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UCSB professors honored by Ecological Society of America

Harrison Tasoff
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(Santa Barbara, Calif.) — Two UC Santa Barbara faculty members have been named among the Ecological Society of America's 2026 fellows. The organization has honored Professor Deron Burkepile as a Fellow and named Assistant Professor Yong Zhou as an Early Career Fellow. The two scientists join an exclusive group of only eight and ten, respectively, this year.

"On behalf of the entire EEMB department, I am delighted to congratulate Yong Zhou and Deron Burkepile on these well-deserved honors from the Ecological Society of America," said Todd Oakley, chair of the Department of Ecology, Evolution, and Marine Biology (EEMB). "These recognitions reflect the excellence and impact of their scholarship. We are proud to celebrate their contributions to our department and to recognize them as leaders in ecology."

The Ecological Society of America (ESA) established its fellows program in 2012 to recognize the work of member researchers. Full Fellows are members who have made outstanding contributions to a wide range of fields served by ESA. Early Career

Fellows are those who have advanced ecological knowledge and applications within eight years of completing their doctoral training (or other terminal degree) and show promise of continuing to make outstanding contributions. Early Career Fellows are elected for five years, while full Fellows are elected for life.

The society will celebrate its new class of fellows during a ceremony on July 27 at their 2026 annual meeting in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Checking in on the community

“I feel very honored to be chosen as an ESA Fellow,” said Deron Burkepile, a professor in EEMB. “I think of myself first and foremost as an ecologist, so it feels very validating to be honored by the most significant group of ecologists in the world.”

Burkepile focuses on fundamental questions about the ecology of communities and ecosystems, always with an eye toward informing the conservation and restoration of these systems. “A lot of the work we do tries to understand the important roles that animals play in ecosystems,” he said. This includes the interplay between predators, herbivores and primary producers (like plants, algae and corals), as well as what happens when ecosystems lose important consumers due to overharvesting.

His group also studies how animals recycle nutrients in ecosystems via their urine, dung and carcasses. “So we think about how animals shape ecosystems both in life and after death,” Burkepile said.

One aspect that sets Burkepile’s research apart is his work across different kinds of ecosystems. “We have worked in coral reefs and kelp forests as well as African savannas and tallgrass prairies,” he said. “My work has often been more about the questions than about the specific ecosystem, trying to understand the generalities about how ecosystems work.”

Insights Underground

“I am deeply honored to receive this distinction,” said Zhou, an assistant EEMB professor who joined UCSB in 2025. “This recognition reflects not only my work, but also the outstanding mentorship and support I have been fortunate enough to

receive from my advisors, colleagues and universities.”

Zhou investigates how ecosystem processes respond to global change, with a particular focus on carbon and nutrient dynamics in fire-prone ecosystems. His current research explores two main themes: the feedback between plants, soil and microbes in response to fire, as well as the biogeochemistry of ecosystem engineers in tropical savannas.

While a lot of research in savannas highlights above ground features — like the balance between trees and grasses or the presence of large herbivores — Zhou’s expertise lies below ground. He investigates how disturbances like shifting fire patterns and expanding tree cover affect nutrient cycling and plant responses through their root systems. He also looks at what implications this has for long-term carbon storage and greenhouse gas dynamics.

One of his current research projects takes place in Odzala-Kokoua National Park, in the Congo Basin, a region with an exceptionally high diversity of termite species. Termites eat a ton of wood and grass, and the tiny microbes in their guts produce methane as a byproduct. And because there are trillions of them, these tiny termites might actually contribute a substantial amount to global methane emissions.

His ESA recognition is strong motivation to continue advancing the field of ecology, Zhou said. “It encourages me to keep uncovering how hidden, below-ground ecosystem processes function and adapt in the face of global change.”

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Media Contact
Harrison Tasoff
Science Writer
(805) 893-7220
harrisontasoff@ucsb.edu

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