

Editorial

The joys of returning to in-person conferences - in an age of travel judgement

The Antarctic research community finally has cause to celebrate the return to meeting face to face, after what amounted to three full years of COVID-19 and subsequent restrictions corralling us all to the stilted environment of Zoom and its congeners. Different elements of our community have had the chance to partake in three highly significant meetings in recent months: the XIII SCAR Biology Symposium, which took place at the start of August in Christchurch, New Zealand; the joint SCAR-SCOR Southern Ocean Observing System Symposium shortly afterwards in Hobart, Australia; and the SCAR INSTANT meeting in Trieste, Italy, in September. I hold my hands up and admit that I went all the way to the first of these, pre-empting that with taking part in the Australia-New Zealand Antarctic Meeting and intervening APECS and SCAR workshops.

So, what did we learn from these meetings? Perhaps, first and foremost, the sheer passion and enthusiasm of rooms full of Antarctic researchers was finally released for everyone to see! The level and intensity of conversation, ideas sharing, meeting of old friends and colleagues and extending to new ones were clear for all to see, things that with the best of intentions do not happen on Zoom. A particular highlight, I believe, at all of these meetings was the very high level of participation of early-career researchers and, not only that, seeing the sheer quality of their work and standards of presentation in talks, posters or workshops. Plainly, even if isolated from each other, the research groups in our communities have not been resting on their laurels! Perhaps our most immediate practical responsibility now is to turn all of these presentations, conversations, ideas and brainstorming sessions into the scientific literature that is the bread and butter of career researchers and the foundation to getting our major messages out into the wider public and policymaking world. Just thinking of the Biology Symposium, our very own journal is providing a route to do so by setting up a 'Special Collection' of articles relating to work presented in the symposium (see [XIII SCAR Biology Symposium](#)). But I would invite all Antarctic researchers to consider *Antarctic Science* for submissions or for proposing further Special Collections arising from the various meetings mentioned, as well as upcoming ones around the world.

However, at the same time as our delight at these types of meetings and all of the benefits of their resumption, sobering global headlines have reported various types of damaging 'extreme events' across the world, with Antarctica far from escaping exposure to these (Siegert *et al.* 2023). This year's extreme record low for Antarctic winter sea ice coincided with the INSTANT meeting, providing a concentration of world-leading expertise for the world's media. While the precise reasons for this exceptional record low are yet to be decoded, various researchers' statements highlight the 'mind-boggling' scale of the change and the implications it has for global environmental stability. Linked with this, there has also been much publicity about the ecosystem-scale threats of such changes for iconic species such as emperor penguins.

In this environment, how do we then justify going anywhere at all? Perhaps the simple answer is to recognize that anything we do, or don't do, has costs and benefits. As emphasized by Dana Bergstrom in her memorable and motivating Biology Symposium plenary, if we do choose to travel, we have the responsibility and ability to maximize whatever the benefits are from that travel, most obviously by combining multiple 'events' to maximize our contribution or learning, contributing where practical to 'hybrid' events in order to maximize their reach and using all means at our disposal to ensure our messages get out to wider audiences. The Parties to the Antarctic Treaty, after the recent ATCM in Helsinki and with all of the deep global geopolitical challenges it currently faces, still achieved sufficient unity to develop the [Helsinki Declaration on Climate Change and the Antarctic](#), highlighting the need for urgent climate action. The SOOS Symposium ended with an [analogous closing statement](#), emphasizing the ongoing need for a sustained and coordinated Southern Ocean observing system as a fundamental prerequisite for understanding the drastic changes currently taking place in the Southern Ocean and their consequences. Finally, the SCAR Biology community developed the [Christchurch Communiqué](#), urging immediate climate action, as the narrow window we have in which to achieve effective change is rapidly closing. These are a few amongst many such initiatives from the concerned science community globally, and we will always face the question of what a few of us can do amongst billions, but I would encourage all to look at, and where possible engage with, these statements.

Reference

SIEGERT, M., BENTLEY, M., ATKINSON, A., BRACEGIRDLE, T., CONVEY, P., DAVIES, B., *et al.* 2023. Antarctic extreme events. *Frontiers in Environmental Science*, **11**, 10.3389/fenvs.2023.1229283.

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