

MEETINGS, SOCIETIES, AND CRITICAL MASSES

As a long-term member of AGU, ASLO, and as an original life member of TOS, I have come to depend on these societies to keep abreast of oceanographic developments. Because I specialize in geological oceanography, I also belong to several geological societies. I especially take note of memberships when I pay dues each year. However, I accept the increasing number of memberships to be a natural outgrowth of an information age, which has more people producing more data and ideas that deserve to be exchanged in journals and at meetings.

Journals are important vehicles for communicating because they represent a definitive repository. For better or worse, what is written by an author is presented before the public as an invariant statement. You may agree or disagree. The validity of the statement may change with perspectives through time. But the statement sits there inert. You can request reprints and make photocopies. These can be filed by author or topic or merely buried within one of the piles on your desk. Yeah, sometimes there will be a comment/reply exchange, but these are relatively tame compared with a good shouting match at a meeting.

Meetings, conferences, symposia, and workshops provide for oral presentations and discussions. The work presented is usually fresh. Exchanges of ideas are spontaneous and opinions can be altered quickly. These oral forums represent an important contrast to journals. And our oceanographic societies offer a smorgasbord of varieties from conferences addressing a suite of issues relevant to a particular discipline, to symposia examining a single topic that transcends many disciplines, to workshops focused on a very narrow concern of a small group. The styles of presentations include brief research talks, thorough overview lectures, and one-on-one poster discussions. This diversity of opportunities is healthy for our complex and ever-expanding community of oceanographers.

Unfortunately, within the US, the one recent casualty among meetings has been the large jointly sponsored technical meeting, that spans all disciplines of oceanography, allows each attendee to say their bit, and attracts a large enough audience to reach critical mass. I've attended these meetings in the past and find them exciting and explosive. In a time when the prevailing strategies toward many research problems are broadly interdisciplinary, it is important to have broadly interdisciplinary meetings at which to present results.

There is a role for varied meeting formats and I appreciate the efforts of individuals and societies to provide our community with the opportunities we now have to speak, listen, and learn. However, we also should have the unique opportunities available in a large meeting. Planning such a meeting requires cooperation between the reigning societies to prevent conflicting schedules and competitive meetings. Many people are like me and belong to two or three of the societies. We care little who receives the credit or the revenues. But we'd like to see the community served. Oceanographers deserve the opportunity to assemble every couple years in a technical meeting that exceeds the threshold for fully interdisciplinary exchange.

Chuck Nittrouer

The opinions are mine. I encourage comment. Responses will be published. CN



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