

Celebrating 50 years of the European Marine Biology Symposium

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It all began in the autumn of 1966 on the small island of Helgoland off the north coast of Germany, when marine scientists gathered for the very first European Marine Biology Symposium (EMBS). In September 2015, marine scientists from Europe and beyond will once more descend on Helgoland for the 50th EMBS meeting. In addition to presentations and discussions on the latest developments in marine biology, there will also be events celebrating the EMBS as one of the longest running annual symposia specifically focused on marine biological sciences.

The aim of the EMBS is to advance the science of marine biology within Europe and beyond; but in an ever busier calendar of international meetings and conferences, what has been the secret of the success and longevity of this symposium?

A symposium emerged from the sea

The history of the EMBS starts in 1960 when a series of German marine biological symposia was initiated by Otto Kinne, at the time Director of the Biologische Anstalt Helgoland. These symposia attracted marine scientists from all over Europe, and this enthusiasm prompted a questionnaire which found that 98% of the respondents were in favour of a regular European Marine Biology

Symposium. The first EMBS was so successful that it has been held every year without interruption since, attracting marine scientists not only from Europe but from all over the world. Each year the host institute also focuses on two or three specific themes, reflecting their core business and interests. The EMBS has from its outset been driven forward and developed in response to the needs of the marine science community, rather than being driven entirely by one specific institute or organization.

Bringing the marine community together

One of the attractions of the EMBS is that it has facilitated networking on an international scale; since 1966 it has been held in a wide number of venues in 20 countries including most recently in St Petersburg, Russia. Networking is also facilitated by the fact that there are rarely multiple parallel sessions, which means that everyone is able to sit in on all presentations and engage in discussions with all colleagues, whether student or senior researcher, up and coming scientists or an established expert. The lack of parallel sessions is appreciated both by speakers, as they know they will be able to present their research to the whole symposium, and the audience who are encouraged to explore new areas and hear new speakers rather than just choose their areas of speciality. The poster sessions are also vital areas

for the exchange of information, with the smaller-scale of the EMBS compared with some conferences (i.e. hundreds instead of thousands of attendees) helping to encourage networking with this. These practical reasons, coupled with the relatively informal atmosphere, mean there is no doubt that a vast number of collaborative research projects over the last 5 decades owe their existence to the EMBS.

Not forgetting to have fun...

An important tradition of the EMBS is the Yellow Submarine contest, an afternoon full of marine related games or activities, in which competition with colleagues from other countries for the trophy can be fierce (see Figure 1) and at times bizarre (from throwing dead sea urchins at balloons in a Norwegian fjord to a potato peeling contest in Germany). There may be cash prizes from the MBA and MARS for best student talk and poster respectively, but the Yellow Submarine trophy is often the most coveted (so much so that the original trophy disappeared after the Swedes had won it and took it to Gothenborg).

The next 50 years...

There have of course been a number of changes over the years. For example, the first symposium proceedings often appeared in books, and sometimes in special issues of various journals. From 2014 onwards, the proceedings will be printed as a special issue of the *Journal of the Marine Biological Association*, thus guaranteeing publication in a well-respected, long-established journal.

The basic format and ethos of the EMBS continues however, and the enthusiasm of marine research institutes and stations to organize an EMBS meeting is as high as ever. Offers have already been put forward



Fig. 1. The almost victorious Dutch team (Vincent Escaravage, Herman Hummel, Christiaan Hummel and Sander Wijnhoven) during the Yellow Submarine competition of the 43rd EMBS in 2008, the Azores, Portugal.

for the next three years following the 50th EMBS at Helgoland (www.awi.de/embs50) with the symposium being planned for Rhodes (Greece), Piran (Slovenia) and Wilhelmshaven (Germany), respectively.

So here's to another 50 years!

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The participants of the 46th EMBS in 2011 at Arendal, Norway.

