

Postdoctoral Fellowships at NCEAS: The Inside Story
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The postdoctoral experience is a challenging and potentially trying time (see Science 1999 and Chronicle of Higher Education 1998). NCEAS postdoctoral appointments have unique features that make the experience more rewarding and more challenging than a typical position. The current cohort of NCEAS posdocs initiated a discussion to summarize the postdoc experience at the Center. We distributed a survey to current and past NCEAS postdocs to produce some quantitative measures of professional success attributable to NCEAS (Table 1) and identified several distinctive features about NCEAS. We have produced this document to summarize the benefits and limitations of our experiences at NCEAS. In doing so, we hope to inform prospective applicants about the postdoctoral program (from the inside) and help prospective postdoctoral applicants decide whether an NCEAS postdoc is a position they desire.

Benefits of the NCEAS postdoc experience

< NCEAS postdocs have unique opportunities for meeting a diversity of leading scientists

Most postdoctoral positions are isolating. At NCEAS the world comes to you. NCEAS postdocs get exposure to a broad range of people and ideas than one could ever get in a single local institution, given all the visitors coming through and diversity of postdoc backgrounds. We also get exposure to Center Fellows (Sabbatical Visitors) from different disciplines who are more focused and accessible than professors with diverse interests located in their home departments. The result is broad exposure to a diversity of ideas and opinions.

< NCEAS postdocs have a community of young scientists with whom to work and exchange ideas.

At NCEAS is that there is a community of young scientists who are in similar stages in their careers. There is a much larger postdoc cohort than in most academic departments, and hence more advice from peers on both scientific and career fronts.

< NCEAS postdocs have great freedom

The NCEAS postdoc experience is particularly valuable for its independence. Here, you're on your own to choose important problems and tackle them in the way you best see fit. There is none of the typical "working on your advisor's problem that he/she doesn't have time to work on" that postdocs experience elsewhere.

< An NCEAS postdoc clearly helps in getting a job.

On average, every postdoc who applied for a faculty job got at least one interview, and about half of those interviewed were offered positions. NCEAS postdocs have been offered faculty positions at Dartmouth, Stanford, University of California at Santa Barbara, University of Chicago and University of Texas at Austin.

< NCEAS postdocs diversify their research experience .

One consequence of the melding of postdocs and Sabbatarians from diverse fields is that we wind up diversifying in our research interests, and taking on side-projects. Some interesting case studies of interdisciplinary projects include ecological economics, community variability, and spatial synchrony. Based on our survey results, NCEAS postdocs became involved with an average of 2.5 working groups during their stay, and produced an average of 1.2 papers from side projects.

Limitations of the NCEAS postdoc experience

< NCEAS postdocs do not have mentors

NCEAS postdocs have no formal mentors with whom we can discuss science or career choices. A high level of self-motivation and sense of direction is required develop and maintain relations with mentors (Center Fellows, SAB members, and Working Group members are some potential mentors). Also, to mitigate the lack of mentorship, funding is available to work with individuals in their lab for extended periods (2-3 weeks).

< No experiments are done and no primary data are collected.

Experimental ecologists should think twice before applying for a position as an NCEAS postdoc. The mission of NCEAS, synthesis and analysis, offers a lot of unique opportunities, but may be confining to some.

< Work at NCEAS is generally collaborative and multi-authored.

Research at NCEAS is generally collaborative, often involving more than two authors. Although the research that done in this manner is often very productive, acceptance of this research style in ecology today still seems quite limited. NCEAS postdocs must be careful to maintain a research program that they can call their own. This may be especially important in applying for jobs.

In sum, NCEAS postdocs are not ideal positions for all ecologists, such as strictly experimental ecologists. However, the emphasis on “analysis and synthesis” at NCEAS provides a stimulating atmosphere in which the postdocs have achieved high productivity and success on the job market.

Table 1. Quantitative measures of academic success (Mean \pm SE) for NCEAS postdocs*

	Current Postdocs	Previous Postdocs
NCEAS papers in press	3	1.3
NCEAS papers submitted	2.3	0.5
NCEAS papers 1 st author in press	2.2	.8
NCEAS papers 1 st author submitted	1.6	.35
NCEAS papers in key journals	.64	.13
Job interviews while at NCEAS**	1.37	1.6
Job offers while at NCEAS**	.84	.56

* Results based on a survey of nine of the twelve previous postdocs and ten of the fifteen current postdocs. Each metric was scaled by ratio of the duration of the stay at NCEAS to the total length of stay at NCEAS (e.g., number of NCEAS papers/(nine months/twelve months).

** The number of job interviews and offers were calculated only those postdocs who applied for jobs during their tenure at NCEAS. Postdocs who had been at the Center for less than 4 months and those that opted not to apply for jobs were not considered in this calculation.

Literature Cited

Magner, D.K. 1998. 'Postdocs,' Seeing Little Way Into the Academic Job Market, Seek Better Terms in the Lab. The Chronicle of Higher Education. 1998 (Aug. 7); Section: The Faculty; Page: A10.

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