1.3: Ecology then and now

Our early hominin ancestors needed aspects of ecology. To find blueberries or other fruit, or where to dig wild onions, they had to know where these foods grew—their distribution and abundance. These parts of ecology have thus been part of life for hundreds of thousands of years. Ecology is connected with our species.

Some elements of the field of ecology were formalized more than 3000 years ago. The Rhind Papyrus lists a number of ecological exercises for students—mathematics from ancient Egypt. Among these oldest ecological problems is this:

Number 27. If a mouse eat 521 ikats of grain each year and a cat kills 96 mice a year, in each of 24 barns, how many cats are required to control the destruction of stored grain?

This is a little problem in quantitative ecology! Even 36 centuries ago, mathematical ecology was part of life. Knowing how many grain bins determined how many cats were to be employed.

Today, ecology has become a glamour word. A product called “Ecogate,” for example, is part of a central vacuum system that keeps sawdust and sanding dust from being tracked around. But why the word Ecogate? Dust collection per se has nothing to do with ecology. Advertisers, however, have found that consumers respond positively to the term.

The term “ecosystem” is frequently used in business and finance, but there it means a collection of companies, customers, and products and their interconnections. For better or worse, ecological terminology is expanding to other domains.