

THE DREW LAB AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

ECOLOGY, EVOLUTION AND CONSERVATION OF CORAL REEFS

 

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Summer is networking season. Hints for students (and the rest of us)

This summer I will be attending the [26th International Congress for Conservation Biology in Baltimore](#). I am quite excited, as these meetings are usually quite exciting. It will be an opportunity to reconnect with old friends and colleagues, to talk about new developments in conservation and to get feedback on my somewhat unorthodox idea of [using population connectivity estimates to quantify shifting baselines](#). I am also attending this year for the first time as a director of a conservation biology MA program, so I'm excited to meet up with my colleagues and learn from their experience. Lastly I am going to be serving on the [student networking panel](#). And to help me prepare for that panel I thought I'd write a piece about the values of networking.

I think the single biggest thing a student can do to help them network is to own their research narrative.

Typically the first question one is asked is "So what do you work on?" and if you do not have a good answer for that, then the conversation is essentially a non-starter. The great science communicator [Liz Neeley](#) famously said that you should be able to talk about your research in 45 min, 10 min, and 2 min blocks and you should prep equally for all three. Students should be able to provide an interesting summary of your work, including the question, the result and why people should care. Please don't sell yourself short, practice this with your labmates before you leave and try it out on the guy on the flight to Baltimore.

Networking is now no longer restricted to face-to-face interactions, and even if you can't make it to the conference, there are other ways to get your name and your research out there. So **the second big thing I would emphasize is get a Twitter account***. My colleagues and I recently wrote an article about how twitter is valuable for researchers (preprint [here](#), astounding infographic [here](#)). Among our findings was that Twitter provides a valuable pre-peer review forum, can expand your research networks (the average Twitter network is 730% bigger than average department size) and it allows you to meet interesting people who you would never think of collaborating with.

To illustrate the latter point, the lab is heading out to Fiji next week where we will be working on a wide variety of projects from microbial ecology to coral reef community assembly to shifts in fishers' perspectives of what natural reef looks like. I simply cannot do all this work alone and will be collaborating with six different researchers outside of my institution on this trip. Of these six, four I met through Twitter (and three I've yet to actually meet in real life). By having an active social network I have been able to find people with the expertise necessary for us to join forces and ask very interesting questions. I'm not going to go into twitter dos and don'ts as there are already several very good resources ([here here here](#) and in peer reviewed form [here](#)). However I do want to urge students, especially those at smaller schools, to join in the conversation.

When on social media, it is important to not forget how to own your narrative. That is still critically important. Social media is a tool for you to reach out, but fundamentally you still have to have something interesting to say about your work. If you tweet about [donuts](#) then that's how people are going to associate you. This isn't to say that you have to be all science all the time, but if you're going to make a name for yourself in science, it's helpful to talk about science.

The last piece of advice I'm going to offer students is to set networking goals for yourself at the conference. These could be as simple as "Going to 5 talks by people who's writing I like" or more advanced like "going to 1 talk about a topic I find interesting but is totally out of my wheelhouse". Also set goals for in-between talks. **Don't just stand there in the corner talking to your labmate. You can do that at home and save yourself a ton of time and money.** Rather force yourself to go up to a speaker and say "Hi, I'm X, I really liked your talk, could you tell me a little more about it". Chances are they'll be happy to, and then they'll ask you "So, what do you work on?" (see above). Bonus if you're on twitter and [live-tweeting the conference](#), chances are you'll find other people who are at the conference. This can help reduce the barriers to communication and get you out meeting other interesting [Follow](#)



NETWORKING AT THE MELANESIAN BIOGEOGRAPHY MEETINGS.

conference participants.

Together these hints should help you develop a professional presence (or shudder "personal brand") and expand the number of people you can share that with. Above all, have fun. Networking should be about finding interesting people who can make you a better scientist and a more thoughtful colleague. Trust me, the more you do it, the easier it becomes.

*mine is @Drew_Lab

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BY LABROIDES IN UNCATEGORIZED ON JUNE 11, 2013.

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3 Comments

Holly Bik

JUNE 11, 2013 AT 6:58 PM

I would add to this and say "never eat alone" and "go to the bar at night (even if you don't drink)" – these informal networking scenarios are just as critical for networking as the conference talks and poster sessions themselves. And if the word "networking" sounds scary, think of it as "discussing exciting science ideas with cool new people"

Kara Woo

JUNE 11, 2013 AT 9:20 PM

This is helpful. I haven't been to many conferences but in these kinds of situations I always find myself in a vortex of social anxiety ("I should be talking to people...but I'm anxious...but now I'm anxious about being anxious...ugh why can't I do this??"). I think setting some baby step goals in advance next time will be a big help. Thanks!

Jude Keyse

JUNE 12, 2013 AT 6:24 AM

I find it easier to talk to important people if I don't know they are important, once I know who they are I get all nervous! Last time I told myself to go talk to someone whose work I thought was interesting I couldn't do it, but I was fine when I found myself having dinner with some big cheeses by accident. My advice would be to talk to as many people as possible, without looking up who is who, chances are you will bump into some really interesting people that way.

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