti became a co-principal investigator of the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station Mitigation Monitoring Program (SONGS MMP), overseeing large-scale coastal mitigation projects and managing a team of nine full-time staff.

A core scientific vision unifies Beheshti’s research. She aims to understand the loss and recovery dynamics of foundation species in a way that leads to effective management and protection. She has worked across a variety of coastal habitats — including salt marshes, seagrass meadows and kelp forests — to develop guiding principles for restoration strategies. Her innovative work has not only helped advance estuarine ecological theory but has also directly impacted coastal policy and restoration practices throughout California.

In addition to her scholarly output, Beheshti has distinguished herself through her outreach, applied communication efforts and commitment to influencing policy.

“I prioritize science communication and often produce my own illustrations,” she said. “I think it's more important for my audience to understand the main take-homes from my analyses than the specifics of the models I applied.”

Citing her collaborative leadership across diverse projects and her ability to make science accessible through public-facing media, the organization said in its announcement that Beheshti “exemplifies the spirit of the Cronin Award, combining academic excellence, real-world application and service to the coastal science community. CERF is proud to recognize her as a rising leader in estuarine science and looks forward to the continued impact of her work.”

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