

# The **Dos** and **Don'ts** of Attending an International Conference:

## Insights from a Grad Student at the Association of American Geographers

### (AAG) Annual Meeting 2015

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As a graduate student, I have found that attending conferences is an essential component of the graduate school experience, crucial not only for the obvious component of networking, but also for the importance of learning how to communicate your research, not only to a room of experts in your field, but to the general audience, to those who have no idea what you mean when you use terms like “mean sensitivity” or “dendrogeomorphology.”

During the week of April 20 to April 24, 2015, I attended the Association of American Geographers (AAG) Annual Meeting in Chicago, Illinois to present research as the Graduate Fellow for the Dendroecology Group at the North American Dendroecological Field Week (NADEF), summer 2014, in a talk titled: “Climate-Growth Relationships and Stand Dynamics of High-Elevation Whitebark Pine in Shoshone National Forest, Wyoming.” Dendrochronology, or tree-ring science, is my specialty in the discipline of Physical Geography, and my focus is on dendrogeomorphology, or the use of tree-rings to reconstruct past geomorphic events, such as debris slides in the Smoky Mountains, or glaciers in the Beartooth Mountains of Wyoming. But . . . blabbering on all day about dendrochronology is not my intent for this article, so I will resume with AAG 2015.

During my time at AAG 2015, I learned much about what it means to be more than a graduate student in Geography, but to be considered an expert in my field, a colleague on equal par, or near equal par, with my scientific heroes. Learning how to be confident in your knowledge and in your contributions to your discipline is an important component to success and to having a productive conference experience. As a result of my experiences at AAG 2015, and many other conferences before, I have assembled a list of dos and don'ts to help the conference first-timer reduce their presentation jitters and to make the most out of what I feel to be an advantageous time.

#### **Do: Be a Presenter**

Although attending a conference without the stress of preparing a presentation can be a relaxing way to take in the current research in your field and boost your own knowledge, attending without presenting is a lost opportunity to prove that you are part of such developing research and an active participant in your discipline. So,

it just makes sense to present something each time, or at least participate in some way; volunteer, organize a panel, or chair a session. If you are traveling there anyway, you might as well make the most out of it.

So if you're a first-timer, warm up with a poster presentation, but make sure that you move to talks (paper presentations) soon. These allow you to practice public speaking and to learn how to tell others, either professionals in your field or a more general audience, about what you do in a clear, concise manner. The sessions are not always specific to a discipline so do not always assume that everyone in the room is an expert on your methods. Gear your talk towards your session, and your audience, as best you can. I always aim at a general audience, pretending that I am a teacher, and I am never satisfied unless I get one chuckle out of the audience. It is okay to lighten the mood a bit. People remember speakers that initiate some response from them, so balance the serious with the lighthearted. It will not only benefit the audience, but may also help you feel more comfortable, and this leads to a better talk.

#### **Don't: Present a Poster Every Time**

Posters are nice and easy. Once they are done, you are done. You just have to show up to your poster session and be prepared to explain your research to a few passers-by, talk casually and accept constructive criticism, feedback or suggestions from session attendees. Now do not get me wrong, the work that goes into a poster can be just as intense as that for a presentation, and for some, being prepared to give a two-minute spiel about their research, being ready to talk “off the cuff” is more intimidating than presenting a practiced speech. One of the perks of giving a poster is extra time to talk about your research and get questions and suggestions from colleagues. And the fact that they can be just as time consuming as a talk is true. The problem is that posters are often seen as the easy way out. Give a couple posters at your first couple conferences, and people will recognize that you're new to the game and testing the waters. Give a poster at every conference



you attend, and people will assume that you are too afraid to give a talk. Don't be the person that sticks to what they know; don't get caught in a groove and stay there. Posters are a good way to get warmed up to the idea of attending a conference, but be prepared to start giving talks as soon as you can.

### **Do: Network, Network, Network**

Conferences provide a unique opportunity to meet future colleagues, co-authors, advisors and career mentors. Many graduate students can likely attest to the lack of exposure to colleagues and co-authors outside of the limitations of their own campus and their own time. Life as a graduate student is a busy, and opportunities to collaborate, except for with those within your own lab or department, are few. Conferences serve as a chance to get away from the "confines" of your own grad school department, to meet fellow scientists from around the world, and to develop relationships with future collaborators.

As an example, during the Chicago AAG meeting, I made a point to attend a Physical Geography session featuring Dr. Markus Stoffel of the Université de Genève Switzerland and founder of the Swiss Tree-Ring Laboratory, practically the man whose research formed the bulk of the literature review for my thesis, and the premier dendrogeomorphologist in Europe. It was so exciting to see his talk because it aligned so well with what I do, but in the American Southeast. After the session, I made it my mission to talk to him, learn more about his research, and discuss my own. The next thing I knew, he was inviting me to Switzerland to attend one of his dendrogeomorphology workshops, all expenses paid except travel, basically the chance of a lifetime for a dendrogeomorphologist like myself! Being proactive, and confident, paid off. So, plan to network. When planning out your conference, look for names that are important in your discipline, look for the people whose research has been featured in your literature reviews, and look for people that will help you to further your professional goals. Then, take a deep breath, and approach them. A hint: It always helps to have a two-minute research spiel ready to go for this sort of thing, but be prepared to improvise. Practice boosts confidence, but don't practice so much that you sound like an automated message.

### **Do: Dress to Impress, Even on "Off" Days**

Consider the entire conference a job fair or job interview. Any moment can become that moment when you are speaking about your research with a potential future advisor or employer. Be ready. It also helps to have business cards, even if you are not yet in the job market. Now, the level of "dress to impress" that you need to attain can depend on the conference. Geography conferences are more relaxed than some business conferences I've *accidentally* attended by being in the same hotel. Gauge your dress by your audience, but look professional at all times.



### **Don't: Be a Clique**

Resist the urge to hang out only with your advisors, professors, and classmates from the university that you attend. I know . . . it's easy. I often find myself attending sessions with my University of Tennessee (UT) colleagues, going to talks and poster presentations given by UT colleagues, and going out for social "networking" with people that I already know. For your first conference, this is the less scary option; you avoid being around strangers and the consequential periodic awkward introductions and conversations with people you have never met before or who you think to be so intellectually above you that you feel there is no possible way that you could converse on the same level. Do not be afraid! If I had been afraid to talk to Dr. Stoffel, I would have missed the chance to work with him in Switzerland.

My advice is this: For your first conference, by all means, start with talks and posters by people you already know, but use these to branch out and discover someone/something new. Pop the conference "bubble" so to speak and get away from your friends and lab colleagues. Look through the abstracts and find something that interests you, or a few things that interest you, and go, without first checking with your colleagues or roommates. If they happen to be there when you get there, so be it, but avoid the "lost puppy dog" syndrome of following your friends or more experienced conference-goers around. Believe me, being confident and pursuing your own goals pays off.

### **Do: Branch Out from Your Own Specialty**

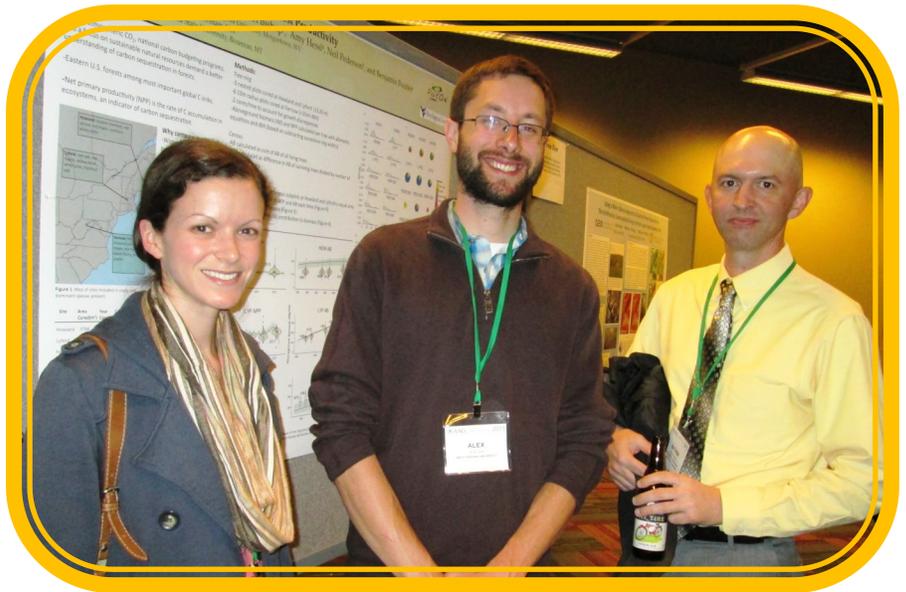
Conferences are a great time to attend talks, panels and poster sessions in your own discipline, to "beef up" on your own concentrations and network with those in your usual circle. However, conferences are also a great opportunity to broaden your knowledge and explore new things. You are essentially surrounded by experts; take advantage of it! Take the time to explore other realms of your science. You never know when you might stumble

upon some new application of your methods, or might find a collaboration you would have never thought possible. Most of my “aha” moments have not come from sessions in my own field of tree-ring science, but have come from sessions that concern connected, but not altogether similar, ideas. For example, I attended a full day of sessions in dendrochronology, but found sessions on geomorphology, environmental reconstruction, human-environment interactions, and even pollen and charcoal from lake cores to be very helpful to my research. Branching out just a bit from the same-old thing that you’ve been doing for the last two to four years of your academic life will allow you to look at things from alternative perspectives, or give you the boost you might need to get out of an academic rut.

(We’ve all been there.) Getting excited about something is the best medicine for a tired grad student. And hey, attend some sessions that just interest you, for no academic reason but to satisfy your own curiosity. And think about your future. Don’t think only about what might benefit you now, think ahead to what might benefit your future; if you want to teach someday, attend some sessions about teaching or lesson planning. If you want to write, attend a session on science communications. Take advantage of the resources surrounding you.

#### **Do: Explore the Exhibit Hall**

Most conferences feature an exhibition of schools, businesses and organizations whose programs and products align with the subject/goals of the association/sponsor of the conference. In the case of AAG, a nonprofit educational society that seeks to contribute to the advancement of Geography, the expo featured companies such as ESRI and National Geographic, publishing companies and universities seeking to recruit to their Geography programs. The Oak Ridge National Lab was also present at the AAG Conference. But, more so than to be a place to sell wares and books to professionals and educators in the field, the exhibition is essentially a miniature job fair. Treat it as such. Even if you intend to stroll through the exhibits on your “off” day, make sure to dress to impress, because you never know when talking to someone at the National Geographic booth could lead to a job offer. In addition, for those seeking future graduate schools, maybe looking for a PhD program, the exhibition is a great place to start, ask questions, and maybe stumble upon an offer. In alignment with the networking suggestions above, be prepared to give a two-minute spiel about your research. Many a colleague of mine has stumbled upon excellent graduate school offers at a conference, either by checking out the booths at the exhibition or by speaking with presenters after sessions.



#### **Do: Meet your “Heroes”**

So you’ve been reading so-and-sos research for the last two years and bam, you see their name pop up as a conference presenter. Resist the urge to tuck into some hiding place and avoid them. As a graduate student, leaders of our own discipline often seem unapproachable, like we have to somehow work our way up to their level to be able to speak with them. This is not the case! Conferences are a great place to meet your scientific heroes. Attend their talks, take notes, and by all means make sure you talk to them in person. Your hero may be your next advisor or co-author.

#### **Do: Grow Your CV**

When you’ve warmed up to the whole conference idea, plan to do more than just be a presenter. Giving a talk or poster proves that you are a part of the research community, but when you become the chair or organizer of a session, panel or symposium, you can prove that you’ve gone yet another step forward. So, present, be a chair, be a session organizer. Get creative! Take charge! It shows that you are more than just a graduate student, but working towards becoming a professional in your field. Not to mention it makes an excellent addition to your CV.

#### **Don’t: Miss the Opportunity to Learn About/Explore the Conference Destination**

As a Geographer, place matters to me, so I try to explore the conference destinations as much as I do the conference. The AAG offers field trips and tours with every conference, but you can also trek out on your own. Don’t see it as slacking (unless you spend more time “exploring” and less time conferencing). I personally believe that one’s knowledge always benefits from exploring new places and cultures, from branching out of their own comfort zone, even if their discipline has nothing to do with culture or geography.

Conferences often give us the chance to travel to new and exciting destinations. As long as it doesn't turn from conference to vacation, make sure to take some time to explore. If anything, it can provide a welcome respite from the sometimes exhausting matter of all-day sessions.

#### **Do: Be Proactive and Productive**

Take some time before the conference to plan out which events you would like to attend, when you will be exploring the exhibition hall, and when you would like to attend a field trip or explore the conference destination on your own. Don't wing it. A planned, but flexible, itinerary will keep you on track and lead to a more productive conference. The AAG provides a conference app for smart phones that allows you to look up events by presenters or topics and build your own conference schedule. Look up the names of important people in your discipline, find out if they will be there, and add any sessions, panels, or symposia that they will be attending. Squeeze in all you can, because again, conferences are one of your best chances to network and grow professionally.

#### **But Don't: Burn Yourself Out**

As part of being proactive and productive, be sure to not overburden yourself. If you attend a week-long conference and attend all-day sessions every day, you will be a zombie by the end. Zombies are not productive. Take some time to refresh your brain and take a break from the conference. Go to lunch with some colleagues, take a walk, go on a field trip. You would take breaks and a lunch break if you were working a full 8 hour day in a job somewhere. Do the same for the conference. Have a half day off, plan some fun activities. It's okay. This doesn't make you a slacker. The trick is balance. When you are building your itinerary, build in some breaks. Make sure you attend important sessions, support colleagues, and explore any events that interest you, but when you find yourself digging for a session just to fill in a 1 hour slot that you didn't have filled, perhaps instead you could use that time to take a break or stroll around the exhibit hall. You might as well face it; those sessions that you use just to fill in slots are often uninteresting anyway. Don't waste your time nodding off in a session that does not interest you. If there is not a session that furthers your career goals or that even remotely interests you for a particular time slot, it is okay. Don't panic. Go grab a coffee, relax, and watch *other* frantic conference-goers hustle by for a time.

#### **Do: Catch Up with Old Colleagues/Friends**

Conferences also offer a unique opportunity to catch up with old colleagues and friends: people that you used to attend grad school with, past advisors and professors, people that have moved on to



other graduate programs or careers, or people you've worked with or collaborated with in the past. Take some time to find out about their current research. Past colleagues can easily become current colleagues again, and can present an opportunity to collaborate outside of your current institution.

#### **Do: Have Fun!**

Enjoy the conference, the people, the destination! Yes, conferences are a place to further your professional career, meet new people and grow your CV, but this doesn't make them a strict and boring place. As a geographer at least, I have found that seemingly unapproachable leaders of the discipline are everyday people just like you and me, easy to talk to and altogether welcoming. Geography conferences are not suit and tie affairs. In fact, blue jeans, hiking shoes/boots, and flannels seem to be the norm. Networking not only leads to meeting future collaborators but also future friends and mentors, people that you can call with questions about your research, but also with questions about life and the struggles of graduate school. I am reluctant to say that this is the case with all conferences, but from my experience I can say that networking with professionals in my discipline has not only benefitted me professionally, but has led to my becoming a part of a great circle of people, a support group that I can call on both professionally and personally. This is one of the priceless benefits of becoming a major player, not a bystander, in your chosen discipline.

#### **This Brings Me to a Final Do: Attend a Conference**

Or better yet, attend many. As far as I'm concerned, conferences are all perks and no drawbacks. Put in the work, and it always pays off.