

Letters to the Editor

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Letters to the Editor

A Kind Word for Annual Meetings

Dear Editor,

Thanks to my lifelong enthusiasm for attending annual meetings, I have had the privilege of meeting all three authors of "Reveille: A Wake-up Call for Organizers of Annual Meetings", E.R.W. Neale, G.S. Nowlan and G.D. Mossop (*Geoscience Canada*, v. 20, p. 82).

Perhaps my situation is unusual because I have, on most occasions, been my own "granting agency". (In this respect, I have something in common with Sir William Logan). At any rate, I come to meetings determined to get my money's worth, to stay awake through at least some of the papers, and to do my best to extract some morsel of wisdom from even the most boring presentation.

My sympathy for authors is also aroused when I recall the very first time I presented a paper, at a Geological Society of America meeting. My mentor at Harvard, Esper Larsen, was famous for never attending the scientific sessions, but when he heard that his youngest graduate student was on the programme he announced he would break his usual rule, and he did in fact appear, and only a little late. Since my talk lasted only seven minutes, it was good he was not any later. In those

days, every contribution to knowledge did not necessarily take fifteen minutes to explain; you said what you had to say and then sat down.

Possibly the presentation of a number of very short papers by young authors might have a better result than the sending of abstracts by E-mail suggested by the three authors. In inter-disciplinary work, there is danger in confining your communication to those in your own subspecialty. Our study of the mineralogy of fossil teeth from Nova Scotia is a case in point: we received interesting feedback from chemists, dentists and other scientists who would certainly not have been on our usual mailing list.

So my thanks to the hard-working organizers of our annual meetings. Despite the shortcomings correctly pointed out by Neale *et al.*, I hope our Annual Meetings will continue to flourish.

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"Reveille" Presents Harsh Judgement

Dear Editor,

The criticism of Geological Association of Canada–Mineralogical Association of Canada (GAC–MAC) annual meetings by our colleagues Ward Neale, Godfrey Nowlan and Grant Mossop raises some interesting issues, but overall we find their judgement rather harsh; perhaps they have become saturated from attending too many meetings and should donate their travel funds to those who have less opportunity to take advantage of such proceedings! After all, for most graduate and undergraduate students and geoscientists from both the public and private sectors — who represent a large proportion of delegates at such meetings — obtaining funding to consider such issues as pre-college education, university curricula, research policy, *etc.* is surely beyond the realms of possibility. In our experience, geoscientists attend annual GAC–MAC meetings for a variety of reasons, and suggesting that most members present a paper only to get their expenses paid is particularly cynical and surely unwarranted.

That established and reputable geoscientists such as the authors would find the tenor of many scientific talks to be below their standards is not surprising; after all, we are all prone to berate the quality of our children's education compared to our own, though often on insufficient and unsubstantiated grounds. The glib remark that others are supposedly dozing in technical sessions while important science is being discussed in the corridors is beside the point. What is impor-

tant is that meetings such as the GAC–MAC provide a forum for geoscientists to hone their skills within their specialties, to stay current on advances made in other fields through direct interaction with their peers, or even to refresh themselves on the state of the art (or should that be science?) of topics less familiar to them. Most would agree that institutional isolationism can lead only to stagnation.

The article's wrath is aimed largely at the content and quality of research papers presented in the oral sessions, and for which there is undoubtedly some degree of justification. However, considering the diverse interests of the GAC–MAC membership, the suggested reduction in the number of technical sessions may be a bit rash. For example, such an approach would not automatically guarantee a corresponding increase in the quality of research contributions and, in our opinion, would seriously, and adversely, affect the number of registrants. The authors, in their summary, also suggested that research papers should be very carefully selected through peer review. However, we were under the impression, perhaps mistakenly so, that all papers submitted for consideration at GAC–MAC meetings were, by definition, subject to a review process, as clearly outlined on the standard abstract forms issued some considerable time prior to the meetings. They also suggested that research results could also be communicated in field trips, short courses, review papers, and particularly, poster sessions. Surely all of these avenues of scientific communication are already an integral compo-

nent of GAC-MAC meetings and so their suggestion is not original. Additionally, of course, it is questionable whether they are aware that the format of short courses and field trips to convey scientific endeavours, which they actively promote, in becoming increasingly inefficient and uneconomic. Over the last several years, many such short courses have either been cancelled or poorly attended, and a great many field trips, prepared with much time and effort, have also been cancelled due to lack of support. While we agree that posters deserve more recognition than they are currently given, in our experience, higher level administrative bodies consistently place more emphasis on oral presentations. Perhaps the GAC-MAC needs, therefore, either to place a greater importance on posters, or to attempt to re-educate such senior administrative bodies; preferably both. Additionally, the GAC-MAC may even wish to reconsider the need for "annual" meetings; are they really necessary, given the time, effort and expense involved?

As a corollary, perhaps a better approach would be for the GAC-MAC to educate its membership on the importance of presenting a well-organized talk accompanied by suitable audiovisual material. Neale, Nowlan and Mossop have already provided a service to GAC-MAC by emphasizing this

general lack of preparedness. University departments could help here by ensuring that graduate students (and professors!) are familiar with some of the basics of good communication. The suggested restriction of papers to a chosen few begs the question of who does the choosing. In spite of assertions to the contrary, state of the art review papers would normally be the prerogative of the more established scientists and would deny proper representation to the younger generation. Nevertheless, for some, GAC-MAC are already perceived as cliquish organizations, so we must guard against making them appear to be even more exclusive.

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The Basic Problem of Inconsequential Presentations

Dear Sir,

The problem that Neale *et al.* raised is real, and is by no means specific to professional societies of Canada. Here, south of the border, we face much the same sort of issue, though perhaps with a slight twist because of somewhat different constraints about research funding, about tenure decisions in universities, and the like. In my view, all these externalities significantly affect the nature of professional gatherings.

Neale *et al.* suggested that main sessions of meetings might be devoted to matters of common professional concern and interest, relegating technical presentations largely to poster sessions. I like poster sessions, but it takes a lot of work to prepare a good one. In particular, for meetings as large as that of the Geological Society of America, with over 1000 oral presentations, having them all in poster sessions may be logistically impossible if every author has to tend to it for half a day.

Perhaps these are not insuperable obstacles, but just push-

ing the kind of paper that amounts to "another set of numbers to fortify the prevailing view" into poster sessions does not solve the basic problem of proliferation of inconsequential presentations. It seems to me that this is really a problem in professional culture. At least in the U.S., and I expect in Canada as well, many people give talks only in part to communicate the latest results of some exciting research; many submit abstracts as necessary tickets for a chance to attend professional meetings, or to build up credit for long-term professional advancement. Funding sources often expect talks as evidence of productivity; certainly, abstracts help with one's bibliography. The whole system must modify its behaviour if we are to make serious inroads in cutting down trivial presentations. How do we do that?

Thank you for your attention.

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