

HYDROGRAPHIC CONFERENCES - SOME OBSERVATIONS

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Abstract

In my capacity as the IHR Editor, I am fortunate to have been invited to two international hydrographic conferences in 2011. The first was hosted by The Hydrographic Society of America (THSOA) and was held in Tampa, Florida USA in April. The second conference was hosted by the Australasian Hydrographic Society (AHS) and was held in Fremantle, Western Australia in November. My last attendance at an international hydrographic conference was in 2003 at the AHS-hosted conference in Christchurch, New Zealand – so it has been a few years between visits. This paper describes my observations about the two conferences and in particular notes the similarities and the differences between the two conferences and hopefully may provide some ideas for future conference organising committees.

Background

Usually each conference will have its own theme directed at the current issues at hand. The underlying purpose is to provide a forum for education, cooperation, networking, professional development and catching up with friends who usually work in far flung, remote environments. Such conferences provide many in the profession with the single opportunity each year or couple of years to meet up and share their journey.

In Australia, the Australasian Hydrographic Society (AHS) organises through the International Federation of Hydrographic Societies (IFHS) to host a conference in the Australasian region every 4 years. Often this is the only time when hydrographers who work on either side of the continent or overseas are able to meet with one other and renew friendships. The importance of these events in Australasia cannot be underestimated.

Hydrographic Conference Schedule

The schedule of hydrographic conferences from 2010 to the end of 2012 are listed at Table 1.

Date	Conference	Place	Host
June 2010	Canadian Hydrographic Conference	Quebec, Canada	Canadian Hydrographic Association (CHA) – held every 2 years
November 2010	HYDRO 2010	Rostock, Germany	German Hydrographic Society for IFHS
April 2011	US HYDRO 11	Tampa, USA	The Hydrographic Society of America (THSOA) – held every 2 years
November 2011	Hydro 2011: Down Under	Fremantle, Australia	The Australasian Hydrographic Society for IFHS
February 2012	Shallow Survey 2012	Wellington, New Zealand	Held every 4 years
April 2012	IHO International Hydrographic Conference	Monaco	International Hydrographic Bureau (IHB) – held every 5 years
May 2012	Canadian Hydrographic Conference	Niagara Falls, Canada	Canadian Hydrographic Association (CHA)
November 2012	Hydro12	Rotterdam, The Netherlands	Hydrographic Society Benelux for IFHS

Table 1. List of major international hydrographic conferences 2010 - 2012

The above table shows that major conferences are conducted annually by the IFHS within Europe and Australasia (every 4 years) along with annual conferences in the North America region. This provides a good balance of opportunity for hydrographers to meet regularly within their own region. Within Australia, this is not so predominant but we need to operate in a global economy and the importance of the events usually means that members of the profession will attend overseas events as needs and opportunities dictate.

Scattered amongst these major conferences are also regular technology supplier user or training conferences e.g. CARIS, ESRI, HYPAC. These are becoming large conferences in their own right.

US Hydro 2011 and AHS Hydro 2011 – Observations

Comparing the two conferences, there were many **similarities**:

Both conferences were very well attended with full exhibition spaces, good venues, on-the-water demonstration capabilities, and a full program of presentations. Presentations covered a range of topics to ensure that all aspects of the profession were covered and both conferences provided specific workshops that were well attended. Whilst presentations were predominantly from local authors and organisations, overseas presentations provide opportunities to share and learn about important survey and R&D activities in those regions.

The US and Australasian regions are quite different in terms of the numbers in the profession, academic support, R&D opportunities and the size of the industry as a whole. Some of the noticeable **differences** were:

- Attendee age
- Student attendance
- Female involvement
- Role of Academia

Age of Attendees

At the Australasian conference, the average age of attendees was markedly higher than that attending the US conference. The age issue was commented on during an open session at the AHS conference and is an ongoing concern within the Australasian region. Encouraging younger people into the profession is an issue facing our industry. The younger average age of participants at the US conference can probably be attributed to the THSOA Student Outreach Program.

THSOA Student Outreach Program

THSOA has a magnificent Student Outreach Program. The program commenced in 2003 with three students. In 2011, this had grown to 27 students representing 18 colleges and universities. The purpose of the Student Outreach Program is to introduce the field of hydrography and associated education and employment opportunities to undergraduate students. I had the pleasure of meeting several of the students and they were all energetic about the conference opportunity. Several had never been exposed to hydrographic surveying. The students had their own program and attended the conference functions with the rest of the delegates. I cannot speak more highly of this initiative and recommend to all Societies and organising committees to consider adopting a similar model. This program will capture the imaginations of our young geospatial students and foster a mentoring role to maintain a healthy profession.

In comparison, there were only a very small number of students in attendance at the Australian conference. It is not known why this was the case. November is probably not a good time of year due to being at the end of the university year and could clash with final exams. Another reason could be related to the overall poor state of surveying, geomatic and hydrographic education within Australian universities. Refer to O'Connell (2006) for further discussion on opportunities for attracting young people into the profession.

Females in the Profession

This is always going to be a difficult area to discuss. The nature of the work and the operating environment makes this a more difficult profession for women to be actively and/or desirable to be involved. The issue of encouraging more females into the profession is a global challenge. There were markedly more women at the US conference, aided by the 30% of students being females.

Involvement of Academia

This was an area more dominant in the US than Australia, primarily due to the larger number of universities and dedicated research groups in the US. At this time, there is no major institution teaching postgraduate hydrography in the Australasian region (hopefully to be remedied soon). The US conference has always been noted for the quality of the presentations made from academia.

Some of the key Australian universities that have previously provided excellent surveying courses have altered the course to be predominantly engineering-based. Further, with no dedicated post-graduate and research schools in hydrography, the academic R&D within the region is extremely poor. Hopefully, some new education initiatives will address some of these issues.

Hydrographic conferences are an important aspect of our profession. They provide opportunities for improving education, allowing current and future professionals to meet with one another, industry to showcase its technology and an open sharing environment for the profession to come together. Our profession is not on its own with issues around an aging workforce, small number of females, attracting youth to the profession, the impact this has on academic support and diminishing travel budgets. Running a conference is hard work and requires a dedicated team on the organising committee. The end result though is worth it.

In comparing the two conferences, what stood out was the Student Outreach Programme developed by THSOA. Supporting such a programme locally within the jurisdiction of each Society has added benefits to potentially increase the support of academia and include more females into the profession.

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely acknowledge my thanks to the THSOA organising committee who funded my attendance to the US Hydro 2011 conference in Tampa. My last US Hydro conference was in 1992 in Baltimore which ran back-to-back with the first ECDIS conference. It has been a long time between visits and both were very beneficial. I also need to thank the Hydrographer of Australia, CDRE Rod Nairn, RAN AM who sponsored my attendance to the recent Australasian Hydrographic Conference in Fremantle.

References

O'Connell, V (2006) "**Strategic Intentions of the IFHS – How to Attract Young People to Hydrography**", XXIII FIG Congress, Munich, Germany, 2006.