

My approach to graduate training

I mentor graduate students with the lofty goal of changing the world for the better. By training first-rate, innovative scientists and communicators, I hope to have a larger and more significant influence on the quality of the world than I ever could by myself. Graduate students also teach me about new ideas and new approaches to the practice of science, ecology and conservation. They help create one of the most intellectually stimulating environments that I believe exists anywhere. In so doing, they enhance scholarship and progress throughout the lab, department, and university.

So I take graduate student mentoring very seriously. I expect to invest significant time, effort and funding into each of my students over the ~5 years of a Ph.D. and to continue to support your career for many years thereafter. I am therefore very selective about the students I accept. I try to identify students with a deep desire to make the world a better place and with the intellectual, communication and social skills needed to realize their professional goals. It's equally important that prospective students thoughtfully size me up as a good fit to their needs and personalities. I strongly encourage an in-person visit to my lab, the department, and the UCSC campus so that we can find out as much as possible about each other.

If you join my lab, you can expect several things from me. I strive to create a stimulating, supportive and inspiring environment within which my students can shine. I will provide time, space, connections, professional and work related advice and, when asked, life advice. Specifically, I strive to set aside ample time to meet regularly with my students, visit your field sites, hold productive lab meetings, and support your intellectual and professional development at each stage of your graduate work. I strive to provide and work on your behalf for funding and for laboratory, computing, and work space; and to apply my extended connections in the ecology, conservation, and land management worlds to your benefit. I also work for a sense of the community in the lab and the department and try to model professional honesty and integrity, respect for the places, people and other organisms I work with, and respect for my colleagues. Finally, I strive to encourage enough balance in life to make all of this sustainable.

In turn, I expect you to own your education and thesis work and run hard with what I and other mentors and colleagues provide. I expect my students' thesis work to be worthy of the huge investment of time and energy that they put into it and to include three components (not necessarily in order of importance):

1. A novel contribution to the basic science of ecology or a related field.
2. A significant contribution to environmental problem-solving, through science and scholarship addressed at a specific need in conservation, environmental management or a related area (through any discipline or combination of disciplines).
3. Direct action or service of some sort (this does not necessarily have to be part of your written thesis), including communication of your work beyond the academy and/or positive contributions to the community or place in which your research takes place.

Finally I ask my graduate students to invest in and support the lab mission and all its members, provide constructive feedback on how to improve the lab, and work to create an honest, supportive environment.

I encourage prospective students with excellent qualifications to apply to my lab if I can advise you well in the areas you want to pursue. It makes sense to work with me if you are interested in one or more of: community and ecosystem ecology, terrestrial plant ecology, consequences of biodiversity change, invasive species ecology, ecological responses and feedbacks to climate and atmospheric changes, or assessing effectiveness of conservation practices. It also makes sense to work with me if ecology is your chief disciplinary interest and you expect to include a significant field component in your thesis research. While my background and the nature of my department facilitate the incorporation of policy, economics, anthropology and other social science into your research, I am probably not the right major advisor for students interested primarily in those disciplines. If you decide to apply to my lab group, be as specific as possible about what you want to work on, with the understanding that it can evolve during your first 1-2 years of graduate school.