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Protists and Society: a report on the 2024 Autumn Meeting of Protistology-UK, at the Natural History Museum, London

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In general, the purpose of regional society meetings, compared to international congresses, is to foster the community, with research dissemination being secondary (Bigg et al. 2023). Certainly, this holds true for *Protistology-UK*, the British Section of the International Society of Protistologists. But we, and other regional protistology societies, increasingly face a challenge of engagement, which was not always so.

At the turn of the century protistologists, from amateur to academic, were united by light microscopy and the novelty of the *infusoria* – so named, as protists arose from infusions of organic matter. But as our field has grown, we have lost this, dare I say, focus. Microscopy has expanded well beyond that of simple lenses, molecular methods have superseded traditional approaches, and *in silico* has replaced *in vitro*. Likewise, the growing appreciation of protistan diversity – function, habitat, taxonomy – has led to an academic diaspora, and former die-hard protistologists have migrated to more subject-specific societies. This trend is not inherently problematic, but it has depleted our community.

What then still unites and attracts us? Possibly the strongest glue that cements our community is the wider lack of appreciation of the discipline: people just don't "get" protists. The Attenboroughized media popularizes big stuff, from ants to elephants and seaweeds to sequoias. Likewise, "microbes" (= bacteria, *sensu lato*) are often appreciated as diseases or possibly as "good bugs for your digestion". Sadly, protists fall through the cracks. How many of you have had difficulty engaging a non-expert, or even funders, as they have little to no context for your work? And protists get misrepresented: I was recently tested for *Toxoplasma*, which my GP told me was bacteria – sigh! It seems that for our collective benefit, the community needs to popularize protists. The Autumn 2024 meeting of Protistology-UK, *Protists and Society* (see <https://www.protistology.org.uk/>, Fig. 1), did just that, by exploring approaches and using a rather non-traditional meeting structure.



Fig. 1 The logo for our meeting showing the façade of the *Natural History Museum*, London, ensconced by a diversity of protists. Drawing by David Montagnes.

The meeting had three parts: 1) four invited (national and international) plenary talks on citizen science and public engagement, ranging from applied research projects to a protist-based video game; 2) an all-inclusive workshop designed as an ice-breaker that addressed scientific communication to non-experts; and 3) eighteen “flash talks” (restricted to five minutes and two slides) by students and postdocs, aimed at various non-expert audiences, from primary school children to decision-makers with no science background.

We sought to make the meeting both accessible and inexpensive. It was held at the *Natural History Museum*, London. Although accommodation in London can be a bit pricy, the city is relatively easy to get to; to paraphrase the Latin proverb “All trains lead to London”. Also, our schedule, as two half-days (just one night), and the kind gift of lecture facilities by the *NHM* allowed for low accommodation and registration fees. Furthermore, the offer of free tours behind the scenes at the *NHM* made the venue even more attractive; we are very thankful to the staff, especially Rachel Foster, for their assistance.

On the first day we started with registration, followed by “meeting and greeting” over an informal light lunch. This was followed by two complementary plenaries: *Citizen Science* by Georgia Ward (*CEFAS*) and *Public Engagement: The Charismatic Protist* by Rod Dillon (*Lancaster*, retired). After questions and a coffee break, Ross Waller (*Cambridge*) led the workshop. This was an inclusive, one-hour, session where groups of three people, randomly – ok, strategically – assigned to enhance community engagement, developed a short presentation, pitching the importance of protists to non-experts. Then, during the relaxed drinks reception, groups delivered their pitch, for discussion and much merriment. We then retired to the affordable and dietarily inclusive conference dinner, where more merriment; (i.e., informal community cohesion exercises) ensued.

Day two began with coffee and tea, followed by our third plenary by Bettina Sonntag and Sabine Wanzenboeck (*Mondsee Limnological Institute, University of Innsbruck*): an interactive presentation of *Protists in Science Communication*. This was immediately followed by the flash talks, restricted to students and postdocs and aimed at non-experts. Our intention here was to place our newest members at the forefront of the community and, critically, to request that they introduce their work at a level that everyone could understand. Earlier in the meeting, Ross Waller neatly summarized the potential success of this inclusivity: during his group’s practice talks, one lab member said to the presenter, whose talk was aimed at primary school children, “Ah! I finally understand what you do.” And in fact, the session was a great success; Alan Warren (*NHM*, retired) remarked that this was possibly the first meeting he had attended where he could actually engage with everything that was presented; his sentiments were echoed by others.

The flash talks were split by a coffee break (for discussion) and our last plenary: *A Demonstration of Children’s Computer Game: Aggi’s Tiny Friends* by Owen Senior (computer game designer), a resource that will soon be on the market (for a preview see <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=nmE8pVTU8Yc> and <https://paramecium-press.co.uk/>).

In short, to build our community we developed an interactive meeting that was designed to attract, engaged, and involved everyone, in terms of content, aims, accessibility, and affordability. Not only did we attract active and retired protistologists, we succeeded in reaching out: in attendance were non-protist academics and a veterinarian who in retirement have developed interests in protistology and an *NHM* staff member who studies meiofauna but came along as protists keep getting in his way.

And of course, lessons were learnt. During and following the meeting it we asked for comments.

First, the friendly welcoming atmosphere was appreciated, especially as the number of people was not daunting, in contrast to international meetings. Also, the *NHM* was considered a “great venue”, and the length of the meeting was “spot-on”. This encourages us to continue these small, community-oriented meetings at the *NHM* as a regular venue and for about the same length (although see below). But there were problems with the timing of the meeting. Some staff could not attend as it was held during the first week of the English University term and well into the Scottish term. We will hold the meeting slightly earlier in the future.

Second, there were some participants who did not relish the impromptu approach of the workshop and its presentations, while others felt the session served as an icebreaker that alleviated pressure of the next day’s more formal presentations and offered new insights into the wide – multidisciplinary – opportunities of protistology. In the future, we will make efforts to create a less daunting workshop, but given the overwhelming support for the workshop we hope to make this a more regular part of our meetings – possibly over time all participants will begin to appreciate (if not enjoy) it.

Third, the keynotes were well received and insightful. Three of the four of these were from local UK researchers (not all of whom were specifically protistologists), keeping costs down. We will probably continue this approach of staying local but widening our search to invite non-protistologists to offer insights in keynotes.

And finally, several people asked for a more formal questions-discussion time of the flash talks, rather than over coffee. Likewise, we did not schedule a community-building networking session where wider interaction was encouraged. Also, one very astute comment was that the flash talks were still only presented to us, and no matter how hard we tried to pretend to be the appropriate audience (e.g., children), this would still be akin to “talking in an echo chamber”. To accommodate these additions and invite our target audience (maybe teachers or the media?) would require a longer meeting. As indicated above, the meeting was tailored to be inexpensive, and hence short. We will consider the merits of balancing economy with added content, or possibly reducing content (e.g., fewer keynotes) to allow for other events – watch this space. Our next meeting is planned to be held in London at the *NHM* in early September of 2025. The theme has yet to be decided, but it will inevitably be aimed at fostering our community.

The meeting and this report were a joint effort from the entire 2024 *Protistology-UK* committee (in alphabetical order): Clare Bird, Martin Carr, Alessandra Dupont, Rachel Foster, Fiona Henriquez-Mui, David Montagnes, Ellen Nisbet, Jackie Parry, Sonja Rueckert, Tasos Tsaousis, Ross Waller, and Alan Warren

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