

AAG Climate Action Task Force Report March 2020

Submitted by Dr. Wendy Jepson, Task Force Chair

INTRODUCTION

In response to the current climate crisis, last spring Pam Martin and Joe Nevins circulated a petition among 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 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 to transform 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.

Since that time, the Annual Meeting Climate Action Task Force (CATF) recruited a diverse group of geographers from across the United States and Canada to serve as members. Through various working groups, task force members are currently focused on three areas:

1. conducting research into qualitative and quantitative dimensions of the carbon regime that underpins the AAG’s conference model;
2. exploring how information and communication technologies can be best mobilized to offer rewarding virtual experiences for conference participants; and
3. organizing a first round of special initiatives at the AAG annual meeting in Denver (2020).

We understand that changing our professional practices is difficult. Our discipline and our careers are often based in large part on in-person connections with physically distant places and people throughout the world. In our professional and personal lives we are immersed in social practices in which air travel is profoundly normalized, and viewed as both a necessity and an unquestioned right. Yet we also know that climate disruption is already here and that air travel is a significant source of CO₂ emissions. If we take seriously the gravity of a situation so clearly spelled out by climate science, then we must collectively create new ways of being in the world, which means weaving new kinds of relationships between individuals and communities, both near and far. In this sense, rethinking the dominant modes of academic conferencing presents the possibility of creating new forms of academic relationships and exchange that remain fully engaged in the world. There are trade-offs and choices. In this sense, the goal of the Annual Meeting Climate Action Task Force is in no way to undo the AAG Annual Meeting or question its

relevance, but rather position both our discipline and our association at the forefront of progressive change.

1. Task Force Charge

The American Association of Geographers (AAG) and its members have collectively and consistently raised concerns regarding climate change, environmental justice, and the need to cut radically carbon dioxide emissions. Motivated by such concerns and by the need to practice and model changes that need to take place across the world, the AAG has modified its organizational practices to adjust how it invests its funds and some aspects related to the running of the Annual Meeting. Yet, in a time of intensifying climate disruption, there is an urgent need to redesign the Annual Meeting in far more significant and transformative ways--ones commensurate with emissions reductions at a depth and scale suggested by climate science and bodies such as the International Panel on Climate Change. The AAG Council has created the Annual Meeting Climate Action Task Force to do so. The Task Force is charged with measuring the CO₂ footprint of Annual Meetings, assessing best climate-sensitive practices for the Annual Meetings, and promoting low-CO₂-emitting activities. In doing so, the Task Force seeks to develop various pathways to transition the AAG into a leader and model of how large organizations can leverage technology, member-ingenuity and participation to respond to climate change. It endeavors this transition in a manner that is effective in meeting the needs of AAG members and that is also socio-spatially and environmentally just.

2. Task Force Members

Last Name	First Name	Email	Title	Institution
Attoh	Kafui	Kafui.Attoh@slu.cuny.edu	Associate Professor	CUNY
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Bruno	Tianna	tianna.bruno@gmail.com	Graduate student	University of Oregon
Hayes	John	john.hayes@salemstate.edu	Associate Professor	Salem State University
Jepson	Wendy	wjepson@tamu.edu	University Professor	Texas A&M University
Larson	Oscar	olarson@aag.org	Director, AAG Meetings	AAG
Martin	Pam	patricia.martin@umontreal.ca	Associate Professor/Chair	University of Montreal
Nevins	Joe	jonevins@vassar.edu	Professor	Vassar College
Olson	Betsy	eaolson@email.unc.edu	Professor	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Parikh	Aparna	aparna.parikh@gmail.com	Post-doctoral Fellow	Dartmouth College
Robbins	Paul	director@nelson.wisc.edu	Prof/Dean Nelson Institute	UW Madison

Ruddick	Sue	Sue.ruddick@utoronto.ca	Professor	University of Toronto
Sneegas	Gretchen	gsneegas@tamu.edu	Post-Doctoral Scholar	Texas A&M University
Stinard-Kiel	Sarah	sarah.sk@temple.edu	Student Rep; AAG Council	Temple University
Thorlund	Elin	ethorlund@aag.org	AAG Meeting Specialist	AAG
Walenta	Jayme	jwalenta@utexas.edu	Lecturer	University of Texas

ACTIVITIES

Smaller academic associations have already experimented with low carbon conferencing (e.g. the Society of Cultural Anthropology's 2018 Conference, Displacements, a hybrid of a virtual conference and in-person gatherings at sites across the world linked via the internet). However, no large learned society has directly engaged with an attempt to transition to a low-carbon conference model. Thus, this initiative has the potential to place the AAG at the cutting edge in the struggle against climate change.

Our work was organized across several activities that include all-hands meetings via Zoom (approximately six meetings) and many ad-hoc working group meetings. Our three working groups are Denver AAG, Research, and Technology. Each group had certain tasks, but as we learned by organizing Denver activities that the research and technology components had to be simultaneously engaged. We also need to acknowledge the tremendous work of the AAG Staff, led by Oscar Larson, to make the task force's vision materialize within the AAG framework. Below is a summary of the CATF work between July 2019, when we hosted our first all-hands meeting, and March 2020.

1. Carbon Baseline Study

Dr. Jayme Walenta and her students at the University of Texas at Austin evaluated our capacity to calculate a carbon dioxide footprint for the meetings' travel related emissions. We believe this baseline data is critical to develop plans and targets for low-carbon conference goals. The first task was to use basic data, however imperfect, to calculate the crude travel-based GHG footprint (measured in metric tons) for the Washington DC Meeting. This was accomplished in fall 2019 by a small group of undergraduate students trained in GHG accounting. Working with Oscar Larson, Dr. Walenta obtained the data the students required to calculate the Meeting's emissions. The students then conducted the calculations using a series of assumptions about travel mode. Following past academic conference travel studies such as Nevins (2014), calculations were made both with and without Radiative Forcing Index (RFI). For reference, RFI represents a multiplier that considers the warming impacts associated with high altitude air travel that are not CO₂ emissions. Using RFI acknowledges the wider impacts on Earth's energy balance and considers human caused pollutants such as water vapor. The results from the student's work are below, indicated as Castro et. al.

Author	Conference	W/O RFI	With RFI	Attendees	Total Emissions (MT) w/o RFI	Total emissions (MT) with RFI
Nevins	Seattle 2011	0.73	2.2	7300	5351	16,053
Castro et al	Washington DC 2019	0.55	1.34	8181	4489	10,964
Walenta & Castro	Denver 2020 (cancelled)					

* RFI is the factor used to multiply the carbon emissions generated by a flight in order to account for a range of factors that can increase the footprint of a flight

Working with the AAG team, Dr. Walenta and others on the task force also added three questions to the on-site registration process on travel behavior and travel pathways. The original plan was to use the travel data gathered at the meeting to run a more accurate travel carbon footprint analysis post meeting (from April 15 - May 15). Following this, Dr. Walenta was to write a peer-reviewed article using the combined dataset, the bibliography, and her analysis. In light of the cancellation, this is postponed until Seattle 2021, and thus our recommendations for any carbon target is also postponed.

2. New Modalities: Virtual Experiments for AAG DENVER

To ensure the wellbeing of the AAG, while seeking to provide a stimulating and inclusive environment for the diverse community of geographers, we organized a series of initiatives aimed at implementing change in an incremental way over the next five years. These initiatives include a virtual plenary session with Kevin Anderson, professor of energy and climate change at the University of Manchester and the former Director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research. We organized a series of “blended” sessions related to the Task Force’s major themes, in which there will be a combination of virtual and on-site participation. These panels and paper sessions were to explore a range of issues, including emerging models for academic conferences, the promises and pitfalls of carbon offsetting, and the dilemmas of knowledge production in an era of climate disruption. They also were to report on ongoing practices in the field to measure emissions, impacts and develop strategies around resilience and mitigation.

We also organized a variety of virtual experiments that will bridge research, activism and performance to highlight the importance of this initiative. For example, CATF members organized virtual “meet ups” that matched senior geographers with emerging scholars in a virtual “conversation over coffee.” We had plans to organize a special poster session with the purpose of helping us to reimagine the AAG annual conference in 2025. Through these diverse initiatives, we wanted to understand the impact virtual conferencing might have on participants’ experiences, while testing the limits and possibilities of different technological infrastructures that could be mobilized to support low-CO₂ conferencing.

AAG 2020 CATF-organized Sessions and Events

- Plenary with Kevin Anderson
- Academic knowledge production in age of climate disruption: relevance, inclusion, connection
- Low-carbon conferences
- Should the AAG Consider Carbon Offsets as Part of Its Transition to Low-Emissions Annual Meetings?
- Voices from the Field- Research on the Climate Crisis 1 and 2
- Coffee with... [virtual meet-ups]

In addition to the CATF-organized sessions, we also sponsored:

- “Slow” Geographies and Ecological-Ethical Dilemmas of International Research
- New Water and Urban Water Security (1, 2, 3) (Hybrid paper and panel sessions)
- University of British Columbia as an experiment to facilitate a new model of academic conferencing

3. Experiments to Scale: Virtualizing AAG 2020

The format and discussions the CATF had during the last several months served to support the AAG Annual Meeting to “virtualize” the conference in light of the COVID-19 emergency. We have over 95 volunteers willing to host and manage more than 100 sessions. These experiments have quickly moved to scale with the direct involvement of the AAG staff and Meeting Director. As of this report, the AAG Virtual Meeting is still in the planning stages, but we have worked with the team to consider all aspects of roll out, including synchronous versus asynchronous delivery (“flipped sessions”), platforms (Zoom, GoToMeeting), protection and safety, IP, week-long schedule, etc. We are also prioritizing the sessions with students and ones that confer student awards so that they are able to still benefit.

4. Assessment

Our assessment strategy included survey and on-site focus groups and interviews. With the cancellation of the AAG this year, assessment of the virtual sessions will be adapted to the current online format. As many of our task force members are adapting to major institutional disruption, the assessment will be brief so as to minimally demand more work at this difficult time.

5. Task Force Work, 2020-2021

We will continue our work on the Carbon Footprint, which will allow us to provide an informed baseline to inform future recommendations. Our experience with the AAG Virtual Meeting 2020 will allow us to evaluate fully the capacity to evaluate alternative conference modalities and pathways for Seattle 2021 and beyond. We want to develop nodes, perhaps in coordination with the regions or individual institutions, offer headlining online keynotes that can be shared publicly to advance the AAG’s prominence, and demonstrate how new technologies can only enhance the AAG Annual Meeting experience for those who choose to participate and for those who may not be able to attend the in-person meeting. Moreover, we envision that the node model may allow for expanding the

international participation in ways that are meaningful, reliable, and affordable to our colleagues around the world.

REQUESTS TO COUNCIL

Moving into the second year of the task force, we request the following to be resolutions for Council to consider at the Spring 2020 meeting:

1. **Reaffirm** the Climate Action Task Force's charge and continue our work so that the AAG 2025 carbon footprint will be significantly lower than 2019.
2. **Request** Annual Meeting Organizers to include a virtual option at the time of session registration for Seattle 2021
3. **Request** the the AAG highlight curated elements of the AAG 2020 Virtual Meeting on the website and in Geograms
4. **Engage and request** input of the Climate Action Task Force **before** deciding on the 2026 AAG meeting venue and beyond.

The Climate Action Task Force will have further recommendations and requests for Council for the Fall 2020 meeting. We anticipate that they will include evidence-based recommendations related to AAG Annual Meeting carbon benchmarking, low-carbon modalities and new pathways for conferencing, opportunities for broadening participation in the AAG Annual Meeting, and carbon offsets.

SELECTED RESOURCES

Julien Arsenault, Julie Talbot, Lama Boustani, Rodolphe Gonzalès and Kevin Manaugh, "The environmental footprint of academic and student mobility in a large research-oriented university," *Environmental Research Letters*, Vol. 14, No. 9, 2019

Joseph Nevins, "Academic Jet-Setting in a Time of Climate Destabilization: Ecological Privilege and Professional Geographic Travel," *The Professional Geographer*, Vol. 66(2), 2014, 298-210.

Seth Wynes, Simon D. Donner, Steuart Tannason, Noni Nabors, "Academic air travel has a limited influence on professional success," *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol. 226, No. 20, 2019: 959-967

Other resources are listed at: www.flyingless.org