

Reflections on Meetings

Summer finds many *Notices* readers away from their home base for meetings, conferences, or collaborative research.¹ This July marks the fortieth anniversary of my own first experience with a summer mathematics conference.

It could well serve as a model: the eighty participants ranged from graduate students like me through junior and senior researchers, including a future Fields medalist and a couple of future AMS presidents, as well as people whose names were already known to all. The topics ranged across algebra, topology, and logic, as did the participants' research interests. Sessions were held in a conference facility adjacent to a West Coast college campus, where we were housed together in a dormitory and dined together in a cafeteria. The weather was balmy and the conference climate serious but noncompetitive, with minor exceptions, like when a brief professional controversy led to an even briefer food fight in the above-mentioned cafeteria. There were coffee breaks and an excursion.

And although I attended every talk and took notes (I was a student, and only a couple of years out of undergraduate school), and while I can remember the way some speakers looked and acted, I have to say that I can't recall now anything any speaker said. This is not due entirely to the passage of time. I clearly recall, for instance, a tour guide on the excursion pointing out that the bridge we were passing near was "the longest of its kind in the world", and one of the conference participants (one of the future AMS presidents, in fact) pointing out that this predicate actually applied to all bridges. I could quote coffee break quips and dinner table repartee as well.

There's nothing strange about these selective memories: I think most of us would agree that often the most useful, as well as the most memorable, parts of meetings and conferences are the informal interactions between participants outside of regular sessions. Marcus du Sautoy has some nice accounts of this in some enviably exotic settings in his recent autobiographical book about the mathematical life, *Symmetry: A Journey into the Patterns of Nature*.

Meetings and conferences are a large component of AMS activities. Consider the Society's 990 (the return nonprofit organizations file with the U.S. Internal Revenue Service): introducing Part III (Statement of Public Service Accomplishments) of the form, IRS cautions that "how the public perceives an organization may be determined by the information presented on its return" and urges that "the return ... fully describes, in Part III, the organization's programs and accomplishments."

¹All issues of the *Notices* are now available in their entirety in PDF format anywhere the Internet can be accessed, <http://www.ams.org/notices>.

In complying, the Society reports its primary purpose to be "to promote mathematical research and education" and its first listed achievement "meetings of the American Mathematical Society" (these are from the 2005 return, the most recent I found online).

Although the Society no longer holds general meetings in the summer, in part because members use summer travel for specialized meetings and conferences in their fields, the regional, international, and winter annual AMS meetings offer a full range of scientific and professional programs. Maybe they are too full, at least at annual meetings. While meeting schedulers try to make sure that every attendee, regardless of scientific specialty, has at least one session available in their field in any given program block, it's not uncommon to find several of interest occurring simultaneously. This is especially annoying when a session of general interest conflicts with sessions in one's specialty.

Such conflicts may have kept some mathematicians from attending a symposium on climate change, jointly sponsored by the AMS and SIAM, which was held at the winter meeting in San Diego in January. Fortunately Patricia Kenschaft of Montclair State University was able to attend and provides a report of the session in this issue. Pat is a seasoned *Notices* author, but this article came to us as a submission. I think it could well serve as an example for other contributions: readers attending meetings, or parts of meetings, may well decide that what they're hearing deserves to be shared with others, and become sort of participant-observer freelance reporters for the *Notices*. Contributed articles like this need to be interesting to a broad range of *Notices* readers, eschew things like formal listings of programs or numbers of attendees, and any accounts of presentations should be checked by the presenters for accuracy. As with all submissions to the *Notices*, clarity and concision are important, and graphics, where appropriate, are appreciated.

Reading about meetings in the *Notices* is no substitute for attendance. But while we're on the subject of climate change, mathematicians concerned about the latter, or about their personal "carbon footprint", might reflect on the fact that a transcontinental plane trip emits a half ton of carbon dioxide per passenger, and an international round trip emits as much as driving a Hummer from Chicago to Seattle. These figures, from websites that sell carbon offsets, may be some solace to those of us who are spending this summer at our home base, although reading about meetings in the *Notices*.

—Andy Magid