

2nd Southern Deserts Conference: "Human-environment interactions in southern hemisphere deserts—past, present and future"

ARICA, CHILE; 10-14 OCTOBER 2005

This four-day conference was designed to help develop a comparative Southern Hemisphere perspective on the ways in which humans have interacted with and responded to the evolution of arid environments from prehistoric times to the present. It proved to be a very successful follow-up to the initial Southern Deserts Conference, held in Canberra, Australia, in January 2003, and will be followed by a meeting in the third desert area of the hemisphere, southern Africa, in September 2008.

The conference was structured into three symposia: 'Late Quaternary Palaeoenvironments, Climate and Culture', 'Resource Use in Pre-Historic, Pre-Industrial and Industrial Times' and 'Holocene and Modern Spatial and Social Organisation', with almost all the 70 or so registrants from 14 countries presenting a paper or poster. There was good coverage of all major deserts across the Tropic of Capricorn but some real insights were provided into those from South America, through an excellent and comprehensive series of papers. Although the first symposium was most focused on PAGES activities, the whole meeting was relevant to the spirit of PAGES and provided a holistic feel of human-environment relationships.

The strong messages emerging from the meeting were:

1. The diversity of deserts, with contrasts between the high-altitude desert of the Atacama, the sand deserts of southern Africa and the 'wet' deserts of Australia.
2. The strong environmental control over human settlement and development of culture in desert environments.
3. The differences but also some notable similarities in human adaptation to the various desert environments.



Fig. 1: The post-conference field excursion group experiencing the driest place on Earth. Although it never rains, riparian vegetation is supported by water from the mountains on the Altiplano.

The conference themes, and their integration, were investigated and cemented on pre- and post-conference excursions from the coast to the Andean Altiplano along oasis corridors. Dramatically marked by huge slope-covered geoglyphs, these ancient traveling routes allowed maintenance of communication between peoples across the centuries and indeed millennia. Prior to the conference, delegates traveled west from Arica into the Andes to the Bolivian border, following Inca trails and appreciating how pre-Incan Indigenous peoples harnessed and managed precious water, modified their landscapes and commenced a history of animal and plant domestication. The post-conference tour experienced the driest place on Earth, where it never rains; lakes and middens of pollen sequences on the Altiplano; and archeology through the whole time range of human occupation from the early Holocene, including the world's oldest mummies, to a nitrate mine settlement abandoned in the 1970s and now a World Heritage site.

I welcomed the opportunity to experience and expand my knowledge of this part of the world and to make the contacts that will facilitate integrated southern hemisphere projects as part of the new PAGES

program. Although South American researchers have contributed substantially to PAGES, a number of participants (especially archeologists and those from elsewhere) were unfamiliar with the organization. An impressive background to the new PAGES initiative on variability in South American climate over the last 500-2000 years, featured in the last PAGES News issue, was presented by Martin Grosjean.

As a consequence of the interdisciplinary nature of the conference, there was a great deal of interaction between participants from diverse backgrounds. This interaction will be maintained through joint involvement in the production of a proceedings of the conference, planned for a special issue of 'Chungara - Revista de Antropología Chilena'. It appropriately focuses on integration, by the writing of joint papers on particular themes arising from the conference.

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