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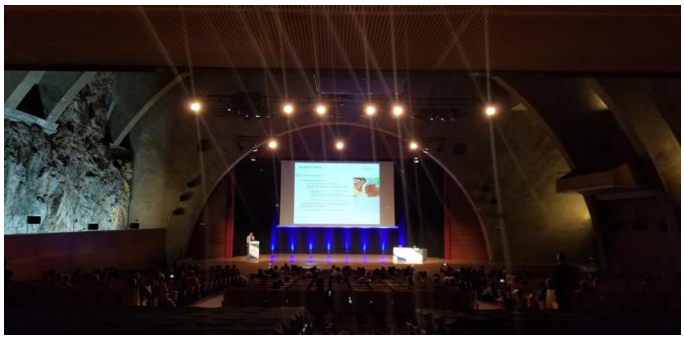
15th International Society for Biosafety Research in Tarragona, Spain, 1 – 3 April 2019

On the 1st of April I arrived at Barcelona Airport and boarded the bus for a two-hour journey south, along the coast to the city of Tarragona, where the International Society for Biosafety Research (ISBR) conference for 2019 was to be held. I was looking forward to presenting my research and learning about the latest scientific developments in the field. The programme had a wealth of highly-regarded scientists talking on gene editing and gene drive technology, which is the focus of my PhD project.



The Palau Firal i de Congressos de Tarragona

After checking into my hotel, I took a brisk walk along the coastal path to the ISBR venue – The Palau Firal i de Congressos de Tarragona – a stunning world heritage listed building. The main stage of the venue was dimly lit and surrounded by striking rock walls. The seats in the main stage were full of attentive academics, industry representatives and regulators. Talks on the first day focused primarily on gene technologies in the food system, which were insightful and stimulating. Following the final talk, I made my way back to the hotel to recover after a busy day.

Feeling refreshed the next morning, I made my way to the conference venue. The morning's session focused on risk assessment of gene edited products, which was followed by the six workshops. I was most interested in, and presenting at, the workshop on "Gene Editing and Gene Drives for Managing Unwanted Vertebrates." I arrived at the workshop prior to it commencing and was introduced to some of the participants and the other speakers. I absorbed all I could from the presentations and discussion at the workshop.

Tarragona coastal path

My talk was well received. I presented work from my PhD project, which aims to a develop a CRISPR-based gene drive system as a humane vertebrate pest management tool. Using the mouse as a model organism, the gene drive I am developing will bias the sex ratio in favour of males. A grossly male population would result in a population decline, while an all-male population would lead to eradication. This system would have several benefits over current pest management tools, which include shooting, trapping, poisoning and the release of biological agents. These approaches are costly and often lead to animal suffering.

After the workshop, an invitational dinner was arranged for those within the gene drive research community. The dinner was held at a restaurant just off the main esplanade in Tarragona. This provided an opportunity for workshop participants and gene drive researchers to interact, share ideas and establish valuable contacts within this niche research field. Following the dinner, I wondered back to the hotel, harbouring a full belly and feeling satisfied with the knowledge I had gained and the contribution I had made to the conference.

The next morning, I checked out of my hotel and I set off to my final day at the conference with my bags in hand. The day was packed with thought-provoking talks on a range of topics, including gene editing, crop improvement and biosafety. As the day drew to a close, I made my way to the bus bound for Barcelona Airport. During the journey to the airport, I reflected on all I had learnt, seen and experienced – what a brilliant few days it had been.

Since my return to Edinburgh, I have continued to be inspired from my attendance to ISBR. The conference has given me newfound motivation with my research, and I am excited to stay within the field at the completion of my PhD. I am immensely grateful for RSB selecting me to receive a Travel Grant, without the society's support this would not have been possible. It was a brilliant experience and one that will resonate with me throughout my career.