

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

June 3, 1991

Dear Friends of Radiocarbon,

I liked every aspect of the recent Tucson meeting except the papers. In general, they were too specific and too heterogeneous. I think that if we are to improve this situation in Scotland, we must first oust the Old Guard and install a program committee made of Young Turks. For this committee, I suggest

John Vogel
Edouard Bard
Bernd Kromer
Ellen Druffel

I would relegate more of the technical papers to posters. I would run more theme sessions launched with an overview paper aimed at bringing up to speed the non-experts who make up the better part of the audience. I would do everything possible to encourage attendance by AMS users interested in ^{10}Be , ^{26}Al , ^{36}Cl , ^{40}Ca and ^{129}I . I would lengthen the time slots to 25 minutes (20 for the talk and 5 for discussion). I would solicit interesting papers from people who might otherwise not attend.

Cheers,

W. S. Broecker

November 13, 1991

Dear Renee:

I would like to add the comments listed below to the discussion concerning the format of future Radiocarbon Conferences.

1. It is reasonable to have a program committee which would help the local committee by suggesting invited speakers and special topics. The local committee must have the final responsibility for organizing the meeting.
2. Any member of the community (however that is defined) should be allowed to give an oral presentation.
3. A speaker should be able to organize his/her work into a 15-minute presentation. Several additional minutes should be allowed for questions. The schedule should not be so tight as to require premature termination of appropriate discussion.
3. I dislike poster sessions with passion! In my opinion, very little information is exchanged at these sessions which could not be exchanged over a short beer. I would do everything possible (including shortening oral presentations and/or having simultaneous sessions) to banish them. Posters remind me of my children's science fair projects.

5. Perhaps the topic is already covered in (1) above, but some carefully selected invited papers are certainly desirable.
6. I agree completely with the notion that people working with the long-lived cosmogenic isotopes should be encouraged to participate in the Radiocarbon Conferences. However, as has been noted, radiocarbon is the “mother” of such isotopes, and will continue to dominate the conferences.
7. If you are collecting names of “Young Turks,” I would urge that you include Tim Jull on the list.

Best regards,

Doug Donahue

SHOULD THE “PRESENT” BE DATED?

E. G. NISBET

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The terminology, “B.P.,” is accepted worldwide by the Earth Science community. It has a long and respected history, originating in legend as “Bill’s Practice.” However, those teaching geology to students in the 1990s have some problems in explaining that the present is A.D. 1950. To students who do not remember the moon landings for the excellent reason that they were unborn, it is difficult to grasp that the “present” is now so long ago that it is out of analytical error. With the decline in arithmetic skills, many of today’s undergraduates find it difficult to subtract 1950 mentally, and do not think of adding 50 and then deducting 2000. For them, it would be simpler to use A.D. 1, which is almost 2000 years ago. Furthermore, non-specialists become disoriented reading scientific papers that jump rapidly between radiocarbon to calendar dates, and from one carbon reservoir to another, all variously called B.P.

To simply change the “present” to A.D. 2000 would irretrievably confuse the literature. One way of resolving the problem is to retain the B.P. usage as in traditional practice, but to introduce an optional new usage based on a datum of A.D. 2000. In this proposal, the letter, “D,” for datum, would signify a number related to A.D. 2000. The letter would then be followed in upper case by the dating system (*e.g.*, C for ¹⁴Carbon, BE for ¹⁰Be, *etc.*, CAL for calendar, DEN for tree rings, *etc.*), and if need be, a lower case comment to indicate the reservoir being dated (*e.g.*, ben for benthic). Thus, a carbon date of a benthic organism at 5000 B.P. would become, with rounding, 5050 DCben.

This proposal would make life much easier for the next generation of students, and has the merits that 2000 is a fine round number that will remain the closest millennium for the next five centuries. The other information should make papers easier to read. There should be no confusion if the B.P. notation is also retained, however, for those who prefer it; the two systems are distinctively different.

REPLY - A VIEW FROM THE OPPOSITE CAMP

Professor Nisbet revisits a thorny problem that has plagued us since the beginning of analytic time. How best to specify our measurements, so they will readily be understood by all? As another pedagogue, I certainly appreciate his comments on the difficulties of explaining to students and non-specialists why we pin radiocarbon time to the strange year, A.D. 1950. However, in my own experience, confusion about radiocarbon ages is not limited to students and non-specialists, but is common amongst primary users as well. Numerous schemes to more closely specify the data and adjustments have been proposed, of which various are still used, causing even further confusion.

I believe that introducing yet another specification method would only add to this confusion, however logical it may seem at the outset. (Further, I have an aversion to making it even easier to subtract calendar years from radiocarbon years.) Stuiver and Polach (1977) have given us a clear definition of "conventional radiocarbon ages." This definition is complicated, but proper use of radiocarbon data requires a basic knowledge of it. The definition is finally becoming widely understood, probably in large part because it leads to the wonderful calibration data that now connects the radiocarbon and calendrical scales. The definition was confirmed and a new notation (*i.e.*, cal. B.P., cal. A.D. and cal. B.C.) for specifying calibrated ages was adopted at the 12th International Radiocarbon Conference (Mook 1986). In my view, changing these definitions now, or adding another new one, will only lead to greater chaos.

That leaves the question of other dating methods, and I'm not convinced that there is a big problem there. Dendrochronologists measure time in dendro-years, which are usually very close to calendar years, and so an A.D./B.C. dendro-scale is appropriate. For most other methods, a discrepancy of only 50 years (in whatever scale) would be a triumph, and so the problem is not nearly so immediate.

Besides, I rather like the year A.D. 1950.

Erle Nelson
Associate Editor

REFERENCES

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Mook, W. G. 1986 Business Meeting. Recommendations/resolutions adopted by the Twelfth International

Radiocarbon Conference. In Stuiver, M. and Kra, R. S., eds., Proceedings of the 12th International ^{14}C Conference. *Radiocarbon* 28(2A): 799.