

# A review of ISRS La Crosse conference 2015

By Murray Scown

La Crosse, Wisconsin. The brochure described it as a working river town. What a perfect place for a bunch of scientists and managers interested in rivers to meet. That and the fact that it is the city with the most bars per capita in the United States (according to a 2013 article in the probably-not-peer-reviewed-and-possibly-factually-incorrect New York Post). This meeting was, of course, the 4<sup>th</sup> biennial symposium of the International Society for River Science (ISRS), held from August 23-28, 2015. With over 150 oral presentations, 34 posters, and 10 invited plenary speakers, this was sure to be a great symposium. For me personally, this meeting was also special because it was the first I would attend as a graduate. After attending the first three ISRS symposiums as a student dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, this time I donned my Sunday's best and came as a contributing scientist among peers. But I didn't get treated any differently. That's the great thing about the society, whether you are the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Westminster or an undergraduate student from the University of Wisconsin, we are all welcomed the same at these symposiums (nowhere was this more evident than on the excursion to the softball field, but I'll get to that).

River connectivity was the theme of the symposium and the opening keynote speaker, Chad Pregracke, kicked it off with his passionate insights into connections not only within rivers or among scientists, but between the general public, industry, river users, and the media as well. This resonated throughout the week with conference attendees and plenary speakers who were government officials, representatives of commercial users of rivers, journalists, managers, public servants, students, and academics. While each of the plenary presentations were insightful and motivating, a highlight for me was the final speech given by Professor Charles Vörösmarty. It is no mean feat to keep a 150+ crowd interested, let alone awake, at the end of a week of stimulating talks. It is harder still to achieve this immediately prior to a river boat cruise with pizza and beer onboard. However, Professor Vörösmarty did so with his ambitious and inspiring thoughts on large-scale, trans-border, interdisciplinary approaches to river science and management around the globe. This was a perfect finale to a symposium on river connectivity—to consider river and water issues not only locally, but as part of one large connected system – the Earth! I will also say that after Professor Jack Stanford's plenary talk, I'm thoroughly looking forward to reading his revisiting of the Shifting Habitat Mosaic of River Ecosystems concept once it is published.

But the symposium was not all about the bigwigs! There were many fantastic talks, most of which I unfortunately missed while attending one of four or five concurrent sessions. However, I will point out some of my personal highlights. One of these highlights was definitely the presentation given by Dr Scott Ensign. Dr Ensign really challenged us to think about space and time in flowing river channels in ways that many of us are unfamiliar and often uncomfortable with (but after all, river science wouldn't be rewarding if it wasn't challenging). I would also encourage everyone to take a look at Dr Ensign's website (<http://www.planktosinstruments.com/>) to see one of the coolest river-related homepages I have ever come across! Another personal highlight for me was the thought-provoking open discussion after Dr Melissa Parsons' presentation on natural disasters and resilience—such discussions are the advantage of being the last speaker in your session! Unfortunately I missed the official resilience workshop, but the

second round of discussions at the Bodega Brew Pub was fantastically good fun (and productive?). On the topic of natural disasters, I also thoroughly enjoyed Dr Andy Large's descriptions of "hidden rivers reappearing" and "oddly brick-shaped sediment" being transported during a flood in Newcastle upon Tyne—a reminder of how much humans have changed rivers over time. It was also interesting to hear about Dr Large's use of Twitter and Facebook posts uploaded during the flood as a trending timeline of the event.

Some other highlights for me from the symposium included the handing over of 'the jacket' from outgoing president Professor Martin Thoms to incoming president Professor David Gilvear. Thank you to Professor Thoms for his leadership over the past two years, and good luck to Professor Gilvear. Congratulations also to the new president-elect Dr Christian Wolter, who will take over the reins of the society at the next meeting in Hamilton, New Zealand, in 2017. Back to the softball game...it is said that many scientists have a very competitive streak, some even have a mean throwing arm. From my observations this is especially true for Professors and grad students associated with either the Flathead Lake Biological Station or Norway, without mentioning any names. Another daily highlight of mine was: "Would you like a glass of milk with your lunch?" ...only in Wisconsin. I also enjoyed hearing *te reo Māori* spoken during the closing ceremony—a reminder of how important connectivity among cultures is for river science and management, but also in everyday life. Overall, I enjoyed meeting many other students and early career researchers, as well rubbing shoulders with those names I cited countless times in my dissertation. The scientific community should be inclusive and welcoming, and ISRS is exactly that. I hope many new faces are encouraged to join and I know that several individuals in the society are actively working to make that happen. Finally, a huge thank you and congratulations to Dr Roger Haro and his team for putting on such a great symposium. The team put in an unfathomable amount of behind the scenes work and it really did pay off. Looking forward to seeing you all again in New Zealand!