

NOTES

CONFERENCE OR NONCONFERENCE? — A POLEMIC

We make no apologies for reproducing on this page a note by Franklin Cardy, Director, Water Resources Branch, Environment New Brunswick, since it has particular relevance to the current fashion of holding symposia, group discussions and workshops. We hope that conferences in future will be better organised with opportunities to 'confer' rather than getting bored by people who are allowed to 'read' their papers.—*Ed.*

Each year about 20,000 people attend scientific conferences held in Canada. Suppose that they do this at an average cost of \$ 500, then \$ 10 million per annum is spent. Since virtually every single attendee is sponsored by an organization (whether Government, University, or Industry), this cost is passed on in one way or another to the public.

What happens at these conferences? Generally speaking, about 80% to 85% of each working day is devoted to the presentation of papers. The remaining time is spent in 'discussion', seldom allowing more than a few minutes for direct questions to each author. During the evenings, groups of scientists talk to each other informally, more often as friends or colleagues than in an exchange of scientific ideas. Sometimes 'workshops' are held but are often only small versions of the main paper presentation sessions and there is still little group discussion.

With regard to particular papers concerning specific research, about 5% of the Conference attendees are interested in the whole project and its details. They are the ones who ask the author detailed questions. Depending on the scope of the conference, about 50% to 80% of the attendees are interested in only the new ideas or conclusions in the paper. The rest may have no interest at all or not enough to listen to the presentation or attend the 'discussion'. And there are always some who contribute to a discussion only by talking about their own work regardless of its relevance.

A conference should be a place where ideas are exchanged, compared, and generated by direct interpersonal communication. A long time ago amateur and professional scientists used to assemble for this purpose. Now the amateurs can seldom afford it and soon, with increasing transport costs and decreasing funds, the professionals will be able to attend, much less frequently.

What would be lost if all conferences stopped?— The papers could still be published but few scientific acquaintances would be made. Most important of all, the opportunity for generating ideas and identifying new ways to find solutions to problems would be lost.

In fact, this loss occurs now! We allow people to present detailed papers at great length to an audience substantially unconcerned with the detail. We allow people who may be able to write but cannot speak to read their 'papers' to an increasingly bored audience!

Let us have the 'papers' printed but have speakers speak. And let them speak of ideas, new thoughts, and new conclusions—opening up and provoking thoughts in the audience, opening new avenues to explore so as to lead the science onward and keep it in focus.

A search party looking for a clue to a murder in the woods does not wander off individually in all directions. It covers the ground and advances in a planned and coordinated manner. If science be the search for truth, so should the broad body of scientists proceed in their quest.

Papers may be written and they may be read and they may generate new thoughts, but the real generation of ideas comes from person to person interaction around ideas with detailed facts playing only a supporting role.

Is it beyond us to provide once again a forum for this? Workshops work but generally only if groups are small—less than a dozen say. 'Poster sessions' properly presented are an excellent idea for the dissemination of detailed information to those that want it. Let us have papers printed, ideas presented by speakers, workshops assisted by facilitators, and much more discussion concentrated on the significant ideas and trends in the sciences. Let us bring together the research scientists, the applied scientists, the practitioners, and the managers and help them interact to compare and combine ideas. Let us have no more nonconferences, let us once again confer.

Persons planning to stage a conference will be interested to learn that a company called International Conferences Unlimited, Ltd., has been formed. Its announcement says; 'We will hold a meeting for you anywhere in the world without the need for you or anyone else to attend. If you wish to host a hydrology meeting in Kashmir, our versatile Far East staff will prepare the agenda, give the papers, take notes, conduct a field trip, and hold a banquet. We will also prepare a proceedings volume. We match discipline with locality: volcanic theories, for example, go to Bali or Reykjavik, never to the Hague. Should one of your staff need to have a prestigious meeting on his record, let us know his special field and we will see that he is on an appropriate agenda and receives a complete set of notes, abstracts, and reprints, as well as slides from the field trip'.

One professor has already reported how much he enjoyed the special hour on the terrace of the Hotel Grand Monaco, at a recent oceanographic conference that he did not attend. His department chairman states that this is the first time the professor has produced notes on a meeting, and the first time he did not take two weeks to recover from the trip. I forgot to say that hotel towels and local souvenirs are available as part of the package. All in all, its a mystery to me how we got along before this service became available. —Robert L. Bates, *Geotimes*, July–August 1977.

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I, B. P. Radhakrishna, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

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(Sd.) B. P. RADHAKRISHNA
Editor, *Journal of the Geological Society of India*.
