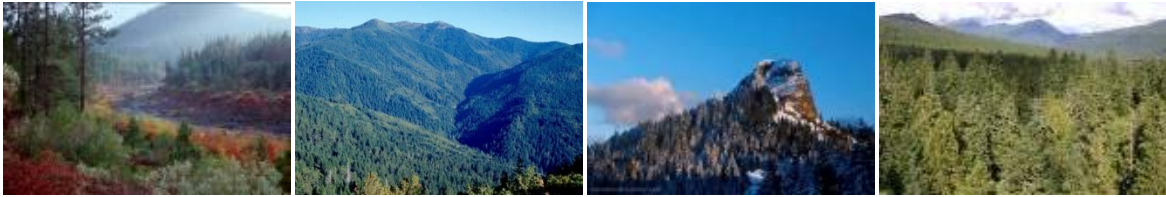


# A Letter from More Than 500 Scientists Urging the President to Fully Support the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule



April 14, 2010

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

As scientists working in natural resource-related disciplines, we commend your commitment to uphold and enforce the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule as the best policy to protect the nation's 58.5 million acres of undeveloped national forests. Now, as your administration deliberates next steps to preserve roadless areas, we would like to stress the scientific importance of this landmark environmental policy and our concern about attempts to undermine its protections on the Tongass National Forest in Alaska and national forests in Idaho and Colorado.

Since its promulgation, we have been, and continue to be, supportive of the 2001 Roadless Rule, because it applies a consistent and scientifically based national standard that appropriately safeguards the numerous ecological benefits that roadless areas provide to the nation's citizens, fish and wildlife, while also supplying clean drinking water to millions of Americans<sup>1</sup>. Ongoing development in concert with human-caused disruptions to the earth's climate now makes the application of a national roadless area policy even more urgent.

The 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule aptly noted the importance of roadless areas for watershed and ecosystem health. For example, over half of the nation's roadless areas supply water to downstream facilities that treat and distribute drinking water to the public<sup>1</sup>. There is strong scientific evidence that roadless areas provide high-quality habitat for threatened species, contain important concentrations of old-growth forests and aquatic strongholds, and, in the

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<sup>1</sup>USFS. 2000. Forest Service Roadless Area Conservation. Draft Environmental Impact Statement. Volume 1. Washington, D.C.

absence of roads and other disturbances, provide a buffer against invasive species<sup>2</sup>. Because over half the nation's roadless areas are at elevations above 7,000 feet<sup>1</sup>, they are vital for wildlife seeking cool, moist conditions in the face of a warming climate. In contrast, the presence and human use of roads have been linked to increased wildlife mortality, fragmentation of habitat, changes in the physical and chemical environment, diminished water quality, introduction of invasive species, wildfire ignitions, and increases in landslide susceptibility<sup>3</sup>. Such ecological effects are estimated to impact nearly one-quarter of all surface areas in the conterminous United States<sup>4</sup>. The few remaining roadless areas, which represent only two percent of the nation's total land area, take on even greater significance when viewed in this manner.

We believe the roadless area benefits described herein are best maintained by applying the 2001 Roadless Rule consistently across the nation, as it was originally intended. In fact, one of the primary reasons for invoking the 2001 Roadless Rule was that individual national forest plans, coupled with various regulations and other outside factors, were allowing the continued erosion of roadless areas absent a national standard<sup>5</sup>. The 2001 Roadless Rule imparted Forest Service officials with the responsibility of considering national interests in the management of the National Forest System, and specifically, inventoried roadless areas<sup>6</sup>. Reverting to state level exemptions and policies would undermine this important national direction, contributing to the further loss of these national forest system lands and their important ecological functions.

Perhaps there is no better example of the scientific justification for full restoration of the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule than the Tongass National Forest in Alaska. When the 2001 Roadless Rule was being developed, many scientists from across the country noted that to best conserve its wildlife and other ecological values the Tongass should be included in any measure to protect national forest roadless areas<sup>7</sup>. Because of a temporary exemption promulgated in 2003, the Tongass is the only national forest on the Pacific Coast unprotected by the 2001 Rule. This is unfortunate, as it holds approximately 30% of the planet's largest remaining coastal temperate rainforests. It also represents one of North America's largest carbon sinks and most biologically productive ecosystems<sup>8</sup>. The Tongass exemption left more than two

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<sup>2</sup>Strittholt, J.R., and D.A. DellaSala. 2001. Importance of roadless areas in biodiversity conservation in forested ecosystems: a case study – Klamath-Siskiyou ecoregion, U.S.A. *Conservation Biology* Vol. 15(6):1742-1754.  
DeVelice, R.L., and J.R. Martin. 2001. Assessing the extent to which roadless areas complement the conservation of biological diversity. *Ecological Applications* 11(4):1008-1018. Loucks, C., N. Brown, A. Loucks, and K. Cesareo. 2003. USDA Forest Service roadless areas: potential biodiversity conservation reserves. *Conservation Ecology* 7(2): 5  
Strittholt, J.R., D.A. DellaSala, E. Fernandez, G. Heilman, and P.A. Frost. 2003. Oregon's Legacy Wild Forests. Conservation value of Oregon's inventoried roadless areas ([www.consbio.org](http://www.consbio.org)). Gelbardi, J.L., and S. Harrison. 2005. Invasibility of roadless grasslands: an experimental study of yellow starthistle. *Ecological Applications* 15(5):1570–1580.

<sup>3</sup>Trombulak, S. and C. Frissell. 2000. Review of ecological effects of roads on terrestrial and aquatic communities. *Conservation Biology* 14:18-30.

<sup>4</sup>Forman, R.T.T. 2000. Estimate of the area affected ecologically by the road system in the United States. *Conservation Biology* 14:31-35.

<sup>5</sup>USFS. 2000. Roadless Area Conservation Final Environmental Impact Statement. Volume 1:3-12.

<sup>6</sup>66 Fed Reg. Notice 3246, January 12, 2001.

<sup>7</sup>December 20, 1999 letter sent to President Clinton.

<sup>8</sup>Schoen, J., and D. Albert. 2007. Southeastern Alaska conservation strategy: a conceptual approach. Chapter 10 in The coastal forests and mountain ecoregion of southeastern Alaska and the Tongass National Forest: a conservation assessment and resource synthesis, eds. J. Schoen and E. Dovichin. Audubon Alaska and The Nature Conservancy, Anchorage, Alaska.

million acres of roadless areas – including many old-growth forests – open to development, placing at risk high-quality habitat for many valued wildlife species as well as contributing to the release of dangerous greenhouse gas pollutants from logging activities.

We are also concerned about efforts by two other states, where rule changes have weakened the 2001 rule (Idaho) or are proposed to bypass many important protections of the 2001 roadless rule (Colorado). Idaho contains the largest intact national forest ecosystem in the lower 48 states, and a new state roadless policy was developed by the previous administration that would place many national forest acres at risk. This includes opening up more than 5,700 acres of roadless areas in the Caribou Targhee National Forest to phosphate mining, which poses a significant risk to terrestrial and aquatic species and water quality<sup>9</sup>, while also being potentially risky to human health and safety. In Colorado, which contains over 4 million acres of inventoried roadless areas, proposed exemptions in their draft rule would impact at least 246,000 acres<sup>10</sup> of inventoried roadless areas by removing them from the national inventory or degrading them by eliminating many restrictions on logging and road building. This would allow approximately 100 oil and gas leases in prime hunting and fishing areas, additional coal mining and exploration, expansion of ski areas, and many other provisions that could have long-term negative consequences to these vital landscapes. Fossil fuel development in these areas also contributes to the build up of greenhouse gas pollutants.

In closing, we thank you for your pledge to restore scientific integrity to policy development and specifically to decisions impacting the environment – including the conservation of our public lands. As scientists, we believe that the 2001 Roadless Rule remains the most scientifically credible approach for managing and protecting our last undeveloped national forests, and we urge your continued support for it.

Thank you for considering our views on this matter of vital importance to America's ecological health. Please do not hesitate to contact us for further information or input.

Sincerely, \*

John Alcock, Ph.D.  
Emeritus Professor of Biology  
Arizona State University  
Tempe, Arizona

Robert Allen, M.S.  
Professor of Biology  
Irvine Valley College  
Mission Viejo, California

Douglas G. Alexander, Ph.D.  
Emeritus Professor of Biology  
California State University, Chico  
Chico, California

Daniel W. Anderson, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus of Wildlife Biology  
Arizona State University  
Phoenix, Arizona

---

<sup>9</sup>Hamilton, S.J., Buhl, K.J. and P.J Lamothe. 2004. Selenium and other trace elements in water, sediment, aquatic plants, aquatic invertebrates, and fish from streams in SE Idaho near phosphate mining. *Life Cycle of the Phosphoria Formation: From Deposition to Post-Mining Environment*, Chapter 18. J. R. Hein, ed.

<sup>10</sup>4.43 million acres of inventoried roadless areas are currently protected by the 2001 rule vs. the state's July 28, 2009 proposal that includes 4.184 million acres. This difference is likely conservative due to cumulative impacts from multiple activities proposed.

Daniel W. Anderson, Ph.D..  
Professor Emeritus of Wildlife Biology  
University of California  
Davis, California

Kayce Anderson, Ph.D.  
Adjunct Professor  
Colorado Mountain College  
Glenwood Springs, Colorado

Steven C. Anderson, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology, Emeritus  
University of the Pacific  
Stockton, California

Robert A. Angus, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
University of Alabama, Birmingham  
Birmingham, Alabama

Robert Anthony, Ph.D.  
Professor of Wildlife Ecology  
Oregon State University  
Corvallis, Oregon

Kenneth J. Arrow, Ph.D.  
Professor of Economics Emeritus  
Stanford University  
Palo Alto, California

Michael Ashley, Ph.D.  
Geneticist  
USDA Agricultural Research Service  
Reno, Nevada

Erik Asphaug, Ph.D.  
Professor of Earth and Planetary Science  
University of California, Santa Cruz  
Santa Cruz, California

Roger Atkinson, Ph.D.  
Professor of Environmental Sciences  
University of California, Riverside  
Riverside, California

Jonathan Aurnou, Ph.D.  
Professor of Geophysics  
UCLA, Earth & Space Sciences  
Los Angeles, California

Peter J. Auster, Ph.D.  
University of Connecticut  
Groton, Connecticut

C. Donovan Bailey, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
New Mexico State University  
Las Cruces, New Mexico

Richard G. Baker, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus  
American Quaternary Association  
Atalissa, Iowa

William L. Baker, Ph.D.  
Professor of Ecology and Geography  
University of Wyoming  
Laramie, Wyoming

Bruce G. Baldwin, Ph.D.  
W. L. Jepson Professor and Curator  
University of California, Berkeley  
Berkeley, California

Marcy J. Balunas, Ph.D.  
Postdoctoral Fellow  
Scripps Institution of Oceanography  
La Jolla, California

Katherine Bannar-Martin, M.Sc.  
University of Texas at Austin  
Austin, Texas

Michael J. Baranski, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology and Environmental Science  
Catawba College  
Salisbury, North Carolina

Mark A. Barath, M.S.  
Environmental Scientist  
U.S. EPA  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Jesse R. Barber, Ph.D.  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, Colorado

Shannon Barber-Meyer, Ph.D.  
Tiger Conservationist  
Riverdale, Maryland

Linda Sue Barnes, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus  
Wade, North Carolina

John Gary Bartlett, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Biology  
Campbell University  
Buies Creek, North Carolina

Andrew Barton, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
University of Maine at Farmington  
Farmington, Maine

Carol Baskauf, Ph.D.  
Clarksville, Tennessee

Robert Baum, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Florida Southern College  
Lakeland, Florida

Jeffrey C. Beane  
Collections Manager, Herpetology  
North Carolina State Museum  
Raleigh, North Carolina

Constance Dustin Becker, Ph.D.  
Co-Director  
Life Net Nature  
Makawao, Hawaii

Erik Beever, Ph.D.  
Community Ecologist  
Anchorage, Alaska

Paul Beier, Ph.D.  
Professor of Conservation Biology  
President-Elect, Society for Conservation Biology  
Flagstaff, Arizona

Steven R. Beissinger, Ph.D.  
Leopold Chair in Wildlife Biology  
University of California at Berkeley  
Berkeley, California

Craig W. Benkman, Ph.D.  
Professor of Zoology  
University of Wyoming  
Laramie, Wyoming

David Benzing, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Oberlin College  
Oberlin, Ohio

David J. Berg, Ph.D.  
Professor of Zoology  
Miami University  
Hamilton, Ohio

Robert L. Beschta, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus  
Oregon State University  
Corvallis, Oregon

Scott Hoffman Black  
Executive Director  
Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation  
Portland, Oregon

Harvey Blankespoor, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus of Biology  
Hope College and University of Michigan  
Holland, Michigan

James R. Blauth, Ph.D.  
Professor and Chair of Biology  
University of Redlands  
Redlands, California

Jane H. Bock, Ph.D.  
Professor Emerita of Biology  
University of Colorado  
Boulder, Colorado

Katherine Bode, M.A.  
Plant Ecologist  
ICF Jones & Stokes  
Santa Cruz, California

Brian E. Bodenbender, Ph.D.  
Assoc. Prof. of Geology and Environmental Science  
Hope College  
Holland, Michigan

Bazartseren Boldgiv, Ph.D.  
National University of Mongolia  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Jim Boone, Ph.D.  
Senior Scientist  
Desert Wildlife Consultants, LLC  
Las Vegas, Nevada

Arthur J. Boucot, Ph.D.  
Professor of Zoology & Geology  
Oregon State University  
Corvallis, Oregon

John L. Bowman, Ph.D.  
University of California, Davis  
Davis, California

Richard Bradley, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor, EEO Biology  
Ohio State University  
Marion, Ohio

Elizabeth Braker, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biology  
Occidental College  
Los Angeles, California

Solange Brault, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
University of Massachusetts, Boston  
Boston, Massachusetts

Holger Brix, Ph.D.  
University of California, Los Angeles  
Los Angeles, California

Jon Brodziak, Ph.D.  
Fisheries Scientist  
National Marine Fisheries Service  
Honolulu, Hawaii

William R. Bromer, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology & Environmental Science  
University of St. Francis  
Joliet, Illinois

Peter F. Brussard, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus  
University of Nevada, Reno  
Reno, Nevada

Thomas N. Buckley, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Biology  
Sonoma State University  
Rohnert Park, California

Jeffery Burkhart, Ph.D.  
Fletcher Jones Professor of Biology  
University of La Verne  
La Verne, California

Nancy Burley, Ph.D.  
Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology  
University of California, Irvine  
Irvine, California

Laurie Burnham, Ph.D.  
Dartmouth College  
Hanover, New Hampshire

Eric Burr, M.F.  
National Park Ranger (ret.)  
Wildlife Society  
Mazama, Washington

Danielle Busch, Ph.D.  
Postdoctoral Fellow  
NOAA  
Seattle, Washington

Luke K. Butler, Ph.D.  
American Ornithologists' Union  
Ewing, New Jersey

David Byman, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Biology  
Penn State University  
Dunmore, Pennsylvania

Tom J. Cade, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus of Zoology  
Cornell University  
Boise, Idaho

Alan B. Cady, Ph.D.  
Professor of Zoology  
Miami University  
Middletown, Ohio

Philip Cafaro, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Philosophy  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, Colorado

John Cairns, Jr., Ph.D.  
University Distinguished Professor  
Blacksburg, Virginia

John R. Cannon, Ph.D.  
Conservation Biologist  
University of Maryland  
Front Royal, Virginia

Philip Cantino, Ph.D.  
Professor  
Ohio University  
Athens, Ohio

Ken Carloni, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Umpqua Community College  
Roseburg, Oregon

Steven A Carlson, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus  
Humboldt State University  
Arcata, California

Gary Carnefix, M.Sc.  
Aquatic Ecologist  
Carnefix Ecological Consulting  
Missoula, Montana

Carlos Carroll, Ph.D.  
Ecologist  
Klamath Center for Conservation Research  
Orleans, California

C. Ronald Carroll, Ph.D.  
Prof. of Ecology; Director, River Basin Center  
University of Georgia  
Athens, Georgia

Bob Carson, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus  
Lehigh University  
Coopersburg, Pennsylvania

Walter P. Carson, Ph.D.  
Professor of Ecology  
University of Pittsburgh  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

F. Stuart Chapin, III  
Professor  
University of Alaska, Fairbanks  
Fairbanks, Alaska

Barclay Charles, M.S.  
Environmental Scientist  
Oregon State University  
Vancouver, Washington

Donald F. Charles, Ph.D.  
Ruth Patrick Chair in Environmental Science  
Academy of Natural Sciences  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Gabriela Chavarria, Ph.D.  
Director of Science  
Natural Resources Defense Council  
Washington, DC

Catherine D. Clark, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor, Environmental Chemistry  
Chapman University  
Orange, California

Raymond Clarke, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Sarah Lawrence College  
Bronxville, New York

Malcolm Cleaveland, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus of Geosciences  
University of Arkansas  
Fayetteville, Arkansas

Michael Cohen, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Sonoma State University  
Rohnert Park, California

Robert K. Colwell, Ph.D.  
Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor  
University of Connecticut  
Storrs, Connecticut

Mindy Conyers  
Professor of Environmental Geography  
University of Central Arkansas  
Conway, Arkansas

Joseph A. Cook, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Paul Corogin, M.S.  
University of Florida  
Gainesville, Florida

Frank Lance Craighead, Ph.D.  
Director  
Craighead Environmental Research Institute  
Bozeman, Montana

Kevin Crooks, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Wildlife Conservation  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, Colorado

Bradley Cullen, Ph.D.  
Professor of Geography  
University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Jim Cummings  
Executive Director  
Acoustic Ecology Institute  
Santa Fe, New Mexico

Michael A. Cunningham, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of EEO Biology  
Ohio State University  
Lima, Ohio

Robert L. Curry, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Villanova University  
Villanova, Pennsylvania

Nancy J. Curtis, M.S.  
Laboratory Instructor  
Bowdoin College  
Brunswick, Maine

Satish Davgun, Ph.D.  
Professor and Chair, Geography  
Bemidji State University  
Bemidji, Minnesota

Ana Davidson, Ph.D.  
NSF International Research Fellow  
University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Luise K. Davis, Ph.D.  
Certified Wetlands Scientist  
Retired  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Paul K. Dayton, Ph.D.  
Professor of Marine Ecology  
Scripps Institution of Oceanography  
La Jolla, California

Kevin de Queiroz, Ph.D.  
Research Zoologist  
Washington, DC

Catherine de Rivera, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Environmental Science  
Portland State University  
Portland, Oregon

Amrita G. de Soyza, Ph.D.  
Senior Ecologist  
NE&D Environmental LLC  
Las Vegas, Nevada

James E. Deacon, Ph.D.  
Distinguished Emeritus Professor  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
Henderson, Nevada

Linda Deegan, Ph.D.  
Senior Scientist  
Ecosystems Center, MBL  
Woods Hole, Massachusetts

Dominick A. DellaSala, Ph.D.  
Chief Scientist and President  
National Center for Conservation Science & Policy  
Ashland, Oregon

Amy L. Denton, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor and Chair of Biology  
California State University, Channel Islands  
Camarillo, California

David F. DeSante, Ph.D.  
Institute for Bird Populations  
Point Reyes Station, California

Georgina DeWeese, Ph.D.  
Professor of Geosciences  
University of West Georgia  
Carrollton, Georgia

Marian Diamond, Ph.D.  
Professor of Neuroscience and Anatomy  
University of California, Berkeley  
Berkeley, California

Kim Diver, Ph.D.  
Visiting Scientist  
Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute  
Washington, DC

Alex Doetsch, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biology  
College of Southern Idaho  
Twin Falls, Idaho

Jim W. Dole, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus of Biology  
California State University, Northridge  
Northridge, California

Dana E. Dolsen, M.S.  
Utah Division of Wildlife Resources  
Salt Lake City, Utah

Carmen Domingo, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
San Francisco State University  
San Francisco, California

Ronald I. Dorn, Ph.D.  
Professor of Geographical Sciences  
Arizona State University  
Tempe, Arizona



Craig C. Downer, M.S.  
Wildlife Ecologist  
Andean Tapir Fund  
Minden, Nevada

Ken Driese, Ph.D.  
University of Wyoming  
Laramie, Wyoming

Amy Dunham, Ph.D.  
Asst. Professor of Ecology & Evolutionary Biology  
Rice University  
Houston, Texas

Andrew Dyer, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biology  
University of South Carolina, Aiken  
Aiken, South Carolina

James Dyer, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Ohio University  
Athens, Ohio

Greg Eaton, Ph.D.  
Professor, Director  
Lynchburg College  
Lynchburg, Virginia

William Edelglass, Ph.D.  
Professor of Philosophy  
Marlboro College  
Marlboro, Vermont

Michelle M. Elekonich, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Life Sciences  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
Las Vegas, Nevada

Norman C. Ellstrand, Ph.D.  
Professor of Genetics  
University of California  
Riverside, California

Gary N. Ervin, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biological Sciences  
Mississippi State University  
Mississippi State, Mississippi

W. Hardy Eshbaugh, Ph.D.  
Miami University  
Oxford, Ohio

Suzanne Estes, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Portland State University  
Portland, Oregon

Jonathan Evans, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
University of the South  
Sewanee, Tennessee

John Faaborg, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biological Sciences  
University of Missouri  
Columbia, Missouri

Frank L. Farmer, Ph.D.  
Professor of Rural Sociology  
University of Arkansas  
Fayetteville, Arkansas

Kurt D. Fausch, Ph.D.  
Professor of Aquatic Conservation Biology  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, Colorado

Chris Feldman, Ph.D.  
Research Professor of Biology  
University of Nevada, Reno  
Reno, Nevada

Tracy S. Feldman, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Biology  
University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point  
Stevens Point, Wisconsin

Daniel J. Feller  
Western Region Biologist  
Maryland Department of Natural Resources  
Frostburg, Maryland

Rebe Feraldi, MESM  
Environmental Scientist  
Eastern Research Group  
Prairie Village, Kansas

Maria Fernandez-Medina, Ph.D.  
University of California, Davis  
Davis, California

David H. Firmage, Ph.D.  
Professor of Environmental Studies  
Colby College  
Waterville, Maine

Thomas L. Fleischner, Ph.D.  
Professor of Environmental Studies  
Prescott College  
Prescott, Arizona

Beth Forys, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology & Environmental Science  
Eckerd College  
Saint Petersburg, Florida

Jeffrey Foster, Ph.D.  
Northern Arizona University  
Flagstaff, Arizona

Laurence Frabotta, Ph.D.  
Adjunct Assistant Professor of Biology  
City University of New York  
New York, New York

Barbara A. Frase, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Bradley University  
Peoria, Illinois

Jerry Freilich, Ph.D.  
Research Coordinator  
Olympic National Park  
Port Angeles, Washington

Lee E. Frelich, Ph.D.  
University of Minnesota  
St. Paul, Minnesota

Christopher A. Frissell, Ph.D.  
Director of Science and Conservation  
Pacific Rivers Council  
Polson, Montana

Robert R. Fuerstenberg, Ph.D.  
Senior Ecologist  
King County Natural Resources & Parks  
Vashon, Washington

Jed Fuhrman, Ph.D.  
McCulloch Crosby Chair of Marine Biology  
University of Southern California  
Los Angeles, California

Stephen W. Fuller, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biological Sciences  
University of Mary Washington  
Fredericksburg, Virginia

Margaret H. Fusari, Ph.D.  
University of California, Santa Cruz (ret.)  
Santa Cruz, California

Caitlin Gabor, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Texas State University  
Austin, Texas

Janet Gehring, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biology  
Bradley University  
Peoria, Illinois

Thomas M. Gehring, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biology  
Central Michigan University  
Mount Pleasant, Michigan

J. Wynne Geikenjoyner, P.T., D.P.T., M.S.  
Research Specialist  
Northern Arizona University  
Flagstaff, Arizona

Charlotte Germain-Aubrey, M.Sc.  
University of Florida  
Gainesville, Florida

John A. Gerwin  
Curator of Birds  
North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences  
Raleigh, North Carolina

Jeffrey Gerwing, Ph.D.  
Portland State University  
Portland, Oregon

Allen G. Gibbs, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biology  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
Las Vegas, Nevada

James D. Gilardi, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
World Parrot Trust  
Davis, California

Bob Gillespie, Ph.D.  
Professor of Ag. and Natural Resource Systems  
Wenatchee Valley College  
Wenatchee, Washington

Matthew Gitzendanner, Ph.D.  
Associate Scientist  
University of Florida  
Gainesville, Florida

Michale Glennon, Ph.D.  
Associate Conservation Scientist  
Wildlife Conservation Society  
Saranac Lake, New York

Stephen R. Gliessman, Ph.D.  
Professor of Agroecology  
University of California, Santa Cruz  
Santa Cruz, California

Grant Godden, M.S.  
Florida Museum of Natural History  
Gainesville, Florida

David L. Goldstein, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Wright State University  
Dayton, Ohio

Enrique Gomezdelcampo, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Geology  
Bowling Green State University  
Bowling Green, Ohio

David A. Gray, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
California State University, Northridge  
Northridge, California

Steven Green, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
University of Miami  
Coral Gables, Florida

Gregory F. Grether, Ph.D.  
Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology  
University of California, Los Angeles  
Los Angeles, California

Edwin R. Griff, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biological Sciences  
University of Cincinnati  
Cincinnati, Ohio

David M. Griffith, Ph.D.  
Visiting Professor of Biology  
Ferris State University  
Big Rapids, Michigan

Francesca T. Grifo, Ph.D.  
Director, Scientific Integrity Program  
Union of Concerned Scientists  
Bethesda, Maryland

Gary D. Grossman  
Professor of Animal Ecology  
University of Georgia  
Athens, Georgia

Daniel S. Gruner, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Entomology  
University of Maryland  
College Park, Maryland

Vincent P. Gutschick, Ph.D.  
Director  
Global Change Consulting Consortium  
Las Cruces, New Mexico

John E. Hall, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus of Microbiology  
West Virginia University  
Morgantown, West Virginia

Charles B. Halpern  
Research Professor  
University of Washington  
Seattle, Washington

Richard W. Halsey  
Director  
California Chapparral Institute  
Escondido, California

Ralph S. Hames, Ph.D.  
Research Associate  
Cornell University  
Ithaca, New York

Healy Hamilton, Ph.D.  
California Academy of Sciences  
San Francisco, California

Mitchel Hannon, M.S.  
Senior GIS Analyst  
Trust For Public Land  
Santa Fe, New Mexico

Stacey Harmer, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
University of California, Davis  
Davis, California

Mark E. Harmon, Ph.D.  
Professor of Forest Science  
Oregon State University  
Corvallis, Oregon

Peter J. Harries, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
University of South Florida  
Tampa, Florida

John Harte, Ph.D.  
Professor  
University of California, Berkeley  
Berkeley, California

Carolyn Heath, Ph.D.  
Professor  
Fullerton College  
Newport Beach, California

Bernd Heinrich, Ph.D.  
Emeritus Professor of Biology  
University of Vermont  
Burlington, Vermont

Cheryl Heinz, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Biological Sciences  
Benedictine University  
Aurora, Illinois

Nicole Heller, Ph.D.  
Research Scientist  
Climate Central  
Palo Alto, California

Brian G. Henning, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Philosophy  
Gonzaga University  
Spokane, Washington

Scott M. Herron, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biology  
Ferris State University  
Big Rapids, Michigan

Jeffrey Hill, Ph.D.  
Professor of Environmental Studies  
University of North Carolina, Wilmington  
Wilmington, North Carolina

Jodi Hilty, Ph.D.  
Ecologist  
Wildlife Conservation Society  
Bozeman, Montana

Nancy Hoalst-Pullen, Ph.D.  
Professor of Geography  
Kennesaw, Georgia

Ingrid Hogle, M.S.  
Monitoring Program Manager  
University of California, Davis  
Berkeley, California

Karen Holl, Ph.D.  
Professor of Environmental Studies  
University of California, Santa Cruz  
Santa Cruz, California

John R. Holloway, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus  
Arizona State University  
Ashland, Oregon

Richard T. Holmes, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus of Biology  
Dartmouth College  
Hanover, New Hampshire

Kent E. Holsinger, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
University of Connecticut  
Storrs, Connecticut

Andres Holz, Ph.D.  
University of Colorado  
Boulder, Colorado

Kristine N. Hopfensperger, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Northern Kentucky University  
Highland Heights, Kentucky

E. A. Horvath  
Assistant Professor of Biology  
Westmont College  
Santa Barbara, California

Robert Huber, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Bowling Green State University  
Bowling Green, Ohio

Malcolm L. Hunter, Jr, Ph.D.  
Libra Professor of Conservation Biology  
University of Maine  
Milford, Maine

Charles Huntington, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology Emeritus  
Bowdoin College  
Harpwell, Maine

Richard Hutto, Ph.D.  
Professor and Director  
University of Montana  
Missoula, Montana

Ines Ibanez, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Terrestrial Ecology  
University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Mrill Ingram, Ph.D.  
Editor, Ecological Restoration  
University of Wisconsin  
Madison, Wisconsin

Brian Inouye, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biology  
Florida State University  
Tallahassee, Florida

David W. Inouye, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
University of Maryland  
College Park, Maryland

Gretchen M. Ionta, Ph.D.  
Postdoctoral Research Associate  
University of Florida  
Gainesville, Florida

Emi Ito, Ph.D.  
Professor of Geology  
University of Minnesota  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Allison Belsches Jablonski, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biology  
Lynchburg College  
Lynchburg, Virginia

Jerome A. Jackson, Ph.D.  
Ecological Sciences  
Florida Gulf Coast University  
Ft. Myers, Florida

Frederick J. Jannett, Jr., Ph.D.  
Adjunct Associate Professor  
University of Minnesota  
St. Paul, Minnesota

Charles H. Janson, Ph.D.  
Associate Dean of Biology  
University of Montana  
Missoula, Montana

Daniel Janzen, Ph.D.  
Professor of Conservation Biology  
University of Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

David M. Jarzen, Ph.D.  
Senior Research Scientist  
Florida Museum of Natural History  
Gainesville, Florida

Douglas Jeffries, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology and Environmental Studies  
University of the Ozarks  
Clarksville, Arkansas

Clinton N. Jenkins, Ph.D.  
Assistant Research Scientist  
University of Maryland  
College Park, Maryland

David G. Jenkins, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Mitchell M. Johns, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Soil  
California State University, Chico  
Chico, California

Rachel Jolley, Ph.D.  
Research Associate, Ecology  
Mississippi State University  
Starkville, Mississippi

Kyle Joly  
Wildlife Biologist  
Fairbanks, Alaska

Cynthia S. Jones, Ph.D.  
Assoc. Professor of Ecology & Evolutionary Biology  
University of Connecticut  
Storrs, Connecticut

D. Todd Jones-Farrand, Ph.D.  
Science Coordinator  
Central Hardwoods Joint Venture  
Columbia, Missouri

Jay H. Jones, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology and Biochemistry  
University of La Verne  
La Verne, California

Walter S. Judd, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
University of Florida, Department of Biology  
Gainesville, Florida

Glenn H. Kageyama, Ph.D.  
Professor of Neuroscience  
Cal Poly University, Pomona  
Pomona, California

David Karowe, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biological Sciences  
Western Michigan University  
Kalamazoo, Michigan

James R. Karr, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus  
University of Washington, Seattle  
Sequim, Washington

Sterling C. Keeley, Ph.D.  
Professor of Botany  
University of Hawaii  
Honolulu, Hawaii

Margaret G. Kidwell, Ph.D.  
Regents Professor Emerita  
University of Arizona  
Tucson, Alaska

John G. Kie, Ph.D.  
Research Professor  
Idaho State University  
Pocatello, Idaho

Ke Chung Kim, Ph.D.  
Professor and Director Emeritus  
Pennsylvania State University  
University Park, Pennsylvania

Nicole King, Ph.D.  
Asst. Professor of Genetics, Genomics, and Devel.  
University of California, Berkeley  
Berkeley, California

Rebecca Kipp, M.S.  
Wildlife Biologist  
Wilmington, Delaware

Bruce Kirchoff, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biology  
University of North Carolina, Greensboro  
Greensboro, North Carolina

Jack Kirkley, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
University of Montana - Western  
Dillon, Montana

Catherine Kleier, Ph.D.  
Director, Environmental Science Program  
Regis University  
Denver, Colorado

Devra G. Kleiman, Ph.D.  
Senior Scientist Emeritus  
Smithsonian National Zoological Park  
Washington, DC

John A. Kloetzel, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor Biological Sciences  
University of Maryland  
Baltimore, Maryland

Rebecca D. Knowles, Ph.D.  
Plant Ecologist/ Planner  
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe  
Cass Lake, Minnesota

Walter D. Koenig, Ph.D.  
Senior Scientist  
Cornell University  
Ithaca, New York

Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, Ph.D.  
Professor  
University of Minnesota  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Marni Koopman, Ph.D.  
Climate Change Scientist  
National Center for Conservation Science & Policy  
Ashland, Oregon

Michael Koryak  
Aquatic Biologist  
KEH, LLC  
Wexford, Pennsylvania

Grace M. Kostel, M.S.  
Botanist  
Black Hills State University  
Spearfish, South Carolina

Andrew Kramer, Ph.D.  
Postdoctoral Associate  
University of Georgia  
Athens, Georgia

Shawn Krosnick, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Biology  
Southern Arkansas University  
Magnolia, Arkansas

John P. LaBonte, Ph.D.  
Post-doctoral Researcher  
University of California, Santa Barbara  
Santa Barbara, California

Sally A. Lahm, Ph.D.  
Ecologist  
Ecology and Environment, Inc.  
Arlington, Virginia

Rebecca S. Lamb, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Ohio State University  
Columbus, Ohio

John W. Lamperti, Ph.D.  
Professor of Mathematics, Emeritus  
Dartmouth College  
Hanover, New Hampshire

Winston C. Lancaster, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
California State University, Sacramento  
Sacramento, California

Jeri M. Langham, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biological Sciences  
California State University  
Sacramento, California

Geoffrey F. Lawrence, M.S.  
North Hennepin Community College  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Daniel J. Lebbin, Ph.D.  
Conservation Biologist  
Vienna, Virginia

Shannon Lee, Ph.D.  
Lecturer  
California State University, Northridge  
Glen Ellen, California

Paul A. Lefebvre, Ph.D.  
Professor of Plant Biology  
University of Minnesota  
St. Paul, Minnesota

Scott Lefler, Ph.D.  
Biochemistry Lecturer  
Arizona State University  
Tempe, Arizona

G. Victor Leipzig, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Golden West College  
Huntington Beach, California

Thomas J Lemieux  
Director, Plant Science Facilities  
University of Colorado  
Boulder, Colorado

W. Z. Lidicker, Jr., Ph.D.  
Professor of Integrative Biology Emeritus  
University of California, Berkeley  
Berkeley, California

Jason A. Lillegraven, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus  
University of Wyoming  
Laramie, Wyoming

Harvey B. Lillywhite, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
University of Florida  
Gainesville, Florida

Steven O. Link, Ph.D.  
Washington State University  
Richland, Washington

Frank Logiudice  
Undergraduate Biology Program Coordinator  
University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Travis Longcore, Ph.D.  
Research Associate Professor  
University of Southern California  
Los Angeles, California

John B. Loomis, Ph.D.  
Professor of Natural Resource Economics  
Fort Collins, Colorado

Thomas E. Lovejoy, Ph.D.  
Biodiversity Chair  
The Heinz Center  
Washington, DC

Marvin M. F. Lutnesky, Ph.D.  
Professor and Chair, Biology  
Eastern New Mexico University  
Portales, New Mexico

Carlos A. Machado, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biology  
University of Maryland  
College Park, Maryland

Lucas C. Majure, M.S.  
Florida Museum of Natural History  
Gainesville, Florida

Jim Malusa, Ph.D.  
Research Ecologist  
University of Arizona  
Tucson, Arizona

Debora L. Mann, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Biology  
Millsaps College  
Jackson, Mississippi

Stephen D. Manning, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Arkansas State University, Beebe  
Beebe, Arkansas

Jim Marden, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Pennsylvania State University  
University Park, Pennsylvania

Travis D. Marsico, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Arkansas State University  
Jonesboro, Arkansas

Sharyn B. Marks, Ph.D.  
Professor of Zoology  
Humboldt State University  
Arcata, California

Michael Marsh, Ph.D.  
Co-Chair, Conservation Committee  
Washington Native Plant Society  
Seattle, Washington

Carlos Martinez del Rio, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
University of Wyoming  
Laramie, Wyoming

Gary G. Martin, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
American Assn. for the Advancement of Science  
Los Angeles, California

Jennifer Martin, Ph.D.  
Associate Research Professor of Biology  
Boulder, Colorado

Patrick Martin, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Landscape Ecology  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, Colorado

Steven R. Martin, Ph.D.  
Prof. of Env. and Natural Resource Sciences  
Humboldt State University  
Arcata, California

Joy N. Mast, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biogeography  
Bristol, Wisconsin

Glenn Matlack  
Professor of Forest Ecology  
Ohio University  
Athens, Ohio

Stockton Maxwell, M.S.  
West Virginia University  
Morgantown, West Virginia

Michael Mazurkiewicz, Ph.D.  
Professor, Biological Sciences  
University of Southern Maine  
Portland, Maine

Kathleen McCarthy, M.S.  
Ecologist  
New York, New York

Dale A. McCullough, Ph.D.  
Senior Fisheries Scientist  
Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission  
Portland, Oregon

Daniel J. McGarvey, Ph.D.  
Freshwater Ecologist  
U.S. EPA  
Athens, Georgia

Peter B. McIntyre, Ph.D.  
Aquatic Researcher  
University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, Michigan



William O. McLarney, Ph.D.  
Director of Biomonitoring  
Little Tennessee Watershed Association  
Franklin, North Carolina

Jack McMillen, Ph.D.  
Washington Natural Heritage Program  
Olympia, Washington

Robert L. McPherron, Ph.D.  
Professor of Geophysics and Space Science  
Institute of Geophysics & Planetary Physics  
Los Angeles, California

Robert J. Meese, Ph.D.  
Staff Research Associate IV  
University of California, Davis  
Davis, California

Gary K. Meffe, Ph.D.  
Editor, Conservation Biology  
University of Florida  
Gainesville, Florida

Eric S. Menges, Ph.D.  
Senior Research Biologist  
Archbold Biological Station  
Lake Placid, Florida

Jennifer C. Merriam, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Biology  
Orange County Community College  
Middletown, New York

Brian T. Miller, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Middle Tennessee State University  
Murfreesboro, Tennessee

Maria N. Miriti, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of EEO Biology  
Ohio State University  
Columbus, Ohio

Russell K. Monson, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
University of Colorado  
Boulder, Colorado

Pamela Morgan, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
University of New England  
Biddeford, Maine

Molly R. Morris, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Ohio University  
Athens, Ohio

Susanne Moser, Ph.D.  
Director and Principal Scientist  
Susanne Moser Research & Consulting  
Santa Cruz, California

Rob Mrowka, M.S.  
Ecologist  
Center for Biological Diversity  
North Las Vegas, Nevada

Megan Mueller, M.S.  
Wildlife Biologist  
Center for Native Ecosystems  
Boulder, Colorado

Paul Mueller, Ph.D.  
Professor  
Gainesville, Florida

Nancy E. Muleady-Mecham, Ph.D.  
Adjunct Professor of Biology  
Northern Arizona University  
Arnold, California

James Murray, D. Phil.  
Professor of Biology Emeritus  
University of Virginia  
Charlottesville, Virginia

K. Greg Murray  
Professor of Biology  
Hope College  
Holland, Michigan

Nancy A. Murray, Ph.D.  
Ohio Wesleyan University  
Delaware, Ohio

Brent A. Murry, Ph.D.  
Research Assistant Professor  
Central Michigan University  
Mt. Pleasant, Michigan

Chris Myers, Ph.D.  
Professor of Zoology  
Miami University  
Oxford, Ohio

Dhruba Naug, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, Alabama

Charles R. Neal  
Department of Interior (ret.)  
Cody, Wyoming

Cara R. Nelson, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Restoration Ecology  
University of Montana  
Missoula, Montana

Andrew P. Nelson, Ph.D.  
State University of New York, Oswego  
Oswego, New York

Harvey Nichols, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus of Biology  
Boulder, Colorado

Barry R. Noon, Ph.D.  
Professor of Ecology  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, Colorado

Gretchen B. North, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Occidental College  
Los Angeles, California

Reed Noss, Ph.D.  
Professor of Conservation Biology  
University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Richard Nyhof, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Philip J. Nyhus, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies  
Colby College  
Waterville, Maine

Dennis Odion, Ph.D.  
University of California, Santa Barbara  
Ashland, Oregon

Richard Olmstead, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
University of Washington  
Seattle, Washington

Charles Olmsted, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus of Environmental Studies  
Greeley, Colorado

Bradley B. Olwin, Ph.D.  
Professor, Molecular, Cellular & Devel. Biology  
University of Colorado  
Boulder, Colorado

Katie Ombalski, M.S.  
Conservation Biologist  
ClearWater Conservancy  
State College, Pennsylvania

Gordon Orians, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus of Biology  
University of Washington  
Lake Forest Park, Washington

Steven A. Osofsky, D.V.M.  
Director, Wildlife Health Policy  
Wildlife Conservation Society  
Bronx, New York

Richard S. Ostfeld, Ph.D.  
Senior Scientist  
Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies  
Millbrook, New York

John F. Pagels, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus of Biology  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
Chesterfield, Virginia

Matthew I. Palmer, Ph.D.  
Columbia University  
New York, New York

Matthew Pamental, Ph.D.  
Northern Illinois University  
DeKalb, Illinois

Daniel R. Papaj, Ph.D.  
Professor  
University of Arizona  
Tucson, Arizona

Theodore J. Papenfuss, Ph.D.  
Research Scientist  
University of California, Berkeley  
Berkeley, California

Christopher J. Paradise, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biology  
Davidson College  
Davidson, North Carolina

Lee R. Parker, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus  
California Polytechnic State University  
San Luis Obispo, California

Michael S. Parker, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Southern Oregon University  
Ashland, Oregon

Gustav Paulay, Ph.D.  
Curator / Professor  
Florida Museum of Natural History  
Gainesville, Florida

Jamey L. Pavey, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Environmental Science  
Lynchburg College  
Lynchburg, Virginia

Mary M. Peacock, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor Biology  
University of Nevada, Reno  
Reno, Nevada

Timothy A. Pearce, Ph.D.  
Assistant Curator and Section Head  
Carnegie Museum of Natural History  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

James L. Pease, Ph.D.  
Emeritus Professor  
Iowa State University  
Ames, Iowa

David A. Perry, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus  
Oregon State University  
Selma, Oregon

Richard E. Phillips, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus  
University of Minnesota  
Saint Paul, Minnesota

Steven Phillips, Ph.D.  
Research Scientist  
Florham Park, New Jersey

Anna Pidgeon, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
University of Wisconsin, Madison  
Madison, Wisconsin

Stuart L. Pimm, Ph.D.  
Doris Duke Chair of Conservation  
Duke University  
Durham, North Carolina

Scott Poethig, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
University of Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Mary Poffenroth, M.S.  
Adjunct Professor of Biology  
San Jose State University  
Fremont, California

Tony Povilitis, Ph.D.  
Life Net Nature  
Makawao, Hawaii

Thomas Michael Power, Ph.D.  
University of Montana  
Missoula, Montana

H. Douglas Pratt, Ph.D.  
Research Curator of Birds  
North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences  
Raleigh, North Carolina

Jessica D. Pratt, M.S.  
University of California, Irvine  
Irvine, California

Riley Pratt, Ph.D.  
Ecologist  
University of California, Irvine  
Irvine, California

Robert M. Pyle, Ph.D.  
Biologist  
Xerces Society (founder)  
Gray's River, Washington

Volker Radeloff  
Associate Professor  
University of Wisconsin, Madison  
Madison, Wisconsin

G. S. Rahi, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor Natural Sciences  
Fayetteville State University  
Fayetteville, North Carolina

John T. Ratti, Ph.D.  
Research Professor (ret.)  
University of Idaho  
New Meadows, Idaho

Eric A. Rechel, Ph.D.  
Botanist  
Grand Junction, Colorado

J. Michael Reed, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
American Ornithologists Union  
Concord, Massachusetts

Stewart B. Reid, Ph.D.  
Western Fishes  
Ashland, Oregon

Marcel Rejmanek, Ph.D.  
Professor of Ecology  
University of California, Davis  
Davis, California

Lynn Resler, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Environmental Geography  
Virginia Tech  
Blacksburg, Virginia

Barbara C. Reynolds, Ph.D.  
Professor of Environmental Studies  
University of North Carolina, Asheville  
Asheville, North Carolina

Fred M. Rhoades, Ph.D.  
Biology Instructor (ret.)  
Western Washington University  
Bellingham, Washington

Ann F. Rhoads, Ph.D.  
Senior Botanist  
Morris Arboretum, University of Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Jennifer Riddell, Ph.D.  
Plant Biologist  
Arizona State University  
Tempe, Arizona

Brett R. Riddle, Ph.D.  
Professor  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
Las Vegas, Nevada

George Robinson, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biological Sciences  
State University of New York, Albany  
Albany, New York

John G. Robinson, Ph.D.  
Chief Conservation Officer  
Wildlife Conservation Society  
Bronx, New York

Javier A. Rodriguez, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
Las Vegas, Nevada

Pamela Roe, Ph.D.  
Professor of Zoology, Emerita  
California State University, Stanislaus  
Turlock, California

Gary W. Roemer, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
New Mexico State University  
Las Cruces, New Mexico

Garry F. Rogers, Ph.D.  
President  
Agua Fria Open Space Alliance  
Dewey-Humboldt, Arizona

Steven Rogstad, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Cincinnati, Ohio

Holmes Rolston, III, Ph.D.  
Professor of Philosophy  
American Assn. for the Advancement of Science  
Fort Collins, Colorado

William H. Romme, Ph.D.  
Professor of Fire Ecology  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, Colorado

Thomas P. Rooney, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biological Sciences  
Wright State University  
Dayton, Ohio

Jon Rosales, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies  
Assn. for Environmental Studies and Sciences  
Canton, New York

Shea Rose, Ph.D.  
Professor of Geography  
University of West Georgia  
Carrollton, Georgia

John L. Rosenfeld, Ph.D.  
Professor of Geology, Emeritus  
University of California Los Angeles  
Los Angeles, California

Michael L. Rosenzweig, Ph.D.  
Professor of Ecology  
University of Arizona  
Tucson, Arizona

Michael Ross, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Environmental Studies  
Florida International University  
Miami, Florida

Amy Y. Rossman, Ph.D.  
U.S. National Fungus Collection  
Beltsville, Maryland

Barbara A. Roy, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
University of Oregon  
Eugene, Oregon

Matthew Rubino  
Research Associate  
North Carolina State University  
Raleigh, North Carolina

Lawrence P. Rudd, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Education  
Nevada State College  
Henderson, Nevada

Ronald L. Rutowski, Ph.D.  
Professor of Life Sciences  
Arizona State University  
Tempe, Arizona

Maria Teresa Saenz Robles, Ph.D.  
Research Assistant Professor of Biology  
University of Pittsburgh  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Nicanor Saliendra, Ph.D.  
Forest Biometeorologist  
University of Maryland, Baltimore County  
Baltimore, Maryland

Robin S. Salter, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biology  
Oberlin College  
Oberlin, Ohio

Scott Samuels, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
University of Montana  
Missoula, Montana

Anna Santos, M.Sc.  
Conservation Biologist  
Arlington, Virginia

Melissa Savage, Ph.D.  
Professor Emerita of Geography  
University of California, Los Angeles  
Los Angeles, California

John O. Sawyer, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus of Botany  
Humboldt State University  
Arcata, California

Bernie Schatz, M.S.  
Science Teacher  
Robbinsdale, Minnesota

Paula Schiffman, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
California State University, Northridge  
Los Angeles, California

Joshua Schimel, Ph.D.  
Professor of Ecosystem Ecology  
University of California  
Santa Barbara, California

Matthew Schlesinger, Ph.D.  
Chief Zoologist  
New York Natural Heritage Program  
Albany, New York

James A. Schmid, Ph.D.  
Schmid & Company Consulting Ecologists  
Media, Pennsylvania

John W. Schoen, Ph.D.  
Senior Scientist  
Audubon Alaska  
Anchorage, Alaska

Elke Schoffers, Ph.D.  
Professor of Chemistry  
Western Michigan University  
Kalamazoo, Michigan

Fred Schreiber, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
California State University, Fresno  
Fresno, California

Randall W. Scott, Ph.D.  
Lecturer, Biological Sciences  
Northern Arizona University  
Flagstaff, Arizona

Clee Sealing  
Fisheries Biologist (ret.)  
Colorado Division of Wildlife  
Fruita, Colorado

Tim Seastedt  
Professor of Ecology  
University of Colorado  
Boulder, Colorado

Daniel L. Settles, Ph.D.  
Vance-Granville Community College  
Henderson, North Carolina

Ruth G. Shaw  
Professor  
University of Minnesota  
St Paul, Minnesota

Rebecca A. Sherry, Ph.D.  
Assistant Research Professor  
University of Oklahoma  
Norman, Oklahoma

Allan Showalter, Ph.D.  
Professor of Environmental & Plant Biology  
Ohio University  
Athens, Ohio

Ronnie Sidner, Ph.D.  
Consulting Wildlife Biologist  
University of Arizona  
Tucson, Arizona

Rodney B. Siegel, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
Institute for Bird Populations  
Point Reyes Station, California

William R. Skinner, Ph.D.  
Professor of Geology (ret.)  
Oberlin College  
Oberlin, Ohio

Douglas Smith, Ph.D.  
Professor of Science and Environmental Policy  
California State University, Monterey Bay  
Seaside, California

Nicholas J. Smith-Sebasto, Ph.D.  
Exec. Director, School of Env. and Life Sciences  
Kean University  
Union, New Jersey

Erica Smithwick, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Geography  
Pennsylvania State University  
University Park, Pennsylvania

Jack A. Sobel, M.S.  
Senior Advisor of Conservation Programs  
ETI Professionals, Inc.  
Bethesda, Maryland

Douglas Soltis, Ph.D.  
Distinguished Professor of Biology  
University of Florida  
Gainesville, Florida

Pamela S. Soltis, Ph.D.  
Distinguished Professor and Curator  
Florida Museum of Natural History  
Gainesville, Florida

Stefan Sommer, Ph.D.  
Director of Education  
Northern Arizona University  
Flagstaff, Arizona

Candan Soykan, Ph.D.  
Postdoctoral Research Associate  
NOAA  
San Diego, California

Gigi Spates, M.D.  
Ecologist and Environmental Scientist (ret.)  
Quogue Wildlife Refuge  
Southold, New York

James H. Speer, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Geography and Geology  
Indiana State University  
Terre Haute, Indiana

Daniel Spencer, Ph.D.  
Professor of Environmental Studies  
University of Montana  
Missoula, Montana

Wayne Spencer, Ph.D.  
Senior Conservation Biologist  
Conservation Biology Institute  
San Diego, California

David Spiering, M.S.  
Ecologist  
Buffalo Museum of Science  
Buffalo, New York

Bill Standley, M.S.  
Wildlife Biologist  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Honolulu, Hawaii

Robert C. Stanton, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biology  
Baldwin-Wallace College  
Berea, Ohio

Richard Steiner  
Professor  
University of Alaska, Anchorage  
Anchorage, Alaska

Robert Stelzer, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh  
Oshkosh, Wisconsin

Alan Stemler  
Professor Emeritus  
University of California, Davis  
Davis, California

Piers H.G. Stephens, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
University of Georgia  
Athens, Georgia

Andrew G. Stephenson, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Penn State University  
University Park, Pennsylvania

Sean Sterrett, Ph.D.  
Post Doctoral Research Assistant  
University of Georgia  
Athens, Georgia

Martin H. H. Stevens, Ph.D.  
Professor of Botany  
Miami University  
Oxford, Ohio

Glenn R. Stewart, Ph.D.  
Prof. Emeritus of Zoology & Environmental Science  
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona  
Pomona, California

Sharon Strauss, Ph.D.  
Professor  
University of California, Davis  
Davis, California

Stephen Stringham, Ph.D.  
President  
WildWatch LLC  
Soldotana, Alaska

Jim Strittholt, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
Conservation Biology Institute  
Corvallis, Oregon

Juliet C. Stromberg, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Arizona State University  
Tempe, Arizona

Charles Sturm, M.D., M.S.  
Research Associate  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

John D. Styrsky, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Biology  
Lynchburg College  
Lynchburg, Virginia

Joseph P. Sullivan, Ph.D.  
Ardea Consulting  
Woodland, California

Robert Summerfelt, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus, Educator  
American Fisheries Society  
Ames, Iowa

John P. Swaddle, Ph.D.  
Director of Environmental Science and Policy  
College of William and Mary  
Williamsburg, Virginia

Billie J. Swalla, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
University of Washington  
Seattle, Washington

Steven L. Swartz, Ph.D.  
Marine Mammal Scientist  
San Ignacio Ecosystem Science Program  
Darnestown, Maryland

Susan M. Swensen, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biology  
Ithaca, New York

Michael C. Swift, Ph.D.  
Asst Professor of Biology and Environmental Studies  
North American Benthological Society  
Northfield, Minnesota

Adam Switalski, M.S.  
Science Coordinator  
Wildlands CPR  
Missoula, Montana

Robert Tafaelli, Ph.D.  
Fisheries Scientist  
New Mexico State University (ret.)  
Las Cruces, New Mexico

John W. Taylor  
Professor of Plant and Microbial Biology  
University of California, Berkeley  
Berkeley, California

Valery Terwilliger, Ph.D.  
Adjunct Professor Geography  
University of Kansas  
Lawrence, Kansas

Eileen Thatcher, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus of Biology  
Sonoma State University  
Rohnert Park, California

Jonathan Thayne, Ph.D.  
Illinois State University  
Le Roy, Illinois

Edward Thornton  
Professor of Chemistry  
University of Pennsylvania  
Swarthmore, Pennsylvania

Tamara Ticktin, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Botany  
University of Hawai'i at Manoa  
Honolulu, Hawaii

Phil Tonne  
Senior Research Scientist  
University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Paul F. Torrence, Ph.D.  
Emeritus Professor of Chemistry & Biochemistry  
Northern Arizona University  
Flagstaff, Arizona

Gene R. Trapp, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus  
California State University, Sacramento  
Sacramento, California

Vicki Tripoli, Ph.D.  
Science Advisory Board  
National Center for Conservation Science and Policy  
Ashland, Oregon

Walter R. Tschinkel, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biological Science  
Florida State University  
Tallahassee, Florida

Daniel Tufford, Ph.D.  
Research Associate Professor  
University of South Carolina  
Columbia, South Carolina

John C. Tull, Ph.D.  
Conservation Director  
Nevada Wilderness Project  
Reno, Nevada

Andrew M. Turner  
Professor of Biology  
Clarion University  
Clarion, Pennsylvania

Julie Tuttle, M.S.  
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill  
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Mary Tyler, Ph.D.  
Professor of Zoology  
University of Maine  
Old Town, Maine

Chris Underwood, M.S.  
University of Tennessee  
Knoxville, Tennessee

Dean Urban, Ph.D.  
Professor of Landscape Ecology  
Duke University  
Durham, North Carolina

Fred Utter, Ph.D.  
Affiliate Professor  
University of Washington  
Seattle, Washington

Michael Van Clef, Ph.D.  
President, Ecological Solutions, LLC  
Great Meadows, New Jersey



Richard R. Vance, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus  
University of California, Los Angeles  
Los Angeles, California

David R. Vann, Ph.D.  
University of Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Thomas T. Veblen, Ph.D.  
Professor  
University of Colorado  
Boulder, Colorado

John Vickery, M.S., M.A.  
Natural Areas Specialist  
Denver Natural Areas  
Denver, Colorado

Eric von Wettberg, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Miami, Florida

Mary Emma Wagner, Ph.D.  
Lecturer Emeritus in Geology  
University of Pennsylvania  
Kennett Square, Pennsylvania

Robert O. Wagner, Ph.D.  
Senior Ecologist  
DeRidder, Louisiana

David B. Wake, Ph.D.  
Professor, Graduate School of Integrative Biology  
University of California, Berkeley  
Berkeley, California

Gregory Walker, Ph.D.  
Professor of Entomology  
University of California, Riverside  
Riverside, California

Lisa Wallace, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Biology  
Mississippi State University  
Starkville, Mississippi

Donald M. Waller, Ph.D.  
Professor of Botany  
University of Wisconsin  
Madison, Wisconsin

Glenn E. Walsberg, Ph.D.  
Professor of Life Science  
Arizona State University  
Tempe, Arizona

Richard T. Ward, Ph.D.  
Professor of Botany, Emeritus  
Colorado State University  
Ft. Collins, Colorado

Gerald J. Wasserburg, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus of Geology & Geophysics  
California Institute of Technology  
Florence, Oregon

Vicki Watson, Ph.D.  
Professor of Environmental Studies  
University of Montana  
Missoula, Montana

Frank J. Wegscheider, M.A.  
Wildlife Biologist  
California State University Fullerton  
Placentia, California

John F. Weishampel, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Judith S. Weis, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Rutgers University  
Newark, New Jersey

Kenneth Weiss, Ph.D.  
Professor of Genetics and Anthropology  
Pennsylvania State University  
University Park, Pennsylvania

Mark E. Welch, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Biological Sciences  
Mississippi State University  
Mississippi State, Mississippi

Hartwell H. Welsh, Jr., Ph.D.  
Research Wildlife Ecologist  
USDA Forest Service, PSW  
Arcata, California

David F. Whitacre, Ph.D.  
Biology Instructor  
Treasure Valley Math & Science Center  
Boise, Idaho

Philip C. Whitford, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology Emeritus  
Wildlife Society  
Cross Plains, Wisconsin

Thomas G. Whitham, Ph.D.  
Regents' Professor  
Northern Arizona University  
Flagstaff, Arizona

Richard Whitkus, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Sonoma State University  
Rohnert Park, California

William Mark Whitten, Ph.D.  
Senior Biologist  
Florida Museum of Natural History  
Gainesville, Florida

Sue Wick, Ph.D.  
Professor of Plant Biology  
University of Minnesota  
St. Paul, Minnesota

Gene E. Willeke, Ph.D.  
Director Emeritus, Inst. of Environmental Sciences  
Miami University  
Oxford, Ohio

James D. Williams, Ph.D.  
Fisheries Biologist  
U.S. Dept. of Interior (ret.)  
Gainesville, Florida

Norris H. Williams, Ph.D.  
Curator  
Florida Museum of Natural History  
Gainesville, Florida

Shawn Willsey, M.S.  
Associate Professor of Geology  
College of Southern Idaho  
Twin Falls, Idaho

Susan K. Willson, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Conservation Biology  
St. Lawrence University  
Canton, New York

Mark A. Wilson, Ph.D.  
Professor of Geology  
College of Wooster  
Wooster, Ohio

Paul S. Wilson, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
California State University  
Northridge, California

W. Herbert Wilson, Jr., Ph.D.  
Professor of Biology  
Colby College  
Waterville, Maine

Erika Wise, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Geography  
University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

Marianna D. Wood, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Biology  
Bloomsburg University  
Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania

Mark Woods, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Philosophy  
University of San Diego  
San Diego, California

Timothy S. Wood, Ph.D.  
Professor of Biological Sciences  
Wright State University  
Dayton, Ohio

Steven Yanoff, M.S.  
Conservation Biologist  
White Oaks, New Mexico

Allen Yun, Ph.D.  
Rockville, Maryland

Louise M. Zeringue, M.S.  
Wildlife Biologist  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Ashland, Oregon

\* Affiliations listed for identification purposes only; 520 signatories as of December 10, 2009.