
Katherine L. Gross, ESA President 1998–1999

There was little in Kay Gross's early childhood to suggest that she would ever be a field biologist. Growing up in the suburbs of Madison, Chicago, and other Midwestern cities, Kay was no budding naturalist. The only childhood story I have ever heard describing Kay's early interest in biology was a tale her mother tells about Kay finding a baby robin and feeding it spaghetti because the noodles looked like worms. (Yes, the bird expired.) Maybe this childhood memory

was also the reason that Kay did not follow through on her undergraduate ambitions to be a doctor. Actually, I know why Kay left the path of medicine and wandered into the field of ecology. It was the summer of 1974.

In 1974, Kay spent a summer at Iowa Lakeside Laboratory on the shores of Lake Okabojii. How many lives have been changed by a summer at a field station? Certainly Kay's was. Somehow, between days wandering the prairie in Bob Cruden and Bill Platt's field

ecology class, and evenings drinking beer with the graduate students, pinning butterflies, talking science, skinny dipping, and riding roller coasters, Kay found a life's calling. At a summer field station, the boundaries between job, life, and biology sometimes disappear, and it was in this place that Kay decided to go to graduate school and study ecology. None of us there that summer would ever have guessed she would end up as ESA president.

Kay settled into another field sta-



ESA President Katherine L. Gross

tion to do her graduate research, studying with Pat Werner at Michigan State's Kellogg Biological Station. Pat's lab was a humming place in those days. John Harper had recently invigorated plant ecology with a fresh breath of Darwinian reasoning and animal demography, and the students in Pat Werner's lab were among the new vanguard of plant ecologists. Kay's dissertation examined how species traits of seed size and seed number determined a species' colonizing ability and the timing of its appearance within a successional sere (Gross and Werner 1982). Focusing on how morphological differences among species determined competitive ability was a decidedly "zoological" approach to plant ecology at the time. This was probably fitting, because Kay graduated from Michigan State with a Ph.D. in Zoology, a fact that she is sure the Botany faculty at Ohio State University were never told when she was hired there as an assistant professor in 1980. Kay never did a postdoc. She interviewed for one job a few months before defending her dissertation, and she got the job offer. This was during a time when advertisements for ecology positions often received >300 applications and graduate students gathered at the mailbox to compare the quality of their rejection letters. One interview, one tenure-track job. Luck, fate, skill?—

probably a bit of all three. In any case, Kay had to learn the ropes of being a faculty member in a hurry.

It was in the Botany department at Ohio State that Kay began to develop the skills of leadership, organization, and working with people that have served her so well in her career and that serve her now as ESA president. It was also here that Kay began the continuing journey of learning how to balance career and family. I still remember the look on people's faces when Kay stepped into a student's committee meeting to tell me that she was walking across the street to the University Hospital because her contractions were getting closer. Her two sons were born in that hospital, about 100 yards from her office. Talk about being organized!

Kay left Ohio State in 1987 to return to the Kellogg Biological Station and the Botany Department of Michigan State University, where she is currently a full professor. Her research interests over the years have been diverse, including, for example, studies of the consequences of seed size, mechanisms of belowground competition, quantification of heterogeneity in plant resources, seed bank methodology, pest population regulation, and diversity in agricultural landscapes. The theme tying together many of these interests has been spatial heterogeneity—both the causes and, more importantly, the ecological consequences. Kay has been in the forefront of empirical investigations of the now widespread notion that spatial heterogeneity plays a central role in determining ecological patterns. Over the past decade she has examined this phenomenon using a variety of systems and scales, including the growth of individual roots, plant species diversity within and across communities, and pest distributions in an agricultural landscape.

Kay has had a long and distinguished history of service to the Ecological Society of America. She has served on the Awards Committee, the Nominating Committee, and the Special Committee on Data Sharing and Archiving. As chair of the committee on the Future of Long-term Ecological

Data (FLED) she published an important two-volume report (funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation) highlighting the need to preserve and make available long-term data sets within the ecological community. Kay also served as ESA Vice-President from 1992 to 1993. In addition to her service to ESA, Kay has been a panel member for the Ecology Program at NSF, and was influential in the early development of the NSF-sponsored National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis (NCEAS) at Santa Barbara, serving on the NCEAS planning committee, chairing the search for the NCEAS director, and serving as a member of the NCEAS scientific advisory board. Kay is active within the NSF LTER (Long Term Ecological Research) network, having served on the LTER National Executive Committee, and she is currently a co-principal investigator for the KBS LTER site. Somehow, within this realm of scientific and community service, Kay manages to maintain an active research program and a life outside of science.

Time, perhaps the most precious of commodities in an academic's life, is what Kay gives most unselfishly. If you see her at a meeting, she is as likely to be talking with graduate students as with "big names." Kay has time for everyone, big or small, and she has not forgotten what it is like to be young and unsure of your path. The members of ESA owe a debt of gratitude to all who have given of their time and energy to serve as Society President, and it is with a great deal of pride and respect that I submit this short biography of our current president, Katherine Gross.

Literature cited

Gross, K. L., and P. A. Werner. 1982. Colonizing abilities of "biennial" plant species in relation to ground cover: implications for their distributions in a successional sere. *Ecology* **63**:921–931.

*Gary Mittelbach
Michigan State University*