

A Day in the “Bangor Phytoplankton Hospital”

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Preface

The following account was written while I was incapacitated and some of the facts may be slightly in error (or worse distorted). I wrote this in the land of Austin Powers, Harry Potter, and Alice in Wonderland! Throw me a bone here! Regardless, my major life experience needs to be shared!

The Story

I came to Bangor, Wales to participate in the International Phytoplankton Productivity Symposium (An appreciation of 50 years of the Study of Production in Oceans and Lakes) in May 2002. The Symposium commemorated the 50th anniversary of the publication of Einer Steeman Nielson’s famous paper on the use of $^{14}\text{CO}_2$ for determining primary productivity (or perhaps something related to a variety of definitions of primary productivity, so the experts debated!). My ulterior motive was to learn more about techniques for measuring primary productivity, especially those that utilize optical methods, as I am beginning to write a book called Bio-optical Oceanography. My formal training is in geophysical fluid dynamics so I have deviated a tad to learn biological and chemical oceanography on the fly as it were! It may be an understatement to say that my life has had many twists and turns. Goodness, I am an oceanographer who grew up in Farmland, Indiana! But my week in Bangor was remarkable, even for me!!

I arrived in Bangor full of expectations for academic and intellectual enlightenment. And I got a nice dose of that, don’t get me wrong! But, the real education of the week began in a most disturbing way. I awoke at 4am on Wednesday, about mid-way through the meeting week, with a terrible stomachache. It was so bad that I was writhing on the floor. As I rolled over on the floor, I noticed the program from the 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea movie shown earlier that night as a bonus treat for the participants. Seeing this program, I decided I’d better get a note to my friends Bob Bidigare and Dave Karl asking them to be sure I was buried like old Captain Nemo in the movie! But luckily the pain subsided enough to make an effort to call an emergency number. I dragged my sorry body downstairs from my dorm room and was able to get through to the Bangor Hospital ambulance service. The medics arrived and got me into the emergency vehicle, making me as comfortable as possible.

After about 15 minutes, I arrived at the Bangor Hospital (or what I thought was the Bangor Hospital!). A very nice young female doctor started asking me a series of questions that seemed pretty standard for the most part. However, it did get little weird when she muttered a couple of her final questions. She asked me where I was from. I said, “Santa Barbara, California.” She gave me a concerned look and asked if I experienced a lot of photoinhibition. I kind of laughed and said, “Probably a

little, but photoadaptation must be epidemic in Bangor!" She did not smile and said it was time for me to go the Casualty Ward and under her breath started saying something about "mortality rates." I said, "Whoaaaa here! I am not that bad off!" She said, "No, that is exactly where you belong and are going." I started thinking, so much for wisecracks in a foreign land that has little use for vowels, but loves lots of consonants per really long word!

So, fairly standard tests began - lots of poking and pricking (I started feeling like my poor research proposals!). Around 11am, I got a call from Peter Williams' (our fearless conference organizer!) secretary asking me if it would be OK for Peter to come visit. I said, "Sure, that would be great!" (Pretty impressive to have such an important figure visit me in a foreign hospital)! A bit later Peter called again and indicated that my friends Bob Bidigare and Dave Karl were going to be coming also. I was even happier as these guys always make me laugh! Then Peter gave the phone to Dave and he said not to worry, he would be bringing a computer projector to the hospital so I could still give my 2pm presentation! Oh boy! That sounded like Dave and I doubted he was kidding! Then Dave said he was handing the phone to Bob. Before Bob said a word, I knew I was in serious trouble with these two "friends"! It hit me all at once. Peter had done his homework and was a brilliant meeting coordinator! He was going to get me discharged from the hospital for getting into trouble with Bob and Dave and still give that 2pm talk! Well, Peter, Bob, and Dave came to the hospital, but surprisingly I was not discharged by 2pm despite some typically inappropriate comments! I guess the poking etc. was not over!

The fab three went back to the meeting and the doctors swung back into action! After some standard X-rays, they decided to do some special X-rays with a little injection. So, I was wheeled back down to the X-ray room and things got strange again. First, the technician commented to his student assistants that I was a really "big one" and to get some extra large fluid volumes ready. As best as I can remember, the technician then asked me if I was allergic to 14CO_2 . I said that I didn't think so, but that I was a human, not a phytoplankton! He just looked at me wryly and said, "In this hospital young man, YOU ARE A PHYTOPLANKTON!" That is when I came to my second realization about Peter. Peter must be a very influential man in Bangor! He did know a heck of a lot about the Bangor Hospital and even explained to Bob and me that he knew how to get people discharged!!

Around 5pm, the doctors came in and said they couldn't find anything wrong and that it was time to get back to the meeting. Well, I was kind of relieved, especially not looking forward to more tests! Like what was next? Their giant FRRF, a PMT, or god forbid one of those huge mechanical testers of phyto structures so graphically illustrated by the young Dr. Hamm-Dubischar in his presentation???

So on the way back to the dorm room where this saga began, I looked at the very simple discharge paper that the doctor had given to me only after some persistence on my part. The line "Reason for Discharge" read "Patient needs to present paper." The doctor's signature was scratched in, but I swear I could make out cap "P" and

cap “W”! Could this have been the work of Dr. Williams, the true Director of the “Bangor Phytoplankton Hospital?”

Well, like I began, the best lessons of life are unplanned. Who would have thought that I came to the meeting as a humble physical oceanographer and wanna be biological oceanographer, but went home as probably the only Symposium participant with $^{14}\text{CO}_2$ flowing through his veins! So to you biological oceanographers, I am one of you now, like it or not!! Thanks to Peter, Bob, and Dave no doubt!!!

ps I returned safely home to sunny Santa Barbara thinking a bit more about that photoinhibition thing! I am feeling great now and have a whole new feeling for phytoplankton productivity! Oh, if you need a really large phyto specimen, drop me an email and maybe we can do some business!