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18th International Meeting of Social Insect Research in Brazil, 03 – 12 August 2018.

In early August 2018, I left my PhD office in Queen Mary University of London for Brazil. After a long plane journey to Sao Paulo, I finally reached my destination: Guarujá, coastal town near São Paulo in which more than 500 social insect researchers were meeting for the International Meeting of the International Union for the Study of Social Insects.

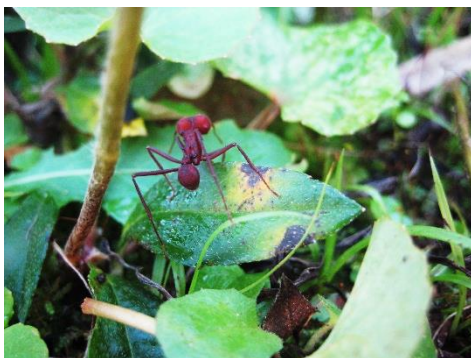
The congress, held every four years, is the largest forum to discuss all scientific advances in social insects, including ecology, evolution, phylogeny, taxonomy, conservation. It is an immensely valuable portal for biosciences at various levels, such as understanding how animal societies evolved, or how to maintain a healthy population of our crops' pollinators.

Over five days, we sampled talks organized in parallel sessions, one of which was a symposium that I co-chaired with a fellow PhD student Carlos Martinez Ruiz and my supervisor Yannick Wurm. Back in Autumn 2017 we wanted to bring together some researchers around the topic of the evolution of social organisation, so we wrote a proposal to organize one of the 33 symposia. Very quickly we received many abstracts to select for both oral presentations and posters. Fast forward to August 2018 and, at last, we could hear the stories that we selected from around the world, from comparative genomics to specific studies on the evolution of queens and workers in colonies, for instance.



Giving a talk on my PhD project (Credit: Carlos Martinez Ruiz)

This was the first time that I organized such event, I would gladly do it again. There are lots of benefits from this long-term project, including thoroughly engaging with a narrow topic of science, keeping up to date with the most recent findings, meeting and networking within the international community of social insect researchers. What I learnt from this are few important pro-tips: select abstracts based on the story to avoid any implicit bias (ask a colleague to remove the speaker's name and institution before reading abstracts), be excellent at time-keeping (communicate the time to the speaker with a notice board; show a countdown on a screen), share the findings on a media platform for scientific outreach to a wider community (obtain agreement from speaker first; Twitter worked quite well for me).



Leaf cutter ant (Credit: Emeline Favreau)

This congress was also the perfect opportunity for me to present the findings of my 3rd year PhD as well as meeting many biologists there. I gave a talk on the genomic basis of social organisation and was grateful to gain some insightful feedback to take onboard for my final year.

This trip was also the first time that I travelled to South America, and I could not leave the country without checking out the local wildlife. I went on a Atlantic Forest tour that did not lack subtropical wonders: banana trees, colourful birds, leaf-cutter ants, to cite a few. It was then time to take the plane back to London, the mind full of ideas for my research, and bright colours from my time in Guarujá.