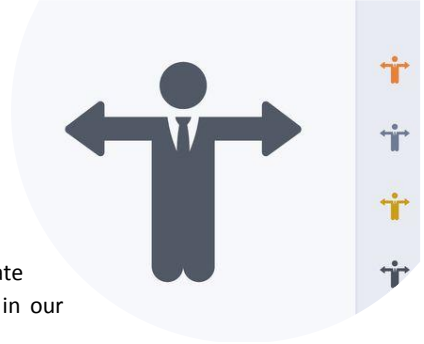
CMS summer school – Beginning an interdisciplinary journey

By Liam Fullbrook



A 'T shaped researcher'

As nice and simple as it might be, we do not live in a world where things operate in small and easy to manage pieces. Although we try to force things to fit in our predesignated boxes, we are increasingly realising that everything is connected (or at least we in the western world are only just realising this). For example, in sciences we research our oceans as Oceanographers, Ecologists, Political scientists, Biologists, Botanists, Ichthyologists and many many more. But as we begin to accept that our actions have complex, interlinked and multifaceted consequences and it is important that we begin exploring the cross-boundary relationships and explore the spaces between disciplines.

The CMS Summer School gave Early Career Researchers (ERCs), experts and experienced interdisciplinary researchers the opportunity meet, discuss and learn about how interdisciplinary research is conducted. It gave ERCs the opportunity to learn how interdisciplinary teams, methods and techniques can be used to improve research, focusing on how we can influence climate change research and the use of the marine environment. For example, all disciplines can contribute to the challenge that is climate change, but we are likely to achieve greater success if we work collectively towards a solution. We heard about how various researchers have used their expertise and broad inter disciplinary research to help solve problems from the changing of public and political perceptions to creating detailed quantitative models. Experts such as Beth Fulton, Ingrid Van Putten Gretta Pecl, Rob Stephenson and Rachel Kelly all demonstrated that interdisciplinarity is not just working together, but planning, discussing, assessing, replanning and advancing together towards a common goal.

CMS Summer school working group - Challenge 5. Left – Right: Tung Yao Hsu, Liam Fullbrook, Kate Dodds, Dean Greeno, & Tormey Reimer

There was also healthy discussion amongst participants and experts at the CMS summer school, facilitated and encouraged by the organisers. This allowed different worldviews, disciplines and cultures to be experienced. A moment which demonstrated this is when a student from Taiwan, Samuel, commented that in Taiwan, they would not have had the whole week to debate and discuss the stakeholder problems, as he felt they are a more 'agreeable' culture. This is something not considered, for example in Australia and could hamper interdisciplinary efforts if unaware. The dynamic and challenging nature of the summer school was also evident when discussing how we deal with changing climates and transforming marine ecosystems. Discussions included 'how we talk to those who deny climate change?', 'how do we make government listen?'. The summer school provided the platform to ask questions, contribute to discussions and learn with peers and experts in a small groups.

Daily and Erhlich (1999) cite friendship and collegiality as critical to interdisciplinary success and for me this was the biggest benefit of the CMS summer school. Meeting other ERCs with similar interdisciplinary ambitions from different disciplines such as, ecology, governance, economics, logistics, psychology, medicine and art, countries such as Taiwan, South Africa, Columbia, England, France and Australia and as well as indigenous Australians, really demonstrated the breath that interdisciplinary research can achieve, and what I can achieve in my own collaborations. Further, as someone working in an Interdisciplinary research centre, I found it incredibly comforting to talk with others who also struggle with what to call themselves. An ecologist? A marine scientist? An interdisciplinary researcher? I think Rob Stephenson's talk on integrated management and interdisciplinary research teams helped a lot of the ECRs. He described an "interdisciplinary researcher" as somebody with a strong grounding in one discipline but with wide arms able to reach and be willing to research with other disciplines. This T shaped researcher is a lot more achievable than the 'expert in many fields' researcher, particularly for ECRs. I feel that this summer school gave us the opportunity to realise the strengths in our expertise and that the willingness to

grow horizontally will make tackling challenges such as climate change more achievable but also more interdisciplinary in the future.