The experience of attending the Ecological Society of America 2001 annual meeting in Madison, Wisconsin

Report for the Rennie Fund committee

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- Ecology at three scales: theory, practice and personal work

The experience of attending the ESA meeting could be described as a unique scaling exercise. Because ecological work in all possible disciplines and environments converge in a single conference centre, each researcher is forced to rethink and rework on the personal work in different environmental contexts, theoretical scales and spatial and temporal dimensions. It is not surprising that this exercise is simultaneously exciting and threatening. On the one hand it is self-assuring to find a niche for one's ideas, questions and findings. I found the greatest motivation when, for a few seconds, my mind could picture an immense network of connections between theory, ideas, findings and practical ecological problems. On the other hand, the experience of picturing your work in that network is equivalent to marking the spot where you are standing in a map of the universe. The pen is never thin enough.

By moving from one room to the next of the Monona Terrace Conference Centre I was able to scale up and down the ecological map: in symposia invited guests discussed the theory of important ecological questions, in oral sessions specialists presented a more detailed overview of their work and finally in the exhibition room I could open my work to discussion.

- The theory: symposia and discussion sessions

Symposia titles had the property of raising umbrella questions that brought together experts working in radically different environments and scales but contributing to the same general ecological theory. In terms of my work, the most interesting symposium was *Functional similarity and functional groups in ecological systems* (along with its discussion session in the evening). This symposium and its discussion session were

created to revise what has been achieved in the 8 years that have passed since the discussion on the function of diversity was open.

So, are more diverse assemblages of species more functional? The room was divided. Microcosms and their unrealistic simplicity versus natural systems and their uncontrollable complexity. They seem to render different answers to the same question. Are functional groups useful? The room was divided again. There are assemblages of species where each component performs such a specific function that functional groups contain one or two members. In other cases a functional system can be neatly divided into a few functional groups of species. It will never cease to surprise me how cutting edge scientific topics keep dragging researchers back to the same old epistemological questions: how to experiment without simplifying to the absurd? Are classification systems a property of natural systems or a bad habit of human kind?

- The practice: oral sessions

Oral sessions were the places where everybody felt at home. That was the space where technical details and very specialised knowledge were discussed amongst the few that understood them in enough depth. I found *my cup of tea* in the session named *Ecosystem processes: decomposition and litter.* This was the session where I heard and discussed the results of studies that test specific hypotheses similar to the ones I have postulated in my own work. I also learned of different field and statistical methods used to analyse similar problems. But, I would say that the most useful experience was to hear graduate students at the end of their degree present their results and answer questions posed by the audience.

At a different depth, oral sessions were not only for specialists, they were also a unique opportunity to attend a *crash course* on the topics that are relevant but just on the outskirts of ones own work. Attending the *Nutrient cycling* and the *Vegetation change: succession, recovery, facilitation* sessions proved very useful.

Finally, there were those scarce but fortunate windows in an afternoon or morning where it was not possible to find in the program ones *cup of tea* or a useful *crash course.* Then it was when one could afford the luxury of feeding curiosity at pleasure. By jumping from one session to an other, I was able to update my general knowledge in ecological topics that are not as close to my field of study.

- Personal work: preparing and presenting a poster

Then there was that minute window devoted to my work. Two square meters of space and an hour and a half of an open shop to attract my scientific clients. I knew months before that the glorious moment was going to be brief and competition for attention very high.

The toughest lesson to be learnt when preparing a poster is that it is impossible to say it all. It takes a lot of self criticism to know what is going to be interesting and attractive for the scientific community. What's worse, the few things that one chooses to say, need to be transmitted visually.

I didn't know it, but that brief moment when I was standing there, talking about my work to people that were interested in my poster, was genuinely worth all the hard work that the poster represented. It was the first time that results produced by my Ph.D. project were presented to the public and therefore, feedback from other researchers and students was useful to determine those points that need to be clarified in the second part of the project.

- Final thought

Undoubtedly, the most important aspect of my experience attending the ESA meeting is that it made only natural something that is usually difficult to achieve: to zoom up and down the ecological map without losing sight of the point where my own work lies. By doing this, I was able to add dimension to my findings, place them in context and review them from different angles, which in turn produced new ideas to be pursued in the second part of my Ph.D. project.