

Diversity Award

The Education and Human Resources Committee of the Ecological Society of America established the EHRC Diversity Award to be given annually in recognition of long-standing contributions of an individual towards increasing the diversity of future ecologists through mentoring, teaching, or outreach.



Dr. Ivette Perfecto came to the United States from Puerto Rico in the early 1980's to earn her Ph.D. at the University of Michigan where she is now a professor. Despite being a single mother knowing limited English, she quickly distinguished herself as a talented and insightful ecologist. She has studied the role of biodiversity in agricultural systems in a number of temperate and tropical locations, and has over 80 peer-reviewed journal publications to her name, including multiple publications in *Science* and *Nature*. Her publication record provides an interdisciplinary viewpoint on the challenges of conservation in the tropics and explicitly links complex ecological theory, global economics, and popular social justice movements in the context of conservation biology for a lay audience.

Perfecto was recently a coordinating lead author of the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development, an international panel dedicated to producing recommendations to reduce global hunger and improve rural livelihoods in economically and environmentally sustainable manners. She has worked directly with farmers in Michigan and throughout Latin America to study and improve the sustainability of agro-ecological systems.

Within her laboratory, Perfecto has educated, mentored, and fostered a remarkable diversity of students and postdocs for nearly 20 years. Her students have gone on to become university professors, governmental advisors, and environmental advocates. At the same time, she inspires a strong work ethic, high standards of scientific research, and mutual respect among her diverse students and colleagues.

Dr. Ivette Perfecto
Professor
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“Throughout history some of the greatest science was done with a moral compass. The best way forward is to make sure your scientific passion is coupled with a well thought-out moral compass.”

I grew up in Puerto Rico. Neither my father nor my mother went to college. My father was a taxi driver. He had to quit high school in order to work to support his brothers and sisters because he was the eldest. He finally got his high school diploma by taking the high school equivalency test. He was an inspiration to me because he was self-taught and placed a high value on education.

Since I was a kid I was fascinated with nature. I loved hiking the trails of El Yunque, our tropical rain forest, and snorkeling in the coral reefs off the coast of Fajardo. Finally, the New World Agriculture and Ecology Group (NWAEG), a group of ecologists interested in social justice, helped me realize that science is not a neutral, but rather a social, activity that reflects the ideologies of those who do science. Through this group, I met Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin and read their book *The Dialectical Biologist*, which was a very influential book in my formative years as an ecologist.

While I earned my master’s degree at the University of Michigan, I was a single mother of a two-year-old boy and my English was still rough. Some professors interpreted my language limitations as a lack of intellectual ability. It took a lot of hard work to prove that I had what it takes to be an academic. While at Michigan I volunteered with a research collective that was investigating the ecology of intercropping systems (polycultures). After this experience, I knew that I wanted to make field-based research my career. My Ph.D. dissertation examined the role of ants as natural enemies of insect pests in the traditional corn/bean system in Nicaragua. These two years in revolutionary Nicaragua reinforced for me the idea that science should be at the service of the people.

