

Dr. Lee Alan Dugatkin (University of Louisville), author of “Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose: When Natural History and History Collide” will be the keynote speaker at Viterbo University’s Seven Rivers Undergraduate Research Symposium. Dr. Dugatkin has written several other popular books about science including “Game Theory and Animal Behavior”, “The Altruism Equation”, “Cooperation Among Animals”, and “Cheating Monkeys and Citizen Bees”. His work has been covered by many sources including the NY Times, Wall Street Journal, Nature, Science, and NPR’s State of Affairs.

His address titled “Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose” is designed to inform and interest a diverse audience (including undergraduates and professionals from many different disciplines) while highlighting the importance of scientific inquiry, natural and American history, and the power of debate. A short summary of his address is below and more details about Dr. Dugatkin can be found at his website (<http://louisville.edu/faculty/laduga01>).

"Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose" is a tale of both natural history and American history. What started out in the Revolutionary War era as an international dispute over natural history quickly took on important political overtones. The story revolves around three fascinating individuals. One of these characters -- Thomas Jefferson -- is known to every schoolchild. The other two characters -- 1) the French Count and world-renowned naturalist, George-Louis Leclerc Buffon, who claimed that all life in America was "degenerate," weak and feeble, and 2) a very large, dead moose -- are less well known, but equally important to the story. Their interactions lay at the heart of an amazing tale in which Jefferson obsessed over a very large, very dead moose that he believed could help quash early French arrogance toward a fledgling republic in America, and demonstrate that a young America was every bit the equal of a well-established Europe. Despite Jefferson's passionate refutation, the theory of degeneracy far outlived Buffon and Jefferson; indeed, it seemed to have had a life of its own. It continued to have scientific, economic and political implications for 100 years, and also began to work its way into the literature of the day, with folks like Benjamin Franklin, Henry David Thoreau, Washington Irving, Immanuel Kant, John Keats and Lord Byron entering the fray. Eventually the degeneracy argument died; but it did not die an easy death."