

**President's Report - August 2005**  
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President of BSA and Chair of the BSA Executive Committee

Most of my efforts as President revolved around staying in touch with Executive Director Bill Dahl and members of the Executive Committee (EC) to help keep the Society moving forward and planning for the future. Each of BSA's standing committees has also contributed to our efforts, of course, and together we have made a lot of progress.

Through email, conference calls, and discussions at our two annuals meeting in April and August, the EC has focused much of our attention on the following topics. Several of these topics are also discussed in Bill Dahl's annual report and those of other BSA committees, which also include updates on BSA finances (very good), long-term planning, and new BSA initiatives.

**1) Building the BSA membership and membership services**

Looking at the numbers, our mid-year individual membership has held steady at about 2,200 members over the past four years. The EC is constantly evaluating what additional benefits we can provide to members and how we can continue to encourage more people to join BSA. This is especially challenging when so much of what BSA provides is free of charge. All of the information on our website is open to all, and many people have free access to the American Journal of Botany through institutional subscriptions. Therefore, we need to function more on the "National Public Radio" model, in which members choose to support BSA because the society and its publications are an important part of their professional development. We all need to keep working on getting this message out to our colleagues and students. BSA membership dues are very reasonable, at \$50 per year for regular members and \$30 per year for students, and the society would be better off with a larger membership.

Meanwhile, the Executive Committee has been exploring several ways in which we can serve the needs of current BSA members. The BSA website continues to get better all the time, and Bill Dahl has done a great job of keeping members informed of BSA activities, opportunities, and deadlines *via* e-mail newsletters. Likewise, under Marsh Sundberg's leadership, the Plant Science Bulletin continues to provide a lively forum for news and opinion columns. Recently, the EC conducted a survey to find out whether members would like to revise our current sectional structure and the way each BSA section now serves as a format for scheduling presentations at annual meetings. Results from the survey will be discussed in an open meeting at Botany 2005 in Austin. We are also exploring ways to recruit more graduate student members and we have discussed adding a category of "amateur botanist" to help build a broader and larger membership base.

**2) Planning future meetings**

Attendance at annual meetings has fluctuated a good deal recently, from a low of 424 abstracts presented at Mobile, AL, in 2003, to a high of 723 abstracts at Snowbird, UT, in 2004, with 524 abstracts so far at Botany 2005 in Austin. The Executive

Committee has worked closely with the Annual Meeting Program Committee to try to make our annual meetings as exciting and enjoyable as possible. Each year, the EC discusses how the program at future BSA meetings might be structured to maximize the intellectual and professional benefits for members. We also request and receive feedback from our member societies regarding the location, facilities, and programming at annual meetings.

Plans for the Centennial meeting in Chico, CA, in 2006 are coming along well thanks to the Centennial Planning Committee, and we are very pleased to be able to meet with the American Society of Plant Biologists in Chicago in 2007. Each of these meetings will provide great opportunities for a unique and enriched program of professional activities. As President, I have also been in touch with the President of the Canadian Botanical Society regarding a joint meeting in 2008. The EC has approved a return to Snowbird, UT, in 2009 to take advantage of the popularity of this location among BSA members and member societies.

As of August 2005, Jeff Osborn has completed two terms as Chair of the Annual Meeting Program Committee. His energy, organization, and dedication to this job have been remarkable and we all owe him a huge debt of thanks. Karen Renzgalia has been elected to serve as the next Chair of this extremely important committee.

### **3) Preparing for changes in academic publishing**

The EC has kept abreast of current trends in academic publishing, including discussions about open access publishing and its effects on small, non-profit professional societies. Bill Dahl and Treasurer Kent Holsinger are especially knowledgeable about these issues. As President of the American Institute of Biological Sciences (AIBS), Kent was very involved in this year's AIBS conference on open access publishing. For the time being, the EC feels that the American Journal of Botany has a good strategy for providing good accessibility while maintaining the expectations of our subscribers (the vast majority of our income from subscriptions comes from institutions rather than individuals). Further details about the BSA's position on open access publishing are described in an article by Scott Russell in the August 2005 Plant Science Bulletin. We are confident that the American Journal of Botany will continue to thrive under the competent leadership of Editor-in-Chief Judy Jernstedt.

### **4) Promoting botany and organismal biology in general**

During the past year, the EC continued to promote botany and biology, mainly by supporting AIBS, our umbrella organization, and efforts of the Education Committee and others. Bill Dahl has been especially active in the BSA's new Scientific Inquiry through Plants Initiative (Sci-Pi), an internet-based mentoring program for middle school and high school students. Kent Holsinger, Bill Dahl, and I participated in the 2005 AIBS meeting in Washington, DC. Kent and I are serving on the AIBS Long-term Planning Committee, which is preparing a major "summit" on the relevance of integrative biology to society and science priorities for the future. We are especially interested in promoting evolutionary, ecological, and organismal biology in the face of declining resources and job opportunities for biologists with these types of expertise.

BSA accepted an invitation from Dr. Eugenie Scott, National Center for Science and Education, to sign an amicus curiae brief to explain why anti-evolution warning

labels are harmful to science education. The purpose of the amicus curiae brief was to assist the U.S. Court of Appeals, Eleventh Circuit, in Atlanta, GA, in making a sound decision about disclaimer labels in science textbooks. The brief included:

- The central tenets of biological evolution
- The nature of science in layman's terms
- Explanation of the meanings of "theory" and "fact" as used formally in science
- The conclusion that evolution should not be disclaimed or "warned against"

Along these lines, the EC continues to receive appreciative letters about the BSA's 2003 "Statement on Evolution", which was prepared by Joe Armstrong and Judy Jernstedt and is posted on [www.botany.org](http://www.botany.org).

#### **5) My other activities as President**

Like all BSA presidents, my first job was to deliver the President's Banquet Address at our meeting last August. I summarized my talk in a contribution to the Plant Science Bulletin, which is included at the end of this report. From September through December, I served BSA from afar during a mini-sabbatical in Denmark, and I submitted a Presidential Letter with the Fall Business Report. Throughout the year, I received many BSA communications and inquiries about BSA, including numerous requests for letters of recommendation and support (a total of over 1,200 email captivating messages as of this writing!). I also served on several BSA committees as an ex-officio member:

- Financial Advisory Committee
- Education Committee
- Merit Awards Committee
- BSA Centennial Planning Committee

Working with Bill Dahl, the EC, and many other BSA members during the past year has been a very rewarding experience. We are extremely fortunate to have a very competent and resourceful staff at our office in St. Louis, and Bill Dahl's leadership as BSA's Executive Director has been outstanding. I have enjoyed representing the society as President, and I look forward to continuing until the 2005 banquet, when I will turn over this title to President-Elect Chris Haufler and move on to my new role as Past-President.

Respectfully submitted by,



Allison A. Snow  
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## **President's Address**

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### **Botany in the news: how to communicate the fruits of our research.**

Keeping botany in the news is an excellent way to promote the goals of the Botanical Society of America and biologists worldwide. Even more important, we need to encourage greater scientific literacy among voters, politicians, and other decision makers. One facet of this effort is explaining our individual research findings to the tax-paying public. As the incoming president of BSA, I'd like to share a few of my thoughts and experiences in this arena.

#### **1. Why communication is important**

As botanists, we continually need to publicize our research accomplishments in order to “justify our existence” in the eyes of administrators, federal agencies, and society as a whole. Every year, competition for research funds and new positions seems to get stiffer and stiffer, while academic departments are hiring fewer organismal biologists, and fewer students are learning basic botany. One way to address these problems is to do exciting research and make it understandable to the public. Whether you work at a small college, a university, or a museum, you are undoubtedly engaged in endeavors that the public should know about. This can be accomplished at a local level, as well as at a truly global level, by making use of the internet and the services of professional science writers.

#### **2. Types of science writers**

Most universities have staff writers who publicize scientific findings of their faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates. This kind of publicity often leads to feature stories in local newspapers, and it is an excellent way to promote botany at a local level. If a public-relations writer thinks your work is intriguing and important, he/she may issue a university press release that is available to science writers worldwide. To reach a *very* large audience, you need to be recognized by science writers who work for agencies such as the Associated Press, Reuters, USA Today, the New York Times, Science News, Discover, Science, or Nature. When your work is featured in one of these high-profile outlets, it is likely to be picked up by other science writers and “recycled” repeatedly in many different venues.

Some science writers specialize in areas such as medical or environmental topics, while others cover a huge range of subjects, making it is impossible for them to gain a very deep understanding of botany. This is why it's important to explain the highlights of your work in accessible, non-technical language.

### **3. What high-profile science writers are seeking**

Reporters need an event to justify writing about your research, such as a new publication or a talk at a national meeting. Obviously, papers that appear in *Science*, *Nature*, and the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* are inherently newsworthy, as long as science writers can figure out how to translate them into engaging news stories. These types of papers are highly original and they often address topics of fairly broad interest. However, many other journals publish equally interesting and important findings, but their news-stories-in-waiting often escape the notice of professional science writers. Once in long while, articles in journals like the *American Journal of Botany* are described in the news pages of *Science* or *Nature* - this could happen more often if authors would promote their research findings more actively.

For gaining recognition, the best situation is to be able to say that you have demonstrated “such-and-such” for the first time, so you can refer to it as a new discovery. It also helps if you happen to work with a system that has inherent public appeal, like plant sex, carnivorous plants, or topics that directly affect people (in my case, GMOs). Even if your findings do not have earthshaking implications for society, there may be angles that the public would appreciate knowing about. People are fascinated by exotic field sites, believe-it-or-not features of plants (biggest, oldest, smelliest, most endangered, etc.), and anything that is entertaining or dangerous. For example, BSA member Lena Struwe, at Rutgers University, received a lot of publicity for publishing a “Potter-esque” name for a new species of Ecuadorian gentian (see [www.eurekalert.org/pub\\_releases/2003-06/rtsu-hpa062303.php](http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2003-06/rtsu-hpa062303.php)).

### **4. How to help if you're contacted**

Whatever you do, don't panic if a news reporter calls you up! Scientists have a natural aversion to oversimplifying complicated results for public consumption. We also worry about what our colleagues will think if reporters misquote us or use unflattering sound bites. My research on the ecological and evolutionary effects of transgenic crops is relevant to debates about genetic engineering, and I have had both positive and negative experiences when journalists report my findings. Some of the lessons I've learned are: journalists like talking to friendly academics; most reporters are conscientious, curious, and fun to work with; simple explanations, humor, and metaphors make their job much easier; reporters often work on unbelievably tight deadlines; and, finally, news reports are ephemeral, and it's not worth agonizing over the inevitable inaccuracies that creep into the media. To make your findings more user-friendly, pretend that you are talking to a friend, a relative, or a group of wide-eyed undergraduates, even though you know full well that your words may be broadcast widely! Don't expect to be able to edit what a reporter has written. There usually isn't enough time for this, although sometimes you will be asked to fact-check a news story in advance.

One of my favorite sources of science news is the online publication of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), which is available to subscribers at <http://sciencenow.sciencemag.org>. The science writers at AAAS are especially good at

distilling the important elements of new publications into concise, accurate, and interesting single-page stories. Have a look at their website if you'd like to see how clever they are. In any case, it's a good idea to read science news on a regular basis to see how specialized, jargon-rich journal articles can be translated into everyday English. These stories are also great for teaching undergraduates about what botanists do.

In conclusion, we all know the many ways in which botanists constantly make important contributions to society and the welfare of the planet. Communicating these findings to the public is always worthwhile, and is easier and more satisfying than many people realize.

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