

The International Ornithological Congress: A Counter View

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I respond to the invitation of the Editor to offer my own views concerning participation in the XVIII Congressus Internationalis Ornithologicus. I do so with some misgivings about the use of *The Auk* as a forum for differing personal convictions that are not scientifically resolvable. This response reflects a philosophic stance that differs from that expressed by my colleague Helmut Mueller and injects some of my own pragmatic considerations.

The natural sciences, including ornithology, are human enterprises that, to the benefit of mankind, seek rational explanations of natural phenomena. Of necessity they supersede national boundaries. This has been true from their very inception even though political and social systems, and their institutions, have often temporarily thwarted or retarded their progress.

As President of the XVII Congressus Internationalis Ornithologicus I was also President of the International Ornithological Committee which accepted the invitation of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR to convene the XVIIIth Congress in Moscow. Prior to the submission of the invitation I had extensive discussions and correspondence with Soviet Colleagues about plans, conditions, and requirements, all consistent with both the rules and traditions of the International Council of Scientific Unions, to which both the Academy of Sciences of the USSR and the National Academy of Sciences of the USA adhere.

I personally favored acceptance of the invitation. There is in the USSR extensive and diverse research effort in avian biology surpassed at most by only a few other countries. There are genuine centers of excellence in this effort. Interest in conservation of birds and of avian habitats is extensive and sincere. At the conclusion of each of my several visits to the USSR I have had a sense of frustration that time did not permit me to learn more from and about Soviet ornithology. Because I read Russian only with substantial difficulty, use of the Russian literature provides only scant amelioration of this frustration.

Unlike most of the long-standing international scientific congresses, at the time of the acceptance of the invitation of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, no previous Congressus Internationalis Ornithologicus had been held in the USSR.

It is clear from the positions adopted by the National Academy of Sciences of the USA that it regards individual visits to the USSR for scientific purposes as matters of personal decision. In no sense have I ever regarded my visits to the USSR as approbation of any acts or policies of the Soviet government, any more than visits to the USA by foreign scientific colleagues constitute endorsement of those of our government. I am certain that my position thereon is shared by at least an overwhelming majority of our colleagues who have visited the USSR.

My colleague Helmut Mueller suggests, as his second "alternative," a boycott of the Congress, an action that has been advocated previously against other congresses. I can only reassert that such action would deprive me, and those of my colleagues who may opt to boycott, of important interactions with Soviet colleagues; it would deprive these Soviet colleagues, who have very limited access to Western congresses, of rare and highly valued opportunities to interact with Western colleagues; furthermore, it would wield no influence whatsoever on the policies of the government of the USSR, just as boycotting of a meeting in our country by foreign colleagues, for whatever reason, would exert essentially no impact on our government. The same observations are also germane to the third "alternative": the protests would be addressed to fellow scientists with essentially or absolutely no influence on the government of the USSR.

As the above suggests, I plan to participate in the XVIII Congressus Internationalis Ornithologicus. In doing so I reject all three "alternatives" offered by my esteemed colleague.

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