

Out of the Crucible: Reclaiming and Reconstructing Ecology from the Ashes of Romanticism



Speaker: Aaron M. Ellison

Senior Research Fellow in Ecology, Emeritus; Executive Editor, *Methods in Ecology and Evolution*; and Founding Principal, Sound Solutions for Sustainable Science

Professional Ecologists, myself included, are the people who are most actively engaged in studying and understanding biodiversity, the nonliving ("abiotic") environment, and how—individually and through their interactions—biodiversity and the abiotic define and continuously redefine "nature." Ecologists also apply our data to the conservation, preservation, and management of "the environment" so that the nonhuman species and "natural" (yet increasingly "anthropogenic") ecosystems continue to provide essential "services" for humans. Although Ecologists have amassed vast amounts of data about how nature "works," our prescriptions for environmental management generally fail. Rather than retread well-worn paths examining the technical reasons for these failures, I seek to understand the cultural context for the failure of Ecology to make a difference to the environment. In short, I invert the essence of ecocriticism—understanding literature as if the environment matters—and instead interrogate Ecology as if the cultural milieu matters. A key question I ask is why do Ecologists, ecologists, and environmentalists hold to the idea of a "balance of nature," despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary? This talk examines the reification of this *idée fixe* in the late 19th- and early 20th centuries, and during the establishment of the first professional Ecological societies: the British Ecological Society (est. 1913) and the Ecological Society of America (est. 1916). I suggest that viewing the epistemological stance of Ecology as a critical reaction of Romanticism to Modernism provides a locus for the origin of the balance of nature as a core belief in Ecology, its persistence as Modernism dissolved into Postmodernism, and its continued influence in environmental science and management. I assert that Ecologists, ecologists, and environmentalists need to abandon this belief and its corollaries if Ecology is to continue as a meaningful scientific discipline, if ecologies are to be relevant to other disciplines, and for environmental management to have any chance of success on this rapidly changing planet.