

President's Report

Canadian Society for Ecology and Evolution

May 2008

Executive Council:

I am deeply honoured to serve as President of The Canadian Society for Ecology and Evolution. Retiring President Graham Bell guided our Society through its crucial formative stages, and has left very big shoes to fill. So too have our retiring Council members, Marylène Boulet, Marie-Josée Fortin, Jeffrey Hutchings, and Denis Réale. We are indebted to each one for the significant role that they played in established our Society and charting our future.

Fortunately, we have a stellar crew of new Council members led by our new Vice-President, Spencer Barrett. Spencer is joined by Councilors Nathalie Brodeur, Andrew Hendry, Kathy Martin, and Sean Rogers. Our Executive is anchored by Secretary Sally Otto (who graciously stood for election to a second term) and Treasurer Louis Bernatchez. Continuing councilors Beatrix Beisner, Mark Forbes, and Marco Festa-Bianchet keep a firm hand on the tiller

Although our new Council formally began work only in January, we continue to advance on several fronts including:

NSERC:

One of our most important activities is our liaison with NSERC. We continue to do this by coordinating our winter Executive Council Meeting at NSERC headquarters in Ottawa, by meeting with GSC Chairs, and in Executive meetings with Dr. Suzanne Fortier, President of NSERC, and Vice-President Isabelle Blain. Our emphasis in the November 2007 meetings was to reiterate our position on the need for increased funding for Discovery Grants, and particularly so for those GSCs representing ecologists and evolutionary biologists in Canada. We also restated our position on the international review of the discovery grant program, and on the GSC review. Our formal responses to both reviews, where we demonstrate the excellence of Canadian ecologists and evolutionary biologists, are reprinted in full on the CSEE website. We also discussed our plans to help create a Canadian Institute of Ecology and Evolution. Each initiative has been well received in NSERC, and we will continue our efforts to maintain a collaborative arms-length relationship at several levels within NSERC.

Our advocacy with NSERC, and more generally with the Federal Government, has been vindicated by both review processes within NSERC. The International review of the DG program noted that Canada ranks 1st among G-7 nations in publication rates per capita and 4th in impact factors. The review concludes that “the Discovery Grants Program is an exceptionally effective model for supporting Canadian research in NSE”. And most recommended improvements in the Discovery Grants Program, such as elimination of “founder effects” based on previous DG grant size, are consistent with our advocacy.

It is also noteworthy that the GSC Structure Review has adopted the “conference model”. This model originated from GSC 18 at the same time that the committee was working with NSERC to help form the CSEE. The main motivation behind the conference model was to guarantee, 1, the union between ecology and evolution, and 2, that each Discovery Grant application receive the best and fairest review possible. We will continue to work with NSERC to strengthen the reviews of DG applications from all members of the Canadian ecology and evolution community, and to secure increased funding for Discovery Grants.

CIEE:

We advertised for proposals to host the Canadian Institute of Ecology and Evolution in our winter 2008 bulletin. We received two excellent proposals led by teams from Montreal (UQAM-McGILL) and the University of Toronto. Both promised to maintain formal connections with our Society, and to integrate the Institute among Canadian institutions and across Canada’s geographical regions. We have, after very careful and detailed examination, endorsed the application from the University of Toronto. The Institute will be officially bilingual and the Toronto team will seek collaborations with other institutions. We hope that many, including UQAM and McGill, will join in this exciting and creative initiative.

PAGSE:

We have renewed our membership in the PAtnership Group for Science and Engineering, where we are represented by Past-President Graham Bell. PAGSE is a cooperative of more than 25 different national organizations in science and engineering representing more than 50,000 individuals. We believe that PAGSE is an effective way to maintain an advocacy presence in Ottawa, where we can add our voice to budgetary decisions and science policy.

House of Commons Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology:

In April we learned that the House of Commons Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology was accepting briefs on Canada's science and technology strategy. With Council's help and guidance I submitted a brief with two recommendations, 1, to increase funding for NSERC Discovery and government research at 4.7% annually until we reach the equivalent of year 2000 funding levels, and 2, to create a 15-person scientific advisory council that reports directly to cabinet.

International Activities:

We maintain our membership in the Federation of Ecological Societies of the Americas which, this year, has a new member with the creation of the Brazilian Ecological Association. Other members include the Ecological Societies from America, Argentina, Mexico, and Chile.

I have taken over from Graham as our Society's representative on the International Affairs Committee for the Society for the Study of Evolution. Spencer Barrett will represent our Society at this year's meeting.

We accepted an invitation from Michael Bull (Chair) to join the International Advisory Board for the Scientific Program Committee for the 10th INTECOL meeting in Brisbane 2009. I nominated Marco Festa-Bianchet for this position.

Society Activities:

Bolstered by the success of our first three scientific meetings we are looking forward to another great gathering from 13-17 May 2009 in Halifax. We were asked by the Genetics Society of Canada if we would be interested in a joint meeting. Council and the local organizing committee agreed that this would be a wonderful initiative, and I am very pleased that we will have our first joint meeting next year. Hopefully we can repeat this process with other Canadian and International Societies in future.

We accepted an invitation from Université Laval to host the 2010 meeting, and we are delighted to return to the Province of Québec.

Council has received an invitation to hold the 2011 meeting at the University of Calgary. We have asked for a formal proposal that council will evaluate at its November 2008 meeting.

We have also received an invitation from Howard Rundle, Head of the Evolution 2012 Organizing Committee, to participate in Evolution 2012 in Ottawa. We are thrilled with the invitation and are currently working on proposals for our participation.

Other major activities include:

- ❖ Formation of a membership committee chaired by Spencer Barrett.
- ❖ A change from one-year to two-year memberships for students and post-doctoral fellows.
- ❖ Local representation in most universities across Canada (an initiative of our Communications Committee Chaired by Andrew Hendry).
- ❖ Glossy CSEE/SCEE recruitment posters delivered to all local representatives (many thanks to Nathalie Brodeur and Louis Bernatchez)
- ❖ Publication of our winter 2008 newsletter (many thanks to editor Marco Festa-Bianchet).
- ❖ Several new initiatives for the Vancouver meeting including substantial awards to subsidize student travel.

Correspondence:

I wrote Prime Minister Harper in January with a recommendation to increase funding to the Discovery Grants Program of NSERC in the 2009 budget. This letter was copied to the Minister of Finance, the leaders of all major political parties, and the President of NSERC. None has yet replied.

I wrote to Deputy Minister Michael Horgan (Environment Canada) in February requesting clarification on media reports about censorship of Environment Canada's scientists, and copied this correspondence to Minister Baird. Mr. Horgan wrote back to me assuring me that there was no intent to censor science communication, and, as requested, provided me with a copy of the Department's media guidelines.

I wrote to Howard Alper, Chair of the Science, Technology and Innovation Council, in March pointing out that the Council lacked proper representation for ecological and evolutionary disciplines. I provided a list of eminent Canadian ecologists and evolutionary biologists who would be able to fulfill this role on the Council. Dr. Alper wrote back in April assuring me that the membership of three Canada Research Chairs, four University and College Presidents, and seven corporate leaders established through an Order in Council could provide the necessary advice, and that there is no opportunity for additional membership.

Also in March I was asked to write a short announcement of our Society for the INTECOL bulletin. I was delighted to do so.

I was approached by Bruce Sells, representing the Canadian Federation of Biological Societies (CFBS), to search for a mechanism whereby our members would be more formally represented in the CFBS. Bruce has asked to address Council on this initiative at our autumn 2008 Council meeting.

I have been communicating with Clément Gauthier, Executive Director of the Canadian Council on Animal Care (CCAC), to seek representation from our Society. The current council lacks appropriate representation from scientists who use wildlife in research. There are no currently available opportunities for a permanent position on the CCAC, so we intend to seek a three-year term appointment that can be filled later this year.

I thank all members for their unwavering commitment to our extraordinarily successful Society. Our meetings are superb, our membership is growing, our Executive and Council work hard on our behalf, and we are making a real difference for ecology and evolution in Canada. The challenges we face are nevertheless daunting. I encourage all members of the Society to join me, the Executive, and Council, in our efforts to represent the interests of, and improve the conditions for, Canada's ecology and evolution community.

Respectfully submitted

16 May 2008
Douglas Morris
President