

*The following is adapted from "Saving the Earth as a career: Advice on becoming a conservation professional" by Malcolm L. Hunter, Jr., David B. Lindenmayer, and Aram J.K. Calhoun (Blackwell, 2007).*

### **Submitting an abstract**

No doubt you have read scores of abstracts for journal papers, but this might be your first experience at writing one. They are not easy. Distilling the essence of your work into a single paragraph that tells a comprehensive and cogent story is a challenge. Here are the essential elements of writing a good conservation science abstract, presented, in the spirit of conciseness, in four sentences.

- 1) Develop a title that is informative and interesting to help attract an audience.
- 2) Follow the standard format of a scientific paper with the four key elements-- Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion--each condensed to one to three sentences.
- 3) Tell a coherent story that culminates in your main conclusion, hopefully one with direct relevance to conservation, not just a call for further research.
- 4) Provide critical evidence to support your conclusion, preferably with specific, quantitative results.

With these guidelines in mind read some abstracts from a major journal or from a conference (the Society for Conservation Biology and many professional societies archive these on their websites). You will find many abstracts that do not follow these guidelines very well. Some of this occurs because certain topics do not fit well within these guidelines (e.g., a discussion of how wetland regulation policies are evolving will probably not have Methods and Results). Some of this occurs because it is hard to write good abstracts and many people do not take enough time to do it well. When writing abstracts for conferences there is often a gap of several months between writing the abstract and making the presentation and this can lead to abstracts that conclude with open-ended promises such as "Results will be discussed in the context of reforming endangered species legislation." It is better to tell the story as you know it now, and if it evolves during the interval between abstract submission and the conference, which is likely, you can still tell the new version.

Why bother spending a couple hours writing a paragraph? First, many conferences have a finite capacity for presentations and thus a poor abstract may lead to outright rejection. Similarly, the capacity for oral presentations is often especially tight so an abstract submitted for an oral presentation slot may be redirected to a poster session. Second, many conferees read abstracts to decide which presentations to attend. Third, SCB and many other professional societies have student presentation competitions and abstracts are the first filter in this process.

The format for submitting an abstract is usually very rigid, with a maximum length, a particular style for reporting your affiliation, and so on. Follow the format exactly. Improperly formatted abstracts are a huge headache for conference organizers and submissions are sometimes rejected on this basis alone. You may be asked to designate a topical area for your submission. Examining archived conference proceedings may give you some idea of the types of presentations that are likely to precede and follow yours if you choose "stream ecology" versus "fish conservation" versus "water policy."