

Historia Naturalis: Inspiring Ecology

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There have never been people without natural history – the practice of natural history attentiveness is the oldest continuous human tradition. Throughout human history and pre-history, attentiveness to nature was so fully entwined with daily life and survival that it was never considered a practice separate from life itself (Fleischner 2005, 2011).

And there has never been scientific ecology without natural history. Indeed, Charles Elton’s *Animal Ecology*, one of the first texts in the new science of the early 20th century, began with a clear statement: “Ecology is a new name for a very old subject. It simply means scientific natural history” (Elton 1927). In recent years, numerous authors have reiterated the crucial importance of natural history as the empirical foundation of ecology, as well as related disciplines such as conservation biology and wildlife management (e.g., Noss 1996, Dayton and Sala 2001, Herman 2002, Hampton and Wheeler 2011, Tewksbury et al. 2014, Barrows et al. 2016).

Historia Naturalis – literally, “the story of nature” – was the title of the first century AD masterwork by the Roman scholar Pliny the Elder, which happened also to be the first written encyclopedia, where everything known about everything important in the world was gathered into one place.... or actually into 37 books in ten volumes. *Historia*, which translates into English as both “story” and “history,” was expansive and inclusive, and did not focus solely on the past, as the term is sometimes misinterpreted today.

Thus, “natural history” pre-dated its descendent “ecology” by 1800 years. It remains the crucial foundation of our field, providing the critical empirical basis for all theoretical advances, as well as, for a great many of us, the source of our enduring passion for the field. Natural history is also, fundamentally, the practice of careful attentiveness – the practice, indeed, of falling

in love with the world. It is literally what our species evolved to do.

The papers that follow in this special series of the *Journal of Natural History Education and Experience* all derive from a special session at the 2019 annual meeting of the Ecological Society of America, organized by the Society’s Natural History Section. “*Historia Naturalis: Inspiring Ecology*” was an “Inspire” session – a format in which each speaker has five minutes and twenty slides, which advance automatically every fifteen seconds. After the presentations, a lively interactive session of question and answer ensued in the crowded conference room. The papers included here will give a sense of the rich dialogue and excitement of that session.

This crucial conversation continues within the realm of scientific ecology, and well beyond. Natural history, as these authors demonstrate, plays a key role in inspiring us as scientists and as humans striving to find our places in an ever-better world.

Each of the seven papers in this series is published separately on the journal’s web platform and includes a feature in the upper right corner of the article that will download a pdf of that article. In addition, a pdf that combines all seven of the articles into one file is available [here](#).

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