



Isaac (Morty) Ortega

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"Keep working at it. Even if you don't have very much experience with the outdoors, the environmental field is still feasible for you. It can be done." Isaac (Morty) Ortega, 2006.

Overview

My general area of research is foraging ecology. I am interested on the predator-prey relationship processes not only at the animal-animal level, but also at the animal-plant level. My concerns at the local and regional levels are related to wild carnivores (coyotes and raccoons) ecology and their behavior around people (yes, we are in the northeast and there are plenty of humans around here). At the international level I am interested on the general ecology in Patagonia. For now my research is concentrated at Torres del Paine National Park in Chile, where I conduct research on huemules (an endangered deer), guanacos (a llama relative), their food, and their predator (mountain lions). His selected publications include:

- Williams S. C., A.J.DeNicola and I.M. Ortega. 2008 Behavioral responses of white-tailed deer subjected to lethal management. *Canadian Journal of Zoology* 86:1358-1366.
- Ortega, I.M., S. Soltero-Gardea, F.C. Bryant, and D.L. Drawe. 1997. Evaluating grazing strategies for cattle: Deer forage dynamics. *J. Range Manage.* 50: 615-621
- Ortega, I.M., S. Soltero-Gardea, D.L. Drawe, and F.C. Bryant. 1997. Evaluating grazing strategies for cattle: Deer and cattle food partitioning. *J. Range Manage.* 50:622-630
- Ortega, I.M., S. Soltero-Gardea, F.C. Bryant, and D.L. Drawe. 1997. Evaluating grazing strategies for cattle: Nutrition of cattle and deer. *J. Range Manage.* 50:631-637
- Ortega, I.M. and W. L. Franklin. 1995. Social organization, distribution and movements of a migratory guanaco population in the Chilean Patagonia. *"Revista de Historia Natural, Chile"*. 68: 489-500

This interview was conducted in 2010.

Early Life and Education

For Isaac (Morty) Ortega, the inspiration to pursue a career in the environmental field stems from a high school ecology class in his native Chile. Ortega grew up in the city, prior to this ecology class, and had not spent much time outdoors. “If not for that class,” Ortega says, “I may have ended up as a physician.” Instead, Ortega is now an associate professor in the Department of Natural Resources Management and Engineering at the University of Connecticut (UConn) where he has worked for the past nine years.

As a young man, Ortega was encouraged to pursue education by his parents and he was the first member of his family to reach the university level. Ortega attended the Universidad Austral de Chile in Valdivia, where he received his bachelor’s degree in ecology in 1976. After doing some graduate work at the same school, Ortega moved to the United States to continue his graduate studies at Iowa State University. He received his Master of Science in wildlife biology in 1985 and went on to get his doctorate in wildlife science at Texas Tech University in 1991.

Mentoring Others

In addition to his teaching and mentoring activities, Ortega is involved in a number of outreach efforts targeted towards increasing minority enrollment in university environmental programs. “Strong CT is an NSF program designed to bring minority students from throughout the state into UConn. Ortega also travels to area high schools to recruit minority students to the school and is currently writing a grant that would provide four years of funding and mentoring in an effort to bring students into the agriculture program.

Ortega’s ability to bring his students into the field combines his two biggest passions—teaching and the natural world. He is proud to teach in ways that brings students closer to the outdoors in a number of different environments. He notes teaching as one of the highlights of his career, and the opportunity to take students on trips to places like throughout the United States, Patagonia and South Africa has been incredible. “I really like the teaching that I do—especially when I get to take my students to different places,” Ortega says. His current research on mountain lion predator-prey relationships in Patagonia is another highlight, and the ability to work outdoors with animals keeps him satisfied with a career in the environmental field.

Importance of Mentoring to Career

Mentors have played an important role in the development of Ortega’s career, from his high school ecology teacher to his master’s advisor at Iowa State. His advisor was especially important in modeling how to do fieldwork, among other things, and the two soon became friends. Now that he has had a great deal of experience in his field, Ortega tries to mentor his young students at every opportunity. In addition to his undergraduate and graduate students, Ortega also counsels students from many countries, including South Africa, Chile and Bolivia.

Advice to Young Professionals

Ortega has these words of advice for those minority students who are just beginning to discover their own passions: “Keep working at it. You must be able to show that you are good at working in the field. Even if you don’t have very much experience with the outdoors, the environmental field is still feasible for you. It can be done.”