Three Harvard faculty net MacArthur fellowships

By Alvin Powell
Harvard News Office

Three biologists — one current and two future faculty members at Harvard — have won MacArthur Foundation “genius” grants, $500,000 no-strings-attached awards intended to encourage creativity, originality, and innovation in a broad array of fields.

The winners are Assistant Professor of Neurobiology Rachel Wilson at Harvard Medical School; Susan Mango, who was recently appointed professor of molecular and cellular biology in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS); and Kirsten Bomblies, who will be an assistant professor in the Department of Organismic and Evolutionary Biology, also at FAS. Both appointments are effective July 1, 2009. Mango is currently a professor at the University of Utah. Bomblies is currently at the Max Planck Institute for Developmental Biology, in Tübingen, Germany.

“IT’s a big shock. Unlike all the other grants and

Harvard Forest: 3,500 acres, global impact

By Steve Bradt
FAS Communications

Harvard may be rooted in Cambridge, but it has a lot more roots in the small north-central Massachusetts town of Petersham.

That’s where you’ll find the woods, streams, and fields of the Harvard Forest, a 3,500-acre research and teaching facility that’s been part of the University for more than a century. Having been closely monitored since 1907 — and with a provenance dating to a Colonial farm established in the mid 1700s — the history of this tract is likely better documented than that of any other forest in the United States.

New England’s forests have a centuries-long history of destruction and resurrection, with a landscape that has veered from thickly wooded in the 18th century to mostly farmland in the 19th century and back to substantially wooded today. The much-researched Harvard Forest helps scientists apply the lessons of the region’s forest history to the environmental challenges faced by forests today.

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“Overall, this forest offers a very positive message for New England about the resilience of our forests,” says David R. Foster, the forest director and a senior lecturer in biology in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS). “The Harvard Forest can teach us much about the history and diversity of natural landscapes.”

Since becoming director of the forest in 1995, Foster has worked assiduously to link together what had been isolated islands of conservation land south of central Massachusetts into a coherent block, the better to support research and maintain native flora and fauna. Today, the map of this area at the head of the Quabbin Reservoir — the body of water that supplies most of metropolitan Boston’s drinking water — is a patchwork of land owned not only by Harvard but also by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the Trustees of Reservations, Massachusetts Audubon, and other conservation-minded organizations.

Since 2005, Foster and colleagues have led an initiative called “Wildlands and Woodlands: A Vision for the Forests of Massachusetts,” endeavoring to protect 1.5 million acres of Bay State forestland. When combined with the existing 4 million acres of protected land in the commonwealth, the cumulative acreage would total roughly half the area of Massachusetts.

“We’re already seeing Massachusetts emerge as a leader in reclaiming the Northeast’s fragmented landscapes,” Foster says. “We hope ‘Wildlands and Woodlands’ will spur new conservation finance tools to refurbish the economic, ecosystem, and quality-of-life benefits of these old conifers, illuminate the important role of the surrounding grove of 200-year-old hemlocks, and maintain native flora and fauna.”

The Harvard Forest’s 45 permanent employees — ranging from ecologists to a server who runs a Drop-in version of a restaurant and coffee house the likes of whose buildings are continually supplemented by a steady stream of visiting scientists from New England and beyond. At any given time, 80 or 100 scientists — most from Harvard but many from elsewhere — may be conducting research. The researchers are drawn to Petersham by population, 1,180, by these forests, and by the head of the Quabbin Reservoir — the body of water within the state’s State Forest that supplies most of metropolitan Boston’s drinking water.

Researchers with the University of Massachusetts have outfitted 25 area streams with GPS collars to track the output of water and carbon dioxide from the surrounding few acres of 200-year-old white pines. The data feeds into studies of snowfall and water chemistry. Researchers with the University of Massachusetts have outfitted 25 area streams with GPS collars to track the output of water and carbon dioxide from the surrounding few acres of 200-year-old white pines. The data feeds into studies of snowfall and water chemistry.

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