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Networking Group Seeks to Bridge the Poles

Christina Reed
United States
4 April 2008

Hundreds of posters lined the football field–sized exhibit hall at last month's [Ocean Sciences Meeting](#) in Orlando, Florida. In the middle of the room, exhibitors sold their scientific wares and doled swag. Camouflaged as a booth, the student lounge came complete with a couch and a high cocktail/conference table with matching chairs. There, four young polar scientists from three countries introduced themselves to each other. All were members of the recently formed [Association of Polar Early Career Scientists](#) (APECS).

"By meeting other early-career scientists, you get into a group of people with similar interests and problems." --Angelika Renner, British Antarctic Survey

"One of the most common traits of polar researchers is that they love the cold," German sea-ice ecologist Angelika Renner said. "I love the cold." But the four scientists seated in the lounge discovered that they have more in common than a passion for low temperatures: Their apparently disparate research interests overlap in myriad ways.

Although polar research is collaborative by nature, professional camaraderie spanning poles and subdisciplines is rare. APECS bridges those gaps, and less than 2 years from its founding, the organization already has nearly 1000 members.

MEETING UP

Networking among polar scientists is the primary goal of APECS. Since the organization's first council meeting in 2007, the group has capitalized on other conferences and the Internet to meet, give talks, and host polar-science career workshops. For the ocean sciences conference, Renner, APECS's networking coordinator, sent out a call for early-career polar scientists to meet up. Alex Poulain, president of the student body for the [American Society of Limnology and Oceanography](#)--the conference co-sponsor--brought the sandwiches. Two new members from Spain's [IMEDEA](#) (Mediterranean Institute for Advanced Studies) also dropped by: coastal ecologist Raquel Vaquer Suñer and biological oceanographer Pedro Echeveste.

"By meeting other early-career scientists, you get into a group of people with similar interests and problems," says Renner of the [British Antarctic Survey](#) in Cambridge, U.K. "It's ideal to build connections for mutual support. We all are struggling with things like getting papers out, getting funding proposals approved, finding our way through grad school, postdocs, [and as] early faculty, standing up to

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established researchers."

BRIDGING POLES

APECS Director Jenny Baeseman first fell in love with the cold in December 2004 when she looked out the small window of a National Guard C-130 at the pack ice that surrounds much of the coast of Antarctica. "For the first time in my life, I thought that I was home and that I belonged there," says Baeseman, who is the program development coordinator for the [Arctic Research Consortium of the United States](#) (ARCUS) in Fairbanks, Alaska.

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APECS Director Jenny Baeseman poses for the camera at a sunny 1:00 a.m. during her first season at McMurdo Station, Antarctica.

Baeseman spent three summer seasons in Antarctica studying the streams in the McMurdo Dry Valleys. When the sun is below the horizon, the only signs of the streams are grooves in the sediment and dry, dormant bacterial mats. But when the sun rises for the summer, the glacial albedo is strong enough to cause meltwater to trickle down the valleys. When the water is running, the algae and cyanobacteria are hosts to a variety of cryptobiotic microorganisms, including rotifers, nematodes, and tardigrades.

In August 2006, Baeseman was involved in an [International Polar Year](#) committee to promote polar science to grades K-12. She found herself working with Hugues Lantuit of the [Alfred Wegener Institute for Polar and Marine Research](#) in Potsdam, Germany. Lantuit was using remote sensing to examine Arctic coastal erosion and the impact of climate on permafrost. Both were well-connected with members of their respective polar groups, the [Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research](#) (SCAR) and the [International Arctic Science Committee](#) (IASC). But the two young scientists saw a need to establish an early-career network through which scientists from both poles could collaborate and communicate.

Their talks evolved into APECS, with 31 founding members. The group held its first official meeting in September 2007 in Stockholm, where it selected its first council members and established its rules and regulations. The organization now has a broad focus, with several committees around the world focused on subject-specific science, career development, outreach, and education. They also hold job fairs for graduate students and organize outreach events at schools.

But at the heart of the organization is enabling young polar scientists to meet others across the spectrum of polar-science careers, whether it's at conferences or through its discussion boards. In terms of career advantages, the APECS Web site offers daily updates on job postings around the world related to polar studies. Informal meetings at related conferences give scientists a chance to discuss résumés, teaching tricks, job searches, and their own goals for their field's future.

In July, APECS will hold its second council meeting before hosting a career workshop in St. Petersburg, Russia. The meeting will be held in conjunction with [the first dual meeting of SCAR and IASC](#). By focusing on both poles rather than one or the other, Baeseman says, APECS fills a unique niche: "We're bipolar." She adds: "Currently, there is no larger community that we can be a part of."

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Back at the ocean sciences meeting in March--the halfway point for the International Polar Year--Renner, Vaquer, Echeveste, and Poulain talked about their research interests. As a graduate student, Poulain studied how mercury deposited in Arctic snow and surface waters can travel back into the atmosphere. But he was frustrated with methods available for tracking microbial transformations of mercury in the environment. For his postdoc at the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#) in Cambridge, he set his mercury work aside. He is now working on the molecular genetics of photosynthetic iron oxidation, one of the most ancient forms of photosynthesis. "I joined APECS hoping to go back to the Arctic and combine what I'm learning with iron and molecular genetics and apply that to tracking mercury," he says.

Echeveste found parallels between Poulain's work and his own research on how phytoplankton respond to pollutants. The two scientists pledged to work together to create new networking opportunities; they've already organized an APECS event for [this summer's meeting](#) of the American Society of Limnology and Oceanography in St. John's, Canada.



MIT postdoc Alex Poulain takes a break from looking at mercury biogeochemistry in the Truelove Lowlands on Devon Island, in Nunavut, Canada.

Renner is looking at the marine ecosystem under the sea ice in Antarctica, but she got her start measuring the thickness of sea ice in the Arctic. She captivated the group with stories of old sea ice (now rare) in the Arctic that floated nearly 100 feet (30 m) above the surface. Poulain chimed in on the importance of sea ice in regulating phytoplankton growth and building a diverse community. "It is so cool to work with sea-ice microorganisms," he said. "They are so heterogeneous."

The same could be said of polar scientists.



Research on ice. A research team works in the Arctic Ocean.

In an e-mail, Renner said she was pleased with the polar science meeting at the Orlando conference. "Although it was small, it did exactly what I hoped for--it brought together young scientists who didn't know each other before and created new contacts and links. ... I think getting involved in such organizations is brilliant for various reasons: you can develop all kinds of skills, you meet lots of enthusiastic scientists, both early-career and well-established, you get great opportunities to network. And, hey, it's fun to get things going and see them happening! It's a lot of extra work, but I think it's well worth it."

Christina Reed is a freelance science writer based in Redmond, Washington.	Comments, suggestions? Please send your feedback to our editor .
Photos, courtesy of (top to bottom): National Science Foundation, Jenny Baeseman, Alex Poulain, Pedro Echeveste.	DOI: 10.1126/science.caredit.a0800049

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