

Letters to the Editor

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the NPS/MAB international symposium and workshop on "The application of genetics to management of wild plant and animal populations" was that it occurred. If I had to write the head for a news story about the meeting, it would read, **HIGH—RISK VENTURE SUCCEEDS**. Consider that the ambient bureaucratic and fiscal climate can scarcely have favored growth of the idea of sponsoring a big meeting on a somewhat esoteric theme at a plush Washington hotel. Consider the problems of getting money and/or moral support from 30 sponsoring organizations and commitments from 60 major participants. Consider the logistics of staging the affair after all the basic arrangements were in place. Consider, above all, the questions that must always have lurked in the background: What if we gave a meeting and nobody came? What if it turns out that field biologists and population geneticists don't have anything much to say to each other? The mere fact of the meeting speaks volumes about the determination, dedication and diplomacy of Chris Schonewald-Cox and the other prime movers. That it ran almost flawlessly and accomplished many of its objectives was jam for the bees.

Typical of the crisply efficient operations, a list of all participants was distributed on the last day of the meeting. It shows that around 300 attended. I thought there were more than that in some of the general sessions, but maybe the mirrored walls of the Regency Ballroom accounted for that impression. Or, perhaps some chose anonymity rather than pay 50 bucks to register. In any case, enough people were there and also an adequate diversity. By my rough tally, 30 percent of those from outside the Washington area who were not on the program represented conservation groups, 22 percent were from universities and 17 percent from state or provincial conservation/fish and game departments. Attendance from NPS field areas was numerically robust, I counted 18 names. That handsome showing doubtless reflected the fact that the meeting was an approved NPS training session, thus escaping the travel-to-meetings stigma. By contrast, field attendance from the other federal agencies with major commitments to natural-area management was almost nil, four from the Fish and Wildlife Service and two from the Forest Service.

The germinal concept of the meeting, to speed the trickle-down (or trickle-across) of important ideas by bringing field biologists into contact with current population genetics theory, was an

exciting one — much talked-about, rarely attempted. It was also a bit tricky and more than a little subversive. We have, after all, pursued our empirical and intuitive ways of managing largely untainted by theory, and, besides, intellectual privation is considered good for the soul. At least, I presume it is, because it has become almost as hard for a field scientist to get to a technical meeting as it's said to be for a rich man to get into the kingdom of heaven.

The interest profile of this meeting differed from any other I've attended, possibly because it brought together such diverse people. At the usual scientific meeting, the level of attention tends to peak early and then to decay exponentially. My calculations, alas from a rather small sample, indicate that the mean LD₅₀ for listening to papers is reached on the third afternoon. Later speakers are likely to find themselves addressing empty chairs and a bored projectionist. The present meeting started slowly with good attendance, but not much feedback. The field folks and the high-powered theorists tended to circle warily, rather like a first meeting between partners in an arranged marriage. The constrained air vanished in the Wednesday afternoon sessions, mostly because people from state conservation departments began speaking up without being unduly worried that they might say something silly. The eventual greening of the meeting owed a lot to the persistent Wyoming biologist concerned about his tiny fragmented populations of bighorn sheep; to the man from Missouri who wanted to know whether he should mix or match his relict groups of prairie chickens; to the lady determined to find the genetically correct procedure for reintroducing river otters into Colorado.

After that, it went pretty well. More and more people were willing to wing it with questions and comments; the geneticists discovered theoretical interest in some field problems that were raised and began arguing with each other; and, at least on occasion, the meeting became the sort of intellectual rough-and-tumble that its organizers must have hoped it would be. Some of the best-attended and most animated workshop sessions occurred in the depths of the Friday afternoon. One sensed that the peak of useful interaction was still ahead; that the meeting could profitably have gone on for a couple more days. For me, an aspect of the unfinished feeling was the heavy load of *l'esprit de l'escalier*, the bright remarks one thinks of too late, that I carried away from the meeting. I wish I'd challenged some of the unfunny witticisms about subspecies; why didn't I keep asking until I really understood the concept of effective

population size?; if only I had ... In short, it was an excellent conference.

Looking back from six weeks later, the glow of course has faded and few of us have kept our solemn self-promises to study the short course in population genetics provided in the handouts. We confront the same population management problems, perhaps with somewhat deeper understanding, and newly aware that no magic answers exist, in genetics or elsewhere. We learned, if we didn't already know it, that geneticists command increasingly powerful techniques for seeing the genome beneath the skin and that the view obtained can yield critical population data. But, the techniques are no more available to most field biologists than they ever were. What we need are working relationships. Contacts at the meeting encouraged belief that population geneticists could become interested in some of our field problems. But, it's not likely to go much farther than that without specific programs, funds and more meetings.

So, what was accomplished in those five days at the Hyatt Regency, and what, if anything, does it portend? While pondering those questions, I kept remembering a bit of doggerel from the deep past, a fragment from a piece which, along with "The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck" and other old rousers, used to be a staple of grade-school dramatic recitations. To avoid being classified as an utterly Cretaceous fossil, I want to make it perfectly clear that this was just something I heard from the older kids. Anyway, the poem, Southey's "The Battle of Blenheim", has an old soldier describing the battle to boys and it concludes:

"But what good came of it at last?"

Quoth little Peterkin.

"Why, that I cannot tell", said he,

"But 'twas a famous victory."

Seen as an isolated intellectual event, the conference on application of genetic principles to population management was a resounding success, unique in the slim annals of NPS, "a famous victory". Whether any abiding good will come of it, I cannot tell. One can easily imagine another, more specific, genetics workshop and see other areas of biology where it would be useful to build some bridges between theorists and empiricists. Is it realistic to think of such things? Well, it happened once. I'm glad I was there to see it.

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