

Wider aspects of a career in entomology.

15. Scientific conferences

Hugh V. Danks

This series of articles outlines some ancillary aspects of my entomological career, for the potential amusement of readers. It reports the sometimes unexpected challenges of working in new places and in the real world, an approach that serves also to expose some conclusions about research and other entomological activities and some information about insects and their environments. This article recounts a few experiences and generalizations from my attendance at conferences.



Scientific conferences helped my career, not only through the informative and wide-ranging presentations but also through personal contacts and exposure to unfamiliar surroundings. National meetings are especially useful to foster individual connections and encourage cooperative work. International ones deal with a wider range of faunas and environments, and may reveal interesting differences among countries in social norms, scientific infrastructures, or approaches to education, for example.

The largest meetings, with thousands of participants, are the International Congresses of Entomology, held every 4 years. The great diversity of people and scientific topics is valuable, but numerous sessions must then run simultaneously. As a result, I missed presentations of interest, especially when different sessions were widely separated (as on a university campus) rather than in a more compact conference centre. In addition, people are hard to find at large meetings. It is a mistake not to talk to someone you encounter, because you may never see them again.

In contrast, smaller gatherings allow everyone to interact and attend each component. It is even possible to herd people together for a photograph (e.g., Figure 1).



Figure 1. Participants at the First International Symposium on the Ecophysiology of Ectotherms and Plants (ISEPEP) (Roskilde, Denmark, 2005), showing most of those attending from 14 countries.

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Hugh Danks (hughdanks@yahoo.ca) retired in 2007 after many years as head of the Biological Survey of Canada. In that role, he helped to coordinate work on the composition and characteristics of the arthropod fauna of the country, and to summarize the results. In addition, his research studied cold-hardiness, diapause, and other adaptations to seasonality in northern regions.

The cultures of host countries influence the organization and formality of conferences. Moreover, depending on national circumstances, organizers or participants may worry about cost. The difference among countries was brought into focus at the 1992 International Congress of Entomology in Beijing, China, where international visitors were housed in a facility designed for them. The price of meals there was consistent with typical prices in Europe and North America, but many times higher than outside its walls. Members of our symposium concluded too late that our Chinese colleague did not attend the symposium dinner because he could not afford it. Indeed, earnings in China for labour of all kinds are relatively low, and the conference hotel was abundantly staffed. For example, on each floor a young lady stood beside the elevator door. Her only visible role was to summon the elevator by pressing the button whenever a guest approached.

Smaller meetings have more options for accommodation. University student residences with shared bathrooms are one of the least costly. At one such meeting in England¹, each guest was provided with a small complimentary bar of soap (accompanied by a message touting that generosity!), a supply that was supposed to last for the whole stay. One American delegate assumed that soaps would be provided daily, as in North American hotels. Therefore, he failed to safeguard his allotment, and soon resorted to scavenging remnants from the showers.

Each international conference highlights characteristics of its location. The 1996 International Congress of Entomology in Florence was impressive for the many Italian Renaissance buildings (e.g., Figure 2)—although one colleague from Canada confessed to me that the experience of touring the city was so intense that after some hours he was overcome by “architectural fatigue.”

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Figure 2. Examples of architecture in Florence (Firenze), Italy. L and R from top to bottom: Palazzo Pitti; Santa Maria del Fiore; Santa Croce; Santa Maria Novella; Ponte Vecchio; Piazza Repubblica; Chiesa Santo Spirito; Palazzo Vecchio.

¹Third European Workshop of Invertebrate Ecophysiology (Birmingham, England, 1998).

At the 2000 International Congress of Entomology in Brazil, a tour visited the nearby natural wonder of Iguassu Falls² (Figure 3). Unfortunately, such local attractions tempt a few people, even some sponsored by grants or other official funds, to spend most of their time sightseeing instead of attending the scientific programme!

Host countries have different climates, so conference information customarily includes expected weather conditions. The organizer of a July meeting in Dunedin, New Zealand³, emphasized that it would be cold (winter in the southern hemisphere). He feared that visitors from the southern United States, for example, might come dressed for summers in Florida. Repeated dire warnings led one forest entomologist from Quebec to bring the outfit that he used for fieldwork during the winter, including a pair of large insulated boots. Although snow might appear on the hills above Dunedin, the climates of Quebec City and Dunedin are strikingly different (Figure 4). The heavy winter gear was deployed only in the aircraft cabin, to avoid excess baggage fees.

Most nations consider food to be important at international conferences, to honour visitors and expose them to national cuisines. Nevertheless, local caterers do not always know the background of those attending. The opening mixer of a parasitology conference in Eastern Europe served a wide range of cold meats. The offerings were under-sampled, because many delegates knew them as a potential source of certain human parasites.

In Italy, formal meals have a complex structure (Figure 5). Delivering the many banquet courses over several hours at the International Congress in Florence was an impressive feat of organization, because diners were distributed across two floors of a large and venerable building.

In China, the banquet included unfamiliar delicacies. The first was explained by my dining companions as “lining of a cow’s stomach”, which I knew as tripe. Then came “birds’ feet”, and



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Figure 3. Iguassu Falls, seen from the Brazilian side.

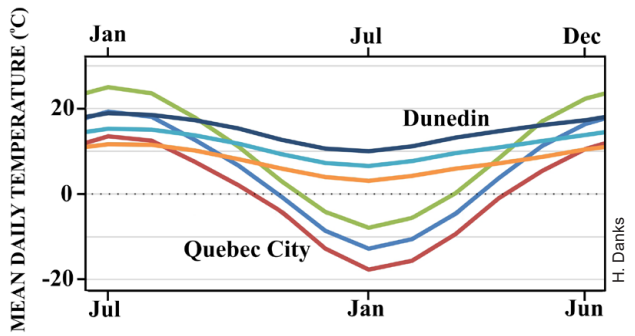


Figure 4. Annual patterns of temperature at Quebec City, Canada, and Dunedin, New Zealand (offset to align seasons). Plots for each location show long-term monthly means (1981–2010) of daily maximum, average, and minimum temperatures.

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²Typically Iguassu in English, Iguacu (Portuguese) in Brazil, and Iguazú (Spanish) in Argentina.

³Second International Symposium on the Ecophysiology of Ectotherms and Plants (Dunedin, New Zealand, 2007).



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Figure 5. Sample courses of a formal Italian meal. L and R from top to bottom (the order served): Aperitivo (aperitif drink, not shown) with appetisers; Antipasti (heavier appetizers: cold meats); Primo (first course: risotto); Secondo (second course, typically meat or seafood) and Contorno (side dish of vegetables); Insalata (salad, if not in Contorno); Formaggi e frutta (cheese and fruit); Dolce (dessert: tiramisu); Caffè (espresso) with Digestivo (digestive drink, not shown).



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Figure 6. Some Chinese delicacies. L and R from top to bottom: Ginger-scallion tripe; Chicken feet; Sea cucumber; Snake soup; Duck tongues; Jellyfish.

sea cucumber (Figure 6). As other items continued to appear, it seemed wise to stop asking and simply eat them⁴.

Less formal meals were served at some smaller meetings. In Russia⁵, every meal, including breakfast, had a vegetable portion, but it was always the same thing: finely shredded hard vegetables. The shreds had a distinctive consistency, which reminded me of the layers just below the surface of compost. My comeuppance for this unkind characterization came soon enough, when I was stricken with dramatic (though unrelated) gastrointestinal disturbances!⁶

Security is a potential concern everywhere. Pickpockets are prevalent in crowded European cities, while many developing countries have more aggressive thieves. In Brazil, the International Congress at Iguassu Falls avoided these hazards because the town is relatively safe. In contrast, the organizers of a more specific entomological symposium that year in the large city of Rio de Janeiro advised attendees to carry at all times an additional dummy wallet, containing a little cash and a cancelled or expired credit card, to hand over “when” (not “if”!) they were robbed.

There were problems in Brazil nonetheless. Some people were relieved of currency under various pretexts, such as relocation on arrival to a more expensive hotel because the one booked was suddenly unavailable, an admission fee charged during a tour even though the guide had already collected the relevant amount, and unexpectedly high charges at the hotel checkout as the airport bus waited outside (early checkout was not allowed). At the Congress site, hours-long “booking” queues that were actually unnecessary reduced the number of delegates who might attend events to which they were entitled.

At an earlier Congress, a copy of a book published by the Biological Survey of Canada, *Arctic Arthropods*, was entrusted to a member of the ESC, who had agreed to publicize it. However, the copy was simply put out on a table for inspection, and was soon stolen. This publicity exercise confirmed that the book was worth owning ... at least if it was free!

Facilities for scientific presentations vary considerably among meetings of all kinds, even at dedicated conference centres. The best rooms have suitable proportions and acoustics, and are soundproofed or separated enough to muffle applause, speech enhanced by microphones, and other disruptive noises from adjacent rooms. In some North American hotels, the sliding partitions used to divide larger rooms into smaller ones provide inadequate soundproofing.

Most large conferences rent adequate facilities, but in Brazil many Congress sessions were disadvantaged by rooms that were long and thin, or partitioned into two by flimsy screens. Presenting and listening were unusually challenging in a space separated by a simple curtain from a busy parking garage.

The best programmes not only have well planned scientific elements, but also multiple ways for individuals to interact informally. Breaks for coffee or other refreshments during the scientific sessions are particularly important to foster interactions (even though the quality of the coffee varies widely!). Unwisely, these breaks are sometimes cancelled because of the cost, which can reach thousands of dollars at a substantial conference. Holding the breaks where posters are displayed is especially productive, provided the room is big enough for everyone to move around easily.

Interactions are also fostered by social functions—for all participants, as well as for students, society volunteers, and other groups. An additional very effective setting at the 1988 International Congress of Entomology in Vancouver was a large beer tent. It was staffed by engineering

⁴Later, I learned that there is a saying in China about the wide dietary choices of Cantonese people. Roughly transcribed, it reads: “Anything that walks, swims, crawls, or flies with its back to the sky is edible.”

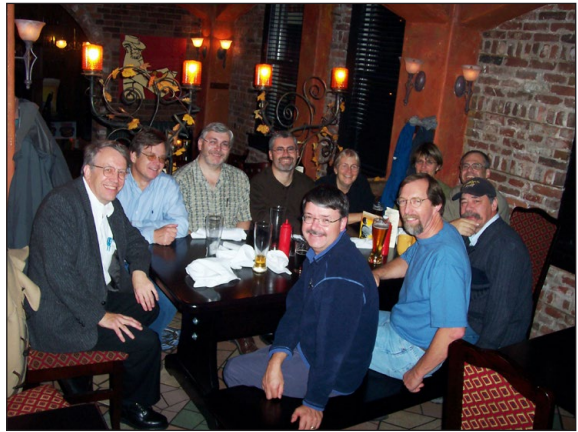
⁵Fourth European Workshop of Invertebrate Ecophysiology (St Petersburg, Russia, 2001).

⁶However, a delegate from South Africa told me a few years later that she had dined out more than once on the strength of amusement generated by repeating my name for the dish.

students, who had organized similar facilities for past conferences. It was reported that the entomologists consumed so much more beer than people at previous conferences that additional supplies had to be ordered on an emergency basis. Profitable discussions among the participants must have been at unprecedented levels ...

“Virtual” conferences lack such personal interactions, and limit the opportunities for education and broadening of perspectives that arise when talks across a range of subjects, and diverse experts, are easily available in one location. Therefore, their value seems to me to be much diminished, although perhaps small virtual meetings of specialists are useful for the scientific content alone, because most participants would know each other already.

Of course, people hold additional informal gatherings at in-person conferences (e.g., Figure 7)⁷. Entomology may not be the only focus of discussion. After the formal talks at my first international conference, which was in my home town⁸, I invited a number of delegates to my apartment. Seating was limited, but the place had plenty of beer, at least until an entomologist from Finland almost exhausted the supply single-handed, even as he remained remarkably coherent about a range of topics, many of which were outside entomology... During meals at later meetings in Canada and Japan, some participants showed extraordinary interest in different techniques for using chopsticks.



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Figure 7. Informal gathering at a joint annual meeting of entomological societies (ESC and Acadian Entomological Society, Charlottetown, 2004).

Early in my career, before digital images were available, conference presentations were illustrated with slides (transparencies) (Figure 8) in a slide-projector (Figure 9).

These projectors had a few quirks. The bulbs failed much more frequently than at present, for example, and some cooling fans were noisy enough to block out the speaker’s words from audience members sitting close to the projector. Norms in different countries created problems at international conferences, because slides that were warped, sealed with tape, or too thick (including older European images sandwiched between sheets of glass) would jam in the projector. Occasionally, the heat of the projector bulb damaged slides that were inside too long, or were too fragile (cf. Figure 10). An audience might gasp at the changing image, but usually the speaker was addressing the listeners and would be oblivious as a precious slide melted or incinerated.

Power Point was gradually adopted as standard, although early talks were disrupted if host

⁷I once spent a long evening in conversation with a Canadian colleague whilst sampling the offerings of local public houses. He told me that the following day he went to an unusually early scientific session of major interest. Somewhat dishevelled and feeling rather grubby, he struggled into the room and took the only remaining seat. He was embarrassed to find himself next to a senior colleague of precise personality, who was always scrupulously clean and immaculately attired, and known to retire early to bed whatever the circumstances.

⁸Fourth International Symposium on the Chironomidae (Ottawa, Ontario, 1970).



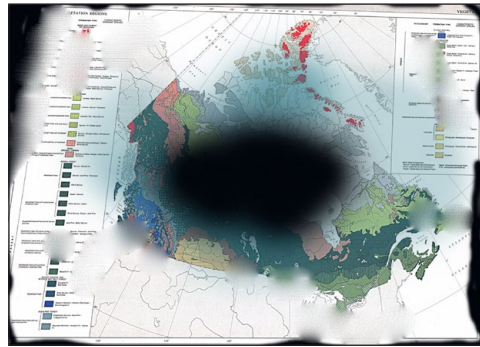
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Figure 8. Back (top) and front of a 5 cm x 5 cm slide (transparency), as used to project illustrations before digital images replaced them. The red dot was added to aid correct insertion of the slide (upside down, with the front or emulsion side facing the screen).



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Figure 9. Kodak Carousel slide projector and magazine, the standard equipment for many years in most locations.

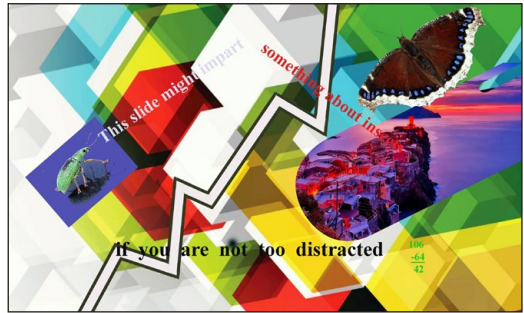


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Figure 10. Slide burned and distorted by the heat of the projector bulb (simulated).

computers could not handle the file sizes or process special characters. It is now easier to generate images, but their effectiveness still varies, independent of scientific quality. Slides with too many entries remain illegible except to the speaker⁹. Moreover, digital images bring new dangers. For example, Power Point can automatically generate elaborate templates, but they are not always appropriate (Figure 11).

Whatever the quality of images, potential distractions include speakers who mumble, fidget, jingle keys, or use “um” and other fillers repeatedly. Such habits tend to increase in front of large audiences. At one meeting I attended, stressed



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Figure 11. An exaggerated version of a poorly designed Power Point image that includes some of the distracting features of available templates.

⁹There was a simple way to test the legibility of a slide: if text on an original laid on the floor could be read by someone standing over it, the photographic transparency made from that original could be read by the audience.

listeners were able to dissipate their own nervous energy by constantly clicking retractable pens, thoughtfully provided for this purpose by the organizers! A more spectacular distraction was a speaker who shut his eyes to concentrate but continued to move around ... until he fell off the stage (happily without injury).

The balance of entomological topics at conferences continues to evolve. In particular, DNA analysis has increased, bringing valuable insights to several kinds of investigations. However, one consequence is that less attention is paid to natural history components, especially among those who now view molecules only in isolation from the living organisms they represent. In parallel, specialization has increased but travel funds are more limited, leading some researchers to attend special-interest conferences instead of general entomological ones.

More granting agencies than in the past expect explicit formal hypotheses and quantification. The requirements may help to focus research proposals, but lead some speakers into dull rationalizations rather than interesting scientific findings. Another change is that no one in rapidly moving fields describes ongoing work, but only what has already been published. For example, molecular biology is now less collegial and more cutthroat, because research can be completed rapidly only by well staffed laboratories with particularly expensive equipment—and unpublished ideas not only can, but will, be promptly followed up and pre-empted by better-funded scientists.

Session Chairs differ widely in ability and approach. Presenters adept at finding ways to extend their time can be constrained only by strict and well briefed Chairs. At a symposium I attended (part of a meeting with many simultaneous sessions), the projectionist had been instructed to turn off the projector at the time limit in case the speaker failed to heed requests to finish. This strategy was extremely effective in curtailing the bluster of one senior European professor ...

To avoid confusion among English speakers, family and given names are normally reversed for contributors from places such as China and Japan (e.g., Masaki Shinzō becomes Shinzō Masaki). However, Chairs unfamiliar with foreign languages frequently butcher individual names. For example, I have heard the Japanese professor Yamashita [Ya-ma-sh'ta¹⁰] introduced as Yah-mah-shee-tah, and the Czech scientist Košťál [approximately Kosh-ch-ahl¹¹] as Costal. Speakers should have been asked beforehand how to pronounce their names, but were gracious enough not to complain.

I was once surprised to hear a speaker using a foreign language, only to realize (after several minutes!) that the language was English, but with unusual rhythm and pronunciation. It was therefore instructive to give talks of my own that were not in English, when fluency, precision, idiom, and other elements normally taken for granted are compromised. Unexpectedly, I had a strange sensation of buzzing in my lips after speaking French for longer than usual, because the oral gymnastics required to produce the necessary sounds are different than for English—and seem more extreme!

My first paper in French (on insect-plant interactions in the Arctic) was at an annual meeting of the Société d'entomologie du Québec (SEQ). Afterwards, a member of the audience told me that he thought that my accent resembled that of Pierre Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada for many years. At the time, the merits of that politician were being hotly debated, both inside and outside the province ... so had a compliment or the opposite been intended?!

Most scientific conferences contain formal opening and closing ceremonies. At the opening ceremony of a meeting of the SEQ, the visiting President of the ESC delivered positive greetings to the regional members, as was the custom. He did so in French, but had overestimated his

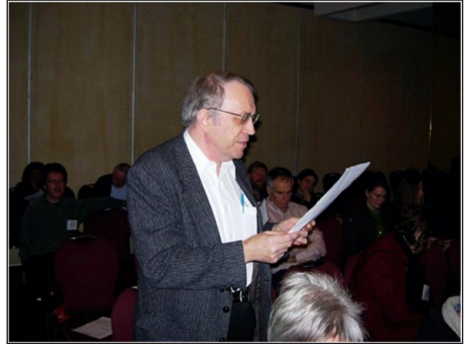
¹⁰Japanese syllables are short, and some vowels are devoiced between certain consonants.

¹¹In Czech, the diacritical marks soften the consonants š (to sh) and ť (to a cross between ch and the t in tutor), and lengthen the vowel à (as in father).

knowledge of the language and the accuracy of his pronunciation. The assembled members shifted uneasily in their seats as the language was tortured, but their discomfort was defused by the president of the SEQ. Speaking in French, he thanked the ESC president for his kind remarks, and added “they will be translated into French and published in the society’s bulletin”, a comment greeted by laughter as the members relaxed again. The ESC president smiled appreciatively too, having failed to understand what had been said!¹²

Many societies hold their Annual General Meetings during conferences. Customarily, resolutions (cf. Figure 12) thank local organizers for their great efforts in arranging all of the scientific and logistic elements. The burden on organizers also includes anxiety, which normally persists throughout: even the final event remains subject to Murphy’s Laws of Meetings.

The ESC’s Annual General Meeting is typically staid, but not always. Years ago, a long-term officer of the society, well known to the Governing Board, was installed as incoming President and took his place at the front of the room. He thanked the members and declared: “I’ll do my best!”, prompting a fellow long-term member of the Governing Board sitting in the audience to call out: “That’s not good enough!” This retort lifted the mood of the room, and the remaining business proceeded smoothly.



Entomological Society of Canada

Figure 12. Author Hugh Danks reading the resolutions at an Annual General Meeting of the ESC (Montreal, 2006)—as he was often asked to do, apparently because some members liked his articulation of “whereas”, “be it resolved”, and other formal expressions!

¹²Later, I asked the SEQ president privately if he thought that the remark might have been a little unkind. I don’t think so, he replied—but maybe daring [“osant”].

