Reflections on ESA Presidency
Jean H. Langenheim (1986-1987)

Having been on Sabbatical leave in the field in Amazonia and other parts of Brazil during most of 1985, I was greatly surprised upon my return to UCSC to discover that I had been elected as president of both ESA and ISCE (International Society of Chemical Ecology). I had not even known of my nomination for the latter position, as mail had never reached me asking if I would accept it. The nominators finally assumed I would be happy to accept this nomination and put my name forth—not knowing about the ESA nomination. Therefore, with these elections I faced an almost overwhelming job of presidencies of two quite different societies, one that was mature and well established but with growing pains, and the other in its infancy.

I no longer have papers available from my tenure as ESA President but can reflect based on memories of some of the more important activities during that period. I remember that between the Annual Meetings of the Society we had two others with the officers and chairs of particular committees at Arizona State University, where Business Manager Duncan Patten was located. It was painfully evident during these meetings that the elected governing group needed more assistance than this Business Office could provide. In fact, assuming the presidency almost required some sort of an administrative position at your home institution for adequate secretarial support. The correspondence load was heavy in addition to telephone calls to constantly convince colleagues to expand their volunteer efforts. The only way I survived presidency of both ESA and ISCE simultaneously was that the Chair of the Biology Department at UCSC was able to assign one of the departmental secretaries to me half time.

It also was still during the 20-year trial period in establishing a Washington Public Affairs Office as part of defining the role of the Society in the public arena. In fact, it was a critical period as the Public Affairs Office had only been in operation for three years. Despite having made progress in some areas, such as networking with other organizations about biodiversity, nuclear winter as well as establishing the Ecological Information Network, major issues had arisen with handling of the office by the current director, Elliot Norse. This led to agonizing discussion of these and finally to his resignation. Marge Holland succeeded Norse as Director during the presidency of Margaret Davis in 1987. After a successful directorship, Marge was succeeded by Nadine Lynn in 1994 during the presidency of Judy Myers, and remains in that position.
Discussion continued about increasing beyond the Public Affairs Office to a larger Washington headquarters office, which would provide various kinds of assistance to the governing group and Society as a whole. Overriding concerns, of course, were whether the Society could afford what some considered “luxuries” for a group always based on the goodwill of volunteers. Apart from dealing with these apparently intractable Washington office issues, I was interested in initiating more international involvement of the Society, especially with our North American neighbors. I felt very strongly from my various field studies in working toward establishment of active Mexican and Canadian chapters. Other opportunities for increasing foreign outreach came unexpectedly from Allen Press. Because of overstocking in their warehouse of back issues of ESA journals, they were enthusiastic about my suggestion to give some to developing countries where ecologists could not afford to purchase the journals. However, this endeavor became more complicated than we originally had anticipated, particularly in funding the shipment of the journals along with obtaining assurances that they would be properly taken care of and made available to all who would benefit from them. We also began to offer to pay ESA membership fees for students and faculty who could not afford them from developing countries—and there still is a place for members to donate for this purpose when they make other payments to the Society. These efforts now, in the internet age, seem a bit feeble, but at the time we were struggling to find ways to help those in need.

Another area where I may have had some impact was possibly in “saving” Ecological Monographs. The Executive Editor, Lee Miller, and members of the Publication Committee had suggested abandoning the publication of Monographs as so few articles were submitted during this period when granting agencies strongly supported publication of short-term results. Thus authors published results from parts of larger projects rather than waiting to produce an integrated synthesis. I was adamant that Monographs should not be abandoned—at least “not on my watch”. I was convinced that there would be a return to valuing synthesis of data, and this view has been validated with Ecological Monographs having the highest citation index for any ecological publication worldwide in 2004.

My final contribution and probably the most important was the previously discussed past presidential address in which my goal was to pay tribute to women’s often unrecognized contribution to ecology and to ESA.