

## **Young Ecologists Talk and Interact YETI 2009 – Survey brief**

*It was realized soon after the inception of the YETI idea that the participants' assessment of the content and organization of YETI 2009 was essential for the future of this idea. This is in keeping with YETI's ideals of being an inclusive forum of learning for students of ecology, evolution and conservation science. Soon after the conference, a survey of twenty-six questions of mostly closed questions and a few open ended ones was sent out to the participants that intended to compile, apart from information on the management of YETI 2009, information on the participant's research background, perceived intellectual gains, and thoughts on taking YETI forward. This was conducted over email using an on-line questionnaire. Recognizing the increasing relevance of the internet in a ecology researcher's day-to-day work we also gathered preliminary information on internet facilities available to the participants for their work.*

A total of a 111 participants from 34 towns/ cities of 10 states and two union territories, representing as many as 54 different academic institutions and NGO's undertook the survey. Of these 44 were from Bangalore and 55 (49.5%) from within the state of Karnataka. Of these, 23 (21%) were those who had helped with the functioning of YETI 2009 directly.

### **Participant information**

Among the number of participants who undertook the survey were 83 Master's degree holders (80%), who were more than those with other degrees combined (29; Bachelor's = 16, PhD = 10, Post-doc = 3). 74 participants were affiliated to a university or research organization. Interestingly, as many as 32 (29%) were participants who conducted research within NGO's. Given this statistics, we as an organizing team found it satisfying to know that YETI 2009 gave as many as 34 participants (30%) a first time opportunity to present at a large conference of this kind. It probably goes on to reinforce the need for YETI as a forum in the future to bring more students together to showcase their work and facilitate mutual learning. The survey revealed that 56 participants (49%) had experience presenting their work at similar conferences elsewhere.

We found that among the participants who were not directly part of organizing YETI 2009, majority of the participants received word about the event by word of mouth (n=43), as against only one and eight from magazines/journals and the YETI website respectively. However, we take it to mean these could have been the first source of information they received about the conference. Considering that YETI organizers sent out more than 300 invites by post to various universities, colleges, research institutes and NGO's to the various concerned head of the departments, it was surprising that only 11 knew about YETI through the notice boards of their respective institutions. 22 received word through email.

### **Expense incurred by participants**

A conference usually is a very expensive affair. Often organizing bodies sponsor participants through travel grants, or other form of monetary support. Since YETI was a student gathering, we faced an uphill task in imagining how students would attend such a gathering placed in a city in south India, far away from many cities of the country. Perhaps

that explains why a half of all the participants were from the state of Karnataka. This could probably be a reason why as many as 53 participants (48%) felt that the amount spent in travel was affordable (4 thought it was cheap, 7 thought it expensive). Among outstation candidates, 39 and 24 participants traveled by train and bus respectively. Six chose to travel by air. Travel expenses ranged from Rs. 50 to Rs. 9000. The mean travel expense for candidates from outside Bangalore was Rs. 1114 (n=59) and the median expense was Rs. 600. As many as 90 students (80%) had no form of financial support for attending such a conference in their own field of study. 14 received full support and the eight others managed to cover it partially. The registration fee of Rs. 250/- was thought to be 'just right' by a total of 83% out of 88 students. Most participants also thought that their accommodation at the guest houses of the institutes was comfortable and within easy reach of the main venue. Among the 17 who responded, participants spent an average of Rs. 214 per day for accommodation during the conference.

### **Access to the Internet and scientific literature**

Every participant who was also an organizer had 24-hour access to the internet and also to scientific literature on-line and at their institute libraries. So we were keen to assess the availability of the same for the other participants. Among them 79 had limited time of free access to the internet at their place of work. However, nine participants did claim that they did not have any form of free internet access. These results could possibly be biased as the survey was conducted via email and on-line. We do not have any means of knowing if the situation follows the same trend in general. 37 have 24-hour free access, eight claim they have access only during office hours and three have access only for a few hours. Among the nine who did not have free access, they ended up spending on average as much as Rs. 104 per week on internet for research related work.

Among participants other than organizers, as many as 87% of the 88 participants referred peer-reviewed journals such as *Current Science*, *Nature*, *Ecology* etc. regularly and 59% also used researched-based magazines such as *Down to Earth*, *Current Conservation* etc. frequently. While 56% and 76% of them had access to scientific literature at their institute libraries via print and on-line media respectively, it was interesting to note that 25% and 19% of the participants used such literature at a public library through print and on-line media respectively.

Considering that most of the participants were Masters students it was interesting to know that among the 79 who responded, 35% had already published their research in a peer-reviewed journal. Many others had written about their research in a newspaper, magazine or a blog/website (6%, 12%, 17% respectively), but the majority (48%) had not written about their work in any medium at all.

### **Quality of the conference**

As a student body we had every intention that YETI should showcase a wide variety as well as maintain good quality of presentations, posters and workshop talks. However, we soon altered course a bit and decided that perhaps what YETI should aim at instead (since it was its maiden venture) is to try and bring as many people from as many parts of the country doing all sort of possible research related to ecology. Tabulated below are the opinions of the participants on this experimentation.

	Learning in their own sub-discipline (no. of votes)	Learning about other sub-disciplines (no. of votes)	Learning about research skills (no. of votes)	Networking and making contacts (no. of votes)
Excellent	17 (20%)	28 (30%)	31 (35%)	31 (35%)
Good	37 (43%)	46 (50%)	36 (41%)	38 (44%)
Average	27 (31%)	13 (14%)	19 (22%)	15 (18%)
Poor	5 (6%)	5 (6%)	1 (2%)	3 (3%)
Total no. of responses	86	92	87	87

It is interesting to note that even without stringent quality control that may have compromised the geographical extent, subject width, taxonomic spread of research work most participants generally thought well about 'learning about other sub-disciplines', research skills and networking. It is worthwhile to notice that a sizable proportion of participants thought that 'learning in their own sub-discipline' was only 'Average'. This probably has to do with having been liberal during the selection process.

From the survey it was quite clear that the Workshop Talks that looked to cover the key aspects of conducting research such as asking the right question (Dr. Raghavendra Gadagkar), using the right designs and experiments (Dr. Kavita Isvaran) and the art of communicating it (Dr. Geoff Hyde) emerged as YETI's own academic blockbusters. Between 86-95% participants rated the talks to be anywhere between 'Excellent' and 'Good'!

**YETI for the future**

Out of the 111 participants who took the survey, 84% wanted YETI to be a yearly event while the others opted for it as a bi-annual event. 70% wanted it to be hosted at others cities and also wanted to take part in organizing it. A significant majority expressed interest in presenting again the next year and in future.

In keeping with the success of the Workshop Talks results, an astonishing 99% of the participants opted to prefer anywhere between the same amount of time or more for focused workshops in the future events! A majority wanted more time dedicated for such an activity. The majority of participants wanted the same amount of time spent on Non-technical talks and slide shows, Student talks, Student posters and plenaries with a moderate proportion wanting more time on them. However, most participants (55%) wanted future YETI conferences to have more time for interaction with other participants while the others thought the time allotted during YETI 2009 was sufficient.

The YETI 2009 organizers had mooted an idea about activities between each YETI event to keep interactions on the research front active. An overwhelming majority (93%) expressed their interest to be part of a discussion group in their own research area, while 88% expressed interest to contribute to an on-line newsletter and almost 70% volunteered to write for a blog on the internet. Among other suggestions that came in were possible visits to field sites and institutions that conduct interesting ecology research.

\*\*\*\*\*