

AAG Climate Action Task Force - Report Spring 2021

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Introduction

In response to the current climate crisis, Pam Martin and Joe Nevins circulated a petition in spring 2019 to various geography listservs requesting that the AAG Council take significant action “to reduce CO₂ emissions related to the Annual Meeting.” The petition asked that the “Council do so in a manner commensurate with what the recent (October 2018) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) special report asserts is needed to limit global warming to 1.5°C: about a 45 percent cut (from 2010 levels) by 2030, and ‘net zero’ emissions by 2050.” In light of the strong support that the petition received, the AAG Council responded in April 2019 with the creation of a task force charged with redesigning the Annual Meeting so that it is a low-CO₂-emitting endeavor. The task force is mandated with transforming the Annual Meetings in a manner that is effective in meeting the needs of AAG members and that is also socio-spatially and environmentally just. This interim report outlines our activities for the 2021 AAG virtual annual meeting and our framework for action toward restructuring the Annual Meeting into a modality that is nearly carbon neutral while advancing elements of social and economic equity. We feel it necessary to attend to the invisible (and prominent) privileges that maintain certain inequalities during these meetings. This report is also intended to solicit Council ideas and input.

Continued Work

Our Task Force has built on the work from the virtual April 2020 meeting. We have a special section forthcoming in *The Professional Geographer* to advance debate by presenting diverse perspectives on a low carbon or carbon neutral annual meeting. The Focus section has been accepted, and is now awaiting publication. Once these are published, we will seek community commentary and input through the AAG website or other viable online venue to further advance discussion.

The work of discussion and debate with membership will also take place through several events that constitute the Climate Task Force track at the April 2021 AAG virtual meeting. We have **two roundtables** for open dialogue across different groups to consider the format and impacts of future AAG Annual meetings that would be “nearly carbon neutral” events (or sets of events). This will allow members to directly generate ideas.

We will host a **collaborative keynote** event with a number of prominent anthropologists (Dr. Anand Pandian, Dr. Mayanthi Fernando, Dr. Andrea Muelebach and Dr. Gabriel Dattatreyan) who have led the Society of Cultural Anthropology in two creative all-virtual meetings. The speakers in the event, “**Displace and Distribute: Experiments with Climate-Friendly Virtual Conferencing in Anthropology**” will share experiences that are vital to our ability to demonstrate the value and framework of new meeting modalities.

Finally, we have also organized a **Keynote, “Naomi Klein: A Conversation on Action for Climate Justice”** to highlight the underlying climate emergency and role of academic communities in collective action toward responding to it.

Furthermore, we recognize that because the New York meeting (2022) will very likely be highly attended, we are developing a set of best practices for low carbon conferencing (for example taking trains rather than flying where possible.)

Moving forward beyond the plans for April 2021, and in conjunction with seeking innovative ideas and strategies from across AAG membership, fulfilling the remit of the Task Force requires planning now for significant and permanent restructuring of the Annual Meeting, into the future. We have identified three types of changes that could be used alone or in combination to meet these aims. We also hope the upcoming meeting and member input will generate further ideas:

1. **Annual nodes:** Simultaneous regional/university/international nodes where people travel to their local/regional hub. This has many advantages: lower carbon travel, a possibility of in-person interaction, participation by those who may not be able to cross international borders (e.g. having nodes in various countries), raising the profile of the regions, while creating a sense of interconnection through simultaneous broadcasts of key events such as award ceremonies, presidential addresses, keynotes, etc. This is the model that has been proposed for the October 2021 in-person Climate Forward meetings.
2. **Biannual Meeting (every other year).** Reducing the travel to a very large annual in-person meeting has the potential to nearly halve emissions. The “off years” would be either online and/or nodes (option 1 or option 3)
3. **Annual nodes + focus place.** This is a variation on #1 where there is one focused location with a smaller meeting, where the ‘national’ meeting + Council meeting would occur, but it would be significantly smaller than the current annual meeting, e.g. a 2000 person meeting. This may be the model that makes the most sense as a transition period through 2025 given that hotel contracts have already been made from the current time through 2025. While it would be difficult to outright cancel the current meeting destinations, it would be significantly easier to lower attendance at each of these places by encouraging or mandating a much smaller “focus place” while directing resources to simultaneous nodes.

We recognize that having a much smaller “focus place” would almost certainly require a selection process for paper/poster/etc presentations to be put in place to limit the numbers. If equity is a concern, processes could potentially be put in place that would try to ensure a minimum % of certain categories of applicants (grad students, stand-alone geographers, specialty group sponsorship) be selected, though this would be quite complicated.

A future of nodes with regional meetings could have some very positive benefits for regions but would also require re-aligning the timing of regional meetings (fall) and national meetings (spring). Having smaller focal points also opens up the AAG to being able to hold conferences in smaller cities, potentially lowering costs for AAG as well as participants (and being able to redirect that investment towards other nodes).

Regardless of what models the future holds, we also recommend that any annual in-person meeting that occurs always have the option of virtual attendance.

APRIL 2021 COUNCIL MEETING REQUESTS

There is much work ahead. Our Task Force understands that changes to the Annual Meeting will impact the entire membership. In addition, we still require clear information about how any proposed change may impact the AAG business model, information about which is only possible with help from the AAG staff. Therefore, we have three major requests:

1. We request the AAG Council to approve a **formal business assessment** of proposed models (above) to gauge the impact on revenue and membership renewal. This will also allow the AAG office to consider how to address membership renewal, a process that can be delinked from the meeting registration. It also may offer insight into growth opportunities in addition to the costs. We would hope to have this analysis for the Fall 2022 Council meeting.
2. We ask permission from the AAG Council to **survey the entire membership** about the Annual Meeting and various options to change the format and frequency of in-person events. We will use the insights from the AAG activities (perspectives and comments) to help design the survey in a way that provides a systematic way to gauge the AAG membership. In consultation with the AAG Executive Director, we ask the AAG to design a survey that is relatively short but effective to assess the perspectives across the community. We would expect to survey the community in November, after the Climate Forward events planned for October. Results would be shared at the Spring 2022 Council meeting.
3. We request that the AAG Council **extend the Task Force** to continue for 3 more years. The Task Force's work requires that we consider various perspectives, provide information to the community, and identify as best as possible the impacts of any change so that we can address the climate emergency while upholding our values of equity, inclusion, and participation. We are at a stage to survey the community and identify the specific formats that may be the most viable from a business perspective.