

JAMES RENNIE BEQUEST

REPORT ON EXPEDITION/PROJECT/CONFERENCE

Expedition/Project/Conference Title: The 15th Annual International Conference on Comparative Cognition (CO3)

Travel Dates: 18th – 23rd March 2008

Location: Melbourne Beach, Florida, USA

Group Member(s): Anjanette Harris.....

Aims: To present my data in the form of a talk entitled ‘Sex differences in spatial cognition: acute stress is the key’, and receive feedback, attend talks/poster sessions about general cognition and provide feedback to others, and to meet other researchers who work in the field of comparative cognition

OUTCOME (not less than 300 words):-

The International Conference on Comparative Cognition (CO3) took place in sunny Florida, March 2008. Every year the popularity of this conference grows and this year was no exception: over 200 delegates had travelled from all over the world to present their work at this conference. The delegates at CO3 were a mix of researchers at various stages of their careers (PhD students, junior post docs and established senior researchers) and everyone was encouraged to present at the conference and mingle at every opportunity.

The conference was unusual in that the majority of talks were five or ten minutes long with two minutes for discussion. Such short talks provide an excellent forum for presenting one question and one answer, and also means almost everyone who attends the conference can present a talk. Such economical presentation of data also meant that the audience was encouraged to find the speaker after the presentation to discuss the background and implications of the presented data. The conference was organised so that the majority of delegates stayed at the Raddisson hotel where the conference was held, thus there was lots of opportunity to meet fellow attendees during coffee breaks or over lunch or dinner, or round the pool in the morning and have informal discussions about science.

I really enjoyed presenting my talk. I thought the audience seemed really interested and friendly and it was a refreshing change to present my work at a conference focussed entirely on cognition. After the presentation I felt more confident talking about my research and I really enjoyed receiving valuable feedback and suggestions for future work. I definitely found that my confidence to speak about my science grew as the conference progressed.

I was especially interested in the ‘Spatial Cognition’ sessions because of their direct relevance to my own research. For example, Danielle Sulikowski from Australia presented her work on spatial cognition in the omnivorous bird (the Noisy Miner), she found that spatial working memory performance depended on the type of food that was presented as a reward. I liked that she used the natural history of the bird to formulate relevant questions pertaining to the cognitive abilities of the birds, an approach that is widely endorsed by Prof. Sara Shettleworth (a leading researcher in cognition). I also enjoyed listening to talks from the ‘Time and Number’ and the ‘Perception and Attention’ sessions. As well as talks there were two poster sessions each of which started at 8pm and went on till well past midnight. Lively discussion was actively encouraged and helped along with a glass or two of wine. My confidence to ask questions increased as the night progressed.

An afternoon session was held in honour of the contributions of Prof. Sara J. Shettleworth to the field of cognition. This session consisted of five excellent plenary lectures, in which leading experts in the field of cognition presented their work. The topics were diverse and interesting. For example, Ken Chen spoke about his research into the search patterns of desert ants for their nest-sites and Sue Healy spoke about the role that natural selection has played in shaping the cognitive abilities of animals, she used data from food storing birds to illustrate her ideas.

After the plenary session there was a master lecture by Sara Shettleworth, in which she described recent advances in the field of comparative cognition and how over the last 10-15 years not only are many more

species being studied, contributions by researchers from different backgrounds are increasing, and research on comparative cognition is better connected with developmental psychology, behavioral neuroscience, primatology, behavioral ecology, and other fields. In the evening we further celebrated Sara's work and the commencement of her retirement with a banquet at the hotel. Two of Sara Shettleworth's previous PhD students paid a touching tribute to Sara in the form of a comedy presentation (we heard stories from Sara's past) and at the end of the presentation Sara was presented with a leather bound copy of her life's work. I enjoyed learning about Sara's past and I was really happy to have met her before she retired.

This was my first international conference and it was unlike any other conference I have ever been to. I found CO3 a really enjoyable and useful experience and I would like to thank the James Rennie Bequest for funding my travel to Florida which allowed me to attend this excellent conference.



Prof. Sara J Shettleworth and I at dinner, discussing important science!