

NEERS at 50 – A Historical Synopsis

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The origin of NEERS can be traced back to the 1940's when Chesapeake Bay scientists lamented the lack of an effective means to communicate among themselves. Three of those scientists, Willard Van Engel and Nelson Marshall of the Virginia Fisheries Lab and Eugene Cronin of the Chesapeake Biological Lab decided to organize a meeting to remedy the situation. Twenty-two estuarine scientists met at the University of North Carolina in Morehead City, NC April 23-24, 1949 to present research and discuss ideas. The meeting was a success and led to the creation of a new organization to facilitate meetings every spring and fall. After much discussion of possible names, Atlantic Estuarine Research Society (AERS) was chosen. As intended, the society held a meeting each spring and fall for "the informal discussion and exchange of ideas upon estuarine and related research problems centering in the Chesapeake-Carolina area."

Over the next twenty years, estuarine research expanded in other areas of the coast and soon there were complaints similar to those of the Chesapeake Bay researchers in the 1940's. It was possible but time-consuming and inconvenient for researchers from New England and the southeast to travel to the mid-Atlantic region for AERS meetings. They needed meetings closer to home. In 1969 AERS approved the formation of regional sections of AERS – AERS-North (New York north), AERS-Central (New Jersey to Virginia) and AERS-South (North and South Carolina).

This prompted Johnes K. "Jay" Moore to mail invitations to twenty-six New England marine scientists for a meeting to form a northeast regional section of AERS. At 10 AM on December 10, 1969, twenty of those invitees met in the faculty lounge in Meier Hall of Salem State College in Salem, MA. Some of the attendees balked at some of the language in the AERS constitution and they were also somewhat miffed that AERS was giving people permission to create regional sections of that society. As a result, they created a new organization with a new constitution and by-laws and a new name – New England Estuarine Research Society (NEERS).

Until elections could be held for officers, Jay Moore was chosen as President pro-tem, Galen Jones of the University of New Hampshire as Treasurer and Robert Zottoli of Fitchburg (MA) State College as Secretary. They decided to hold the inaugural meeting of NEERS the following spring at the New England Conference Center of the University of New Hampshire in Durham, NH. The dates of May 28-30 were chosen to correlate with the dedication of the new Jackson Estuarine Lab scheduled for Saturday, May 30. The registration fee for the meeting was set at \$2 and the cost of the Friday night banquet was \$10. AERS donated \$75 to help defray the costs of the first NEERS meeting.

On Thursday May 28, 8 contributed papers were presented, followed by a business meeting, cash bar, dinner and Beer Blast "AERS Style." On Friday they held a symposium on "Pollution of Estuaries" with two invited talks dealing with domestic

pollution, two with industrial pollution and one on the role of the federal government in the control of estuarine pollution. The symposium was followed by a banquet that included a talk by Dennis J. Crisp of the University College of North Wales. The dedication of the Jackson Estuarine Lab took place at 10 AM on May 30, followed by a luncheon and open house.

The meeting, with 100 attendees, was a success and it was decided to hold meetings every spring and fall, in the manner of AERS. The fall 1970 meeting was held in Kingston, Rhode Island, at which time new officers were elected: David Dean of the University of Maine was elected as President, Donald Horton of The Research Institute of the Gulf of Maine (TRIGOM) as Secretary-Treasurer and Irwin Alperin of the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries and Eva Monteiro of the Woods Hole Fisheries Lab as At-Large officers.

Initially, three membership categories and fees were established: Regular (\$3) for those actively engaged in estuarine research, Associate (\$2) for those interested in estuaries but not actively engaged in research and Student (\$1) for those enrolled in a field of study at an academic institution. Persons interested in joining NEERS needed to apply for membership and their application was voted on at the next NEERS meeting. That was soon changed so that providing contact information and payment of dues was sufficient to become a member and the different membership categories were dropped; the Student category was revived some years later. In 1983 a new Honorary Membership category was added for long-standing members who have made significant contributions to NEERS. To date there have been 22 Honorary Members, 11 of whom, including the first ten, are now deceased. A list of Honorary Members can be found on the NEERS website at <http://www.neers.org/MEMBERS/HonoraryMembers.html>.

In 1971 AERS and NEERS created the Estuarine Research Federation (ERF) to serve as an umbrella organization for the two existing and future additional affiliate societies. As anticipated, new affiliates soon sprang up: the Gulf Estuarine Research Society (GERS) in 1973, the Southeastern Estuarine Research Society (SEERS) in 1974, and the Pacific Estuarine Research Society (PERS) in 1979, and later two more were formed: the California Estuarine Research Society (CAERS) in 2002 and the Atlantic Canada Coastal and Estuarine Science Society (ACCESS) in 2003. In 2000 the name of the umbrella organization was modified to Coastal and Estuarine Research Federation (CERF) to better encompass the interests of the seven affiliates.

There currently are four prizes for student presentations at NEERS meetings. The Ketchum Prize for Best Graduate Student Oral Presentation is named after Bostwick "Buck" Ketchum, Marine Biologist, Oceanographer, Senior Scientist, and Associate Director of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, and NEERS Honorary Member, who died in 1982. The Rankin Prize for Best Undergraduate Student Oral Presentation is named after John "Stubby" Rankin, founder and Director of the University of Connecticut's Marine Research Lab in Noank, CT and Honorary Member, who died in 1987. The Dean Prize for Best Graduate Student Poster is named after David Dean, Director of the University of Maine Darling Center, one of the NEERS founders, first

elected President and Honorary Member, who died in 1991. The Warren Prize is named for R. Scott Warren, Professor Emeritus at Connecticut College and long-time promoter of undergraduate student research and participation in NEERS meetings. In addition, there are two travel awards to assist students attending a NEERS or CERF meeting named after William "Bill" Niering, long-time educator at Connecticut College who died in 1999 and Marshall Pregnall, professor at Vassar College who died in 2016, both of whom were avid supporters of student research and participation in NEERS and CERF meetings.

In addition to the student presentation prizes there are several additional NEERS awards presented occasionally. Perhaps more coveted than a presentation prize is the Stickleback Award, established in 1998, and presented, if warranted, at the conclusion of a NEERS meeting. The recipient, chosen by the previous winner, must meet three criteria: (1) they must distinguish themselves in dancing until the music ends Friday night, (2) they must attend the first presentation Saturday morning, and (3) (least important) they must show exemplary service to NEERS. According to the NEERS website, the award consists of a cherished copy of the book "The Life Cycle of a Stickleback" by Philip Parker, which includes a discussion of the stickleback's "zig-zag" dance. The recipient's name is written in the front cover and book is passed on to the next award recipient. Also established in 1998, the NEERS Achievement Award recognizes people who "have made significant contributions over a period of years to estuarine science, education, conservation, or management." The first recipient was Scott Nixon in 2000 and the only other recipient is Fred Short in 2012. From the NEERS website, "The Graying Gracefully Award was initiated in 2001 and is awarded at the discretion of the President to a senior scientist who gives an exceptionally thoughtful and inspiring presentation at a NEERS meeting. The award consists of an old copy of 'You're Only Old Once' by Dr. Seuss. The winner's name is written in the front of the book and the book is passed to the next winner when the prize is next awarded." To date the award has never been given so apparently we are not graying gracefully. The most recently established awards are "Early Professional Funds" to provide travel assistance to a member within two years of their most recent degree and the Stuck Boot Award for a member who gets "stuck" and requests financial assistance to attend a NEERS meeting. Neither of these two awards has yet been presented.

From time to time there have been other impromptu awards and contests. These include the "Bubonic Award" (Spring 1976) for the speaker wearing the loudest blouse or shirt, the "Estuarine Biologist at Work Slide Contest" (Spring 1980), a t-shirt design contest (Fall 1982), a logo design contest (Spring 1984), and the "First Annual Paul Chantey Memorial Beer Can Stacking Contest" (Spring 1992). Unfortunately (fortunately?), winners of these awards were not recorded. We do know, however, that Barbara Welsh and her colleagues won the homemade sampling device "Rube Goldberg Award" (Spring 1979) for a maximum-mini um recording tide gauge built at a cost of one popsicle (to provide the stick required in the mechanism). Also of note is that Robert Radulski, at the Fall 1975 meeting, was awarded the "Gunga Din Medal" for "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action" when he was able to use his belt to fashion a substitute for a failed

beer keg pump gasket, saving the Beer Blast participants from "falling victim to desiccation, disgruntlement, and despair."

To date there have been 79 NEERS meetings (not including ERF/CERF conferences) held at 49 locations throughout the northeast. The most meetings have been held in Massachusetts (26) followed by Maine (16), Connecticut (13), Rhode Island (11), New Hampshire (5), Nova Scotia (3), New York and New Brunswick (2 each) and Vermont (1). Woods Hole, MA was a popular meeting site in the early years and is tied with Groton, CT and Block Island, RI for the site with the most meetings (6), followed by Salem, MA (5), Portland, ME (4), Boothbay, ME and Boston, MA (3 each). Seven other sites have hosted 2 meetings each. Meeting locations are intentionally moved around to ensure relatively short travel for all members at least every other year so the distribution of sites among the states has remained fairly constant from decade to decade throughout the past 50 years. For a complete list of NEERS meetings, including programs and abstracts, go to <http://www.neers.org/MEETINGS/PastMeetingsDocuments.html>.

While all NEERS meetings have been enjoyable and informative, some have been more memorable than others, beginning with the infamous Spring 1978 meeting in Boothbay, Maine, in the saloon of the Rusty Anchor, marking the first appearance of the NEERS Kazoo Band and the still record \$2959 bar tab (a staggering \$111,468 in today's dollars); \$953 was spent for food. After attending the Spring 1980 NEERS meeting, ERF Newsletter Editor and member of SEERS, A. Quinton White surmised that NEERS stood for "Nothing Else Like It Estuarine Research Society" and further suggested that NEERS members each should be tattooed "Do Not Preserve -- Pre-pickled in Ethanol." While NEERS earned a reputation during the 70's for considerable alcohol consumption at meetings, the organization enjoys a more important reputation for being an excellent forum for exchange of scientific ideas in a friendly, informal setting. Of particular note are the two ferry crossings to meetings in Nova Scotia, the First Fun-Filled Fall Fundy Ferry Forum (FFFFFFF) in Fall 1985 and the Second Spring Semi-Serious Scotian Shipboard Symposium (SSSSSSS) in Spring 1991. At the Fall 1985 meeting high winds delayed the arrival of the ferry Scotia Prince to the point where Bernie McAlice began a pool for when the ferry would finally arrive. The ferry ended up being five hours late and, to add insult to injury, the winner of the pool was non-NEERS ferry passenger "outsider," Vicky Amato of Sebago Lake, Maine. NEERS again ventured to Nova Scotia in Spring 1999, meeting on the western shore of Mahone Bay opposite Oak Island (there was no field trip to dig up the treasure). At the conclusion of the meeting, the old school bus rented to transport people back to Yarmouth to catch the last ferry back to the US blew a tire and was disabled along the road. Enterprising NEERSians wrote help messages on the backs of posters and stood along the road. Every car stopped and provided rides so that all were able to catch the ferry. Other boat trips went more smoothly -- an evening sampling cruise along the Thames River (Spring 1993), a tour of the Great Bay/Piscataqua River area (Spring 1995), and the ferry trips every four years since 1996 to and from Block Island. During the Fall 1994 meeting in Orleans on Cape Cod at the Jailhouse Tavern (which seemed a more appropriate setting for a NEERS meeting than the Pilgrim United Church of Christ in Duxbury, MA, where paper sessions were held at the Spring 1984 meeting), the call for assistance for a Friday afternoon heavy rain sewer

overflow at a nearby Stop & Shop parking lot seemed suspiciously suited to the "Translating Science into Management" symposium. Due to space limitations at the Spring 2005 meeting in Eastham, MA, the poster session was held under a tent on the sand volleyball court. It seemed like a good idea until strong winds threatened to blow away both the posters and the tent. Since Fall 1996 NEERS has met every four years on Block Island, RI, notable both for the location and Walter Berry's organized (disorganized?) game nights (Jeopardy, Survivor, Family Feud, Wheel of Fortune, Who Wants to Win an NSF Grant). Lastly, the most recent meeting in June 2020 is memorable because it was the first virtual meeting via Zoom due to the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic making an in-person meeting impossible.

From the very beginning NEERS described itself as "a friendly, informal organization emphasizing the work of those presently active in estuarine research, [with one of the] primary purposes to present works in progress for discussion and suggestions." For the past fifty years NEERS has held true to that description. The research discussed is of high quality and the oral and poster presentations have become more polished, but the meetings remain friendly and informal. This very successful format is especially conducive to student participation and no changes are anticipated. It is very likely that the same description of NEERS still will apply after the next fifty years.