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## STEPS Institute holds second workshop on Central Coast biodiversity

By [Tim Stephens](#)

Researchers studying the biodiversity of California's Central Coast gathered at UCSC on February 6 for an all-day workshop hosted by the [STEPS Institute for Innovation in Environmental Research](#). Participants included researchers in a range of disciplines at UCSC, as well as representatives of federal and state agencies and nongovernmental organizations.

As part of a project called the Santa Lucia Gradient Study (SLGS), the STEPS Institute is helping to coordinate a network of researchers, managers, and policy makers concerned with issues of biodiversity along the Central Coast.

The SLGS project focuses especially on patterns of biological diversity in the environmentally complex area extending from the coastal waters of Big Sur, across the Santa Lucia Range, to the Carmel Valley.



**The Santa Lucia Range, rising steeply from the Big Sur coast, is one of the most environmentally complex and biologically rich areas of the state.** Photo credit: John Thompson

Speakers at the workshop discussed a wide range of research efforts on the rapidly changing diversity of fish, birds, mammals, insects, and plants along the Central Coast.

John Thompson, professor of ecology and evolutionary biology and director of the STEPS Institute, described the institute's progress on compiling a "meta-database" of Central Coast biodiversity research. The meta-database is essentially a database of databases--it doesn't hold any data, but aims to provide a comprehensive source of information about the data that are available and where they can be found.

"There is a lot of valuable data out there, and it is not necessarily on someone's computer. It could be on loose-leaf notebooks from the 1920s," Thompson said.

Phillip Hoos, a staff researcher at STEPS who is managing the meta-database project, has been traveling up and down the coast visiting researchers and going through file drawers and storerooms, sometimes turning up forgotten troves of information, Thompson said.

"It's remarkable how little access there is to all the data out there. What we are doing is pretty simple, but this kind of information has been almost impossible to

find in one place. We're just getting started on the meta-database, and it is already being used by people in the SLGS group," he said.

The SLGS project is part of the STEPS Institute Genes to Ecoregions Initiative, which is facilitating interdisciplinary collaborations among researchers, policy makers, and managers working on biodiversity issues. The goal of the initiative is to link innovative ecological and molecular research questions and methods with the needs of policy makers and managers.

The project was launched at a previous STEPS workshop held last year. Thompson said that both workshops have led to new collaborations among the participants.

The February 6 workshop included representatives from the U.S. Forest Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute, The Nature Conservancy, Wildlife Conservation Society, UC Berkeley, Elkhorn Slough Foundation, Big Sur Land Trust, Santa Lucia Conservancy, and Big Sur Ornithology, among others.

The STEPS Institute was established at UCSC in 2002, funded by a gift from UCSC alumnus Gordon Ringold and his wife, Tanya Zarucki. The institute is leading a campuswide effort to facilitate and strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration among UCSC environmental researchers and other researchers, policy makers, and managers throughout the region and state.

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