

LTET Network Social Science Committee Report

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A 2½-day workshop was held in Athens, GA, on 3-5 August, 2005, to examine the status and role of the social sciences within the LTER Network. The objective was to determine a course of action for engaging the social sciences to substantively contribute to the future being envisioned by the planning process for LTER Network-level Science and Synthesis.

The Athens workshop sought to complement the LTER Planning effort by taking a bottom-up, community-driven approach toward moving the social science dimension in the LTER from a mere committee to a true community of researchers. The objectives of the workshop were to: 1) Characterize the present state of the social sciences in the LTER Network; 2) Identify the data, methods, procedures and knowledge necessary for Network-level interdisciplinary collaboration; and, 3) Determine strategic objectives for engaging social scientists in Network-level science and synthesis within the LTER.

Site Representation

The Athens workshop was first announced at the LTER Alaska CC meeting in August 2004; the formal invitation was sent to lead principal investigators at each LTER site in November 2004. LPIs were provided information on workshop objectives and logistics, and informed that funds were available for each site to send one representative of their choice. The selection of site representative was left entirely up to the site LPI and the workshop proceeded on the premise that the selected individual faithfully represented the social science interests of their site.

There were a total of 28 individuals at the Athens workshop, with 23 out of 26 sites being represented. The sites not represented for different reasons were Cedar Creek (CDR), Harvard Forest (HRF) and Moorea Coral Reef (MCR). In addition to site representation, there was a representative from the LTER Network office, a graduate student representative from the LTER Network, and three additional LTER graduate students who participated and also transcribed the proceedings of the workshop (Table 1).

Site Assessment

In order to provide common ground for discussion over the course of the workshop, the morning of the first day was dedicated to a) a brief history of the social sciences in LTER research, b) a summary of NEON planning efforts, and c) a summary of LTER Planning Grant efforts. This led to an initial open discussion by the participants about social science activities across the LTER Network in response to preliminary results from a 10-question survey that site representatives were asked to complete prior to their arrival in Athens. It has previously been noted (Gosz et al. 2004), although not specifically in reference to the social sciences, that disciplinary breadth and technical expertise are unevenly distributed across the LTER Network. The results of the survey reveal that the situation is even more pronounced with respect to the social sciences thus

presenting a real challenge to realizing the goals envisioned in the Planning Process for the LTER of the future.

Workshop Activities

After an open and candid discussion of the site assessment among workshop participants that generated many interesting questions to be examined in a different context, attendees were divided into three break-out groups. During the afternoon of Day 1 these groups developed matrices of site-level strengths and weaknesses, or things their sites currently do well and things their sites need in order to succeed in the future. The point was to characterize the present state of social science in the LTER Network in order to discuss the establishment of future collaborations in the manner being discussed in the LTER Planning Process. Break-out groups were thus asked to assess their sites by going beyond their particular individual needs and consider how they might design an LTER Network that met the needs and expectations of their graduate students' graduate students.

Based on the outcomes of the assessment of social science research, workshop attendees were again divided into break-out groups for the first three quarters of the second day. Their charge was to identify one or more questions with an explicit human dimension that might be asked either at a site-level, a cross-site level or a Network level. Once such questions had been outlined, groups were to then identify the data requirements along with standard methods and procedures to both answer the questions and ensure comparability of practice and results. The point was for break-out groups to uncover the foundational elements necessary and sufficient for interdisciplinary collaboration across the LTER Network in light of existing or anticipated disciplinary strengths and technical expertise.

The closing of the workshop on the morning of Day 3 brought participants back to how social science in the LTER Network could move from being a committee to being a community of researchers with common goals and accepted ways of examining the interaction of human and biophysical systems. The group-wide discussion that ensued following the overview of Day 2 findings led to the identification and description of strategically significant activities for successful collaborative, interdisciplinary LTER research with an explicit human dimension. A critical insight from the site assessment is the observation that the social science research in most cases is carried out on an *ad hoc* basis.

Report and Initial Recommendations

We have completed a draft report from the Athens meeting. This report will be sent to participants for their review and revision. A final meeting report and the assessment survey will be provided to the LTER Network and each site LPI. We will provide copies of the survey and report and discuss the results of the meeting with NSF program officers, too. In the meantime, the following are four of the major recommendations from the meeting.

- 1) **Establish and maintain a threaded listserv.** Enhancing communication and extending relevant expertise will go a long way to overcoming the present isolation of individual researchers and their site-based efforts.
- 2) **Create a digital archive of information and data that can be queried.**
- 3) **Hold an interdisciplinary, thematic social science meeting.** (Luquillo has volunteered already to be the site of the next meeting).
- 4) **Establish long-term funding for social science AND synthesis science research.**

We look forward to discussing the complete assessment and report with each site, the Network Office, and NSF program officers; contributing to the LTER Planning process; and building upon the substantial progress we made during the Athens meeting.