



Guidelines for organisers of IAVS excursions

Excursions are one of the activities most appreciated by IAVS members. They may be short, mid-symposium excursions, or longer excursions either preceding or following the IAVS symposium. Such excursions are anticipated to provide deep knowledge and understanding of the visited country or area, primarily through the expertise of a local colleague or colleagues. The main interest of participants is to learn about the flora, vegetation, environmental conditions, and ecological processes of the visited area. This sort of information is not easy to obtain through normal travel because it is extremely time-consuming or impossible to accumulate in advance knowledge of the local flora, the key sites to visit, and the critical ecological processes in play. Frequently participants take numerous photographs, which gives the casual observer the impression that their focus is on rare or unusual plants and nice landscapes. However, most are equally interested in exposure to interpretation and explanation of ecological processes, vegetation history, human influence, and similar topics. Discussion of such topics in a field setting can make the excursion a much richer experience.

Excursions provide an excellent opportunity to make personal contacts and to hold scientific discussions between colleagues from different countries. Such events often serve to initiate or establish collaborative research projects and to start or strengthen personal and professional links between our members. Keep in mind that excursions are a valuable mechanism to reinforce the network of links between us and give cohesion to our Association. To assume commitment to reach a high scientific standard in the selection of sites, presentation of information, and discussion of scientific issues is to provide a great service to our colleagues and potentially catalyze unanticipated advances in our field.

Scientific guidance

Floristic information must always be provided efficiently to all participants. The best case is for the excursion leader to be thoroughly knowledgeable about the flora of the visited region. For larger groups, or for locations where the excursion leader is not as knowledgeable, additional well-informed local guides should be provided. Inclusion of officers or staff of local conservation and management agencies can enrich the field experience.

Participants are also eager to learn about environmental and ecological conditions of the visited area, so explanations at appropriate times of such topics as climate, geology, geography, history of the flora and vegetation, disturbances, human influence, and population dynamics are much appreciated.

Between stops there is always a drive of variable length. Buses should be equipped with microphones as this offers the opportunity for explanations inside the moving bus. Such explanations can be about general conditions of the area, research conducted by local colleagues and so on, but mostly should deal with the landscape

and landscape changes that are to be seen directly through the windows of the bus. This is an important aspect of the scientific guidance of the excursion, particularly for those days with much bus travel and little field exposure.

Excursion documentation

If at all possible, provide each participant with a map in which the complete journey can be followed. A summary page with explanations of the visited places for each day is recommended. In it basic information for each stop should be given, such as the name of the place (exactly written; remember that most of the participants are foreigners), geo-coordinates, altitude, substrate, main vegetation types and dominant plants.

For some excursions a printed guide has been prepared by the organisers. Although much appreciated by the participants, preparation of such a guide is neither required nor expected as this task can be excessively burdensome for the organizers. However, in the event that such a guide is prepared, IAVS would welcome the opportunity to distribute it more broadly and on a permanent basis via its website. We aspire to host a collection of such guides for use by our members during their future travels.

As many participants like to research sites and related topics more deeply during the excursion, provision of a small, portable library for each bus can be very helpful and appreciated.

Duration

The duration of the excursion can vary from one or a few days, to a fortnight or even more. Longer periods are very difficult to arrange for most organizers as well as participants. An alternative is to offer two consecutive excursions that can be combined to complete a longer trip and cover a broader geographical range, if the organisers are willing to offer such an option.

Stops

For any one day, a modest number of longer stops should be preferred to many short stops. One or two hours per stop is considered optimal, with short walks, explanations in the field, time to take pictures, and opportunity for discussions of the site. Days with many short stops in which participants can hardly become aware of what is at any particular spot are not recommended. Participants need a bit of time to take pictures, to learn about the plants, to write down their observations and the given explanations, and to ask the guides their many questions.

Each stop should be quite different from the previous one and should provide representation of the range of vegetation types of the surrounding area. For example, if we visit sand dunes, a good example of them should be selected with most of the typical communities. For this reason it is often better to have stops well-spaced in order that we can experience places that differ significantly in both physical setting and vegetation.

The optimal number of stops per day is four, two in the morning and two in the afternoon. This easily allows one to two hours per stop. Of course, this depends on the distance and time between stops and the things to be seen in each place. Such a plan requires that stops be carefully selected.

This optimal plan of four stops per day is rarely possible, perhaps only when we are in the core of the visited area. The variation from this can range between two extremes:

- one-stop days where we might have a long walk in a mountain region or other complex and interesting area, and
- several-short-stop days, often when the excursion has to travel long distances and participants have to spend most of the time inside the bus.

Try to initiate each stop with an explanation for all participants (as if they were students) of what can be seen there: the physical conditions (geology, climate, etc.), vegetation, and the main species present. This avoids a lot of repetitive questions later during the stop.

Stops should show natural conditions as much as possible; well preserved vegetation and impressive landscapes are particularly welcome. Inclusion of a visit to a local botanical garden, if available, is also likely to be appreciated.

Stops that illustrate current or recent research questions are much to be desired, especially where an expert can provide a short presentation and then allow the participants to participate in a discussion relevant to the site. Sometimes it is convenient to include a few graphics pertinent to these presentations in the material distributed at the start of the trip. However, it is not recommended to visit research centres with the intention of showing the local working conditions and achievements of the research team of the excursion guide as this reduces the time available for field observations. Explaining the research achievements of the organizer or local colleagues is perfectly appropriate to the extent that this enhances understanding and appreciation of the field sites visited.

Lodging, food, and supplies

Optimization of the ratio of cost to quality of the excursion experience is always difficult. In undertaking this organizers should bear in mind that potential participants from many countries have limited budgets, as do graduate students.

For lodging, it is generally better to opt for low cost while avoiding excessively rustic options, adapting, of course, to local conditions. Most people expect showers and clean sheets. Mid-symposium excursions are generally one day in duration and thus do not require lodging arrangements.

The typical meal arrangement is to have breakfast and dinner at the hotel or a near-by restaurant with lunch provided to each participant in a picnic bag at the beginning of the day's excursion. However, other arrangements for lunch may be appropriate and appreciated. Inevitably there will be some complications due to special requirements of some of the participants, particularly vegetarians, but in most countries appropriate food should be easily available. Most participants are interested in experiencing the

local cuisine and other cultural features of the region. If the excursion organisers can provide this to some extent, they will be thanked.

Opportunities for shopping can be important to excursion participants, particularly for books and maps, but also souvenirs and other goods. Stopping in the visitor centre shops of National Parks, Botanical Gardens and similar places is always appreciated. Occasional stops at supermarkets can provide opportunities to acquire additional fruit, beverages, food, and various personal supplies.

Pre-trip information

Critical information must be communicated to participants prior to their departure from their home institutions. The normal approach is to send a compilation of this information by email to each participant well in advance of their anticipated departure date. This information typically includes a form to be filled out and returned by email so that the organizers can be sure that they have identified the special needs and limitations of the various participants, and are sure that the package of information was received by each of the participants. The information can also be posted on a website with the location provided to participants. Typical components of the pre-trip information package include the following:

- **Departure and contact details.** Exact and unambiguous information on the time and place of departure is critical. Directions for reaching the departure location in a timely manner should be provided. Directions must be provided for what to do if a participant encounters an unexpected delay in travel.
- **List of participants.** A list of participants and contact information would be appreciated. Most participants like to know who is participating so that they have the opportunity to communicate in advance about common interests.
- **Visa and security issues.** Any unusual requirements with respect to visas or local security and safety should be described.
- **Lodging.** Lodging arrangement issues and expected amenities should be described, such as the need to select roommates and the possibility of internet access.
- **Food.** Dietary requirements should be requested in advance so as to anticipate health, vegetarian, and religious constraints.
- **Weather, clothing and health.** Information on the potential range of weather conditions is very helpful. Special recommendations concerning clothing should be given (hiking shoes, rain coat, etc.), even though most of us are used to field conditions. Health concerns should be anticipated, such as the need for sun screen, possibility of strenuous hikes, hikes at high elevations, unsafe water, and insect-borne diseases. Participants should be asked if they have any medical conditions that might limit their participation. Remind participants to bring any required medicines as there may not be an opportunity to acquire these during the excursion.

- **Transportation and luggage.** Participants appreciate knowing the character of the vehicles that will be transporting them. In addition, any constraints on the amount of luggage that can be carried should be identified.
- **Literature.** Advice about books (field guides, floras, etc) and maps that might be consulted or purchased in advance is always appreciated. An annotated list of literature references is helpful for those who wish to learn about the destinations in advance.
- **Additional expenses.** Most participant expenses will be included in the excursion fee. However, if some expenses are not expected to be covered, these should be identified in advance. Typical examples include certain meals and alcoholic beverages.
- **Collecting permits.** Some participants desire to collect plant specimens. Constraints on collection should be identified and the opportunity to apply in advance for collecting permits should be mentioned where appropriate.
- **Special requests or questions.** Participants sometimes have special interests or concerns, so it is useful to provide an opportunity for them to express these in advance and for the organizers to respond in a timely manner.

Registration

Excursion participants should be accepted mostly on a first-come-first-served basis, but with the following constraints:

- Priority should be given to IAVS members and other scientists, over vacationing family members.
- Provision should be made for officers and other unusually busy, but regular, participants who may be late in signing up.
- Priority should be given to individuals with scientific expertise particularly relevant to the excursion and who could enrich and deepen the discussions. It is often necessary to extend a formal invitation to entice such potential participants into joining the excursion.

The best mechanism for accepting applications with the above constraints is not obvious. One solution is to have a certain proportion of the slots open immediately for any IAVS member who wishes to sign up with other slots held in reserve for a period for priority participants, after which applications can be accepted from all interested parties.

IAVS may be able to arrange for receipt of applications and excursion payments through its website, but this is not guaranteed. Inquiries should be directed to the IAVS Secretary

General constraints

Several constraints apply to excursion organization and these should be understood by potential organizers before undertaking responsibility for an excursion.

- All responsibility for organization of the excursion is the formal responsibility of the local organizing committee or its designees.
- Plans for the excursion should be reviewed by officers of the Association, including the Meetings Committee Chair, the Secretary, and the President.
- IAVS does not provide funding or financial support for excursions, so expenses must be covered by participant fees or other sources identified by the organizers.
- IAVS cannot accept legal liability for any claims that might result from participation in the excursion. Responsibility for liability coverage should be arranged separately, typically through the home institution of the local organizer of the excursion or the organizer of the associated IAVS meeting.

Compiled by Javier Loidi and Robert Peet

November 2008