Letter

Student reflections on the international symposium on salmonid population ecology in Luarca

Burt JM, Halttunen E, Gale MK. Student reflections on the international symposium on salmonid population ecology in Luarca. Ecology of Freshwater Fish 2010. © 2010 John Wiley & Sons A/S

‘Una mas por favor!’ This seemed to be the parting sentiment from most of the participants of the 2010 International Symposium, Advances in the Population Ecology of Stream Salmonids. Held in Luarca, a small village in northern Spain, the conference brought together university, professional, government and student researchers from over 20 countries spanning Europe, North and South America, New Zealand and Japan. The goal of this meeting was to provide an international forum to (i) update existing knowledge on the population ecology of stream salmonids, (ii) explore how to move from scientific knowledge to conservation principles to ensure the long-term viability and evolutionary course of salmonids, (iii) evaluate mitigation of human impacts on salmonid populations and (iv) reduce the impacts of exotic salmonids on native faunas where they have been introduced. At the end of the conference, despite being intellectually over stimulated, sleep-deprived and stuffed, all the symposium attendees we spoke with agreed that an overall rating of excellence was achieved on many levels. Here we present student reflections on the scientific insights gained during the conference and the organisational aspects that contributed to its overall success.

The social setting

Unlike many international fish meetings, this symposium was not held in a large bustling city, but in a small charismatic fishing village on the northwest coast of Asturias, Spain. Apart from Luarca’s inherent picturesque charm and culinary wonders, the primary benefit of the location was the small size of the town. As there were few opportunities for salmon scientists to disperse or emigrate, the atmosphere fostered a sense of intimacy and promoted exceptional opportunities for mingling and networking with schools of socialising scientists outside of conference hours. Along with these informal dinners and chats, long Spanish-style lunches, a day off in the middle for an organised tour of the region and a spectacular final banquet provided additional time for connecting one-on-one with colleagues. These interactions were both enjoyable and extremely valuable for students, as they gave us the opportunity to have more in-depth discussions about people’s work.

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and ideas, as well as cultivate inspiration and connections for future projects and collaborations, all in a relaxed and collegial atmosphere.

The science

Over four very full days of symposium and 2 days of workshop, attendees presented 82 talks and 22 posters categorised under a broad range of topics (life history, population dynamics, salmonids as invasives, habitat selection, human impacts, challenges to native salmonid conservation, rehabilitation and recovery, and lifetime fitness). The presentations were of high quality (even though at times the acoustics were not), and students were well represented among presenters (~25%). We found the ‘single session’ symposium format to be enjoyable and effective. Because all of the participants were exposed to all of the presentations, we felt this facilitated a greater overall familiarity among researchers and a common ground for later retrospective discussions of the major findings, themes and issues.

Fellow students shared the sentiment that the conference offered an excellent snapshot of the issues that currently concern salmon ecologists. In particular, we appreciated the global and future perspectives that were conveyed. For example, we found it interesting to discover that salmonid scientists in the northern and southern hemispheres have radically different research focuses: mapping the threats to salmonids vs. mapping the threats of salmonids, respectively. This illustrated the important role that international conferences can play in communicating information across global boundaries. In addition, as many students are looking for future projects, we gained considerable insight into the areas of research that are becoming increasingly important (for example the consequences of species introductions, escapes and stockings – such as hybridisation and the loss of genetic diversity and fitness). It seems we are arriving at the end of the prevailing paradigm of ‘saving our fisheries by compensating for habitat loss with stocking’. Many talks contributed to the mounting evidence that this avenue has only created a plethora of other mechanisms for the destruction of wild fish.

Another theme that was apparent through the presentations was the increasing utilisation of advances in technology (e.g. telemetry and 3D videography with impressive accompanying analysis software) that are allowing researchers to study individual fish movements and spatial environments on increasingly smaller scales and in greater detail. At the same time, attempts are being made to integrate our understanding of individual and population-level salmonid dynamics (e.g. density dependence, abundance, movement, competition) within the context of complex food webs and environmental variability (e.g. temperature influences). Indeed, the presentations conveyed that stream salmonid research is simultaneously addressing more in-depth mechanistic questions and striving to map the interconnectivity of the systems we study.

Following the symposium, a small number of researchers participated in a very engaging 2-day workshop on combining mark-recapture and genotype-based pedigree data to estimate the fitness of stream fishes in the wild. As a student, it was a fantastic opportunity to experience the palpable enthusiasm shared by the workshop leaders, Dr. Ben Letcher and Dr. Asbjorn Vollestad, in manifesting a ‘dream’ to create an international network of scientists interested in combining their skills and resources to tackle deeper questions relating to fish fitness in the wild. After several presentations and much discussion, it seemed that important first steps had been carved out in generating ideas for future data collection, analysis, modelling and collaboration.

Gracias para todo!

To conclude, conferences are venues for exceptionally fruitful collisions that can lead to job opportunities, ideas for projects, grant applications and new networks. If we use these unions and the degree of inspiration generated as indicators of the quality of a conference, from a student’s perspective, the Luarca 2010 meeting was indeed a great success! We would like to thank all the attendees for their inspiring talks and posters, encouragement, career advice, and of course, lots of laughs. We are especially grateful to the conference organisers for fostering a relaxed and intimate setting at a conference of such high scientific calibre. It was indeed a life-changing experience for many of us.