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NEWS

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Ecology in the Digital Age

Santa Barbara, California -- How might students better understand ecological concepts? Using large-scale data publicly available from the internet may provide one answer, according to faculty at a recent workshop hosted by the National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis (NCEAS) at UC Santa Barbara. Following a competitive proposal process, Teresa Mourad of the Ecological Society of America (ESA), Dr. Wendy Gram of the National Ecological Observatory Network (NEON, Inc.), and Dr. Bruce Grant of Widener University, organized the workshop to explore the opportunities and challenges associated with using this approach. Faculty participants from eight minority-serving and small undergraduate institutions, and NCEAS Deputy Director, Dr. Stephanie Hampton, participated.

Faculty participants developed undergraduate teaching modules focused on topics such as climate change and polar bears, patterns in bird diversity, and the carbon cycle. These activities aim to enable undergraduate students to better understand ecological concepts and equip them with critical quantitative skills as the demand for a data-savvy workforce continues to grow.

The modules will be revised over the next year, implemented with students, and assessed. The group will reconvene in late 2010 to synthesize their experiences and discuss ways to promote use of data-based experiences in undergraduate science courses.

NCEAS is funded by the National Science Foundation, the University of California-Santa Barbara, and the State of California. NCEAS supports cross-disciplinary research that uses existing data to address major fundamental and applied issues in ecology, fostering new techniques in mathematical and geospatial modeling, dynamic simulation, and visualization of ecological systems. Since its establishment in 1995, NCEAS has risen into the top one percent of 38,000 institutions in the world for publishing in ecology and environmental sciences, in terms of scientific impact.

ESA is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization of scientists founded in 1915 with more than 10,000 members worldwide in academia, government and the corporate sector. ESA's Education and Diversity Programs office offers a variety of programs to increase the diversity of ecology-related professions and to improve the quality of ecology education.

