Environmental Conservation Graduate Program

Wildlife, Fish and Conservation Biology Concentration

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A. Concentration Description

This concentration leads to both Master of Science (MS) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees in Environmental Conservation (ECo) and is designed for students who want scientific training in the multi-disciplinary field of wildlife, fish and conservation biology. The focus of this concentration is broadly on animal ecology and conservation biology but encompasses specialized training in fields such as conservation genetics, population ecology and landscape ecology. The prime impetus for this concentration is the need for an adequate science base and professional training for decision-making regarding wildlife and fish resources.

Faculty affiliated with this concentration (see below) have expertise in vertebrate population ecology; endangered, threatened, and overabundant species; wetland and forest ecology; animal behavior and physiology; geographic information systems and remote sensing; aquatic toxicology; population dynamics and demographic modeling; and landscape and ecosystems ecology. A major strength of our program is the unique convergence of Universities, federal and state agencies in Amherst, unmatched in the Northeast. A series of cooperative agreements, memoranda of research understanding and sole-source vendor relationships with state and federal agencies provide a strong base of research funding. These agreements also provide important teaching and research relationships between our program and state and federal natural resource agencies. Wildlife research focuses on wetlands, biodiversity, animal habitat associations, landscape and systems ecology, remote sensing, human-wildlife conflicts, forest-wildlife relationships, and international conservation. Fisheries research focuses on marine, estuarine, and inland resources and specifically on population dynamics, relationship of ecosystem structure and production, the effect of organic and inorganic contamination on aquatic ecosystem function, and anadromous fish behavior, ecology and physiology. There are approximately 70 graduate students in the Wildlife, Fish and Conservation Biology Concentration. Through their research projects, graduate students often employ or provide volunteer opportunities for interested undergraduates (about 150 in the Wildlife and Fisheries Conservation concentration within the Natural Resources Conservation major). Graduate students are encouraged to participate in projects and activities of their colleagues to broaden their experience and to provide and receive ideas and suggestions for improvements.
At the MS level, students have the option of pursuing either a professional degree or thesis degree. The thesis/dissertation degree leads to the MS or PhD degree and centers around the completion of a major independent research project in addition to a modest coursework requirement. The professional degree leads to the MS degree and centers around a professional paper based on an internship/practicum in addition to a more substantial coursework requirement. Both degree options provide students a strong foundation in three core topic areas: 1) environmental science (biology, ecology, conservation and environmental building systems), 2) quantitative science (statistics, GIS and modeling), and 3) human dimensions (environmental policies, economics, politics, administration, management and values). The MS thesis degree is intended to prepare students for the option of pursuing a PhD or a career in conservation science. The MS professional degree is meant to be a terminal degree for students seeking graduate-level training in a particular field of study and a career as a professional conservation scientist. Overall, the academic requirements of this concentration in combination with the research/practicum experience provide students the professional training for conservation science positions within academia, state and federal resource management agencies, non-governmental conservation organizations, and private industry (e.g., environmental consulting firms). In addition, MS thesis degree students completing this program are well prepared to meet the challenges of any PhD program.

Curriculum

B. Course Offerings

The following courses are offered for partial fulfillment of the degree requirements (see below). Note, all courses ending in 90 and 97 have an additional letter designation (e.g., 697A) not specified below because it is subject to change; check SPIRE online for the current course number listing.

1. Core Courses for the MS degree

   ECO 601  Research concepts (fall, 3cr)
   ECO 697  Analysis of environmental data - lecture (fall, 3cr)
   ECO 691A*  Current research in env conservation seminar (both, 1cr)
               *to be taken twice, each semester

2. Core Topic Areas for the MS degree

   a. Environmental Science

      NRC 564  Wildlife habitat management (fall, 4cr)
      NRC 565  Wildlife population dynamics & management (fall, 4cr)
      NRC 570  Fish ecology (fall odd yrs, 4cr)
      NRC 571  Fisheries science & management (spr odd yrs, 4cr)
      NRC 581  Wetlands Assessment (spr odd yrs, 3cr)
      NRC 590AE Aquatic ecology (fall even yrs, 4 cr)
      NRC 590  Global change ecology (fall odd yrs, 3cr)
NRC 590  Invasion ecology (fall even yrs, 3 cr)
NRC 590  Restoration ecology (spring, 3 cr)
ECO 621  Landscape ecology (spr even yrs, 4 cr)
ECO 622  Conservation biology (spr odd yrs, 3 cr)
ECO 624  Diadromous fisheries ecology & conservation (fall, 3 cr)
ECO 697  Recreational fisheries science and management (fall odd yrs, 2 cr)
ECO 697  Urban wildlife ecology and management (spr even yrs, 4 cr)
ECO 757  Advanced fisheries management (spr odd yrs, 3 cr)
ECO 758  Advanced wildlife conservation (fall even yrs, 3 cr)
ECO 768  Wetland ecology & conserv. (fall even yrs, 3 cr)
ECO 777  Advanced systems ecology (spr odd yrs, 3 cr)

b. Quantitative Science

NRC 577  Ecosystem modeling & simulation (fall even yrs, 3 cr)
NRC 585  Introduction to GIS (both, 4 cr)
NRC 587  Digital remote sensing (spr even yrs, 3 cr)
NRC 597  WebGIS (spr, 3 cr)
ECO 632  Multivariate statistics for environmental cons. (spr odd yrs, 4 cr)
ECO 634  Analysis of environmental data - lab (fall, 2 cr)
ECO 697  Advanced topics in GIS (fall even yrs, 3 cr)
ECO 697  Applied biostatistics (spr, 4 cr)
ECO 697  Advanced statistics for env conservation (fall even yrs, 4 cr)
GEOG 668  GIS and Spatial Analysis (spr, 3 cr)
PLSOIL 661  Intermediate biometry (fall, 3 cr)

c. Human Dimensions

NRC 576  Water resources management & policy (fall, 3 cr)
NRC 579  Cree culture, natural resources and sustainability (spr, 3 cr)
NRC 590  Adapt. to climate change: theories, policy ... (spr even yrs, 3 cr)
ECO 690  Environmental conflict & collaborative policy (spr even yrs, 3 cr)
ECO 690  Public engagement and communication (spr even, 3 cr)
ECO 697  Federal environmental law & regulation (fall, 3 cr)
ECO 697SV Design, Implementation, Analysis of Surveys of People (spr 3 cr)
REGIONPL 553 Resource policy & planning (spr even yrs, 3 cr)
REGIONPL 575 Environmental law & resource management (spr, 3 cr)
RES-ECON 720 Environmental & resource economics (fall even yrs, 3 cr)
RES-ECON 721 Advanced natural resource economics (fall, 3 cr)
GEO-SCI 666 Water resource policy (spr, 4 cr)
POLSCI 784 Environmental policy (tbd, 3 cr)
C. The MS Professional Degree

Prerequisites

Candidates for an MS professional degree in this concentration will be admitted on the basis of their academic training, work experience, and letters of recommendation. At a minimum, candidates will be expected to possess a Bachelor's degree in:

- a natural resources field or environmental sciences; or
- the biological sciences with an emphasis in ecology; or
- any field with strong background in mathematics and the biological and physical sciences, and professional experience working as a natural resources professional.

Note, prerequisites exist for many of the required courses. Students are expected to have satisfied these prerequisites prior to commencing the program.

Requirements

MS professional degree students in this concentration are expected to meet all of the requirements for an MS degree in ECo, as outlined in the student handbook, including the following:

1) A minimum of 35 credits is required, distributed as follows:
   a) Core courses (see above): 8 credits.
   b) Core topic area courses: 21 credits in the major field (defined broadly), 8 of which must be at the 600 level or above, including a minimum of one 500-level or above 3-4 credit course in each core topic area (see above), plus a minimum of three additional courses, as approved by student's committee. Note, students may take courses other than those listed above to fulfill the core topic area requirements, such as special topics courses that are offered irregularly, if they are approved by the students advisory committee. Note, up to 6 graduate credits can be transferred from previous course work from UMass or another university to fulfill these requirements.
   c) Internship/practicum: 6 credits specific to this concentration and approved by the student's advisory committee. All students in the MS professional degree option are required to complete at least a 3-month long professional internship or equivalent. There are numerous internship opportunities with state and federal resource management agencies (e.g., MA Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, MA Department of Environmental Protection, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), nonprofit organizations (e.g. The Nature Conservancy), and many other organizations. The advisory committee and the concentration coordinator may exempt some students with prior professional experience from this internship requirement.

2) Successful completion of a comprehensive exam based upon the student’s academic training in environmental conservation, encompassing three “core” topic areas (environmental science, quantitative science, and human dimensions) in addition to the required ECo core courses.
3) Successful final defense of a publishable-quality professional paper resulting from the internship/practicum.

C. The MS Thesis Degree

Prerequisites

Candidates for an MS thesis degree in this concentration will be admitted on the basis of their academic training, work experience, and letters of recommendation. At a minimum, candidates will be expected to possess a Bachelor’s degree in:

- a natural resources field or environmental sciences; or
- the biological sciences with an emphasis in ecology; or
- any field with strong background in mathematics and the biological and physical sciences, and professional experience working as a natural resources professional.

Note, prerequisites exist for many of the required courses. Students are expected to have satisfied these prerequisites prior to commencing the program.

Requirements

MS thesis degree students in this concentration are expected to meet all of the requirements for an MS degree in ECo, as outlined in the student handbook, including the following:

1) A minimum of 35 credits is required, distributed as follows:
   a) Core courses (see above): 8 credits.
   b) Core topic area courses: 15 credits in the major field (defined broadly), 8 of which must be at the 600 level or above, including a minimum of one 500-level or above 3-4 credit course in each core topic area (see above). Note, students may take courses other than those listed above to fulfill the core topic area requirements, such as special topics courses that are offered irregularly, if they are approved by the students advisory committee. Note, up to 6 graduate credits can be transferred from previous course work from UMass or another university to fulfill these requirements.

2) Thesis: 8 credits. All students in the MS thesis degree option are required to complete a thesis based on independent research as approved by the student’s advisory committee.

3) Successful completion of a comprehensive exam based upon the student’s academic training in environmental conservation, encompassing three “core” topic areas (core science, quantitative science, and human dimensions) in addition to the required ECo core courses.

4) Successful final defense of the thesis.

5) A minimum of one publishable-quality scientific paper resulting from the thesis research project.
D. The PhD Degree

Prerequisites

Candidates for a PhD degree in this concentration will be admitted on the basis of their academic training, work experience, and letters of recommendation as evaluated by the faculty sponsor. At a minimum, candidates will be expected to possess:

1) a Bachelor’s degree in:
   • a natural resources field or environmental sciences; or
   • the biological sciences with an emphasis in ecology; or
   • mathematics, statistics, or policy with some coursework in biological and physical sciences, or experience working as a natural resources professional.

*Note, students wishing to pursue a PhD with only a BS degree can choose to obtain a MS degree on the way to completion of Ph.D. degree requirements. MS is not a requirement.

Requirements

Students in this concentration are expected to meet all of the requirements for a PhD degree in ECo, as outlined in the student handbook, including the following:

1) A minimum of 18 dissertation credits is required, based on a research project specific to this concentration and approved by the student's advisory committee; no other course credits are required other than those determined by the student's advisory committee.
2) Successful completion of a comprehensive exam based on the three “core” topic areas (environmental science, quantitative science, and human dimensions).
3) Successful final defense of the dissertation.
4) A minimum of three publication-quality dissertation chapters.

E. Resources & Facilities

Two University forests (totaling 2,000 acres), the 800-acre Swift River Wildlife Management Area of the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, and the 81,000-acre Quabbin Reservation of the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation offer unique field study areas close to campus. The University of Massachusetts also maintains the Nantucket Field Station and the Marine Station at Gloucester. The Conte Anadromous Fish Research Center in Turners Falls offers excellent, modern facilities for both lab and field study of migratory fish behavior, ecology and physiology. Cooperation with the National Marine Fisheries Service allows graduate students to participate in research cruises in the Northwest Atlantic, as well as use facilities at the NMFS Woods Hole Laboratory. As members of the Five College School of Marine Science Program, students have access to research laboratories at Woods Hole and Waquoit Bay on Cape Cod. Further, concentration faculty conduct research in a variety of sites outside Massachusetts, including overseas.
F. Matriculation & Financial Aid

This program typically takes a full-time MS professional degree student 3-4 semesters to complete, a full-time MS thesis degree student 4-5 semesters to complete, and a full-time PhD student 8-10 semesters to complete, including the completion of a practicum/thesis/dissertation. However, some students may be able to complete the degree in less time and some take longer depending on their academic preparedness and the dictates of the practicum or thesis/dissertation research project.

Funding opportunities are limited, yet financial assistance is provided to virtually all of our MS thesis and PhD students through teaching or research assistantships (at Graduate Employee Organization bargained wage rates), University fellowships, or hourly wages. Tuition is waived during semesters in which at least a 10-hour assistantship or fellowship is awarded, but the student is responsible for most fees. Research assistantships are available through faculty members who have grant-supported research, and many faculty only accept students if they are able to provide grant-supported assistantships. Limited University and Departmental fellowships are awarded by the Graduate School or ECo Graduate Program in open competition.

Funding opportunities are more limited for students in the MS professional degree option. Some teaching assistantships and University fellowships may be available, or internship institutions may be able to provide some assistance, but most professional degree students are self-funded. Again, tuition is waived during semesters in which at least a 10-hour assistantship or fellowship is awarded (or the equivalent from an internship employer), but the student is responsible for most fees.

G. Concentration Coordinator & Faculty Affiliates

The following on-campus faculty (both regular and adjuncts) and professional staff, including the Graduate Concentration Coordinator, are principally affiliated with this concentration and regularly serve in the role of the student’s advisory committee chair or member and instructor for core courses; other faculty and staff are occasionally involved in this concentration. See Departmental website for information about the faculty and staff (http://eco.umass.edu/index.php/people/).

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