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NEWS RELEASE

June 10, 2000

ECOLOGIST STRESSES VALUE OF SMALL-SCALE CONSERVATION

MISSOULA, Mont. --

In a time when environmental conservation efforts are becoming increasingly large-scale, be careful not to throw the small-preserve baby out with the bathwater. That was University of Tennessee Professor Daniel Simberloff's message during the opening plenary session of the Society for Conservation Biology's annual meeting at The University of Montana.

While mega-scale projects will be essential to the continued health of remaining, relatively unaltered habitats, and their restoration where possible, Simberloff said that we won't know what we are trying to conserve and whether we are succeeding without looking at individual species populations where they currently exist. Habitats even as small as a few acres, he said, can be fully functioning ecosystems supporting a diverse array of original species.

"In many regions, there is nothing left but small sites," Simberloff said. "We have to save these small areas if we are going to save species...The ultimate goal of conservation, after all, is the preservation of biodiversity."

Among many examples, Simberloff described small preserves of long-leaf pine forests -- some just a few acres -- that remain in the southeastern United States. The ground cover in these areas can contain as many as 400 species of native plants, he said, along with an equally large number of insects. Carefully managed, these small tracts should be capable of preserving their biodiversity for centuries if the surrounding areas do not become barriers to pollinators or

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seed dispersal. Similarly, while the original tall grass prairie of the central United States has all but disappeared, isolated stands of fewer than five acres have successfully preserved all of their original species.

Bald spots atop Appalachian Mountains are examples of naturally small areas that contain dozens of threatened or endangered plant species that are adapted to their isolated habitats. Other areas, such as fens, bogs, savannahs and outcrops, are all naturally small habitats that should not be overlooked.

These small reserves, though isolated or fragmented, play a critical role in preserving biodiversity.

“We have to measure the success of our conservation efforts one species at a time,” Simberloff said. “We have to target these small-area habitats or else risk conceding extinction in advance.”

Simberloff is the Nancy Gore Hunger Professor of Environmental Studies and Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. He has published widely on a variety of conservation issues, including biogeography, evolution, and population and community ecology. He has taken a particularly active role in bringing the issue of invasive species and their threat to biodiversity to the forefront of conservation biology. His recent book, “Strangers in Paradise: Impact and Management of Nonindigenous Species in Florida,” was published by Island Press. He currently is editor of the journal Biodiversity and Conservation.

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