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of the
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“Sustainable Greening” of the AAG

I am reluctant to place the now ubiquitous marketing terms, greening and sustainable, in the title of this column. With everyone from oil companies to political candidates and timber companies to Wal-Mart exhorting us all to become greener and more sustainable by buying their product, these terms are perhaps in need of what used to be known as “operational definition.”

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that most other organizations including Exxon Mobil are by now well ahead of the AAG in systematically trumpeting their green image and the need for the rest of us to become more green like them. I hope you will forgive me for not having kept apace of Shell Oil and the others in boasting about our greening activities at the AAG, and also for not seizing the opportunity of this column to develop here a “green marketing strategy” for the AAG “brand” and to urge others to follow the example of our rhetoric.

As with most things, however, it is easier to talk about greening than to do something about it. So, instead of a new vision, I hope this mere description of some of the things we are actually doing will suffice to address this issue, and inform our members of the many common sense ways we try to be a good organizational citizen at the AAG with regard to the environment. During the last several years, without a lot of fanfare or chest-thumping, the AAG has been steadily attempting, in plain terms, to reduce waste, save on supplies, recycle materials, and in the process also save energy (both human and fossil) and to become more efficient (thus also saving money, which we regularly recycle for projects on behalf of geography).

While many of the long-standing “greening” activities (e.g. recycling paper, etc.) by the AAG have taken place as a con-

sidered effort to “do the right thing” (which I think we all want to do), some of the most significant greening results we have seen have been driven also by our efforts to achieve greater efficiency in our operations (e.g., see Richardson, “Building a Foundation for the AAG’s Future,” *AAG Newsletter*, January 2007).

One example is the comprehensive replacement at the AAG of paper-based and US Mail document transport systems with digital and online transaction systems that have resulted in massive reduction of paper used and energy consumed for transportation associated with mailing and shipping of formerly hard copy materials. In nearly



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every area of its operations the AAG now conducts its business online. For example, in Membership Management, one of our largest operations areas, instead of paper membership forms and records, AAG members may now join the AAG, renew their membership, update their address changes and submit payments for membership fees all online, with almost no use of printed paper forms, envelopes, paper checks, or energy intensive shipping of all these items back and forth by mail trucks.

Similarly, for our large Annual Meetings almost all attendee registrations, field trips, workshops, and related event payments now also occur mainly through paperless, online systems. An enormous reduction in paper usage also occurs through the custom abstract submission software we designed and had developed exclusively for AAG. In addition to automating the abstract submission and session organization process, the AAG now also publishes its Annual Meeting Abstracts book on CD, with only a few copies printed in paper book form for those who request these in advance. In most

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years, field trip guides and local meeting publications are published online rather than in hard-copy. Furthermore, nearly all follow-up correspondence, confirmation, receipts, etc., for both Annual Meetings and Membership are handled online rather than through paper and energy-intensive mailing and shipping.

Our Publications Department has also seen very substantial decreases in paper resource usage and shipping energy usage through fully automating online our AAG journals' article submission, peer review and publication preparation processes. Other, smaller areas of operations have also seen similar but proportionately more modest savings of resources. For example, the AAG grants, awards, and honors programs are all now managed online, rather than through receiving, reproducing and re-shipping large packets of applications materials back and forth to selection committees around the nation.

Collectively, massive reductions in the use of paper and in energy intensive mailing and shipping have been achieved at the AAG during the past five years through automating Membership, Publications, Annual Meeting, and many other areas of operations.

In the communications area, the AAG has adopted new technologies to foster distance learning, meetings, and research project coordination, thus lessening travel. We now regularly use Skype for conferencing and working meetings involving colleagues and collaboration in Africa, Latin America, and throughout the U.S. At our Annual Meetings, we have begun to create podcasts and downloadable video recordings of selected proceedings at our annual meetings, to make these available to those who may not be able to physically attend our meetings. During our recent meeting in Boston, for example, we recorded presentations by speakers such as Jeffrey Sachs and Noam Chomsky, and made these available both online and on DVD for those

interested. Plans are in place for expanding these efforts at future annual meetings.

AAG employees are also encouraged and financially rewarded to commute to work by using public transportation, with a program in which AAG pays for employees' expenses of commuting on the Washington Metro public transportation system (all subways, commuter trains, and busses). This very substantial employee benefit, for which the AAG covers the full cost, is also considered tax-free to the employee. The program helps save gas, reduce pollution of automobile commuting, and relieve congestion in downtown Washington, DC.

Of course, the AAG also engages in a broad range of general conservation measures, such as extensive recycling of materials such as printer ink cartridges, batteries, newspapers, office paper, books, cans, bottles, file folders, etc. We now maintain twice as many trash bins devoted to recycled materials as for general trash. At AAG annual meetings, plastic name badges, tote bags, and other supplies are collected and reused or recycled. Long-standing energy conservation measures include insulating windows and doors with special shades and weather stripping, regulating temperature in the building on evenings and weekends, and installation of newer, more efficient heating and air conditioning equipment. Recently, we had the roofs of our office building coated with special reflective coating to reduce heat absorption and save on air conditioning energy usage.

New AAG Green Initiatives

In addition to the many green activities and programs already underway at the AAG, some of which are described above, with this column I am also pleased to announce two new AAG actions designed to help the environment. First, beginning this month, AAG members wishing to do so may elect

to receive their AAG journals online only rather than in both hard copy and online. AAG members may make this choice when joining the AAG or when renewing their membership, or can request this change at any time, including now, by contacting Laura Miller of the AAG staff at lmiller@aag.org, or 202-234-1450, ext. 131. AAG members who wish to access the AAG journals online may do so from any location in the world simply by logging onto the AAG website.

Second, starting with this issue, the AAG newsletter will be printed exclusively on certified recycled paper, despite its somewhat higher cost. The quality of the recycled paper of this issue is closely comparable to the new paper which was previously used for the AAG newsletter. We trust that any minor difference in the paper quality will be acceptable to AAG members, given the environmental trade-offs. We hope you will enjoy this inaugural recycled paper issue, and note that the ink colors are unchanged and unfaded: still bright green!

While I have not attempted to provide in this column the much needed operational definition of the term "greening," I hope I might at least have achieved an "operational description" of some of the many greening activities underway at the AAG. We take the goals of supporting the environment through our work at the AAG seriously, and despite substantial progress made so far there is, of course, much more that we as an organization might realistically and cost effectively do—while not losing sight of our overarching AAG mission to support geography—in the realm of "greening." I look forward to receiving your ideas and to working together with you to make continued progress in greening the AAG in future years. ■

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