

JAMES RENNIE BEQUEST REPORT ON CONFERENCE

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Conference Title: 24th Fungal Genetics Conference

Travel Dates: 19th – 28th of March 2007

Location: Asilomar Conference Center, Pacific Grove, California, USA

Aims: Updating with the latest advances in the field and presenting my work

OUTCOME :

Attending this year's 24th Fungal Genetics Conference which took place from the 20th-25th March 2007 at the Asilomar Conference Center in Pacific Grove was amazing. It is a very special place and I can well understand why more than 750 scientist from all around the world gather every two years to exchange and discuss their latest research. The meeting was a quite intense and very stimulating experience, and a great pleasure. Sincere thanks are due to the James Rennie Bequest for supporting my attendance and thus the opportunity to present a poster so early on in my PhD project.

The Asilomar State Beach and Conference Grounds are located at a long stretch of white sand about 90 miles south of San Francisco, close to the south-west end of Monterey Bay. The Arts & Crafts architecture styled timber cottages are well integrate in the coastal wood scenery. Boardwalks lead through flower speckled dunes to the pacific shoreline. A wonderful beach to relax after a long day of talks and scientific discussions.

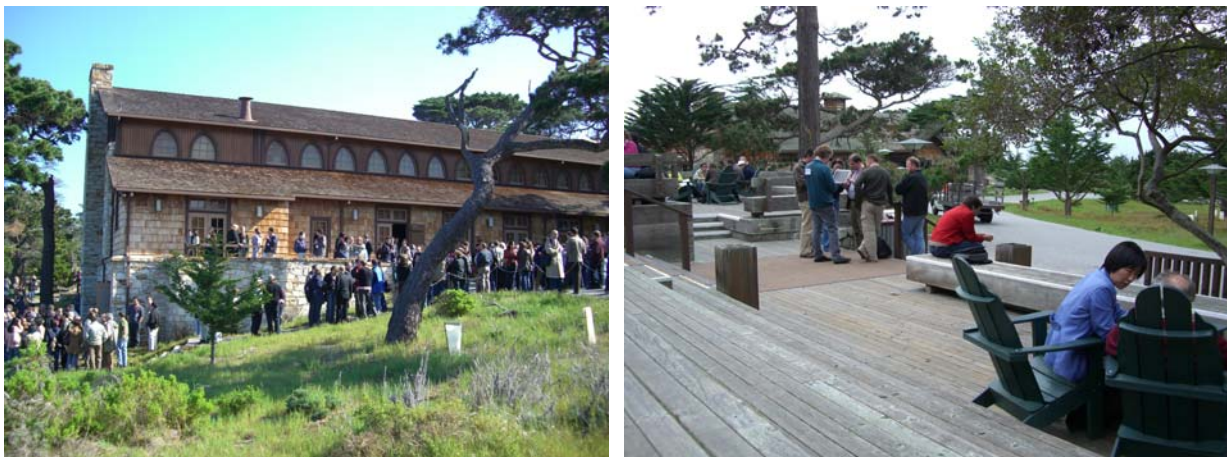


(L) Merrill Hall, venue for plenary talks and the conference closing party. (R) Boardwalks leading through dunes down to the beach.

The organising committee, chaired by Barbara Howlett (University of Melbourne, Australia) and Joseph Heitman (Duke University Medical Centre, USA), did an incredibly well job by putting together a programme that included all major fungal model organisms covering the broad diversity of modern fungal genetics and cell biology. Credits are also due to all speakers who presented leading edge research on a level that was equally attractive and accessible for senior and junior scientists.

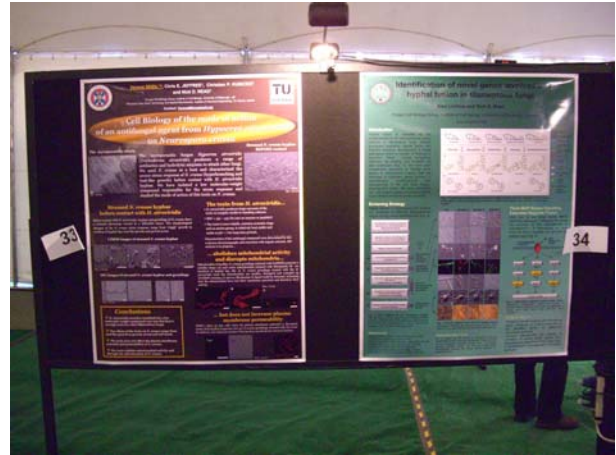
Outstanding speakers who provided valuable information for my project were: Michael Freitag (Oregon State University) who talked about ‘Gene silencing mechanisms in *Neurospora crassa*’, Katherine Borkovich (University of California, Riverside) speaking about ‘Heterotrimeric G proteins and their coupled receptors in *Neurospora*’, Barry Scott (Massey University) who’s topic covered ‘Molecular insights into mutualism in fungal-plant interactions’ and Jin-Rong Xu (Purdue University) talking about ‘*Magnaporthe grisea* infection of rice and parallel studies in wheat scab’. Also to mention the fantastic talk by Nick Talbot (University of Exeter) speaking about ‘Mitotic control and induction of autophagic cell death during appressorium formation in the rice blast fungus *Magnaporthe grisea*’, as well as Louise Glass’s presentation (University of California, Berkeley) covering ‘Transcriptional profiling during colony establishment in *Neurospora crassa*’ and André Fleissner talking about ‘PRM-1 is involved in germling fusion and is essential for male and female fertility in *Neurospora crassa*’ from the same group. There are many more people to allude who provided valuable information and ideas for interesting theoretical and experimental approaches that hopefully will be useful for my own work.

After breakfast all delegates assembled in Merrill Hall to attend the five plenary talks until lunch. Coffee breaks in between allowed for brief chats with the speakers. After lunch eight talks followed in six concurrent sessions at various venues on the conference grounds. All within walking distance which allowed for changing location and attending individually selected talks. Additionally, eight workshops were organised during lunch breaks. The *Neurospora* and *Magnaporthe* meetings I attended provided useful background information on how future research topics and interaction between individual groups of the community are organised. After dinner, more informal discussions took place during the poster sessions.



(L) Coffee break in between plenary talks outside Merrill Hall. (R) The picnic area: meeting point for discussions after the concurrent afternoon sessions.

Four of our group members attended the meeting, including our PI Nick Read, the postdocs Gabriela Roca and Verena Seidl, and myself as first year PhD student. We all presented posters, and Nick and Gabriela also gave talks at one of the afternoon session. Although I was struggling with my voice after more than two hours of continuous talking during my poster presentation, I very much enjoyed displaying my data. Actually, I was a bit surprised about the interested and very positive response. I presented quite preliminary data in a rather simple overview and expected to vanish amongst the other 200 posters that were out. But the simple concept proved quite successfully as it triggered numerous questions from the people who stopped, and engaged them in very stimulating discussions, sometimes quite controversial. I benefited especially from this evening, as it helped me to rank my project in the field and compare it to other approaches. In total 600 posters were presented in three individual sessions. All abstracts can be found on the FGSC website: www.fgsc.net.



(L) The poster tent: poster presentation and lively discussions along with a nice wine reception. (R) Verena Seidl's and my poster on display.

One clear challenge of this meeting was its size. It is not possible to attend every talk and to meet all interesting people; not even within the own individual research area. Therefore, it is important to have a careful look at the programme way before the meeting to select talks and people that most likely will have a high impact for one's own work. On the other hand it is also worthwhile to randomly mix under colleagues from different backgrounds and get insights in other areas.

In summary, it was a great time. My personal outcome from this meeting is a long list of ideas and things to do, as well as practical tips which will have an important impact on my work for the next months. Two collaborations also emerged from this, including a planned visit to Nick Talbot's lab at the University of Exeter, in order to learn more about working with the rice blast fungus *Magnaporthe grisea*, as well as a closer interaction with André Fleissner from Louise Glass's lab at the University of California, Berkeley. As a highly valuable side effect of this meeting I had the opportunity to visit him for one day in their lab which resulted in long discussions and even more ideas.

I can only strongly encourage other PhD students to attend scientific meetings early on in their projects, to prepare and present data (either as poster or talk) and to apply for financial support from organisations such as the James Rennie Bequest. Thanks again to JRB for making this possible.



Seals and amazing jellyfish at the famous Monterey Bay Aquarium.