

Conservationist cautions against greenhouse gasses from conferences

August 4 2015, by Evelyn Perez



Academic conferences are resulting in significant greenhouse gas emissions and conservationists are not immune. But all hope is not lost, according to FIU researchers.

The primary culprit is excess [greenhouse gas emissions](#) that are generated when scientists travel for meetings, conferences and research trips. Kenneth J. Feeley, an FIU biologist who has engaged in his fair share of academic travel, said scientists need to do better at optimizing their travel, and event organizers should give more thought to destinations for major conferences. Feeley recently conducted a study was published in *Ecography* that examines the link between emissions and scientific travel.

"These results are in no way exclusive to scientists or any specific profession. Travel is travel," Feeley said. "But we focus our article on scientists because they need to be at the forefront of changing behavior and need to lead by example."

The idea to investigate the matter came to Feeley after organizing the International Biogeography Society's conference at FIU in 2013. The society is dedicated to the advancement of studies on the relationships between Earth and the plants and animals that populate it. Since 2007, the organization has hosted its biennial conference in Spain, Mexico, Greece and twice in the United States. Using the past four conferences as a case study, Feeley determined each attendee was responsible for greenhouse gas emissions equivalent to as much as 166 gallons of gasoline, equaling about a 5,000-mile drive.

Feeley points out that the good coming from conferences—including new ideas and information-sharing—largely offsets the emissions, but efforts to optimize locations could help alleviate travel.

Feeley and his student James Stround found the majority of meeting attendees are from the United States and Europe. In many cases, conference sites are chosen to be in exotic locations in the hopes of increasing appeal and facilitating international information-sharing. While exotic, hard-to-reach meeting locations may increase attendance

numbers, hosting meetings in these locations also increases travel distances and greenhouse [gas emissions](#). According to Feeley, a typical meeting with 400 attendees is responsible for the same amount of CO₂ being emitted as if a person had driven 2 million miles or driven around the world 80 times.

Feeley's suggestion to minimize overall travel distances of targeted attendees would reduce [carbon emissions](#), while offering the added benefit of making meetings easier and cheaper to attend.

More information: "Responsible academia: optimizing conference locations to minimize greenhouse gas emissions." *Ecography*, 38: 402–404. doi: 10.1111/ecog.01366

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