

From the World of Geography

This column presents talking points and events that have taken place in the world of Geography and geographers. In the current issue we wander through a conference held in the United States and end up to the academic smörgåsbord in Sweden.

Wandering through the Association of American Geographers conference in Denver

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The Association of American Geographers (AAG) is a scientific and educational society founded in 1904. It has members from 62 countries and includes 53 specialty groups. The 2005 Annual Meeting of the AAG was held April 5-9, 2005 in Denver, Colorado. The Annual Meeting of AAG is one of the biggest geographical meetings in the world with over 4000 attendees and almost 3000 presentations in over 700 sessions scheduled throughout the meeting in this year (AAG 2005). These numbers can show something about the interaction possibilities on the field of geographies.

Scenery of the conference

Denver is quite interesting place to visit. It is the capital of Colorado and lies about 1,760 metres above sea level. The population of Denver is 554, 636 (2.4 million in the metropolitan Denver). Major industries are communications, utilities and

transportation. Denver is also an attractive tourism district because of the vicinity of the Rocky Mountains that are about 40 kilometres from Denver (DenverGov.Org 2005; Lindbland & Westby 2004: 252).

The conference was held in the Adam's Mark hotel (Figure 1). In our point of view, the location of the Adam's Mark was perfect. It was in the middle of the city (at the end of the pedestrian street which was also the main shopping district, see Figure 2) and about ten minutes walk from our hotel. So, during the lunch breaks you could easily go to get some lunch or buy some presents to bring home to. However, eating healthy is a bit difficult in Denver. The dishes were huge in restaurants (e.g. the salads that were supposed to be starters were so big that we could not eat them for a dinner) and there were no groceries in the down town.

As a conference place, the Adam's Mark hotel was a bit challenging. Sessions were held in two buildings and in principle you could go from one building to another without going outside – if you were able to find the right elevator or corridor. If you could not, you were lost. The next challenge was to find the right floor. It was actually easy in the Plaza Building where sessions were held only in one floor. The challenge there was a renovation which made it more difficult to find right rooms. In the Tower Building the sessions were held in six floors.



Figure 1. Adam's Mark hotel in the middle of other high buildings

The problem was that there were floors where you were able to go only by one elevator or stairs. So, first you had to find the right elevator and then the right floor. After that finding the right room was not a big challenge anymore. Of course we got maps, but in spite of that we were mostly lost for the first two days.

The confusing structure of the conference place was frustrating especially when you had to hurry to one session to another. Sometimes the timetables were late so you did not have too much time to change the session. The timetables were also a problem if you wanted to see some particular presentation, because not all

chairs respect the given order of the presentations.

Most of the sessions were held in quite small rooms, which was good because there were usually not that many people listening. However, some of the sessions were arranged in big ballrooms where the voice of the speaker disappeared in the space. Therefore, it was sometimes hard to understand, especially when the topic of the presentation was difficult and new, and the speaker talked very fast. However, most of the presenters spoke very good English and were easy to follow.



Figure 2. The main pedestrian street in Denver city centre

Participating in working groups

Intensive participation of the conference allowed listening about 60 different presentations. Some of the papers were more connected with our own research topics, some sessions just sounded interesting or there was a known person giving a presentation. It was interesting to hear fresh ideas, which discussed the experimenting methods and new technology issues on the fields of geography research. On the other hand, some papers approached the issues that are in the program of the first year students in Finland (e.g. basic procedures of the European Union). However, this variety of the topics and methods was rather impressive.

Usually participants were divided into conference specialty groups by the organizers according to the submitted abstracts. But the blur electronic system of the registration created also other ways of getting into work group. There was possible to see that the organizers of several sessions formed their groups according to previous relations. For example, many participants of the “Planning for transborder development” specialty group have been publishing articles in the recent book, which was demonstrated also in the paper session. Therefore people knew quite well the presented research topics and discussion followed ‘usual’ tracks. However, some case studies about later developments were new and interesting.

After the formal session the participants of above mentioned group landed in near café. There was more time to talk about the current research projects, future conferences and plans of the geographers. The possibilities of the cooperation were expressed. And then was already time to shake the hands and leave for the other activities.

Challenges met in the conference

The annual meeting is pretty Anglo-American oriented. The idea of the meetings is mostly to provide networking possibilities with colleagues and discover new developments in geography.

Well, the networking was not that easy if you do not know people before the conference, because there was a lack of the possibilities for creating new contacts. Just some small things could have made it better – like some tables and chairs in a lobby, maybe coffee served there in certain times like in IGU meeting in Glasgow.

Most presentations were interesting and well prepared – stimulating new ideas and questions. We found that you should not count too much to meet these presenters later on – it would be best to take the contact immediately after the presentation. Sometimes it was possible, sometimes not. If you were lucky you got an active session and some time afterward to talk with people in the group. But since it was not possible to choose your session, you may end up to be a “Finnish session” like in Katri’s case. Networking possibilities might increase when you have some contacts and a few good publications.

Aftermath of the meeting

Presentation of the paper and getting feedback created one of the motivations to make a long trip to Denver. This kind of conference helps in the early stage in your research career to widen your understanding about the variety of geography and your position in it. Maybe later on, when you have managed to get some credit in research field you have better possibilities to get “inside”. In general this is why our feelings about the profits of the conference were quite two-folded: we heard so many different and nice presentations but contacts which would have carried further were quite few. However, after the conference we have more motivations and a lot of new ideas to our own research.

References

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Academic Smörgåsbord in Östersund

The 11th International Symposium on Society and Resource Management 2005

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His Majesty King Carl XVI Gustaf opened an academic symposium by referring to the place as the one where he had learned to ski and where he had learned to appreciate Swedish nature. This was the place for the

11th International Symposium on Society and Resource Management (ISSRM).

ISSRM 2005 (June 16th –19th) was entitled: “From Knowledge to Management – Balancing Resource Extraction, Protection & Experiences”. The association behind ISSRM was originally founded in the United States and the meetings are held every other year in North-America. This was actually just the third time that ISSRM was arranged in Europe – the previous European countries being Italy and Austria. This time the symposium was held in Östersund, Sweden.

ISSRM 2005 had four goals: 1) To give Scandinavian research and policy community a chance to learn more about the diversity of applied interdisciplinary



Figure 1. His Majesty King Carl XVI Gustaf giving the opening speech.

research done in North America and elsewhere in the world. 2) To make it easier for Scandinavian scientists and students to meet those from around the world who are working with recent theoretical and methodological developments in applied social science research for managing natural resources. 3) To build relationships between Scandinavian researchers and their counterparts outside the region. 4) To give the international scientific community some understanding of the institutions, geography and the culture of Scandinavia. There were lessons to be learned in this symposium!

The scientific committee of the symposium included advisors mainly from United States and from the Nordic countries. One member of the scientific committee was the vice-president of Geographical Society of Northern Finland Jarkko Saarinen who also works as a professor in the University of Oulu at the Department of Geography. The composition of the scientific committee also implied the multidisciplinary nature of the symposium – there were experts from human to natural sciences.

If the weight in the history and in the organisers of ISSRM were in North of the world, the participants made this symposium truly an international one. There were over 500 participants from 37 different countries. The participants also enhanced the multidisciplinary nature of the symposium by presenting their own work from the world of science.

Decision anxiety on the smörgåsbord

One of the main organizers of the symposium compared the academic variety of this symposium to traditional Swedish smörgåsbord. The participants had four

days to enjoy this sitting. The academic presentations were divided into nine tracks and each day there were two to three sessions in each. During each session there were three to four presentations. In addition there were presentations of keynote lecturers and roundtable discussions on specific topics. Besides the oral sessions, there were also almost 100 poster presentations put on display in two separate poster sessions. The topics of these oral presentations and posters focused on migration, indigenous people, recreation and tourism, sustainability, use of protected areas, human dimension of it, landscape visualization, local participation and resource management etc. There definitely were toppings, dressings and academic fulfillment in general for every scholars craving.

When there is plenty to choose from sometimes it is nice to try something different. For a beginner in the academic symposiums the speciality was a round table discussion. Taking into consideration so wide symposium, there was only one round table discussion focusing on sustainability; range of views across Canada and Europe. The aim of roundtable discussion was to reflect different conceptions and perceptions on sustainability related to forests. The aim was to share the perspectives with others in a mutual learning forum. The active roundtable discussion in small group with 30 participants around world was very refreshing occasion in middle of symposium. This session also gave fruit weeks after the actual event when the chair Peter Duinker from Canada, kindly sent the memory of the roundtable to all of its participants.

Whenever you bring your own dish to the smörgåsbord there is excitement on how other people will enjoy it. Jurvakainen's presentation in "Sustainable tourism" session was titled "Environmental Management System in Tourism Area - case Rokua in Northern Finland. Riipinen gave her presentation in the session called "Local participation in Policy and Planning" and her display was entitled "Scaling Social capital – Global Processes and Local Perspectives on land use." 15 minutes on the stage is over in 15 minutes and there is another scholar waiting for his/her 15 minutes (of fame?). Few comments were given right after the presentation but the actual discussions on the presentations and the useful networks were mainly done during the dessert.

Social events, Nordic culture and nature – a sweet dessert for the researchers

Social events included welcoming party at Town Hall of Östersund hosted by Major of Östersund. One of the interesting social events was "Wine of the World" where participants were asked to bring bottle of wine of their country/region/town or one of their favorite bottle. Oulu 400-year celebration bottle of white and red wine found their way to buffet besides really wide range of bottles from all over the world.

The organizers had devoted one afternoon for field trips to 13 different targets. There were trips to the mountains, forests and lakes including tourist and resource extractive locations, visits to Swedish heritage; Sami settlement, Jämtland regional museum and Moose garden. Participants could also get acquainted with northern nature and its

facilities in downhill skiing resorts, back country hiking sites and sustainable forestry or eco park sites. These field trips were excellent opportunities to get know a Nordic country and its nature especially to participants far away countries. Field trips also served as an opportunity for the scholars to get to know each other.

The symposium ended with a banquet in Gamla Hoteln Teatern. It was another occasion to show Swedish cuisine in a long lasting dinner accompanied with lots of local program.

Digesting

This symposium was an excellent opportunity to follow different disciplines and presentations of researchers from various countries and continents. Regardless on the discipline a common nominator was found in the topic of the seminar – society and resource management. In addition introducing one's own research and having discussion on it – sometimes even a little bit critical – is extremely important for post-graduate students. As Professor Thomas Heberlin said in his welcoming words "working hard can be fun" meaning that meeting face to face and building international bridges is nowadays necessary in scientific work and in (hopefully) forthcoming scientific career.

When sitting back in your own research chamber, you notice what kind of wide network of researcher you've created during few days. This creates new perspective into your own writing process and the hard works creates its fruits. One cannot wait to enjoy the smörgåsbord offerings in another place and another time.

