PERCS Within an Uncertain World

A new virtual, international seminar supporting Early Career Researchers in the Pal(a)eo Sciences

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With the onset of COVID-19, many departments have stopped hosting regular seminar series, and conferences and workshops have been postponed or adapted to become virtual. In addition to the loss of idea-sharing between institutions and networking opportunities, virtual spaces de-emphasise person to person interactions and discussions, both formal and informal. Furthermore, social distancing and isolation have stopped informal day-to-day interactions and stimied workplace camaraderie with colleagues. Science is a collaborative endeavour. What can we do to regain those interactions and fruitful discussions? How can we create an inclusive, supportive environment, lifting up early career researchers (ECRs), or those early on in their careers in non-academic workplaces, who do not have large networks of collaborators/colleagues? Those within academia additionally do not have the stability of tenured senior researchers. Those who are early career (new to a workplace, PhD students, postdocs, fellows) frequently describe isolation, worry about temporary contracts, and having limited support from administration or departments (Metcalfe et al., 2020 [https://www.ukri.org/files/legacy/documents/research-integrity-main-report/]; Wellcome Trust, 2020 [https://wellcome.ac.uk/reports/what-researchers-think-about-research-culture]), accentuated if the individual is from an underrepresented background. These aspects of being early career in a workplace are going to be further amplified by the coming collapse of the (academic) job market during and post-COVID-19. With COVID-19 and all the issues faced by early career and/or diverse scientists, how does the community best support these folks in an uncertain world?

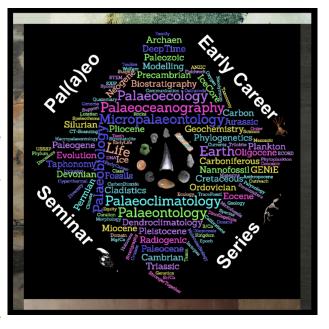
Enter Pal(a)eo PERCS: an international, grassroots initiative, created to continue the sharing of research, and striving to highlight the work of ECRs - those who will form the next generation of research leaders. Whilst PERCS (Pal(a)eo EaRly Career Seminar) was initially created to fill a vacancy, our hope is to use the strengths of the virtual space to benefit our community, by building a venue accessible across communities, far-flung locations, and career stages. As an entirely virtual seminar our costs are relatively low and we have been able to work with resources already available to build the framework. However, as the series grows we hope to secure funding to improve accessibility, and support the longevity of the initiative.

"Pal(a)leo" is a broadly defined field that can sit in many different departments, from geosciences to biology, chemistry, oceanography, and even anthropology, anything old and/or long dead. PERCS aims to broaden the academic and intellectual frameworks and networks of researchers interested in understanding the Earth's past by bringing these varied subdisciplines together. PERCS provides a forum for "cross-pollination" for researchers from different "flavours" of the pal(a)eo-sciences, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration. Each PERCS session lasts ~90 minutes, comprising a 30 minute seminar, 15 minutes Q&A, 15 minute break-out sessions for facilitating small group interactions, and a 25-30 minute virtual "tea-time" organized around an informal topic (e.g., "What paleontological organism would you least like to be?"). The break-out sessions and tea-time are unique features, which have been



incorporated to encourage networking and fun scientific (and social!) discussions and interactions. Seminars are closed-captioned, and, where possible, are also recorded and made available for a limited time, for participants who cannot attend in real-time.

The choice to focus on diverse Early Career Researchers is entirely deliberate: researchers in the early stages of building their career and networks are some of the hardest hit by COVID-19, especially those in temporary or fixed-term positions. However, ECRs are also an exceptionally diverse group of researchers across multiple axes, and it is by uplifting ECRs from diverse backgrounds and perspectives that we will ultimately build a more supportive, equitable, and diverse scientific community for the future. We have had an overwhelming, positive response, with over 850 sign-ups to our mailing list, and an average of



around 100 participants at each of the first three seminars in real-time, with recorded talks garnering over 100 views each week. While the initial speakers were chosen from an internal nomination pool, we are actively soliciting community and self-nominations to further diversify the speaker pool and create future sustainability.

As an organising group, we represent different institutions and are from a variety of 'early career' paths and stages. We have all conducted or are conducting research using micropalaeontology as our main tool, however we approach it from different angles, from biological (palaeo)oceanography to (palaeo)ocean circulation, and work on different timescales, from the Ediacaran to the Holocene. Within our group we all lead on different aspects of seminar organisation, including website management, social media, video recording editing, speaker scheduling, and publicity. As a group we discuss and finalise speaker choices and evaluate how each session has run and what we can do better for next time. Each seminar also has a speaker host and a technical host, and we rotate these duties between us.

All Pal(a)eoPERCS organisers are committed to equity, diversity, inclusivity, and accessibility (EDIA) within our own respective scientific sub-disciplines and workplaces, and we extend this commitment to Pal(a)eoPERCS. We value the presentations and attendance of diverse scientists from a range of backgrounds and experiences, and centre EDIA in our speaker scheduling and seminar organisation. We have created a Code of Conduct that all participants and speakers must abide by during the seminar. Our accessibility efforts include live-captioning of talks using auto-captions, making seminar recordings available to attendees with caring responsibilities or conflicting schedules for later viewing, and encouraging our speakers to usPae colourblind-friendly graphics. This is not exhaustive however, and if anyone requests any further accessibility requirements, we will try our hardest to implement them.

Whilst Pal(a)eoPERCS is created by a group of ECRs and will focus on featuring ECR speakers, we encourage folks at all career stages and spheres, from undergraduate to emeritus, industry to policy and the general public, to attend the seminars, join in on a conversation and learn about the excellent work being done by early career scientists. Pal(a)eoPERCS is hosted on Zoom at 1500 UTC every Tuesday, and we have an exciting line-up of talks covering many topics from palaeoclimatology, to bryozoans, to stalagmites in coming weeks. To be able to join the seminars, you must join our mailing list (https://paleopercs.wordpress.com/participate/) and agree to the code of conduct. You can also follow us on Twitter @palaeopercs. If you would like to nominate a speaker, or self-nominate, you can do so here https://paleopercs.wordpress.com/nominate-speakers/. You can also contact us at paleopercs@gmail.com. We warmly invite you to join us for our weekly "PERCS", and hope you enjoy the seminars as much as we do!

All authors contributed equally to this article

