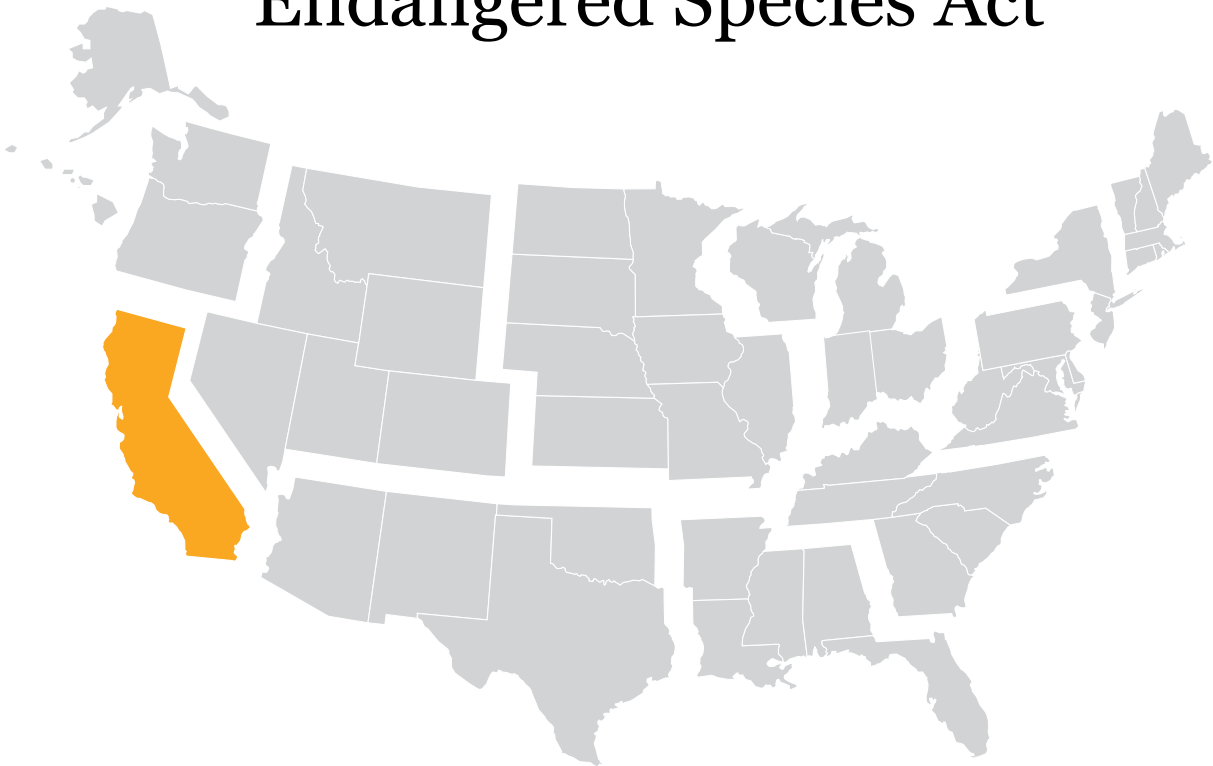


M A R C H 2 0 0 6



A Letter from Biologists
to the United States Senate
Concerning Science in the
Endangered Species Act



CALIFORNIA

The Endangered Species Act is scientifically sound and its goals are important to human well-being. We should improve its performance, not reduce its protections.

Jane Lubchenco, Marine Ecologist

Valley Professor of Marine Biology and Distinguished Professor of Zoology, Oregon State University; member, National Academy of Sciences; MacArthur Fellow; past president, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Ecological Society of America, and International Council for Science

As children, small creatures endlessly fascinate us; as adults, we can protect them so as to inspire future children.

Les E. Watling, Marine Ecologist

Professor of Biological Oceanography and former director, Darling Marine Center, University of Maine; Pew Fellow in Marine Conservation; and past president, Crustacean Society

Scientists know we must protect species because they are working parts of our life-support system.

Paul Ehrlich, Entomologist, Population Biologist

Bing Professor of Population Studies and president, Center for Conservation Biology, Stanford University, California; member, National Academy of Sciences; MacArthur Fellow; and Crafoord Prize winner in Bioscience

For what DNA literacy if we have extinguished the books?

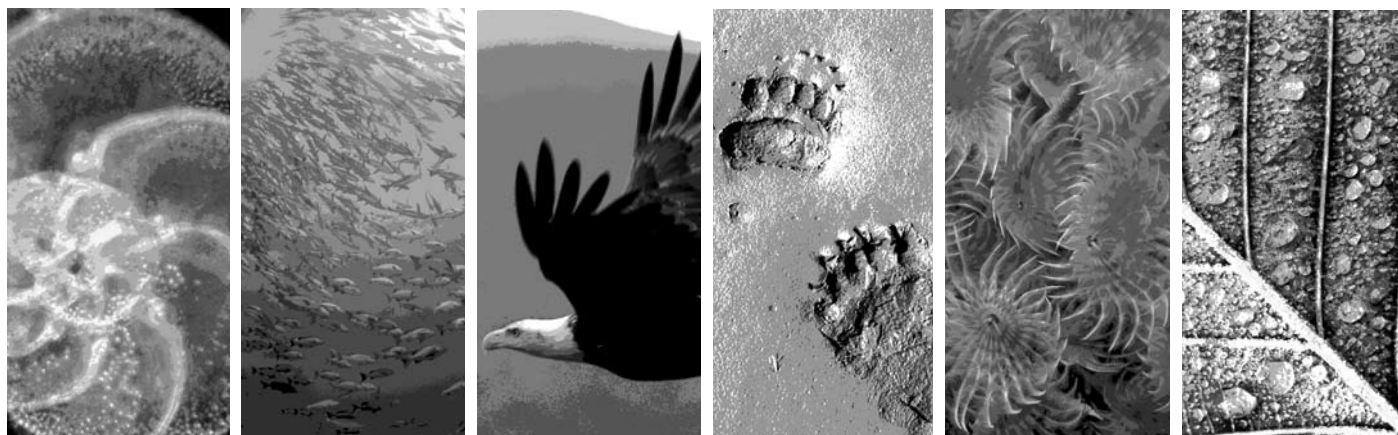
Daniel H. Janzen, Evolutionary Ecologist

Professor of Biology, University of Pennsylvania; member, National Academy of Sciences; MacArthur Fellow; and Crafoord Prize winner in Bioscience

To weaken the scientific foundation of the Endangered Species Act is to doom more species to extinction.

Walter V. Reid, Ecologist

Consulting professor, Institute for the Environment, Stanford University, California; former director, Millennium Ecosystem Assessment; and past board member, Society for Conservation Biology



A Letter from Biologists
to the United States Senate
Concerning Science in the
Endangered Species Act

M A R C H 2 0 0 6

A Letter from 5,738 Biologists to the United States Senate Concerning Science in the Endangered Species Act

Dear Senators:

WE ARE WRITING AS BIOLOGISTS WITH EXPERTISE IN A VARIETY OF SCIENTIFIC disciplines that concern biological diversity and the loss of species. With the Senate considering policies that could have long-lasting impacts on this nation's species diversity, we ask that you take into account scientific principles that are crucial to species conservation. Biological diversity provides food, fiber, medicines, clean water, and myriad other ecosystem products and services on which we depend every day. If we look only at well-studied species groups, nearly one-third of native species in the United States are at risk of disappearing.¹ Extinction is truly irreversible — once gone, individual species and all of the services that they provide us cannot be brought back.

On December 8, 1973, President Richard Nixon signed the Endangered Species Act (“ESA”) with the goal of conserving endangered and threatened species and the ecosystems on which they depend. For species that have been listed and provided protection under the ESA, much of that purpose has been achieved. According to an article in the September 30, 2005, edition of *Science*, less than one percent of listed species have gone extinct since 1973, while 10 percent of candidate species still waiting to be listed have suffered that fate. In addition to the hundreds of species that the Act has protected from extinction, listing has contributed to population increases or the stabilization of populations for at least 35 percent of listed species, and perhaps significantly more, as well as the recovery of such signature species as the peregrine falcon. While complete recovery has been realized for just two percent of species listed, given the precarious state of most species when listed, this represents significant progress.

One of the great strengths of the Endangered Species Act is its foundation in sound scientific principles and its reliance on the best available science.² Unfortunately, recent legislative proposals would critically weaken this foundation. For species conservation to continue, it is imperative both that the scientific principles embodied in the Act are maintained, and that the Act is strengthened, fully implemented, and adequately funded.

► LISTING

Objective scientific information and methods should be used in listing species, subspecies, and distinct population segments as endangered or threatened under the Act. While non-scientific factors may appropriately be considered at points later in the process of protecting species, their use in listing decisions is inconsistent with biologically defensible principles. Due to the fragile state of many of those species that require the Act's protections, the listing process needs to proceed as promptly as possible; otherwise, species will go extinct while waiting to be listed.

► HABITAT

Habitat provides the unique food, shelter, and other complex requirements that each species needs for its survival; habitat loss and degradation are the principal reasons for the decline of most species at risk. Habitat protection is essential if species are to be conserved and the goals of the ESA are to be met. The relationship between species, their habitats, and the threats they face can be exceedingly complex. Therefore, the chances of species recovery are maximized when habitat protection is based on sound scientific principles, and when the determinations of the biological needs of at-risk species are scientifically well informed.

1 From NatureServe, an international network of scientists cataloguing biological diversity.

2 The National Academy of Science's National Research Council said in its seminal 1995 report, *Science and the Endangered Species Act*: “...there has been a good match between science and the ESA...[and] the ESA is based on sound scientific principles.”

The obligation for federal agencies to consult with the appropriate wildlife agency and its biologists when federal actions could affect habitat for listed species is an indispensable provision in the ESA. It provides the means for science to inform decisions about the habitat-dependent survival and recovery of species at-risk. The designation of critical habitat places further obligations on the federal government to, among other things, protect the habitat essential to species recovery. It is far more effective, far easier, and far less expensive to protect functioning natural habitats than it is to recreate them once they are gone.

► **SCIENTIFIC TOOLS**

The current Endangered Species Act standard of “best available science” has worked well and has been flexible enough over time to accommodate evolving scientific information and practice. Failure to keep the ESA open to the use of scientific information from the best available research and monitoring, and to rely on impartial scientific experts, will contribute to delays in species recovery and to species declines and extinctions. Critical scientific information should not only include current empirical data, but also, for example, historic habitat and population information, population surveys, habitat and population modeling, and taxonomic and genetic studies. Use of scientific knowledge should not be hampered by administrative requirements that overburden or slow the Act’s implementation, or by limiting consideration of certain types of scientific information.

► **RECOVERY PLANS**

Recovery plans must be science-based documents that are developed with the input of scientists and are responsive to new information. Recovery plans must be based on the best possible information about the specific biology of each species, must identify threats to each species and address what is needed to mitigate those threats, and must predict how species are likely to respond to mitigation measures that may be adopted. To be most effective, recovery plans need to incorporate scientific principles of adaptive management, so they can be updated as new information on species and their habitats becomes available. Changes to the ESA that would delay completion of recovery plans, or provide for inflexible recovery goals that cannot be informed by new or additional scientific knowledge, should be avoided.

► **SCIENTIFIC ADVANCES AND NEW ISSUES**

The scientific community has contributed significant new information on imperiled species, their uses of habitats, and threats to those resources since the ESA was first passed into law. Serious, new, and as yet insufficiently addressed issues, such as global warming and invasive species, have emerged as primary environmental concerns that affect the fate of our native species diversity. We urge Congress to initiate thorough studies to consider the foremost problems that drive species toward extinction.

Losing species means losing the potential to solve some of humanity’s most intractable problems, including hunger and disease. The Endangered Species Act is more than just a law — it is the ultimate safety net in our life support system. As Earth has changed and as science has progressed since the Endangered Species Act was authorized in 1973, the ESA has served our nation well, largely because of its flexibility and its solid foundation in science. It is crucial to maintain these fundamental principles. The challenges of effective implementation of the Act should not be interpreted to require substantive rewriting of this valuable, well-functioning piece of legislation.

Thank you very much for taking our concerns into account. We are available to discuss any and all of the issues we have raised.

Sincerely,

5,738 Scientific Experts Concerned About Endangered Species and Their Habitats

California

Luna Abdallah, Ph.D.

San Francisco, CA

Alice Abela

Wildlife Biologist
Santa Maria, CA

David Ackerly, Ph.D.

Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Thomas C. Adam

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology, Evolution
and Marine Biology
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Goleta, CA

Melissa M. Adams

Department of Ecological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Rachel Adams

Doctoral Candidate
Stanford University
Palo Alto, CA

Peter B. Adler, Ph.D.

Department of Ecology, Evolution
and Marine Biology
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

David G. Ainley, Ph.D.

Associate Ecologist
San Jose, CA

Peter S. Alagona, M.A.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of History
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA

Susan Alexander, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Department of Science
and Environmental Policy
California State University, Seaside
Seaside, CA

S. Elizabeth Alter, Ph.D.

Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Pacific Grove, CA

Richard F. Ambrose, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Environmental
Health Sciences
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA

Charles G. Anderson, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Stockton, CA

Daniel W. Anderson, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Wildlife, Fish,
and Conservation Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Ileene Anderson, M.S.

Center for Biological Diversity
Los Angeles, CA

Jennifer K. Anderson, M.S.

Lecturer (Retired)
Department of
Environmental Studies
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Kayce L. Anderson

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology and
Evolution
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Sean Anderson, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Department of Environmental
Science and Resource Management
California State University, Channel
Islands
Camarillo, CA

Charles Andre, Ph.D.

San Francisco, CA

James M. Andre

Director
Granite Mountains Desert Research
Center
University of California, Riverside
Kelso, CA

Karen C. Arden, Ph.D.

Professor
La Jolla, CA

Peter Arensburger, Ph.D.

Department of Entomology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Y. Meriah Arias, Ph.D.

Scientist
San Diego, CA

Isabel Ashton, Ph.D.

Department of Ecology and
Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA

John C. Avise, Ph.D.

Distinguished Professor
Department of Ecology and
Evolution
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA

Thomas Azwell

Doctoral Candidate
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Keith Babcock, M.S.

Loomis, CA

Patricia Baird, Ph.D.

Department of Biological Sciences
California State University, Long
Beach
Long Beach, CA

Bruce G. Baldwin, Ph.D.

W. L. Jepson Professor and Curator
Department of Integrative Biology
Jepson Herbarium
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Grant Ballard

Senior Biologist
Doctoral Candidate
Stinson Beach, CA

Jun Bando, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Researcher
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Michelle Barbieri, M.S.

Los Angeles, CA

Michael G. Barbour, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Plant Sciences
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Jonathan N. Baskin, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus
Department of Biological Sciences
California State Polytechnic
University, Pomona
Pomona, CA

Maddalena Bearzi, Ph.D.

Ocean Conservation Society
Marina del Rey, CA

Gordon Becker, M.S.

Center for Ecosystem Management
and Restoration
Oakland, CA

Ted Beedy, Ph.D.

Yosemite Association
Nevada City, CA

Annaliese Beery, M.S.

Department of Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Natalia Belfiore, Ph.D.

Museum of Vertebrate Zoology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Charles L. Bellamy, D.Sc.

Senior Insect Biosystematist
Plant Pest Diagnostics Branch
California Department of Food
and Agriculture
Sacramento, CA

Christopher Belnap

Master's Candidate
Department of Plant and
Microbial Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Evan K. Benn

Fisheries Biologist
ECORP Consulting Inc.
Roseville, CA

Mica Bennett, M.S.

University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Elizabeth Bent, Ph.D.

Department of Plant Pathology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Elizabeth Bent, Ph.D.

Riverside, CA

Elena C. Berg, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Research Fellow
Center for Tropical Research,
Institute of the Environment
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA

Gerick S. Bergsma

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology, Evolution
and Marine Biology
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Steven Berkeley, M.S.

University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

California

Eric L. Berlow, Ph.D.

Field Station Director
Sierra Nevada Research Institute
University of California, Merced
Merced, CA

Tammie Beyerl, M.S.

Auberry, CA

James Biardi, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Fellow
Department of Chemistry
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Allison Bidlack, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science, Policy and Management
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Carolyn Bigger, Ph.D.

El Cajon, CA

Robert E. Bingham

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Tania Bird, M.S.

San Francisco, CA

Roxanne Bittman, M.S.

Davis, CA

Rick Bizzoco, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biology
San Diego State University
San Diego, CA

Robert Blazej

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Bioengineering
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Jessica L. Blickley

Doctoral Candidate
Ecology Graduate Group
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Jessica Blois

Doctoral Candidate
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Julia C. Blum

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Steve Blumenshine, Ph.D.

Department of Biology
Fresno, CA

Carol Boggs, Ph.D.

Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Monica Bond, M.S.

Wildlife Biologist
San Francisco, CA

Autumn Bonnema, M.A.

Moss Landing Marine Laboratories
Moss Landing, CA

Martha L. Booz, Ph.D.

Bio-Rad Laboratories
El Sobrante, CA

Mark Borchert, Ph.D.

Ecologist
Los Padres National Forest
U.S. Forest Service
Ojai, CA

Karrigan Bork

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology
University of California, Davis
Woodland, CA

Stuart Borrett, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Research Scientist
Center for the Study of Language
and Information
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Sara G. Bothwell

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Studies
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Virginia L. Boucher, Ph.D.

Reserve Director
John Muir Institute of the
Environment
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Sarane Bowen, Ph.D.

Professor Emerita
Department of Biology
San Francisco State University
San Francisco, CA

Peter A. Bowler, Ph.D.

Senior Lecturer
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA

John Bowman, Ph.D.

University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Sean F. Boyle

Principal Scientist
Human Genetics
Roche Pharmaceuticals
Oakland, CA

Matthew Bracken, Ph.D.

Bodega Marine Laboratory
University of California, Davis
Bodega Bay, CA

Valance E. Brenneis, Ph.D.

Department of Environmental
Science and Policy
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Richard E. Brenner, Ph.D.

Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Steven Brenner, Ph.D.

Department of Plant and Microbial
Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

William Bretz, Ph.D.

Natural Reserve System
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA

Laurie Briden, M.S.

Senior Wildlife Biologist
California Department
of Fish and Game
Stockton, CA

Martin Ralph Brittan, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus
Department of Biological Sciences
California State University,
Sacramento
Sacramento, CA

Jeremy Brooks

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Anthropology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Shannon M. Bros, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biological Sciences
San Jose State University
San Jose, CA

Berry Brosi, M.S.

Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Matt Brown, M.S.

Chico, CA

Milford S. Brown, Ph.D.

Research Chemist (Retired)
U.S. Department of Agriculture
El Cerrito, CA

Richard N. Brown, Ph.D., D.V.M.

Adjunct Professor and Veterinarian
Department of Wildlife
Humboldt State University
Arcata, CA

David K. Bruck, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biology
San Jose State University
San Jose, CA

Jennifer J. Buck, M.S.

Restoration Ecologist
The Nature Conservancy
Davis, CA

Travis Buck

Biologist
Encinitas, CA

Thomas Buckowski

Lake Biologist
Costa Mesa, CA

Joseph Burdo, Ph.D.

Research Associate
The Salk Institute
for Biological Studies
La Jolla, CA

Ryan Burnette

Avian Ecologist
Terrestrial Ecology Division
Point Reyes Bird Observatory
Conservation Science
Chester, CA

Timothy A. Burr, M.S.

Wildlife Biologist
Poway, CA

April Burton

Doctoral Candidate
Davis, CA

California

Cole Burton, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science, Policy and Management
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Ramona J. Butz

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Earl Byron, Ph.D.

Sacramento, CA

Denise M. Cadman, M.A.

Natural Resource Specialist
City of Santa Rosa
Santa Rosa, CA

Gregor M. Caillet, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Ichthyology
Moss Landing Marine Laboratories
Moss Landing, CA

Susan Cameron

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science and Policy
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Diane Campbell, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA

Gail M. Campos, M.S.

Senior Ecologist
Los Angeles, CA

Bradley J. Cardinale, Ph.D.

Department of Ecology, Evolution
and Marine Biology
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Eli Carlisle

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Viticulture
Davis, CA

Heather A. Carlisle, M.A.

San Diego, CA

Peter Carlton, Ph.D.

Department of Biochemistry
University of California, San
Francisco
Berkeley, CA

Paul Caron

Senior District Biologist
Los Angeles, CA

Scott P. Carroll, Ph.D.

University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Taylor Carroll, M.S.

Biological Analyst
Science Applications
International Corporation
Santa Barbara, CA

Joel Casagrande

Master's Candidate
Marina, CA

James F. Case, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus
Marine Science Institute
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Ted J. Case, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biology
University of California, San Diego
La Jolla, CA

David Casper, D.V.M.

Veterinarian
Department of Natural Sciences
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Gonzalo C. Castillo, Ph.D.

West Sacramento, CA

Michael Caterino, Ph.D.

Curator of Entomology
Santa Barbara, CA

Joseph J. Cech, Jr., Ph.D.

Department of Wildlife, Fish, and
Conservation Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Peter Chaille, M.A.

Department of Ecology, Evolution
and Marine Biology
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Alexis Chaine, Ph.D.

Department of Ecology
and Evolution
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Yvonne Chan, M.S.

Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Jesse Chaney, M.S.

Director
Arcata, CA

Maxine Chaney

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Marine
Environmental Biology
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA

Michael Chasse

Natural Resource Management
Specialist
San Francisco, CA

Stylianios Chatzimanolis, Ph.D.

Department of Invertebrate Zoology
Santa Barbara Museum of Natural
History
Santa Barbara, CA

Dave Checkley, Ph.D.

La Jolla, CA

Ted Cheeseman, M.S.

Cheesemans' Ecology Safaris
Saratoga, CA

James Childress, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Ecology, Evolution
and Marine Biology
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Lee Christianson, Ph.D.

Stockton, CA

Carrie A. Cizauskas, D.V.M

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science, Policy, and Management
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Curtis Clark, Ph.D.

Professor
California State Polytechnic
University, Pomona
Pomona, CA

Howard O. Clark, M.A.

Ecologist
Department of Biology
H. T. Harvey and Associates
Fresno, CA

Anthony Clemento, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Sean Clemenza

Doctoral Candidate
Sacramento, CA

Chris Clervi

Santa Barbara, CA

David A. Cleveland, Ph.D.

Department of Environmental
Studies
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Robert C. Clover, Ph.D.

Department of Zoology
Oregon State University
Los Osos, CA

Martin Cody, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus
Department of Biology
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA

Philippe S. Cohen, Ph.D.

Administrative Director
Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Mary E. Coker, M.S.

Morgan Hill, CA

Mark A. Colwell, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Wildlife
Humboldt State University
Arcata, CA

Jason Conder, Ph.D.

Irvine, CA

Richard Cone, Ph.D.

Oakland, CA

Erin Conlisk, Ph.D.

Doctoral Candidate
Energy and Resources Group
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Michael J. Connor, Ph.D.

Executive Director
Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee
Riverside, CA

Kevin Contreras, M.S.

Watsonville, CA

California

Douglass Cooper, M.S.

Project Manager
San Diego, CA

Lauronda D. Cooper, M.A.

Department of Biology
San Francisco State University
Cupertino, CA

Miriam Cooperband, Ph.D.

West Hills, CA

Stephanie Coppeto, M.S.

Ecologist
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Jeffrey D. Corbin, Ph.D.

Adjunct Professor
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Ammon Corl

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Will Cornwell

Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
San Francisco, CA

Gwynne N. Corrigan, M.S.

Department of Ecology and
Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Kimberly M. Cover

Master's Candidate
Department of
Environmental Studies
California State University, Fullerton
Berkeley, CA

Wendy A. Cover

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Daniel Crocker, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Department of Biology
Sonoma State University
Rohnert Park, CA

Jeffrey A. Crooks, Ph.D.

Researcher
San Diego, CA

Louis C. Cullman, M.S., J.D.

Partner
Preston Gates and Ellis, LLP
Irvine, CA

Brian J. Cummings, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Department of Physical Medicine
and Rehabilitation
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA

Jason Curole, Ph.D.

Department of Marine Biology
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA

J. Hall Cushman, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biology
Sonoma State University
Rohnert Park, CA

Brian Cypher, Ph.D.

Research Ecologist
Bakersfield, CA

Ellen Cypher, Ph.D.

Regional Botanist
Bakersfield, CA

Gretchen Daily, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biological Sciences,
Stanford Institute
for the Environment
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Christine Damiani, Ph.D.

Research Ecologist
U.S. Forest Service
Arcata, CA

Ellen Ingman Damschen, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Research Associate
Department of Ecology, Evolution,
and Marine Biology
Marine Science Institute
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Carla M. D'Antonio, Ph.D.

Professor
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Rebekka Darner, M.S.

San Diego, CA

Matt Daugherty, M.S.

Berkeley, CA

Frank W. Davis, Ph.D.

Professor
Santa Barbara, CA

Heather G. Davis, Ph.D.

Petaluma, CA

John Dayton, M.A.

Biologist
Department of Biology
San Jose State University
San Jose, CA

Paul Dayton, Ph.D.

Professor
Scripps Institution of Oceanography
University of California, San Diego
La Jolla, CA

Marlene De la Cruz, Ph.D.

Associate Director
Minority Science Programs
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA

Ellen Dean, Ph.D.

Botanist
Davis, CA

Leah DeBella, Ph.D.

Davis, CA

Kelly L. M. Decker, Ph.D.

Senior Research Scientist
Division of Science and
Environmental Policy
California State University,
Monterey Bay
Moffett Field, CA

Montague Demment, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Plant Sciences
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Amy Denton, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Department of Biology
California State University,
Channel Islands
Camarillo, CA

Jessie E. Denver, M.S.

Biologist
Department of
Environmental Services
Watershed Protection
City of San Jose
San Jose, CA

Abby F. Dernburg, Ph.D.

Life Sciences Division
Lawrence Berkeley National Lab
Berkeley, CA

Manish Desai

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental Health
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Tom Devitt

Doctoral Candidate
Berkeley, CA

William C. Dewey, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus
Department of Radiation Oncology
University of California, San
Francisco
San Francisco, CA

Jared Diamond, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Geography
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA

Tanya Diamond

Master's Candidate
Department of Biological Sciences
San Jose State University
San Jose, CA

Samuel L. Diaz Munoz

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Dorothy Dick

Master's Candidate
Department of Geography
San Francisco State University
San Francisco, CA

Ryan T. DiGaudio, M.S.

Biologist
Division of Wetlands
Point Reyes Bird Observatory
Conservation Science
Stinson Beach, CA

Fred L. Dilleuth, M.S.

Department of Biological Sciences
California State University, Hayward
Hayward, CA

Hugh Dingle, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus
Department of Entomology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

California

Katrina M. Dlugosch

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Daniel Doak, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Solomon Dobrowski, Ph.D.

Tahoe Environmental Research
Center
Davis, CA

Natalie Doerr, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology,
Evolution and Marine Biology
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Timothy Doherty

Master's Candidate
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Jim W. Dole, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biology
California State University,
Northridge
Northridge, CA

Clare M. Dominik, M.S.

Marine Biologist
Santa Cruz, CA

Megan Donahue, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Department of Biological Sciences
Humboldt State University
Arcata, CA

Rachel Donham, Ph.D.

Department of Environmental
Toxicology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Theodore E. Donn, Jr., Ph.D.

Principal Scientist
Lafayette, CA

Chelsea Donovan, M.S.

Senior Environmental Scientist
San Francisco, CA

William Dowd, M.S.

Department of Wildlife, Fish,
and Conservation Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

John N. Downs, M.S.

Wildlife Biologist
Sacramento, CA

Allen Doyle, M.S.

Laboratory Manager
Santa Barbara, CA

Tom Dudley, Ph.D.

Research Faculty
Marine Science Institute
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Jeffrey Dunk, M.S.

Lecturer
Department of Environmental
and Natural Resource Sciences
Humboldt State University
Arcata, CA

Chris P. Dunn

Ventura, CA

Jennifer A. Dunne, Ph.D.

Assistant Director
Pacific Ecoinformatics and
Computational Ecology Lab
Berkeley, CA

Matthew Durnin, Ph.D.

Mammalogist
Department of Ornithology
and Mammalogy
California Academy of Sciences
San Francisco, CA

Michael Dwyer, M.S.

Energy and Resources Group
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Michelle E. Early

Wildlife Biologist
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Charles M. Efferson, M.A.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science and Policy
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Thomas B. Egan

Desert Tortoise Council
Board of Directors
Helendale, CA

Paul Ehrlich, Ph.D.

Bing Professor of Population Studies
President
Department of Biological Sciences
Center for Conservation Biology
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Ann G. Ellis, M.A.

School Programs Manager
Conservation and Education
The Oakland Zoo
Oakland, CA

Norman Ellstrand, Ph.D.

Professor
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Sarah Elmendorf, M.A.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science and Policy
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

John A. Endler, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Ecology,
Evolution and Marine Biology
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Thomas D. English, Ph.D.

Department of Physics
and Chemistry
Palomar College
San Marcos, CA

Peter Epanchin

Doctoral Candidate
Davis, CA

Lynn Epstein, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Plant Pathology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Marc E. Epstein, Ph.D.

Senior Insect Biosystematist
Plant Pest Diagnostic Center
California Department of
Food and Agriculture
Sacramento, CA

Melissa Erickson, M.S.

Berkeley, CA

Holly Ernest, Ph.D., D.V.M.

School of Veterinary Medicine
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Tracy Erwin, M.S.

Department of Plant Sciences
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Elaine McCleary Esteban, M.S.

Chico, CA

Douglas P. Evans, Ph.D.

Los Angeles, CA

Richard Evans, Ph.D.

Extension Specialist
Department of Plant Sciences
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Kathleen Farley, Ph.D.

Ecologist
Monterey, CA

Paul Faulstich, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Pitzer College
Claremont, CA

Cliff Feldheim, M.S.

Northern California Preserve
Manager
Center for Natural Lands
Management
West Sacramento, CA

Krishna V. Feldman, M.S.

Ecologist
Pacific Southwest Research Station
U.S. Forest Service
Albany, CA

Peggy Fiedler, Ph.D.

Senior Scientist
Oakland, CA

Kathleen E. Fischer, Ph.D.

Conservation Scientist
Wildlife Conservation Society
Smith River, CA

Erin Fisher, M.E.S.M.

Department of Environmental
Science and Management
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

H. Kenneth Fisher, M.D.

Professor
Department of Medicine
University of California, Los Angeles
Beverly Hills, CA

California

Kevin T. Fisher, M.S.
Restoration Ecologist
Oakland, CA

Kirk Fitzhugh, Ph.D.
Department of Research
and Collections
Natural History Museum
of Los Angeles County
Los Angeles, CA

Erica Fleishman, Ph.D.
Senior Research Scientist
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

David W. Flietner, M.S.
Botanist
San Diego, CA

Beverly Flood
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Marine
Environmental Biology
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA

Jonathan Fong, M.S.
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Steven Fonte, Ph.D.
Graduate Research Assistant
Department of Agronomy
and Range Science
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Lawrence D. Ford, Ph.D.
Senior Natural Resource Ecologist
Felton, CA

Tom Ford, M.A.
Director
Kelp Restoration and
Monitoring Project
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA

Brian D. Foster, Ph.D.
ARA
El Cajon, CA

Susan Frankel, M.S.
Sudden Oak Death Research
Program Manager
U.S. Forest Service
Albany, CA

Margaret Franzen, Ph.D.
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Maeton C. Freel, M.S.
Ecosystem Staff Officer
Los Padres National Forest
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Goleta, CA

Jan Freiwald
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Maren Friesen, M.S.
Department of Evolution
and Ecology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Mark Frye, Ph.D.
Los Angeles, CA

Jed Fuhrman, Ph.D.
Professor
Department of Biological Sciences
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA

Marty S. Fujita, Ph.D.
Co-leader
Food For Thought
Ojai, CA

Heather L. Fuller
Master's Candidate
Department of Anthropology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Craig Fusaro, Ph.D.
California Trout, Inc.
Santa Barbara, CA

Stephen D. Gaimari, Ph.D.
Plant Pest Diagnostics Branch
California Department of Food and
Agriculture
Sacramento, CA

Steven Gaines, Ph.D.
Director
Marine Science Institute
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Heather Galindo
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Pacific Grove, CA

Claire Gallagher, M.S.
Davis, CA

John Gallo
Conservation Scientist, Doctoral
Candidate
Department of Geography
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

John A. Gamon, Ph.D.
Department of Biological Sciences
California State University,
Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA

Janet Bell Garber, Ph.D.
Historian of Science
Los Angeles, CA

Janet A. Garcia
Doctoral Candidate
Riverside, CA

Margarita Garcia, Ph.D.
Carnegie Institution of Washington
Stanford, CA

Julie Garren, M.S.
Department of Ecology
and Evolution
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Gary Geller, Ph.D.
Conservation Liaison
Glendale, CA

Jack Geller, M.D.
Clinical Professor
Department of Medicine
University of California, San Diego
San Diego, CA

Sasha Gennet, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecosystem Science
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Luke George, Ph.D.
Department of Wildlife
Humboldt State University
Arcata, CA

Paul Gepts, Ph.D.
Professor
Department of Agronomy
and Range Science
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Sharon Gericke, M.S.
Davis, CA

Tim Gerrodette, Ph.D.
National Marine Fisheries Service
National Oceanic and Atmospheric
Administration
San Diego, CA

Alec C. Gerry, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Entomology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Jesse Giessow, M.S.
Encinitas, CA

James Gilardi, Ph.D.
Director
World Parrot Trust
Davis, CA

Ilana C. Gilg, M.S.
Marine Environmental Biology
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA

Brian D. Gillespie, M.A.
Adjunct Professor
Department of Biology
Sacramento City College
Sacramento, CA

Jill S. Gilmore
Scientist
Sacramento, CA

Donald A. Glaser, Ph.D.
Berkeley, CA

Stephen R. Gliessman, Ph.D.
Department of
Environmental Studies
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Richard Glor, Ph.D.
Post-doctoral Researcher
Center for Population Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Daniel Gluesenkamp, Ph.D.
Habitat Protection and Restoration
Audubon Canyon Ranch
Glen Ellen, CA

Karen Goetz, M.S.
Graduate
Department of Biology
San Francisco State University
Berkeley, CA

California

Lynda Goff, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Melanie Gogol-Prokurat

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science and Policy
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Warren Gold, M.D.

Professor
Department of Medicine
University of California,
San Francisco
San Francisco, CA

Rebecca Goldman, Ph.D.

Stanford University
Palo Alto, CA

Rita Graze

Doctoral Candidate
Davis, CA

Steven E. Greco, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Department of Environmental Design
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

M.R.C. Greenwood, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Nutrition
and Internal Medicine
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Gregory F. Grether, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA

Cynthia R. Greyraven, M.S.

Professor
Department of Biology
San Bernardino Valley College
San Bernardino, CA

John F. Griffith

Microbiologist
Westminster, CA

Ami K. Groce, M.S.

Marine Biologist
San Diego, CA

Edwin D. Grosholz, Ph.D.

Associate Specialist
Department of Environmental
Science and Policy
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Eric E. Grossman, Ph.D.

Santa Cruz, CA

Daniel S. Gruner, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Scholar
Bodega Marine Lab
University of California, Davis
Bodega Bay, CA

Andrew J. Gunther, Ph.D.

Executive Director
Center for Ecosystem
Management and Restoration
Oakland, CA

Darcee Guttilla

Master's Candidate
Avalon, CA

James Haas, Ph.D.

Sacramento, CA

Sarah K. Haas, M.S.

Permit Specialist
La Mesa, CA

Tonya Mason Haff, M.S.

Curator
Department of
Environmental Studies
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Judy Haggard, M.A.

Wildlife Biologist
Fieldbrook, CA

Thomas P. Hahn, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Department of Neurobiology,
Physiology and Behavior
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Ken Halama, Ph.D.

Department of Biology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Benjamin Halpern, Ph.D.

University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

M. Robert Hamersley, Ph.D.

Department of Biology
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA

Robin Hamlin, M.S.

Wildlife Biologist
McKinleyville, CA

Christopher Hamm

Master's Candidate
California State University, Fresno
Fresno, CA

Kamille Hammerstrom, M.S.

Research Associate
Moss Landing, CA

Michele Hammond, M.S.

University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Allison Hansen, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Entomology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Jinnah Hansen

Biologist
Citrus Heights, CA

Michael T. Hanson, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biological Sciences
California Polytechnic State
University, San Luis Obispo
San Luis Obispo, CA

Alexander Harcourt, Ph.D.

Professor
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

J. Daniel Hare, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Entomology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Robert N. Haring, M.S.

San Diego, CA

John A. Harman

Master's Candidate
Department of Entomology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

David Harris

Restoration Ecologist
Department of Biology
Center for Biodiversity and
Ecological Restoration
Santa Barbara, CA

Mary Harte, Ph.D.

Berkeley, CA

Brett N. Harvey

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology
University of California, Davis
Albany, CA

Raymond Hastings, M.S.

Cardiff by the Sea, CA

Katherine Hayden

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science, Policy, and Management
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

William K. Hayes, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Earth
and Biological Sciences
Loma Linda University
Loma Linda, CA

Hilary Hayford

Master's Candidate
Moss Landing, CA

Miao Ling He

Master's Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science, Policy, and Management
University of California, Berkeley
San Leandro, CA

Rain Healer

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Biology
California State University, Fresno
Fresno, CA

Ryan F. Hechinger

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology, Evolution,
and Marine Biology
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Dennis Hedgecock, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biological Sciences
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA

Elizabeth R. Heeg

Graduate Student Researcher
Department of Population
Health and Reproduction
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

California

Julie B. Heffington, M.A.

Director
Institute of Marine Sciences,
Seymour Marine Discovery Center
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Valentine Hemingway

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology and
Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Gordon Hendler, Ph.D.

Curator
Los Angeles, CA

Laird Henkel, M.S.

Aptos, CA

Michael Henry

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology, Evolution
and Marine Biology
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Timothy J. Herrlinger, Ph.D.

Instructional Support Manager
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Fritz Hertel, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Department of Biology
California State University,
Northridge
Northridge, CA

Mark B. Hessing, Ph.D.

Botanist
Department of Natural Resources
Fort Irwin
Fort Irwin, CA

William E. Hewson

Master's Candidate
Fullerton, CA

Janneke HilleRisLambers, Ph.D.

Department of Ecology, Evolution
and Marine Biology
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Sue E. Hirschfeld, Ph.D.

Professor
Hayward, CA

Ingrid B. Hogle, M.S.

Department of Environmental
Science and Policy
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Karen D. Holl, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Environmental
Studies
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Daniel Holley, Ph.D.

Department of Biological Sciences
San Jose State University
San Jose, CA

Victor Holmes, Ph.D.

Department of Biochemistry
University of California, Berkeley
Oakland, CA

Jodie Sims Holt, Ph.D.

Professor and Chair
Department of Botany and Plant
Sciences
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Marcel Holyoak, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Department of Environmental
Science and Policy
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Stacie Hooper

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Veterinary Medicine
Department of Population
Health and Reproduction
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Michael H. Horn, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biological Science
California State University, Fullerton
Fullerton, CA

Frank T. Hovore

Natural Areas Administrator
(Retired)
Doctoral Candidate
Los Angeles County
Santa Clarita, CA

Fred Hrusa, Ph.D.

Senior Plant Taxonomist
Plant Pest Diagnostics
California Department of Food and
Agriculture
Sacramento, CA

Valerie Kay Hubbart

Wildlife Biologist
Santa Barbara, CA

Russell T. Huddleston, M.S.

Ecologist
Environmental Management and
Planning
CH2M HILL
Sacramento, CA

Brian Hudgens, Ph.D.

Trinidad, CA

Christine L. Huffard, Ph.D.

Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Rebecca Hufft

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology
and Evolution
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Randall Hughes

Doctoral Candidate
Bodega Marine Laboratory
University of California, Davis
Bodega Bay, CA

Kris Hulvey

Doctoral Candidate
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

John C. Hunter, Ph.D.

Plant Ecologist
Sacramento, CA

Pamela M. Huntzinger, Ph.D.

Faculty Programs Coordinator
Teaching Resources Center
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Diana L. Immel

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Plant Sciences
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

David Imper, M.S.

Eureka, CA

Chris D. Ineich

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Land, Air and Water
Resources
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Susan Infalt, M.S.

Department of Plant Sciences
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Louise E. Jackson, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Land, Air
and Water Resources
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Herbert R. Jacobson, Ph.D.

Department of Agriculture
and Natural Resources
Chico, CA

Jaime Jahncke, Ph.D.

Senior Scientist
Department of Marine
Ecology Division
Point Reyes Bird Observation
Conservation Science
Stinson Beach, CA

Stephen C. James, M.S.

Professor
Department of Biology
Sacramento City College
Sacramento, CA

Heather L. Johnson, M.S.

Wildlife Biologist
Sacramento, CA

Melanie S. Johnson, M.S.

Biologist
Multiple Species
Conservation Program
City of San Diego
San Diego, CA

Orion J. Johnson

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Earth Sciences
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA

Rebecca F. Johnson, M.A.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
San Francisco, CA

Betony Lee Jones, M.S.

Director
Truckee, CA

Bobette E. Jones, M.S.

Ecologist
Department of Plant Sciences
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

California

Jennifer Jones, M.S.

University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA

Krista Jones

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Wildlife, Fish,
and Conservation Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Mark Jordan

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science Policy Management
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Judith E. Kahle, M.S.

Department of Science
Peoples High School
Vallejo, CA

Jennifer Kalt, M.A.

Botanist
McKinleyville, CA

Pauline L. Kamath, Ph.D.

Department of Environmental
Science, Policy, and Management
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Corinne Kane, M.A.

Santa Barbara, CA

Carrie V. Kappel, Ph.D.

National Center for Ecological
Analysis and Synthesis
Santa Barbara, CA

Nina J. Karnovsky, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Department of Biology
Pomona College
Claremont, CA

Jennifer Karsner, M.S.

Associate Biologist
Vacaville, CA

Madhusudan Katti, Ph.D.

Department of Biology
California State University, Fresno
Fresno, CA

David H. Kavanaugh, Ph.D.

Department of Entomology
California Academy of Sciences
San Francisco, CA

Kathleen Kay, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Fellow
Department of Ecology, Evolution,
and Marine Biology
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Jamie Keck, Ph.D.

The Scripps Research Institute
La Jolla, CA

Matthew T. Kedziora, M.S.

Field Supervisor
San Clemente Island
Institute for Wildlife Studies
Coronado, CA

Megan E. Keever

Master's Candidate
Berkeley, CA

Elise Kelley, Ph.D.

Department of Geography
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Ventura, CA

Douglas Kellogg, Ph.D.

Department of Molecular, Cell,
and Developmental Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

John P. Kelly, Ph.D.

Director
Conservation Science
Cypress Grove Research Center
Audubon Canyon Ranch
Marshall, CA

Karen E. Keltner

Education Program Director
Ambassadors of the Environment
Education Program
Jean-Michel Cousteau's Ocean
Futures Society
Santa Barbara, CA

Terri Kempton, M.S.

Project Manager
Invasive Plants
Sustainable Conservation
San Francisco, CA

Bruce Kendall, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Donald Bren School of
Environmental Science
and Management
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Vida C. Kenk, Ph.D.

Interim Dean
College of Science
San Jose State University
San Jose, CA

Ruth A. Kern, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Department of Biology
California State University, Fresno
Fresno, CA

Amber C. Kerr, M.S.

Energy and Resources Group
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Peter H. Kerr, Ph.D.

Associate Biosystematist
Sacramento, CA

Eric L. Kershner, Ph.D.

Institute for Wildlife Studies
San Diego, CA

Harold Kerster, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus
Department of
Environmental Studies
California State University,
Sacramento
Sacramento, CA

James Ketchum, M.S.

University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Gerald Key, M.S.

San Diego, CA

Henrik Kibak, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Department of Earth Systems
Science and Policy
California State University,
Monterey Bay
Seaside, CA

Rebecca L. Kihlslinger, Ph.D.

Department of Neurobiology,
Physiology and Behavior
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

John B. Kim, Ph.D.

Ecoinformatics Manager
Field Station Programs
San Diego State University
San Diego, CA

David L. Kimbro, Ph.D.

Research Scientist
Department of Environmental
Science and Policy
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Jason Kindopp, M.S.

Environmental Scientist
Orville, CA

Amy King, M.S.

Department of Land, Air,
and Water Resources
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Elizabeth Gallant King, Ph.D.

Davis, CA

Brian P. Kinlan

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology, Evolution
and Marine Biology
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

James W. Kirchner, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Earth
and Planetary Science
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Thomas Kirk, M.S.

Department of Wildlife
U.S. Forest Service
Arcata, CA

Joseph L. Kirschvink, Ph.D.

Van Wingen Professor of Geobiology
Department of Geological and
Planetary Sciences
California Institute of Technology
Pasadena, CA

Carissa J. Klein, M.S.

Department of Environmental
Science and Management
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Goleta, CA

Jamie Kneitel, Ph.D.

Department of Biological Sciences
California State University,
Sacramento
Sacramento, CA

Lawrence P. Kobernus, M.S.

Senior Biologist
San Francisco, CA

California

Walter Koenig, Ph.D.

Research Zoologist
Department of Muscle
Vertebrae Zoology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Gerald Kooyman, Ph.D.

La Jolla, CA

Robert E. Kopp

Master's Candidate
Department of Geobiology
California Institute of Technology
Pasadena, CA

Jeannine Koshear, Ph.D.

Professor
Fresno, CA

Laura Koteen, M.S.

Ecologist
Energy and Resources Group
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Marc G. Kramer, Ph.D.

Department of Earth Sciences
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Steven H. Kramer, M.S.

Fieldbrook, CA

Stefanie Krantz, M.S.

School of Natural Resources
and Environment
University of Michigan
Santa Rosa, CA

Timothy P. Krantz, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Department of
Environmental Studies
University of Redlands
Redlands, CA

Sara K. Krause

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Wildlife, Fisheries,
and Conservation Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Christophe Kreis, Ph.D.

University of California, San
Francisco
Gladstone Institute of Virology
and Immunology
San Francisco, CA

Rayda Krell, Ph.D.

Department of Entomology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Claire Kremen, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Department of Environmental
Sciences Policy and Management
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Patricia A. Krueger, M.S.

Regional Threatened and
Endangered Species Coordinator
American Canyon, CA

Paul Krushelnicky

Doctoral Candidate
Berkeley, CA

Janet Kubler, Ph.D.

Department of Biology
California State University,
Northridge
Northridge, CA

Shawn R. Kuchta, Ph.D.

Department of Ecology and
Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Tim J. Kuhn, M.S.

Department of Agronomy
and Range Science
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Eva G. Kuo, Ph.D.

University of California, Davis
Sacramento, CA

Michael Kutilek, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biological Sciences
San Jose State University
San Jose, CA

Rikk Kvitek, Ph.D.

Seaside, CA

Tasha La Doux, Ph.D.

Botanist
Twentynine Palms, CA

John LaBonte

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology, Evolution,
and Marine Biology
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Tim Lam, Ph.D.

Marine Environmental Biology
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA

Russell Lande, Ph.D.

Professor & MacArthur Fellow
Department of Biology
University of California, San Diego
La Jolla, CA

Meta M. Landys, Ph.D.

Solana Beach, CA

Todd W. Lane, Ph.D.

Livermore, CA

Jeri Major Langham, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biological Sciences
California State University,
Sacramento
Sacramento, CA

Charles H. Langley, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Evolution
and Ecology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Brenda Larison, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology and
Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA

Philip LaRiviere

University of California, Berkeley
Palo Alto, CA

Brendon Larson, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Fellow
Department of Ecology
and Evolution
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Steven C. Latta, Ph.D.

Latin America Program
Point Reyes Bird Observatory
Conservation Science
Stinson Beach, CA

Sharon Lawler, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Department of Entomology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Derek E. Lee, M.S.

Farallons Biologist
Department of Marine
Ecology Division
Point Reyes Bird Observation
Conservation Science
Stinson Beach, CA

YeunShin Lee, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Napa, CA

Colleen Lenihan, Ph.D.

Department of Wildlife, Fish
and Conservation Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Hunter S. Lenihan, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Bren School of Environmental
Science and Management
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Christopher W. Lester, M.A.

Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Thomas E. Leuteritz, Ph.D.

Conservation Ecologist
Redlands Institute
University of Redlands
Redlands, CA

Glen Leverich

Master's Candidate
Department of Geosciences
San Francisco State University
San Francisco, CA

Joan Levine, Ph.D.

Senior Research Associate
Department of Preventive Medicine
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA

Jonathan Levine, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biology
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Rebecca Lewison, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Department of Biology
San Diego State University
San Diego, CA

Christina Liang

Doctoral Candidate
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

California

William Z. Lidicker, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Johan Liljeblad, Ph.D.

Department of Entomology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Tammy Lim, M.S.

San Francisco, CA

Michael Limm, M.S.

Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Jeffrey L. Lincer, Ph.D.

Research Director
Administration
Wildlife Research Institute, Inc.
La Mesa, CA

Rachel E. Linzer

Doctoral Candidate
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Richard Lis, Ph.D.

Department of Fish and Game
State of California
Redding, CA

Steven Y. Litvin, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Research Associate
Hopkins Marine Station
Stanford University
Pacific Grove, CA

Haven Livingston, M.S.

Santa Cruz, CA

John C. Ljubenkov

Invertebrate Taxonomist
Independent Consultant
Pauma Valley, CA

James Lloyd-Smith, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Researcher
Department of Environmental
Science, Policy and Management
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Brent L. Lockwood

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Lawrence Lovell

Senior Museum Scientist
Scripps Institution of Oceanography
La Jolla, CA

Margot Lowe, M.S.

Santa Monica, CA

Jenella E. Loye, Ph.D.

Associate
Department of Entomology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Carole C. Lu, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Biology
California Institute of Technology
Pasadena, CA

Joshua A. Ludtke

Master's Candidate
San Diego, CA

Amy Lynd Luers, Ph.D.

Climate Impacts Scientist
Global Environment Program
Union of Concerned Scientists
Berkeley, CA

Quenby Lum

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Land, Air,
and Water Resources
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Carolyn Lundquist, Ph.D.

Hillsborough, CA

Barney Luttbeg, Ph.D.

Department of Environmental
Science and Policy
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Rebecca M. Lutzky

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Suellen Lynn, M.S.

San Diego, CA

Bruce Edward Lyon, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

S. Kathleen Lyons, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Researcher
National Center for Ecological
Analysis and Synthesis
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Stephanie MacDonald, M.S.

San Jose, CA

Katharine Mach

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Foster City, CA

Sally MacIntyre, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Ecology,
Evolution and Marine Biology
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Jason B. MacKenzie, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Fellow
Museum of Vertebrate Zoology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Elizabeth M. P. Madin

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology, Evolution
and Marine Biology
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Eliza Maher, M.S.

Preserve Manager
Riverside, CA

Julin N. Maloof, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Section of Plant Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Makela Mangrich, M.S.

Environmental Analyst
Encinitas, CA

Mollie K. Manier, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Fellow
Hopkins Marine Station
Stanford University
Pacific Grove, CA

Antoinette G. Mantz

Master's Candidate
School of Public Health
San Diego State University
San Diego, CA

Curtis A. Marantz, Ph.D.

Evolutionary Biologist
Sherman Oaks, CA

Michael P. Marchetti, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Department of Biological Sciences
California State University, Chico
Chico, CA

Sharyn Marks, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Department of Biological Sciences
Humboldt State University
Arcata, CA

Brett L. Marshall, M.S.

Research Associate
Department of Virology
and Immunology
Gladstone Institute
San Francisco, CA

John A. Martin, M.S.

Fish and Wildlife Biologist
San Diego, CA

Belinda Martineau, Ph.D.

Davis, CA

Patrick Martone

Doctoral Candidate
Hopkins Marine Station
Stanford University
Pacific Grove, CA

Rebecca G. Martone, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Hopkins Marine Station
Stanford University
Pacific Grove, CA

Tawny M. Mata

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science and Policy
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Michael Matiassek, Ph.D.

Department of Microbiology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Pamela A. Matson, Ph.D.

Professor and Dean
School of Earth Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Virginia Matzek, M.S.

Stanford University
Stanford, CA

California

Jeffrey R. Maurer, M.S.

Wildlife Biologist
Lecturer
Department of Animal Science
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Sara Maxwell

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ocean Sciences
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Sarah May, Ph.D.

Department of Biology
University of California, Los Angeles
Sunnyvale, CA

Christy M. McCain, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Researcher
Department of Biological Sciences
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Andrew McCall, M.S.

Davis, CA

James McCammon, Ph.D.

La Jolla, CA

Douglas McCauley

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Palo Alto, CA

Craig R. McClain, Ph.D.

Monterey Bay Aquarium
Research Institute
Moss Landing, CA

Meredith L. McClure, Ph.D.

Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA

Patrick O. McConnell

Master's Candidate
Department of Biology
San Diego State University
San Diego, CA

Patrick E. McGuire, Ph.D.

Director
Genetic Resources
Conservation Program
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Susan McIlroy, Ph.D.

Graduate Student Researcher
Department of Environmental
Science, Policy, and Management
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Blodwyn M. McIntyre, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Environmental Studies
University of Redlands
Redlands, CA

Patrick J. McIntyre, M.S.

Center for Population Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Robert C. McKee, M.S.

Department of Ecology
and Evolution
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Michelle M. McKenzie

Wildlife Biologist
Pacific Southwest Research Station
U.S. Forest Service
Arcata, CA

Carol McKie Manning

San Marcos, CA

Tanya McKittrick

Doctoral Candidate
Marina, CA

Shawna McMahon

Doctoral Candidate
Goleta, CA

Janine McMurdie, M.S.

Amgen, Inc.
Thousand Oaks, CA

Joey McMurdie, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Engineering
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Camille McNeely, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Researcher
Davis, CA

Brad McRae, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Associate
National Center for Ecological
Analysis and Synthesis
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Mariah Meek

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Evolution
and Ecology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Robert J. Meese, Ph.D.

Staff Research Associate
Davis, CA

Josh Meidav, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Harald Meimberg, Ph.D.

Department of Plant Sciences
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

John M. Melack, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biological Sciences
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Kurt Merg, Ph.D.

Resident Director
Big Creek Reserve
University of California, Santa Cruz
Big Sur, CA

Justin Merritt, Ph.D.

University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA

Everett H. Meyer, M.S.

Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Marc Meyer, Ph.D.

Davis, CA

Fiorenza Micheli, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Pacific Grove, CA

Brooke L. Weaver Miller, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Donald G. Miller, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Department of Biological Sciences
California State University, Chico
Chico, CA

Kathy A. Miller, Ph.D.

University Herbarium
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Meghan T. Miller

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Biomedical
Sciences and Pharmacology
University of California, San Diego
San Diego, CA

Rebecca Miller, M.S.

Berkeley, CA

Matthew R. Milnes, Ph.D.

Research Associate
Department of Developmental
and Cell Biology
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA

Elizabeth A. Moffitt

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Wildlife, Fish,
and Conservation Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Alexis N. Moiseyev, Ph.D.

Department of Geology
Stanford University
Palo Alto, CA

Keri L. Monda, M.S.

Department of Biology
University of California, San Diego
La Jolla, CA

Arlee Montalvo, Ph.D.

Riverside, CA

Harold Mooney, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Jim Moore, Ph.D.

Department of Anthropology
University of California, San Diego
La Jolla, CA

Kara A. Moore, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science and Policy
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Virginia Moran, M.S.

Grass Valley, CA

California

Leopoldo A. Moreno-Matiella, M.S.

Associate Environmental Research Scientist
Endangered Species Project
Department of Pesticide Regulation
Sacramento, CA

Lance E. Morgan, Ph.D.

Chief Scientist
Marine Conservation
Biology Institute
Glen Ellen, CA

Steven G. Morgan, Ph.D.

Professor
Environmental Science and Policy,
Bodega Marine Laboratory
University of California, Davis
Bodega Bay, CA

Tony Morosco

Botanist
San Francisco Botanical Garden
San Francisco, CA

Peter B. Moyle, Ph.D.

University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Mary Mulkins, Ph.D.

Principal Research Scientist
Department of Cellular
Pharmacology
Roche Palo Alto
Palo Alto, CA

Lynne Mullen

Doctoral Candidate
San Diego, CA

Andrea Mummert, M.S.

Sacramento, CA

Sandra Murcia, M.S.

Corona, CA

Shannon K. Murphy, M.S.

Research Biologist
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Steve Murray, Ph.D.

Dean and Professor
College of Natural Sciences and
Mathematics
California State University, Fullerton
Fullerton, CA

Kathren Murrell Stevenson, Ph.D.

Plant Ecologist
Oakland, CA

Amy Musante, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology,
Evolution and Marine Biology
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Allan Muth, Ph.D.

Director
Deep Canyon Desert
Restoration Center
University of California, Riverside
Palm Desert, CA

Tuyeni H. Mwampamba, Ph.D.

Davis, CA

Roz Naylor, Ph.D.

Senior Fellow
Center for Environmental
Science and Policy
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Eric L. Nelson, M.S.

Adjunct Professor
Stockton, CA

Caterina Nerney, M.S.

Graduate Student Researcher
Department of Environmental
Science, Policy and Management
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Kristina Neuman, M.S.

Biologist
Point Reyes Bird Observation
Conservation Science
Aptos, CA

Darren Newman

North Fork, CA

Wallace J. Nichols, Ph.D.

Research Associate
Department of Herpetology
California Academy of Sciences
Davenport, CA

Kerry J. Nickols

Doctoral Candidate
Davis, CA

Karina J. Nielsen, Ph.D.

Department of Biology
Dartmouth College
Rohnert Park, CA

Erik G. Noonburg, Ph.D.

Santa Barbara, CA

J. Cully Nordby, Ph.D.

Research Scientist
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA

Gretchen North, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Department of Biology
Occidental College
Los Angeles, CA

Kathy Norton, M.S.

West Sacramento, CA

Kevin O'Connor, M.S.

San Diego, CA

Dennis Odion, Ph.D.

Vegetation Ecologist
Institute for Computational Earth
Systems Science
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Michael O'Donnell, Ph.D.

Marine Science Institute
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Jennifer O'Leary

Marine Biologist Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Christopher E. Olin

Research Assistant
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Guy W. Oliver, Ph.D.

Research Fellow
Institute of Marine Sciences
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Dawn Olson, M.S.

IT/GIS Coordinator
Municipal Wastewater Department
City of San Diego
San Diego, CA

Suzanne Olyarnik

Master's Candidate
University of California, Davis
Sebastopol, CA

Megan O. O'Neill, M.S.

Instructor
Biological Sciences
Cuesat College
San Luis Obispo, CA

Jeff J. Opperman, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Researcher
Center for Watershed Sciences
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Mary E. Orcutt, M.S.

Research Associate
Arroyo Grande, CA

Anne Orlando, Ph.D.

Wildlife Biologist
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Ivonne Ortiz

Department of Wildlife, Fish,
and Conservation Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

David J. Ostrach, Ph.D.

Pathobiologist
Department of Pathology,
Microbiology and Immunology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Jeb P. Owen

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Entomology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Scott Owen

Master's Candidate
Department of Molecular
and Cellular Physiology
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Joyce Ownbey, M.A.

Sacramento, CA

Joel E. Pagel, Ph.D.

Endangered Species Ecologist
Santa Cruz Predatory
Bird Research Group
Oceanside, CA

Elizabeth L. Painter, Ph.D.

Santa Barbara, CA

Robert B. Painter, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus
Department of Microbiology
University of California,
San Francisco
Burlingame, CA

California

Wendy J. Palen, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Fellow
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Francis H. Palmer, D.Env.

Sacramento, CA

Jennifer L. Palmer, M.S.

Conservation Scientist
Marine Conservation
Biology Institute
Glen Ellen, CA

Jeanne Panek, Ph.D.

Berkeley, CA

Christopher M. Papouchis, M.S.

Conservation Biologist
Sacramento, CA

James Ford Parham, Ph.D.

Doctor
Evolutionary Genomics Program
Department of Energy Joint
Genome Institute
Walnut Creek, CA

Ronald Parker, Ph.D.

Shell Beach, CA

Sophie S. Parker

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology,
Evolution, and Marine Biology
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Edward Parnell, Ph.D.

Project Scientist
Integrative Oceanography Division
Scripps Institution of Oceanography
La Jolla, CA

Leslee A. Parr, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Department of Biological Sciences
San Jose State University
San Jose, CA

Jae Pasari, Ph.D.

Department of
Environmental Studies
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Dean Pasko, M.S.

Metropolitan Wastewater
Environmental Monitoring
and Technical Services
Division Laboratory
San Diego, CA

Anand Patel, M.S.

Department of Biology
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA

John S. Pearse, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Vicki Buchsbaum Pearse, Ph.D.

Long Marine Lab
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Kabir G. Peay, M.S.

Department of Ecosystem Sciences
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Sherwood H. Peckham, Ph.D.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Robin Pelc, M.S.

Santa Barbara, CA

Ricardo Pereira, M.S.

Berkeley, CA

Colleena R. Perez, M.S.

Santa Cruz, CA

David D. Perkins, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Chris Perle, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Biology
Stanford University
Pacific Grove, CA

Bruno Pernet, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Department of Biological Sciences
California State University,
Long Beach
Long Beach, CA

Allan Pessier, D.V.M.

San Diego, CA

Tawnya Peterson, Ph.D.

University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Mark Phillbrick

Doctoral Candidate
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Jeff K. Phillips, M.S.

Fish and Wildlife Biologist
Donald Bren School of
Environmental Science
and Management
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Julie Phillips, M.A.

Wildlife Biologist
Cupertino, CA

Denise A. Piechnik

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Entomology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Danielle L. Pierce, M.S.

Department of Viticulture and
Enology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Deanna Pinkard, M.S.

Research Fisheries Biologist
La Jolla, CA

John D. Pinto, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus
Department of Entomology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Edwin P. Pister, M.A.

Executive Secretary
Desert Fishes Council
Bishop, CA

Doug Plass, M.S.

Master's Candidate
Department of Evolution
and Ecology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Mary F. Platter-Rieger, M.S.

Retired
Spawar Systems Center, San Diego
San Diego, CA

Raina K. Plowright, D.V.M.

Center for Vectorborne Disease
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Mary Poffenroth, M.S.

San Jose, CA

Anne Poopatanapong, M.S.

District Wildlife Biologist
U.S. Forest Service
Idyllwild, CA

Karen L. Pope

Doctoral Candidate
Wildlife Biologist
Department of Ecology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Stephen Porder, Ph.D.

Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Joshua Povich

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
San Francisco, CA

Katherine Prager, D.V.M., Ph.D.

Ecology Graduate Group
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

M.J. Pramik, M.S.

San Francisco, CA

Robert B. Pratt, Ph.D.

Bakersfield, CA

Thomas R. Prentice, M.S.

Staff Research Associate
Department of Entomology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Katherine A. Preston, Ph.D.

Lecturer
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Jeff Price, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Department of Geological and
Environmental Sciences
California State University, Chico
Chico, CA

Mary V. Price, Ph.D.

Professor of Biology
Department of Biology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Matt A. Price, Ph.D.

Senior Project Manager
Department of Medical Affairs
International AIDS Vaccine Initiative
San Mateo, CA

California

James J. Provenzano, M.A.

President
Energy Department
Clean Air Now
Los Angeles, CA

Eric Punkay

Doctoral Candidate
Sacramento, CA

Lori Pye, Ph.D.

Santa Barbara, CA

Nicholas D. Pyenson

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Jessica H. Quinn, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Wildlife, Fish
and Conservation Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Lauren Quinn, Ph.D.

Adjunct Instructor
Department of Biology
Dominican University
San Rafael, CA

Theodore K. Raab, Ph.D.

Senior Ecologist
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Andrew Raaf, M.S.

Environmental Scientist
Bren School of
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Margaret S. Race, Ph.D.

Research Analyst
Mountain View, CA

Milos Radakovich, M.A.

Pacific Grove, CA

Erik J. Ragsdale

Master's Candidate
Department of Nematology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Stephanie Ramos

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Molecular Biology
and Biochemistry
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA

Jan A. Randall, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biology
San Francisco State University
San Francisco, CA

Jai Ranganathan, Ph.D.

Doctoral Candidate
Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Devii Rao, M.S.

Berkeley, CA

Sky Rashby

Division of Geological
and Planetary Sciences
California Institute of Technology
Pasadena, CA

Linda L. Rasmussen, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Research
Scripps Institute of Oceanography
University of California, San Diego
La Jolla, CA

Walter Reid, Ph.D.

Consulting Professor
Institute for the Environment
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Donald A. Reiersen, M.S.

Staff Research Associate
Department of Entomology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Christian R.L. Reilly, Ph.D.

Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Pacific Grove, CA

Richard James Reiner, Ph.D.

Senior Ecologist
Chico, CA

Robert M. Rhode, M. S.

Museum Scientist
Department of Nematology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Kevin J. Rice, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Plant Sciences
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Michael Richard

Ecological Resource Specialist
Department of
Environmental Programs
County of Riverside, California
Riverside, CA

Georgia F. Richards, D.V.M.

Turlock, CA

Jim Richards, Ph.D.

Department of Land, Air
and Water Resources
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Peter J. Richerson, Ph.D.

Department of Environmental
Science and Policy
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Bruce A. Rideout, D.V.M., Ph.D.

Head of Pathology
Conservation and Research
for Endangered Species
Zoological Society of San Diego
San Diego, CA

Corinna Riginos

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Plant Sciences
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Amy Ritter, Ph.D.

Department of Ecology
and Evolution
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Susana L. Roberts, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Jeremy Rockweit

Master's Candidate
Marysville, CA

Timothy C. Rodwell, Ph.D., M.D.

Researcher
Department of Family Medicine
University of California, San Diego
San Diego, CA

Deborah S. Rogers

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

William J. Roltsch, Ph.D.

Environmental Research Scientist
Sacramento, CA

Erica B. Rosenblum, Ph.D.

National Science Foundation
Post-doctoral Research Fellow
Department of Molecular
and Cell Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Nicholas Rosenstock

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science, Policy, and Management
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Ann Rosenthal, M.S.

Lab Manager
California National Primate
Research Center
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Aviva Rossi, M.S.

San Anselmo, CA

Katie Ross-Smith, Ph.D.

Sacramento, CA

John T. Rotenberry, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Barry Roth, Ph.D.

San Francisco, CA

Melissa S. Roth

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Marine Biology
Scripps Institution of Oceanography
La Jolla, CA

Stephen Rothstein, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Ecology,
Evolution and Marine Biology
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Eric Routman, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biology
San Francisco State University
San Francisco, CA

California

Sean M. Rovito

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Dana Rowan, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Richard C. Rowe, M.S.

Marine Biologist
Metro WasteWater
City of San Diego
San Diego, CA

William R. Ruggles

Masters Candidate
Department of Wildlife
Humboldt State University
Arcata, CA

James Russell

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Entomology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Mason Ryan, M.S.

Tropical Forestry Initiative
San Diego, CA

Eli Saddler, M.P.H.

San Francisco, CA

Hugh Safford, Ph.D.

Regional Ecologist
Pacific Southwest Region
U.S. Forest Service
Vallejo, CA

Jennifer Saltzman, Ph.D.

Palo Alto, CA

Sherri Sandberg-Ransom, M.S.

Science Teacher
Davis Senior High School
Davis, CA

Jonathan Sanderman

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science Policy and Management
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Susan D. Sanders, Ph.D.

Susan Sanders Biological Consulting
Nevada City, CA

Wesley K. Savage

Doctoral Candidate
Section of Evolution and Ecology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Renee Saville, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Civil and
Environmental Engineering
Stanford University
Mountain View, CA

Rebecca Schaffner, M.S.

Division of Biological Sciences
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA

Katherine N. Schick, Ph.D.

Stockton, CA

Amy Schilling, M.S.

Marketing Manager
Berkeley, CA

Joshua Schimel, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Ecology,
Evolution, and Marine Biology
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Matthew Schlesinger, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science and Policy
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Fredrick V. Schlexer, M.S.

Wildlife Biologist
Redwood Sciences Laboratory
U.S. Forest Service
Arcata, CA

Russell J. Schmitt, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Ecology,
Evolution and Marine Biology
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Jane Schneider, Ph.D.

Senior Research Scientist
San Diego, CA

Stephen H. Schneider, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Allan A. Schoenherr, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Natural Sciences
Fullerton College
Fullerton, CA

Sean Schoville

Doctoral Candidate
Environmental Science,
Policy and Management
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Beatrix Schramm, Ph.D.

Scientist
San Diego, CA

Fred E. Schreiber, Ph.D.

Professor of Biology
Department of Biology
California State University, Fresno
Fresno, CA

Brian M. Schreier, M.S.

Graduate Student Researcher
Department of Anthropology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Jerry R. Schubel, Ph.D.

President and C.E.O.
Aquarium of the Pacific
Long Beach, CA

Harold L. Schwartz, Ph.D.

Clinical Professor
Department of Medicine
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA

Rachel Schwartz

Doctoral Candidate
Davis, CA

Roger R. Seapy, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biological Science
California State University, Fullerton
Fullerton, CA

Ravinder Sehgal, Ph.D.

Department of Biology
San Francisco State University
San Francisco, CA

Cagan H. Sekercioglu, Ph.D.

Research Associate
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Kimberly A. Selkoe, Ph.D.

Research Scientist
National Center for Ecological
Analysis and Synthesis
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Katerina Semendeferi, Ph.D.

Department of Anthropology
University of California, San Diego
La Jolla, CA

Jason P. Sexton, M.S.

Botanist
Department of Plant Sciences
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

H. Bradley Shaffer, Ph.D.

Director
Center for Population Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Priya Shahani

Doctoral Candidate
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Sandra S. Shanks, M.S.

Zoologist
Wildlife and Habitat Data
Analysis Branch
California Department
of Fish and Game
Sacramento, CA

Arthur M. Shapiro, Ph.D.

Professor
Center for Population Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Kathleen M. Sharum

Wildlife Biologist
Bureau of Land Management
Maricopa, CA

Alison Sheehy

Naturalist
Nature Alley
Weldon, CA

Jean V. Shepard, M.S.

Assistant Curator
Department of Plant Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Tiffany Shepherd, M.S.

Wildlife Biologist
San Diego, CA

California

Peter Sherman, Ph.D.

Department of Science
Deep Springs College
Big Pine, CA

Tom Shih, D.Env., M.P.H.

Los Angeles, CA

Fraser Shilling, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Daizaburo Shizuka

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Jessica W. Shors

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

W. David Shuford, M.S.

Wetland Ecology Division
PRBO Conservation Science
Stinson Beach, CA

Soni Shukla, M.S.

Research Assistant
Department of Microbiology
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Michal I. Shuldman

Doctoral Candidate
Oakland, CA

Rachel Simmons, M.S.

Department of Animal Science
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Ellen L. Simms, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Julie Simpson, Ph.D.

Department of Ecology, Evolution
and Marine Biology
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Jennifer Skene

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Randolph Skrovan, M.S.

University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Kenneth S. Smallwood, Ph.D.

Davis, CA

David Smernoff, Ph.D.

Acterra
Portola Valley, CA

Adam B. Smith

Doctoral Candidate
Energy and Resources Group
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Matthew E. Smith

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Plant Pathology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Molly Smith

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science, Policy, and Management
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Raymond C. Smith, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus
Department of Geography
Institute for Computational
Earth System Sciences
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Reni M. Smith

Marine Research Specialist
Los Angeles, CA

Steven A. Smith, Ph.D.

Humboldt State University
Arcata, CA

Thomas B. Smith, Ph.D.

Professor, Director
Department of Ecology and
Evolution Institute of the
Environment
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA

Michael Sneary, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Department of Biological Sciences
San Jose State University
San Jose, CA

Carolyn Snyder, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Interdisciplinary Graduate Program
in Environment and Resources
Stanford University
Palo Alto, CA

Susanne Sokolow

Doctoral Candidate
Davis, CA

Daniela Soleri, Ph.D.

Department of Environment Studies
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

John T. Sorensen, Ph.D.

Senior Insect Biosystematist
Plant Pest Diagnostics Center
California Department of
Food and Agriculture
Sacramento, CA

Victoria Sork, Ph.D.

Professor and Chair
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA

J. Angel Soto Centeno, M.S.

Collection Manager
Department of Herpetology
San Diego Natural History Museum
San Diego, CA

Michael Soule, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus
Department of
Environmental Studies
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Wayne D. Spencer, Ph.D.

Senior Conservation Biologist
Conservation Biology Institute
San Diego, CA

Renee Spenst, Ph.D.

Department of Plant Sciences
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Robert B. Spies, Ph.D.

Editor
Marine Environmental Research
Little River, CA

Paul Springer, Ph.D.

Wildlife Research Biologist
Department of the Interior
U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Arcata, CA

Kathrine R. Springman, Ph.D.

Center for Health and the
Environment
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Jeannie A. Stamberger, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Edward J. Stanton, M.S.

Center for Natural Lands
Management
Fallbrook, CA

Hilary Olcott Staples, M.S.

San Anselmo, CA

Jonathan E. Stead, M.S.

Department of Wildlife Fish
and Conservation Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Timothy D. Stebbins, Ph.D.

Senior Marine Biologist
Metropolitan Wastewater,
Marine Biology Section
City of San Diego Ocean
Monitoring Program
San Diego, CA

Kerri Steenwerth, Ph.D.

Research Scientist
Woodland, CA

Alan Steinbach, M.D.

Professor
School of Public Health,
Joint Medical Program
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Alan Steinbach, Ph.D., M.D.

Clinical Professor
School of Public Health
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Todd Steiner, M.S.

Executive Director
Turtle Island Restoration Network
Forest Knolls, CA

Glenn R. Stewart, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus
Department of Biological Sciences
California State Polytechnic
University, Pomona
Pomona, CA

California

Hannah L. Stewart, Ph.D.
Santa Barbara, CA

Matthias Stoeck, Ph.D.
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Anita Stone, Ph.D.
Post-doctoral Scholar
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Geoffrey Stone, Ph.D.
Scientist
University of California, San Diego
San Diego, CA

Chantal Stoner, Ph.D.
Davis, CA

Alison N. Stover
Graduate Research Assistant
Department of Ecology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Diana Stralberg, M.S.
Landscape Ecologist
PRBO Conservation Science
Stinson Beach, CA

Elisa Stratton, Ph.D.
Santa Barbara, CA

Lewis Stringer, M.S.
San Francisco, CA

Kristen Strohm, M.S.
Wildlife Biologist
EDAW, Inc.
Sacramento, CA

Mark Stromberg, Ph.D.
Resident Reserve Director
Museum Vertebrate Zoology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Joseph P. Sullivan, Ph.D.
Woodland, CA

Kristin Sullivan, M.S.
Capitola, CA

Christina Swanson, Ph.D.
The Bay Institute
Novato, CA

Hilary Swarts
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Wildlife, Fish,
and Conservation Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Samuel S. Sweet, Ph.D.
Professor
Department of Ecology,
Evolution and Marine Biology
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Andrea Swei
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Camm Swift, Ph.D.
ENTRIX Environmental
Consultants, Inc.
Ventura, CA

Kirsten Swinstrom, Ph.D.
Instructor
Department of Life Sciences
Santa Rosa Junior College
Santa Rosa, CA

Sarah Swope
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Steve A. Sykes
Master's Candidate
Department of Ecology,
Evolution, and Marine Biology
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Robert K. Tarquinio, Ph.D.
Santa Monica, CA

Tracy K. Teal, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Biology
California Institute of Technology
Pasadena, CA

Douglas J. Tempel, M.S.
Wildlife Biologist
Big Bear Lake, CA

Anastasia Thanukos, Ph.D.
Researcher
Museum of Paleontology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Julie A. Thayer, Ph.D.
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Wildlife, Fish
and Conservation Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

William H. Thomas, Ph.D.
University of California, San Diego
San Diego, CA

Rosemary Thompson, Ph.D.
Senior Biologist
Science Applications International
Corporation
Santa Barbara, CA

Robert C. Thomson
Doctoral Candidate
Section of Evolution and Ecology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Heidi Tiura
Naturalist
Monterey, CA

Anne Todgham, Ph.D.
Department of Ecology,
Evolution and Marine Biology
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Catherine Toft, Ph.D.
Professor
Section of Evolution and Ecology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Gene R. Trapp, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus
Department of Biological Sciences
California State University,
Sacramento
Sacramento, CA

Brent Trela, Ph.D.
Program Director
Department of Viticulture and
Enology, and Extension Service
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Tina Treude, Ph.D.
Department of Marine
Environmental Biology
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA

Melanie A. Truan, Ph.D.
Post-doctoral Researcher
Department of Wildlife, Fish
and Conservation Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

William J. Trush, Ph.D.
River Ecologist
Department of Fisheries
Humboldt State University
Arcata, CA

John S. Tucker, Ph.D.
Stockton, CA

Gregg Tully, Ph.D.
Department of Biological Sciences
University of California, Santa
Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Michael W. Tuma, M.S.
Wildlife Biologist
Sierra Madre, CA

Anna C. Tyler, Ph.D.
Department of Environmental
Science and Policy
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

William B. Tyler, M.S.
Long Marine Laboratory
Santa Cruz, CA

Joseph Ulmer, M.S.
Sebastopol, CA

Art Unger, M.D.
Bakersfield, CA

Shem Unger, M.S.
Resources Conservation District
Fort Jones, CA

Julie Uyehara, Ph.D.
Goleta, CA

Jeremy Van Cleve
Master's Candidate
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Sula Vanderplank
Master's Candidate
Claremont, CA

Dustin R. VanOverbeke
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Entomology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

California

Michael C. Vasey, Ph.D.

Environmental Studies
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Ashwani Vasishth, M.S.

Assistant Professor
California State University,
Northridge
Los Angeles, CA

Cassandra Vasquez, Ph.D.

Riverside, CA

Kurt J. Vaughn

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Marc P. Vayssières, Ph.D.

California Department
of Water Resources
Davis, CA

Kari Veblen

Doctoral Candidate
Davis, CA

Jann Vendetti

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Geerat J. Vermeij, Ph.D.

Distinguished Professor
Department of Geology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Danel Vickerman, Ph.D.

Department of Entomology
University of California, Riverside
Oceanside, CA

Stella Villegas

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology
and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Ilonka von Lipke, M.S.

Los Angeles, CA

Vance T. Vredenburg, Ph.D.

Post-doctoral Scholar
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Kim Waddell, Ph.D.

Executive Director
American Vineyard Foundation
Napa, CA

Christine A. Walker, M.A.

Half Moon Bay, CA

Gregory P. Walker, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Department of Entomology
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA

Matthew D. Wallenstein, Ph.D.

Department of Ecology Evolution
and Marine Biology
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Baiqing Wang, Ph.D.

Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Ian Wang

Master's Candidate
Center for Population Biology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Philip Ward, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Entomology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Dee Warenycia

Roseville, CA

Timothy M. Waring

Human Ecologist
Department of Environment
Science and Policy
University of California, Davis
Martinez, CA

Peter J. Warner, M.A.

Environmental Scientist
Little River, CA

Robert Warner, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Ecology,
Evolution and Marine Biology
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Nils Warnock, Ph.D.

Bolinas, CA

Jan O. Washburn, Ph.D.

Specialist
Department of Plant and
Microbial Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Michael Wasserman

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science, Policy, and Management
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Kerstin Wasson, Ph.D.

Research Coordinator
Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine
Research Reserve
Watsonville, CA

James M. Watanabe, Ph.D.

Lecturer
Department of Biological Sciences
Hopkins Marine Station
Stanford University
Pacific Grove, CA

Marian L. Waterman, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Department of Microbiology and
Molecular Genetics
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA

Stephen F. Wathen

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Plant Sciences
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Rebecca R. Watson, Ph.D.

Department of Medicine
University of California, San Diego
San Diego, CA

Ward B. Watt, Ph.D.

Professor
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Mark A. Weeks, M.S.

Department of Environmental
Science and Management
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Karen Weinbaum

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science, Policy, and Management
Berkeley, CA

Rob E. Weinberg, M.S.

Research Associate
Department of Environmental
Science, Policy, and Management
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Michael Weise, Ph.D.

Department of Ecology and
Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

Heidi Weiskel

Doctoral Candidate
Section of Evolution and Ecology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Jeanette Weisman

Master's Candidate
Oakland, CA

Stuart B. Weiss, Ph.D.

Menlo Park, CA

Kenneth C. Welch, M.A.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology,
Evolution and Marine Biology
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

George F. Wells

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Civil and
Environmental Engineering
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Hartwell H. Welsh, Ph.D.

Research Wildlife Biologist
Arcata, CA

Kevin Chi-Ming Weng, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Pacific Grove, CA

Erin Wessely

Master's Candidate
Department of Environmental
Science and Management
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

California

Christopher C. White, M.S.
Principal Water Quality Specialist
Department of Animal Science and
Agronomy
University of California, Davis
Grass Valley, CA

Raymond R. White, Ph.D.
Department of Biology
City College of San Francisco
San Francisco, CA

Stephanie White, Ph.D.
Professor
Department of Physiological Science
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA

Will White
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology, Evolution,
and Marine Biology
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Michael L. Whiting, Ph.D.
Soil and Environmental Scientist
California Space Institute
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Kathleen L. Whitney
Doctoral Candidate
Marine Science Institute
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Lan Wiborg, M.P.H.
Toxicologist Marine Biologist
San Diego, CA

Alexander Wild
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Entomology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Becky L. Williams, M.S.
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Susan L. Williams, Ph.D.
Professor, Director
Bodega Bay, CA

Asa Wilson
Santa Barbara, CA

Carol A. Wilson, Ph.D.
Research Assistant Professor
Department of Research
Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden
and Claremont Graduate University
Claremont, CA

Robert E. Wishner, D.V.M.
Veterinarian
Chula Vista, CA

Jennifer Wolf, M.S.
Marine Science Institute
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Carlsbad, CA

Shaye Wolf, M.S.
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA

David M. Wood, Ph.D.
Professor of Biological Science
Biological Sciences
California State University, Chico
Chico, CA

Elijah S. Woolery
Master's Candidate
Department of Vertebrate Ecology
Moss Landing Marine Laboratories
Monterey, CA

David T. Wyatt, M.S.
Professor
Department of Biology
Sacramento City College
Sacramento, CA

Megan T. Wyman
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Geography
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Douglas Yanega, Ph.D.
Riverside, CA

Charles Yanofsky, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Annie Yau
Doctoral Candidate
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Hillary Young
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Thomas H. Young
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Ecology,
Evolution, and Marine Biology
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA

Pauline Yu
Master's Candidate
Department of Marine
Environmental Biology
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA

Nayer Zahiri, Ph.D.
Researcher
Riverside, CA

Amy E. Zanne, Ph.D.
Department of Integrative Biology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

Melinda Zaragoza, Ph.D.
Department of Medical
Microbiology and Immunology
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA

Frederick Zechman, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Department of Biology
California State University, Fresno
Fresno, CA

Once species become extinct, no corrective legislation can bring them back—they are gone forever.

Allen M. Solomon, Paleoecologist

Senior research global ecologist, Environmental Protection Agency (retired); and former senior policy analyst, White House Office of Science and Technology Policy

The Endangered Species Act is crucial to our nation's ecological health, and solid science is crucial to the ESA.

Gary K. Meffe, Conservation Biologist

Professor of Conservation Biology, University of Florida, Gainesville; and editor, *Conservation Biology*

The Endangered Species Act has protected our natural heritage for 30 years; it must continue to do so.

Stuart Pimm, Conservation Biologist

Doris Duke Chair of Conservation Ecology, Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences, Duke University, North Carolina; Pew Fellow in Conservation and the Environment; and LaRoe Prize winner for biodiversity protection

People can visit sacred shrines and imagine the spirits and the murmur of the voices of past generations. Likewise, we should go into natural places and imagine the spirits and murmurs of future generations hoping to experience the diversity of nature.

Paul Dayton, Marine Ecologist

Professor of Oceanography, Scripps Institution of Oceanography, La Jolla, California; Pew Fellow in Marine Conservation; and member, U.S. Marine Mammal Commission



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Each species on our planet plays a role in the healthy functioning of natural ecosystems, on which humans depend.

William H. Schlesinger, Biogeochemist

Dean, Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences and James B. Duke Professor of Biogeochemistry, Duke University, North Carolina; member, National Academy of Sciences; and past president, Ecological Society of America

Biodiversity is our nation's natural wealth. The Endangered Species Act safeguards these riches.

Judy L. Meyer, Aquatic Ecologist

Research professor of Limnology, Institute of Ecology, University of Georgia; fellow, American Association for the Advancement of Science; and past president, Ecological Society of America

Science is the foundation for preserving biodiversity to benefit all life on Earth.

Jerry Schubel, Marine Biologist

President and CEO, Aquarium of the Pacific, Long Beach, California; former dean and director, SUNY at Stony Brook's Marine Sciences Research Center; and board member, Census of Marine Life

We share this planet with many species. It is our responsibility to protect them, both for their sakes and our own.

Pamela A. Matson, Ecologist

Dean, School of Earth Sciences and Goldman Professor of Environmental Studies, Stanford University, California; member, National Academy of Sciences; MacArthur Fellow; and past president, Ecological Society of America

