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Eminent Ecologist Award Presented to Stephen P. Hubbell

The Ecological Society of America presented Stephen P. Hubbell, staff scientist at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute and distinguished professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at UCLA, with the 2009 Eminent Ecologist Award.

The award honors “a senior ecologist in recognition of an outstanding body of work or sustained ecological contributions of extraordinary merit.” Hubbell’s nomination was “absolutely astounding,” said Cathy Pringle, chair of the society’s awards committee, and it included letters of support from Jared Diamond and E.O. Wilson.

In 1979, Hubbell argued that the only way to gather enough data to test ideas about tropical forest diversity was to study very large areas of forest, including rare tree species. The first experiment to map, measure and identify 250,000 trees on Barro Colorado Island in Panama has evolved into a long-term, large-scale forest dynamics experiment at 34 sites in 20 countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa—one of the few on-the-ground efforts that offers data on the effects of global change.

“Steve Hubbell’s brilliant idea was to map thousands of individuals of each tree species in a forest because ecology is ultimately about space,” said Stuart Davies, director of the Center for Tropical Forest Science, which coordinates the network.

As a tropical plant ecologist and theoretical ecologist, Hubbell is best known as the author of the Unified Neutral Theory of Biodiversity and Biogeography. The Neutral Theory filled a theoretical void. Previously, ecologists lacked a general theory to explain the diversity of life. “The fact that the Neutral Theory is refutable—that it could be tested—has fundamentally advanced the science of ecology,” said Davies.

Author of three books and more than 160 papers, Hubbell has contributed to the careers of ecologists as an academic advisor and colleague—writing countless grants to support students and to repeat forest measurements in order to give long-term perspective to forest dynamics studies. He also founded the National Council on Science and the Environment, now a 10,000-member organization with the mission of improving the science underlying environmental decision making.

The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, headquartered in Panama City, Panama, is a unit of the Smithsonian Institution. The institute furthers the understanding of tropical nature and its importance to human welfare, trains students to conduct research in the tropics and promotes conservation by increasing public awareness of the beauty and importance of tropical ecosystems. Web site: www.stri.org.