

# **A Century of Human Ecology: Recollections and Tributes—On the Occasion of the 100th Anniversary of the Ecological Society of America**

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As we enter the twenty-first century, ecological concepts have been adopted by, and adapted to, virtually every academic and applied field—from the social sciences and humanities to engineering, planning, medicine, business, and politics. With ever-increasing awareness, humanity is arriving at an understanding that we live in an ecological—and a human ecological—world.

Ecology, as an interdisciplinary science, has always wrestled with topics of complexity and comprehensiveness. However, some of the most challenging issues have occurred at the intersection of natural and human ecology. For some, ecology should focus on the scientific study of nature; for others, humans are an inescapable part of the living world and the domain of ecology must include them. These concerns date to before the founding of the Ecological Society of America (ESA); indeed, they were a significant aspect of ecology from the outset.

Human ecology has a complex history. The first decades of the twentieth century saw multiple attempts to initiate the field, coming not from scientific ecology, but from social sciences and human studies disciplines such as geography, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. During the 1950s and 1960s, similar attempts were made in various applied fields, including health, planning, architecture, and design. However, these initiatives seldom extended beyond their fields of origin, and they rarely had any relation to one another. ESA produced multiple advocates for human ecological orientations over the years, along with many attempts to establish formal organizational structures—though these efforts tended to be periodic and not sustained (see Cittadino, 1993; Young, 1974, 1983).

In the 1970s and 1980s, a truly interdisciplinary human ecology began to emerge, stimulated in part by the advent of the environmental movement and by the founding of an assortment of academic degree programs in human ecology worldwide. Further developments followed with the emergence of regionally based professional societies, including the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council, the European Association for Human Ecology, the Nordic Society for Human Ecology, the Indian Society for Human Ecology, and the Japanese Society for Human Ecology, among others. One of the last groups to form was the US-based Society for Human Ecology

(SHE), founded in 1981. Between then and now, SHE has organized more than two dozen international human ecology conferences in Europe, Asia, and North and South America—frequently in partnership with the above organizations. Since 1993, the society has also offered *Human Ecology Review* as a leading research and scholarly publication for the field. More recently, SHE has become the coordinating hub for international human ecology activities, education, research, and professional networking (see e.g., Borden, 1989, 2008, 2014; Dyball, 2012; Ekehorn, 1992; Suzuki et al., 1991).

Another major step toward the development of an interdisciplinary human ecology took place in 2007 at the Third International EcoSummit in Beijing, China, which SHE co-sponsored. At the time, I was SHE's executive director, and my colleague, John Anderson, was president. In a conversation with ESA President Alan Covich at the close of the EcoSummit event, we discussed the possibility of re-activating a human ecology section within ESA. Alan was enthusiastic about the idea. Shortly after the conference, he and Katherine McCarter, ESA's Executive Director, guided us through the steps of preparing by-laws, enlisting a founders' group, receiving governing board approval, and launching ESA's section on human ecology.

The section's first meeting was held in August 2008 at ESA's 93rd annual meeting in Milwaukee. John Anderson was elected as the section's first chair, with Rob Dyball—also a founding member—as vice-chair. Our group, still quite small in comparison to older, more established sections, has been growing steadily ever since and has enjoyed active collaborations with other human-oriented sections of ESA, such as the urban ecology, environmental justice, applied ecology, and agro-ecology sections. We have also contributed our own symposia and organized annual sessions.

In the lead-up to ESA's centennial conference, Rob took an active role in ensuring that human ecology was meaningfully incorporated into the activities of ESA's Historical Records Committee. At the 99th annual meeting in Sacramento, he and I were co-presenters of "Human Ecology: An Historical Review" within a nine-part session on the history of ESA. I was elected section chair at that meeting for the forthcoming year and, as one of my centennial-event responsibilities, took on the task of organizing a historically oriented session on human ecology: "Human Ecology—A Gathering of Perspectives: Portraits from the Past—Prospects for the Future."

The aim of the session was to review a century of contributions to understanding the human dimensions of ecological thinking by highlighting some of the influential individuals whose articulations of their concerns about human–nature relationships have helped to shape the field. Exploring some of these long-standing interests across the timeline of ecology's history illustrated the myriad ways in which human ecological questions have arisen and re-emerged over the years.

Each presenter composed a historical “portrait” of a notable individual—reviewing his or her early life, educational background, professional contributions, and broader influence. The “human ecological” thinking of each person was highlighted within the context of his or her lifetime, as well as in terms of its current and prospective significance. We began with Ellen Swallow Richards, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology chemist and public health researcher, who visited Ernst Haeckel’s lab in Jena and, some say, was the first American to publicly use the word “ecology” (see “New Science,” 1892). The next three portraits were of ESA past presidents who, in various ways, touched upon human environmental issues. Victor Shelford, ESA’s first president, was an ecological scientist and avid conservationist, whose work reflected the perennial ‘is–ought’ complications of humans-in-nature. Paul Sears was likewise a serious scientist and conservationist, and a forthright spokesperson for human ecology. Frank Golley, the most current of our selected ESA past presidents, advanced landscape ecology, emphasizing environmental ethics and other human-oriented issues. The remaining portraits focused on significant contributors to the history of ecological thought from outside ESA. Rachel Carson, through careful research and skillful writing, conveyed the basic concepts of ecology in everyday language—as did René Dubos, a leading scientist and a prolific author, who developed a rich range of human ecological ideas. Ian McHarg brought ecology to regional planning through his pioneering program at the University of Pennsylvania and influential book *Design with Nature* (1969). We ended with Gregory Bateson, whose work on the “ecology of mind” charted a distinctive exploration of ecological epistemology and the deeper questions of mind-in-nature.

Following the meeting, all the presenters welcomed the opportunity to prepare written versions of the profiles they had presented. The backgrounds of these authors are as diverse as the individuals they portrayed; they come from the fields of ecology and social science, history, literature, psychology, and environmental design. The chance to simultaneously look backward and forward on the occasion of ESA’s 100th anniversary was a special opportunity. We hope that our gathering of perspectives renders a multifaceted and valuable overview of the meaning(s) of human ecology from the past, in the present, and for the future.

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