

Dynamic Ecology

Multa novit vulpes

Summer conference season advice

Posted on [May 3, 2017](#) by [Jeremy Fox](#)

Summer conference season is here! No matter what conference(s) you're attending, we've got you covered with plenty of advice on how to prepare, and how to get the most of the conference once you're there. Most of it's from us, some of it's from others, and most have excellent comment threads with additional advice. Share your own tips in the comments!

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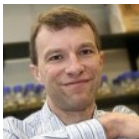
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About Jeremy Fox

I'm an ecologist at the University of Calgary. I study population and community dynamics, using mathematical models and experiments.

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8 THOUGHTS ON "SUMMER CONFERENCE SEASON ADVICE"



3C Style

on [May 3, 2017 at 7:57 am](#) said:

Thanks for the tips. I am a french scientific journalist and fashion blogger and wife of a researcher. Always good to know more about tough questions. Nice blog!



Gambino

on [May 3, 2017 at 10:10 am](#) said:

What a magical time of year.

The time when we squander taxpayer dollars to go to far-off places, get drunk with old friends, and talk about the latest science (which, of course, we could do for free and without emissions by just sharing pre-prints or teleconferencing). All for some marginal benefits to our careers (and a free vacation).



Jeremy Fox

on [May 3, 2017 at 10:23 am](#) said:

Science is a social activity, it's not something that everybody could do alone. And no, teleconferences aren't a good substitute.

Scientists vary widely in how often they travel to conferences (<https://dynamicecology.wordpress.com/2013/04/02/how-often-do-you-travel/>). If you personally don't find conferences very beneficial, then just don't attend any.

As for the ethics of flying to conferences and the associated carbon footprint, we have an old comment thread on this. My own view is that it's not a black and white issue: <https://dynamicecology.wordpress.com/2016/03/07/how-to-decide-whether-to-attend-conference-x/#comment-48923>



Elliot Rosenthal

on [May 3, 2017 at 12:33 pm](#) said:

Seems you have a very negative take on conferencing. I confess I have enjoyed going to far-off places and having a drink with old friends. But I would also assert most of us do not "get drunk". We do talk extensively about the latest developments in our field, and very often these chats go into the wee hours of the night... and often involve a drink or two, but again, not any drunkenness. There most certainly are some emissions involved when traveling to and from far-off places, and we

should take that into account. I never travel to any conference beyond my regional scope (western US and western Canada) unless I am presenting, and so I feel I am being frugal in that regard.

As for your point about “marginal benefits,” I do believe you could be anymore mistaken and so I must vociferously disagree. Among the many benefits provided by conferences is the benefit of “education by immersion,” i.e., the “Chinese Drip Method,” as it were. If there is a topic with which I am only distantly familiar, but need/ want to learn more about, then conferencing is the ideal way to do that. Spending 12+ hours a day for a week or two, immersed in a specific topic that is discussed by the experts certainly does the trick. And no, reading pre-prints or tele-conferencing are not adequate substitutes.

Also, virtually all of the research collaborations I have formed over decades of work were borne out of conferences- where I had direct interaction with people. I have never formed a collaboration by reading a paper and then tele-conferencing. The reasons for this are clear: Neither I nor anyone else is comfortable committing to a long-term partnership without some form of direct personal contact. Getting a read on a person’s disposition, attitudes and proclivities is very important, and cannot happen “over the phone”.

As for your comments about a “free vacation,” I’ve no doubt *some* conference attendees treat it as a “vacation,” but most do not. I think it is disingenuous to use institutional/ grant funds for travel and lodging, and then only show up for your talk while the rest of your time is spent “getting drunk” on the Redneck Riviera. By the same token, often a person will attach a vacation prior to or after the conference, thereby saving a few shekels on personal travel expenses. I have done so myself, and I see no ethical conflict with the practice. However, conferences in of themselves have never been a “vacation” for me. I always leave a conference exhausted- both mentally and physically- because of the near-constant engagement in scholarship.

Lastly, I do not know if you are a scientist or something other. The flippancy of your remarks makes me think *maybe* not. But if you are a scientist, then I would say your comments are highly irresponsible. The vast majority of scientists do not behave as you have suggested, and the vast majority of conferences have a great many tangible benefits. You to us a great disservice in making these kinds of derogatory statements, for they undermine public trust and therefore have the potential of curtailing our ability to be the best scientists we can be.



Ken
on [May 3, 2017 at 6:02 pm](#) said:

I completely agree. Maybe Gambino is having a bad day, but I believe his statements are way off the mark and, as you say, irresponsible.



Jim Bouldin

on **May 5, 2017 at 12:41 pm** said:

Gambino is perhaps yanking a chain or three but I have some sympathy with the underlying argument regarding the actual need for conferences: to what degree are they really necessary now, given how technology's advanced, versus being a kind of paid vacation?

However, I have a greater sympathy for the cost argument, including the issue of who pays for it, but also with the more basic issue of total cost. These things are universally very expensive, some extremely (e.g. AGU in SF—y'ain't going to that for under \$1000). Many are the conferences I would have attended but could not, due to the cost, being very poor most of my adult life. To this very day. It's discriminatory—those with money can go, and those without cannot—don't kid yourself. Faculty, government researchers, etc., they're the ones who go—because it's paid for. Grad students or others without grant support or finances generally—they ain't there. And so the rich get richer. Conferences are mainly just a big career advancement thing.

Jumping back to the issue of actual need, at the few conferences I've been to, I didn't actually see a lot of people standing and reading posters, these being IMO where you actually *learn* something, since you have unlimited time to read and actually evaluate, and question the author in depth. But I did see a lot of socializing in the foyers and etc. So I wonder what people actually learn at these things.

I don't agree, at all, that science is inherently a social activity. In fact I think social relations cause huge problems in science, compromise peoples' objectivity and willingness to speak their true minds. Too much subtle peer pressure, favoritism etc.; it ramifies through the whole system. It's part of the game of getting jobs, pubs and money, and that IS the game.



Elliot Rosenthal

on **May 5, 2017 at 10:59 pm** said:

Not certain I concur with all of your points. For a great many years I have split my time between private consulting and managing an NGO... and in neither case do I receive support for conference costs. Although my research is supported by funds from each, they do not pay for other things. So my conference costs have been out-of-pocket for a long time. I usually attend about two per year, and my costs probably range about \$2-3K total.

So I do not believe conferences exclude people without the kind of support you mention. Also, many private employers pay out-of-pocket to send employees to these conferences. I also really really disagree about your assertion that conferences do not have direct tangible benefits beyond the self-promotion you mention. These events are hotbeds for ideas to be formulated, shared and expanded upon. I have notebooks chock full of ideas I have harvested from conferences that i would never have gotten from tele-conferencing or reading a paper.

Socializing is an important element of not only conferences but also science. Inevitably, the brown-nosers, sharks and princesses rear their ugly heads, but I believe they are by far in the minority. And the truth is, most competent people see them for what they are, so I do not think they gain much of an edge at these events- and if anything, lose ground.



Jim Bouldin

on [May 7, 2017 at 3:16 pm](#) said:

I didn't mean to state that only those whose ways are directly paid go to conferences, but instead that it's a simple cost vs income issue. Even if it's not directly paid for, if one's making \$60,000 a year, a \$1000 conference doesn't have the same impact as for one making \$20,000. I don't think it can be denied that attending conferences furthers career advancement, and so the more you can attend, the better. If you can't go because you don't have the \$\$, then it's a discriminatory practice. It's not a matter of blatant brown-nosing, it's a more subtle advantage gained than that.

Then let's add publication page charges to the discussion, same basic story there.

