

ESF RESEARCH CONFERENCES

Rapporteur Report

Partnership:	ESF-COST
Conference Title:	Extreme Environmental Events
Dates:	13-17 December 2010
Chair:	Andrew Parnell
Rapporteur:	Piero Lionello

General Comments

The conference covered a wide range of issues related to extremes, including their statistical description, prediction and impacts. Subjects were very heterogeneous, from technical statistical inference issues to field experiments analysing the impacts of extremes on plants. This situation had positive and negative aspects. There is potential for real exchange of information among different research subjects, which anyway, it has appeared to be not easy to exploit. There is a major difficulty in learning from different subjects, because background is totally different (e.g. compare the language of theoretical statisticians to that of descriptive biologists).

Quality of Scientific Programme, Presentations and Discussion

Key note lectures have been remarkably good and well delivered. Speakers were clearly aware of the lack of common background in the audience and avoided technical details. The level of the remaining presentations by the participants varied greatly. Question time after the presentations was generally good in terms of number of questions and interest that was shown by at least part of the audience. More time should have been devoted to group discussion. There was a reasonable effort for organizing it, but time was not sufficient, and just two short (30min) group meetings have been possible, plus a short final discussion.

Informal Networking and Exchange; Atmosphere

The schedule of the presentations was quite full and little time has been left for extensive and informal discussion. Unfortunately, apart from the canteen, which was anyway rather dark and noisy (and this did not help conversation), there was no natural place where to meet outside the conference schedule. A fraction of younger scientists was actively participating to the question time.

Balance of Participants

There was an appropriate balance between young and senior participants and among national groups. Researchers included mainly statisticians, climatologists and biologists, with a minority of hydrologists and scientists working on geohazards. In this respect, it was an interdisciplinary conference.

Outlook and Future Developments

The heterogeneity of the participants' background may be an obstacle to future cooperation or an advantage for interesting and new interdisciplinary cooperation. This will depend on whether someone will take the lead for coordinating follow-up activities. It might be a good idea to use schemes such as COST to give to these groups the opportunity to meet again in future.

Follow-up

There is an opportunity for a dialogue that might start among different disciplines (e.g. between climatologists and biologists). A dedicated effort would be likely needed to steer a follow-up initiative.

Organisation and Infrastructure

There were some marginal problems. There was no obvious location where participants could meet and seat comfortably for informal discussion, e.g. after the end of the talks or during breaks. There were no rooms for group discussions. The canteen was dark and noisy and not very favourable to promote discussion. I have been happy with my room and facilities (free web connection in the room). Administration and support so far (let me wait for the reimbursement) have been excellent.

Summary & Overall Assessment

Invited lectures were good and offered interesting overviews and excellent guidelines for research development. Whether participants will be able to take advantage of them, begin fruitful cooperation, use information gathered during the conference for their future research, it will depend on the follow-up activities. To me, the conference looks mainly like the starting point of a potentially valuable new initiative and whether it can be considered successful or not will depend on future activities that can be originated from it.

About ESF Research Conferences

The Scheme

This conference is part of the European Science Foundation's (ESF) Research Conferences Scheme. The Scheme aims to promote scientific excellence and frontier level research throughout Europe and the rest of the world. Conferences aim to provide leading scientists and other participants, including young researchers, with a platform to present their work, to discuss the most recent developments in their fields of research and to network.

Conference Format

The core activities should be based on lectures by invited speakers, who are leaders in their respective fields, followed by extensive discussion periods. An informal exchange of ideas, both inside and outside the lecture room, should be encouraged, and the number of sessions in the daily timetable should be limited in order to allow sufficient time for interaction between the participants. Time should be reserved for a 'Forward Look Plenary Discussion' about future developments in the field.

Participants can take all their meals together to encourage further contact and networking, which can be particularly beneficial to younger researchers who may be less outspoken in the formal lecture room setting. In order to gain optimum benefit from the conference, both the speakers and the participants are asked to stay for the whole duration.

Division of Tasks

The Conference Chair is responsible for ensuring the quality of the scientific programme through the selection and invitation of speakers, and through the selection of participants.

The ESF Conferences Unit is responsible for managing all the logistical aspects of the conference organisation, including the provision of an on-site secretariat.

Further information: www.esf.org/conferences