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David A. Dippold, Grant D. Adams, Troy M. Farmer & Benjamin A. Staton

To cite this article: David A. Dippold, Grant D. Adams, Troy M. Farmer & Benjamin A. Staton (2017) Maximize Your Meeting: A Student's Guide to AFS Meetings, *Fisheries*, 42:4, 187-189, DOI: [10.1080/03632415.2017.1288472](https://doi.org/10.1080/03632415.2017.1288472)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03632415.2017.1288472>



Published online: 27 Mar 2017.



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Maximize Your Meeting: A Student's Guide to AFS Meetings

David A. Dippold, The Ohio State University, Department of Evolution, Ecology and Organismal Biology, 1314 Kinnear Road, Columbus, OH 43202. E-mail: dippold.14@buckeyemail.osu.edu

Grant D. Adams, The University of Southern Mississippi, School of Ocean Science and Technology, Division of Coastal Sciences, Ocean Springs, MS.

Troy M. Farmer and Benjamin A. Staton, Auburn University, School of Fisheries, Aquaculture, and Aquatic Sciences, Auburn, AL.

INTRODUCTION

Division, Chapter, Student Subunit, and Section American Fisheries Society (AFS) meetings are an invaluable (<https://thefisheriesblog.com/2015/08/24/professional-conferences>) resource for students in fisheries and other related fields. American Fisheries Society meetings serve as a venue for presenting your work, getting updated on the current state of fisheries science, networking with fellow fisheries professionals, and furthering your education. However, attending an AFS meeting can be daunting for a student or young professional. On one hand, attending an AFS meeting is an opportunity to travel, connect with friends, and interact with the broader fisheries field. On the other hand, giving a presentation, feeling pressured to network with potential advisors and employers, and developing a professional reputation can make attending an AFS meeting stressful. Fortunately, there are several ways students and young professionals can maximize their meeting experience while still having an enjoyable time. In this article, we discuss some tangible ways to make the most of AFS meetings. We provide information on pre-meeting preparation, giving and attending presentations, successful networking, and participating in all of the opportunities that AFS meetings offer. We hope that this information can help make your AFS meetings in the future productive and enjoyable.

PREPARING FOR THE MEETING

Getting the most out of your meeting experience requires a certain amount of preparation prior to the meeting. First and foremost, make time to finish your presentation or poster (if giving one) and practice it sufficiently before arriving at the meeting. If at all possible, give a practice presentation to a group of colleagues prior to the public presentation of the work. Practicing the presentation in front of an audience will allow you to become comfortable presenting the information and will allow for constructive feedback, which can be extremely valuable. If possible, practice the presentation with both lab mates and advisor(s) who are familiar with the work and others who are not as close to the work. This will allow you to verify that the presentation is technically sound and also understandable to those who are unfamiliar with your research. Once your talk is ready and you arrive at the meeting location, try to scope out the room you are presenting in before your talk to see the room layout and size and availability of a podium or microphone. This will help you prepare and minimize the chances of surprises. Being fully prepared to give your presentation will allow you to maximize your time by attending

presentations, poster sessions, and networking events with your fellow fisheries professionals.

In addition to preparing and practicing your presentation, spend time before the meeting identifying talks and posters that you want to see. For Division meetings and Society Annual Meetings, you can download the presentation program from the meeting website. Also, check meeting websites for mobile apps that allow you to create a personal schedule of presentations and posters you want to attend. At these larger meetings, planning your daily schedule is critical, because the number of oral presentations and posters can be very large (e.g., >500). You will not be able to see every presentation or poster you would like to, but by prioritizing, you can see the ones that are most important and relevant to you. For the presentations, you will not be able to attend, socials and networking events offer a great opportunity to catch up with those presenters to discuss similar interests.

Though attending presentations will probably take up the majority of your time, networking with other professionals is also extremely valuable and can be enhanced with a little preparation. In addition to using meeting-specific mobile apps to make a personalized schedule, you can create your own profile, upload a picture, and search profiles of other attendees. This can help others find you and vice versa. Also, if there are senior scientists or other students you know you want to meet, an e-mail prior to the meeting is an effective way to schedule a time for a quick coffee or lunch. Reviewing their recent work will give a good base for conversation. Also be sure to bring copies of your current curriculum vitae to the meeting. Though it may seem a little dated, having business cards is a great way to quickly exchange contact information with others. Some universities offer this as a service to students, or you can easily create and order cards online. By spending a little time preparing prior to the meeting, you can maximize the knowledge gained and connections made during these busy 4–5 days.

GIVING AND ATTENDING TALKS

Oral presentations are the centerpiece of scientific meetings, and attending them should constitute the majority of your time. If at all possible, you should give a talk about your research, because this is one of the best venues to get your work out there. When giving a talk, your primary focus should be on making sure that it is relevant to a broad audience. In general, presentations should not rely on text to make points but should instead include more pictures, figures, and conceptual diagrams. Use text to guide

your narrative but not as the primary delivery of information. For delivery, it is imperative to be clear and concise with your wording and to speak loudly enough to be heard. Briefly glancing at the slides to orient yourself or to point something out is fine, but be sure to face the audience and do not read the slides. With approximately 15 minutes to talk, you will not be able to say everything you want to, but be sure that you hone in on the key aspects of your research. To do this, be sure to set the stage for your work with a short introduction to the problem and boil the methods and results down to the very basics of what you did and the most important parts of what you found. The conclusion section should be longer and should tie your research into the broader field of what is already known about this topic—be sure to not just repeat your results. After your talk, hopefully the audience will have some questions. Answer them the best that you can, and if you cannot answer a question, try to avoid simply saying “I don’t know.” Instead, consider initiating a brief discussion about the question, possibly including your plans to look into it and something about what information you would need to address the question. After questions, make yourself available for follow-up discussions. If someone approaches you, it means that they found your talk interesting and either have more questions or they may have some ideas for your work; in either case, you want to be involved in that discussion because it may be the most important one of your whole trip.

Though attending talks is a great way to expand your knowledge of new and exciting research, make sure that you devote plenty of time to attending talks relevant to your own work. These talks may offer critical insights, perhaps addressing a problem that you are struggling with or exposing you to new ideas or methods. After these high-priority talks, fill your time with topics that you would not get exposure to elsewhere. When traveling between talks, it is good etiquette to wait until a speaker is done to leave the room, and try to avoid entering a room during the middle of a talk.

NETWORKING

One of the many benefits of attending AFS meetings is the opportunity to network with potential employers or advisors and to develop working relationships with fellow researchers. For some people, starting a conversation with a stranger, especially

one who may be your future boss or advisor, comes easily; for others, it does not. Thankfully, networking at a scientific meeting can take many different forms, and even the shyest student can be a successful networker. A great starter is attending talks, poster sessions, or continuing education workshops given by a student, researcher, or faculty member of interest. Being an active participant and asking questions about someone’s work is an easy way to connect. Reviewing the conference program prior to the meeting and familiarizing yourself with someone’s research will be a great benefit to developing good questions. The time allotted for questions during oral presentations may limit your ability to network, but writing down questions to ask later is an easy way to open a conversation when time is less limited. For example, poster sessions and networking events offer opportunities to converse with others and ask about their work. Alternatively, inviting others to attend your talk or poster can give you a chance to show off your skill set to future employers and discuss your research. Approaching a potential academic advisor or employer can be daunting; however, making connections with current and former students or employees is generally less stressful and can go a long way toward learning more about the lab, gauging your fit, and possibly being given a strong introduction later on.

There are also many conference “extras” that offer easy ways to connect with others, such as field trips, fun runs, and student/mentor lunches. Participating in these activities offers a relaxed and causal way to meet established researchers, demonstrates your interest in the field, and gives a good impression to potential employers. Division, Chapter, and Society Annual meetings also schedule social events just for networking and care should be taken to not associate exclusively with your lab or overindulge if alcohol is involved. Networking events are typically relaxed, and a natural way to introduce yourself to other fisheries professionals is by asking questions on their work that you formulated previously while attending their talk or preparing for the meeting. During lunch and at night, inviting others to join you is a great way to connect and can lead to working relationships in the future. Finally, using social media during or after the meeting can be an effective way to continue to develop the relationships you formed at an AFS meeting. Many researchers have Twitter accounts or blog sites where you can keep up with their current research.



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ADDITIONAL WAYS TO MAXIMIZE YOUR EXPERIENCE

In addition to oral presentations, poster sessions, and networking events, AFS meetings offer a host of other opportunities to help maximize your conference experience. These activities include continuing education workshops, Section meetings, technical committees, trade shows, and special events. Participating in these AFS meeting extras can help you gain additional expertise in your field, meet other students and professionals, and learn new skills relevant to your work. For example, continuing education workshops offer introductory and advanced instruction on a variety of field, technical, and analytical topics. At the 2016 AFS Annual Meeting in Kansas City, Missouri, there were 12 workshops offered, ranging in topics from Bayesian analysis to electrofishing to scientific publishing. Continuing education workshops are a great resource because they offer training in subject areas that may not be available at your institution, that are affordable (and sometimes free) for students and young professionals, and that are taught by high-caliber scientists and researchers.

American Fisheries Society Sections (defined by professional interests) and technical committees (defined by subject areas) also meet at AFS Annual and Division meetings. There are 22 Sections (<http://fisheries.org/about/units/sections>) in AFS relating to a variety of subdisciplines in fisheries. Becoming a member of a specific AFS Section and attending Section-specific functions, usually held at AFS Annual Meetings, are great ways to connect with those sharing similar research interests. You can become a Section member when you renew or join AFS. An additional benefit to being a Section member is that many Sections offer travel awards (John E. Skinner Award, Estuaries Section Student Travel Award, etc.) for students to attend meetings. More information on these awards is available online. Similar to Sections, technical committees usually operate at the Division level and are species or subdiscipline specific. So, for instance, if you are

interested in salmonid management, you could become a member of a Salmonid Technical Committee and have another chance to interact with potential employers and advisors, and expand your knowledge of current issues and ongoing activities. Section and committee events are often overlooked and underused by AFS students despite their obvious benefits.

Trade shows at AFS meetings offer more than free pens and keychains. Trade show exhibitors include fishery supply companies, federal and state agencies, publishers, and academic institutions. Trade shows provide opportunities for informal networking, exposure to the latest fisheries research tools, and chances to talk to the manufacturers of products you may use in your own work. Tradeshow networking events typically co-occur with poster sessions, adding to their appeal.

Finally, in addition to continuing education workshops, Section and committee events, and trade shows, each AFS meeting offers other unique “extras” that can help enhance your attendance. Past examples of these meeting extras include the annual “Monsters of Stock Assessment Workshop” held at the 2015 Annual Meeting in Portland, Oregon. Participating in as many of these additional meeting activities as you can will certainly round out your AFS meeting experience and will help you develop as a fishery professional.

CONCLUSION

With so many opportunities, AFS meetings can be a valuable addition to your education and professional development. Spending time preparing before an AFS meeting, attending relevant talks, participating in networking events, and taking advantage of meeting extras can help maximize the benefits of attending an AFS meeting and ensure that you get the most out of your meeting experience. Before you attend your next AFS meeting, consider taking some time to prepare, and while at the meeting, be sure to take advantage of all of the opportunities available. [AFS](#)

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