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Why don't we go back to Hawaii?

It is the eternal lament. Many of us have very happy memories of meetings on the Big Island or Maui (1978, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2011). Science is our constant, but these meetings felt special – our kids swam with dolphins and people renewed wedding vows. Why, then, do we presently seem to be oscillating between FL and AZ?

The answer is that we need a hotel that provides enough rooms for most of us and offers a conference center that can handle our talks and poster sessions. If we add a requirement for warmish weather during the meeting, we have outgrown all but a small number of hotels. In Hawaii, the only option would be a mega-hotel on the Waikiki Strip in Honolulu. This would not be the Hawaii we remember fondly. Rather, we would be spending a great deal of money and flying a long way to be in a crowded, touristy and urban locale. Revisiting Mexico is not an option. It is very challenging for some attendees to travel outside the US, so current ACNP policy is to restrict our meetings to US territories. Puerto Rico? See second-to-last paragraph of this blog.

Of course, our options would broaden if we held scientific sessions in a convention center, rather than using a hotel with its own conference center. But this might come at a cost. Would sessions and mentoring events be well attended if people had to bus from hotels to the conference venue? Would you run into the senior scientist or potential collaborator who you would love to meet if the poster session took place in an enormous convention center? Would conversations migrate from the convention center to restaurants or informal gathering places with the same ease we now enjoy? Efficiency also matters. Say what you will about the Diplomat, but it is nice to be able to go from your room to the conference center simply by walking down a long hallway, and later go from the conference center to the beach in less than 5 min. The hotels we have utilized in the Phoenix area offer many of the same benefits. In sum, face-to-face conversations and their unexpected turns can make all the difference in developing an innovative new project or cementing a mentoring relationship, and the odds of such interactions increase when we are all living and working in the same space.

The existing strategic plan of the ACNP is to limit growth so that we can avoid the convention center scenario and maintain an intimate and collegial atmosphere at the meeting. As an aside, it is important to keep in mind that this is not the most important reason for our stringent membership selection process. First and foremost, we must maintain our stature as an organization of world-class scientists and

clinicians because this sets us apart, gives us leverage when we speak on research, educational or policy matters, and attracts the next generation of top scientists to our ranks. In addition, members must be willing to enthusiastically serve the College, not just list it on their CV. This is one reason the Membership Committee looks favorably on applicants who have previously participated in one or more annual meetings. Presumably, such applicants understand the commitment they are making.

Let it not be said, however, that there is no romance left in the souls of the Council members and the Parthenon staff. As you may have noticed, the 2021 meeting will take place in San Juan. If you are of a certain age, this evokes even fonder memories than Hawaii! The upcoming meeting will not, however, be a rerun of those golden days when nearly everyone stayed at the Caribe Hilton – where the lobby flowed into the open-air bar and then the beach - and crammed themselves like sardines into the poster venue in their parking garage. We no longer fit, not by any stretch of the imagination. Instead, we will try a hybrid model, in which we stay at the Caribe and surrounding hotels but hold scientific sessions in the newly remodeled San Juan convention center. This convention center is very small and reasonably close to the hotels, qualities that we hope will mitigate the concerns about large convention centers that I listed above, especially when combined with the beauty and fun of San Juan. However, there are other potential downsides, including costlier and longer flights, heavy traffic on the route from hotels to the convention center, and the risk of another catastrophic storm (San Juan suffered substantial damage during Hurricane Maria in 2017).

As you attend the next few meetings, please give some thought to the relative value you place on good weather, a resort location, a venue that maximizes our interactions by offering everything under one roof, and ease of access from all parts of the country. Going forward, we are trying to identify new hotels on the US mainland that offer most of the above at a reasonable cost – hence the “Orlando experiment”! I’m looking forward to seeing all of you there.

Marina Wolf, ACNP President