



With the beginning of the Gordon Research Conference season, a veteran conferee offers some sage advice for survival. Standardized, systematic annotation of the human genome is no small task; a suggestion is to capitalize on the existing journal system, and "by adding sections of highly structured text to each article...and linking sub-parts of an article to relevant database identifiers, one can envision how a 'literature annotation standard' could readily be interpreted by computers." And early and recent geologic models of the Slave craton in Canada, the oldest known terrestrial crust, are discussed.

A Gordon Conference Survival Guide

I have the utmost respect for T. S. Eliot, but it seems to me that June, not April, is the cruelest month. With June comes the Gordon Research Conference season, and with it, danger for thousands of unsuspecting scientists. Without proper guidance, a Gordon Conference can wreak havoc with even the most well-conditioned scientist. You will hear about great science, but it is possible to return from one of these conferences weighing 10 pounds more than when you left for it, with a hangover that will last until fall, mosquito bites on parts of your body that you wouldn't think a mosquito could get to, and your spine bent into the shape of a Greek letter. You can suffer heat that would keep a Bedouin in his tent, humidity that rivals that of a Turkish bath, and rain that would induce Noah to start gathering cubits of something. If you are unprepared, your first Gordon Conference could well be your last. But fear not. As a veteran Conference goer, I offer a few tips to help you come through.

1. *Don't eat the Brownie Supreme.* Gordon Conferences have a special dessert called the Brownie Supreme. Decorum prevents me from describing it in detail, but suffice it to say that if they let this dessert out, ours would no longer be a hungry planet.

2. *Don't eat three full meals a day.* These conferences have food, and lots of it, so pace yourself. You're going to be there a whole week, and if you don't exercise some restraint, you'll need one of

those wide first-class airline seats when you head for home.

3. *Expect anything, weather-wise.* Pack for days of extreme heat and nights of surprising cold. Pack for rain, hail, snow, sleet—weather of biblical proportions. This is New England.

4. *Ask for a large, flat board.* Your mattress will appear flat, but when you lie down on it you will suddenly discover the truth of Einstein's assertion that massive objects curve the space around them. Don't spend even a single night on it. Ask for a board to put under your mattress the moment you arrive.

5. *Don't try to recapture the glories of your lost athletic youth.* Don't play basketball or volleyball in the afternoons; you'll pull something that's best left unpulled. Don't go canoeing. Rent the video

of *Titanic* and you'll understand why. Don't climb one of the mountains without oxygen and a team of Sherpas. Spend the afternoons hiding in the lecture hall; it's usually air-conditioned, and it's the last place they'll look for you.

6. *Just because you're living like a graduate student for a week doesn't mean you can still drink like one.* I remember one late night at a Gordon Conference bar when one of the conferees came up to me and said, "I know you, you're, uh, you're..." "Greg

Petsko," I replied helpfully.

He looked at me with rheumy eyes. "No," he said, "that's not it." Unless you want to end up like him, go easy on the binges.

7. *Beware the Lobster of Doom.*

Every year, someone tries lobster for the first time. A significant number of these experimentalists end up sick. If you must try it, do it at the Gastrointestinal Disorders Gordon Conference, not at the Protein Crystallography Gordon Conference. Or better yet, wait and do it at home near a major medical center.

8. *Watch out for low-flying insects.* New England has mosquitoes, B1-bomber-sized mosquitoes, so you'll need insect repellent—a lot of insect repellent. Ideally, I'd suggest you bathe in the stuff, except

that there's no place to take baths at a Gordon Conference, which brings us to one last bit of advice.

9. *Shower at off hours.* These are dormitory showers. Remember dormitory showers? They have two temperatures, "God, it's hot!" and "God, it's cold!!" If you try to use them at the same time as your fellow conferees, you will rediscover Petsko's third law of hydrodynamics, which states that the shower you are using is always the farthest from the water source.

This covers most of the major hazards. Follow this guide and you stand a good chance of making it back. Not unscathed—we're talking about a Gordon Conference, after all—but relatively OK.

Gregory A. Petsko

Departments of Biochemistry and Chemistry, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA 02454-9110, USA. E-mail: petsko@brandeis.edu

