

First Overseas Conference Travel Fund

97th Western Society of Naturalists Conference
Monterey Bay, California 10-13 November 2016

First of all, I'd like to thank the New Zealand Marine Sciences Society for the opportunity to attend the annual Western Society of Naturalists meeting. The Western Society of Naturalists (WSN) annual meeting focuses on ecology, evolution, natural history and marine biology. Since it was the 100th anniversary of the society, the meeting was larger than normal with ~950 attendees.

WSN aims to have a student accessible meeting (with half or more of the talks given by postgraduate students), so the meeting kicked off with a great workshop organized by the student committee. Using Pixar stories and staff members, one of the students discussed what makes a good story and how we can describe our work in a more compelling way.

As indicated by the student workshop, a major theme of the conference was communicating science well. Not just for the general public, but also so policy makers understand the research we are conducting and how it impacts greater society. Several plenary speakers highlighted that we as scientists need to remain naturalists. The trend in many ecology papers recently has been multiple authors addressing theoretical concepts instead of the, "old school," approach to ecology (spending time in the field to observe and study how organisms live). Many of these speakers called on the attendees to not only remember their roots as naturalists, but to remind us that natural history stories, often in themselves, are compelling.

I was able to attend some really interesting talks on a variety of topics from the strength of coralline algal joints to potentially using fish eye lenses to age fish to coral reef ecosystem recovery after storm events. I also had the opportunity to give a talk presenting my research to date. I got some great feedback on future experiment ideas and contacts for networking which has given me a renewed sense of enthusiasm as I carry on with my PhD research.

Finally, for the 100th anniversary of the society, the top 100 most influential papers in marine ecology were ranked by the WSN. The number one most influential paper in marine ecology was the Origin of Species by Darwin, highlighting how much field observations drive science. So I'll end my conference report with the main message from the Naturalist of the Year: Discover → Contribute → Report → Repeat

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