

Professor recounts early days of ecology

Matt Hunt
Capital Times Staff

Sharon Kingsland, an associate professor from Johns Hopkins University, spoke to a group of students and faculty at the Student Center of Penn State Harrisburg on March 31. The lecture focused on the early days of ecology.

Kingsland teaches both graduate and undergraduate courses in the history of science department at the college, she described ecology as a branch of biology that developed in the United States in the early 1900s.

"That's when Carnegie Foundation funded a research laboratory in Tucson, Arizona, dedicated to ecology," Kingsland said. "The early ecologists were a combination of scientist and adventurer. People came from all over to do ecological research."

In the early 1900s, the researchers were welcomed by Daniel McDoogel, the director of the laboratory. This was because, "it was necessary to show ecology had all the trappings of real science," Kingsland said.

"One of the main people responsible for ecology gaining respect as a real science was Fredrick Clemens, who was the most vocal advocate of ecology as a science," she explained. "Clemens created a new language for ecology. He knew ecology needed it (the new language) to be taken seriously," she said.

"Clemens also created an elaborate classification system," Kingsland said. "Clemens and McDoogel tried to push ecology as a real science and make sure it was not made into fad or a part of agriculture."

Kingsland explained how people's interest in ecology began to grow as there was a larger need and desire for understanding.

"In the '30s, ecology seemed to have a very practical application with the appearance of the Dust Bowl," Kingsland said. The Dust Bowl was an area of farms hit by a severe drought. An estimated 24,000 farms could not be plowed.

Carnegie lent Clemens out to government to help the farmers, she said. As the Dust Bowl grew worse, the government relied more and more on ecologists, she said.

This was at a period of time when ecology was not a popular science, Kingsland said. While Clemens believed ecological theory could solve all problems, he was proved wrong, Kingsland said.

The Dust Bowl problems were solved by a combination of rain, relocating people and better farm management, not Clemens' theories.

According to Kingsland, this marked the changing point of ecology, and ecologists moved away from academic learning and long-range experiments.



Photo by Mike Starkey

Sharon Kingsland, an associate professor from John Hopkins University, informs an audience of the early days of ecology during her lecture in the Student Center of the Capital Union Building on March 31.

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