



Science Reporter

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REDUCING CARBON FOOTPRINT OF CONFERENCES

Are conferences a waste of time and a drain on the resources? Recently, in the United States, heads have been rolling ever since it was discovered that nearly one-million dollars were spent on a conference held in Las Vegas in 2010 for General Services Administration (GSA) bureaucrats featuring a mind reader, a clown, a comedian, free bicycles and lavish receptions in resort suites.

A recent editorial in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* even questions the utility of conferences, arguing that “there is virtually no evidence supporting the utility of most conferences”.

And then, there is the increasing carbon footprint of conferences. In a 2008 report in the *British Medical Journal*, Malcolm Greene pegged the average aggregate jet-fuel pollution at some 10,000 tons of carbon for participants attending a mid-sized international conference. There are also the bulky abstracts, the innumerable fliers and publicity material for which quite a few trees have laid down their lives and most of which have a lifetime not more than a newspaper’s.

But there are those who argue that meetings and conferences allow people in different areas and fields and settings to mix leading to fertilization of new ideas, fructification of existing ones and uncovering of new research opportunities. There are also the opportunities for young scientists and even students to soak in the academic atmosphere and perhaps a chance that a truly inspiring talk could catalyze and trigger their creative juices. These are benefits that cannot be denied.

While certainly working on enhancing the academic utility of conferences and meetings, can we not at least make such events a little less burdensome on the environment and with a reduced climate impact? There is a worldwide movement towards minimizing the carbon footprint of conferences. And there are several aspects of conferences that provide this opportunity such as the choice of venue, registration, transportation, food and beverage services, paper use and waste reduction.

Recently, in a report, the American Chemical Society highlighted its efforts aimed at “sustainable” meetings, counting among others: a) Reducing carbon footprint of hotel shuttles (to carry passengers) by 50%; b) Issuing of its meeting programme as a mobile app and PDF download – it claimed that offering a digital alternative saved 1,600 pounds of paper and associated freight; c) Donating all usable, uneaten food from meeting events to local community groups; d) Giving attendees reusable water bottles because bottled water has a huge carbon footprint.

Some of the other climate-friendly practices that are being explored are minimizing waste, choosing venues that employ energy- and water-efficient equipment and practices or use renewable energy, using alternative fuel vehicles for ferrying guests, arranging accommodation for guests at walkable distances from the venue, and minimizing use of paper and where essential using recycled paper. A compost programme for all food waste could reduce the amount of waste going to landfill thus cutting down on emissions of methane.

Hasan Jawaid Khan



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