

DAVIS ASSISTS FOREIGN IN-COUNTRY CAPACITY FOR CONSERVATION AT HOME

Mark Schwartz has been a professor of the Ecology Department for 14 years. He is a plant ecologist and is primarily concerned with conservation issues. Schwartz's research projects include assessing patterns in the geographic and taxonomic distribution of rare plants in the US and Canada, predicting the effect of habitat fragmentation on distribution shift potentials of trees under global warming scenarios and monitoring of rare plants performance, including population viability analysis and predictive habitat modeling. Schwartz's newest endeavor involves a fellowship for Ecology graduate students made possible by the Packard Foundation that targets international applicants.



Photo Courtesy of Mark Schwartz

International Affairs Journal: What steps do developing countries need to take to promote conservation and sustain biodiversity?

Mark Schwartz: Developing countries need professionals with a spectrum of social and scientific skills in order to make conservation work.; they need to be able to engage local people, people like village leaders, to think about the developing a sustainable relationship with their environment. To accomplish this, these countries need to be thinking about training staff of resource management agencies in ways that can help them accomplish their goals. There are reasons that conservation organizations are starting to take Ph. D. students and put them into leadership positions in developing countries. These professionals are developing strategies for conserving ecosystems because they have the research experience to know when research is useful, and when it is not. Highly trained professionals have the context and the framework to think about conservation as a research problem. Even though these professionals are often not doing research when they take conservation management jobs, they can use their experience as a researcher productively. Developing countries need these skills to deal with the complexities of sustainable ecosystem management. We are trying to help train this new generation of conservation professionals.

What are non-governmental organizations doing internationally to assist “developing” nations in conservation efforts?

Increasingly, conservation organizations are hiring Ph. Ds to run programs within developing countries. We started talking to the Packard Foundation about a training grant to help provide graduate student fellowships for international students to fill these professional needs. The Packard Foundation was particularly fond of the idea of funding ecosystem based conservation management because

they have a big ecosystem-based management program and their focus is on international students. Their reasoning being that conservation organizations are sending people over to Tanzania, Mozambique, and other such places in order to help develop local conservation organizations. These organizations are not really going to succeed until they have built in-country capacity for conservation. Building professional capacity in ecosystem management in the developing world is a priority for philanthropic organizations such as Packard, conservation organizations such as Conservation International, and is an interest of ours at UC Davis. We [The Graduate Group in ecology at UC Davis, with the financial assistance of the Packard Foundation] are now recruiting for our first cohort of students in this new training program. We are trying to bring international students to this program on conservation management.

What kind of students are you looking for?

We are looking, primarily for students from developing countries. Developed countries, such as Australia, are perfectly capable of training their own conservation professionals. This recruitment is a bit of a challenge because international student fees at UC are very, very expensive. This is financially prohibitive for these foreign students, and also for our faculty who pay their stipends and fees off of research grants. Many of the people who we are trying to recruit need us to pay their application fee for them; even applying to a US University is a big step for them. So, we are working with organizations within these countries in order to identify the right kinds of people.

How do you get let potential applicants know about this program?

We have an external advisory committee made up of representatives from a variety of conservation organizations: the Wildlife Conservation Society, The Nature Conservancy and Conservation International all have representatives on this panel. We also have people from California Fish and Game Commission and many others. Each of those representatives have connections both domestically and abroad that can help us identify appropriate students and also to help them find appropriate research collaborations.. What we would like to do with this grant is focus on international students and so we asked our collaborators to put out the word to their contacts in order to find suitable applicants

How did the applicants in this first year fare?

We have a pretty decent applicant pool and there are about a dozen or so international applicants who are candidates. We feel pretty good about that. But, we didn't, in this first year, do an adequate job at getting a good geographical spread of international applicants. The Packard Foundation funded this training grant in the middle of December; our application deadline was January, so we did not have much time. We had a strong indication that we were going to be funded, so we started advertising in November, but that wasn't quite enough. We got lots of inquiries from places like Madagascar, where Conservation International has a big program, but they mostly didn't apply. Our applicant pool is strongly dominated by students from China and Southeast Asia.

Are Chinese and Southeast Asian applicants not ideal candidates for this program?

China is a very special case. China classifies themselves as a "developing" country or they are classified as a "developing" country, but they are investing an awful lot into education – so their universities are growing rapidly. There is now an international collaboration between the UC system and Chinese Universities and together we are jointly developing exchange programs to foster interactions between the Chinese and American Universities. The Chinese government has a program of awarding fellowship money for their Ph. D students to spend a year or two abroad. So in some ways China is not our target audience; there is a real commitment from the Chinese government to build this infrastructure themselves, at least in science, I don't know about conservation in particular. We would like to support these kinds of students, and work with Chinese scholars, but we would like a broader, harder to reach, pool as well.

How does the program plan on diversifying the application pool?

In the coming years we want to work to diversify to get a broader array of applicants. For example, we think that we can do a good job training African students. We have several researchers working in Africa. It has been very difficult getting appropriate African applicants. We did not get any this year. The Society for Conservation Biology is an international organization that meets once a year. Alternate year meetings are held outside of North America. They met in South Africa in 2007; in 2009 the meeting will be in China. For 2007, the Society launched

a huge effort to get broad participation by Africans at the South African meeting. This was fairly successful. Africans are, by far, the most challenged suite of conservation biologists interacting with the international community. Travel is difficult; salaries tend to be low; their libraries tend to have few scientific journals, electronic access is patchy, it is just hard!

Where there any African applicants this year?

Several Malagasy students inquired. They reported that paying the application fee was prohibitive for them. So, I asked them to send me their application material without officially applying. If they would not be competitive then we would skip it. Alternatively, if they would be competitive then I will pay their application fee. Unfortunately, that was the last we heard from them. We need to take a more hands-on approach.

How do you plan to remedy the lack of African applicants?

Clearly we need to start earlier and cultivate those relationships over a longer period of time. The idea of spending several years abroad for an education can be a daunting thing for many people. I had a Zambian student a while ago. She was in the US for almost ten years and that was a challenge for her. She came over wanting to develop skills and return to Africa. By the time that she was finished with her Ph. D she wasn't so sure. She had a son who was six and she was debating this issue of economic well-being and education for her son and her professional career. In the end it worked out alright for her, but she had to negotiate hard. Jobs she was offered in Zambia wanted to pay her a Zambian salary. She just couldn't live and educate her son on that income. She needed an international salary. The Zambian Wild Dog Project eventually agreed to hire her on an international salary, making it possible for her to return to her country. Once she negotiated an international salary, she felt very good about going back. She has been very happy that she could make this decision and return to her homeland.

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What do you see for the future of this program in conservation management?

I think it will be a great program; we have a lot of enthusiasm. We have a large number of domestic students that would like to participate and that is quite good. It is our first year so we have a lot of work to do developing the program. We will be taking new students in the fall. We are very excited that we have money for five fellowships; four of which also pay non-resident fees.