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The GRIN Meeting: A 'third place' for managers and scholars of social-ecological systems

In his book *The Great Good Place*¹, Ray Oldenburg writes about the important role that 'third places' play in community building. Third places refer to social environments other than home (first place) and work (second place) where people spend time. These places provide neutral ground for engagement and relationship building, with conversation or dialogue being the main activity.¹ Churches, cafes, clubs, public libraries and parks are examples of third places. The ancient Greek concept of the *agora* or 'gathering place' is an older variant of a third place, which served as a dedicated public space in a city-state for deliberating philosophical, artistic, spiritual, economic and political affairs of the day.

Third places or *agora*-type spaces are also required for scientists and practitioners to meet, share experiences and learn together.² This requirement is particularly relevant for addressing sustainability challenges, which typically requires consideration of diverse scientific expertise in combination with social values, policies and management practices.³ Sustainability challenges are social-ecological in nature and characterised by complex feedbacks, contested decision options and uncertain outcomes. Addressing these challenges usually goes beyond the capacity of any one organisation⁴ and requires integration of knowledge from across disciplines, sectors, scales and science–policy–practice realms.⁵ Furthermore, these challenges tend to evolve and hence call for adaptive approaches that allow for continual reframing, ongoing and collaborative learning and cooperative decision-making.⁶

The Garden Route Interface and Networking (GRIN) Meeting was initiated in 2017 with the aim of creating a third place for dialogue on, and advancement of, research and practice dealing with the interactions between natural and social systems, and with how those interactions affect the challenge of sustainability. Held in the Garden Route over 3 days during September–October of each year, GRIN addresses two important interfaces: research–practice and human–nature (or social-ecological). As such, the overarching theme of GRIN meetings is *research and management for sustainable social-ecological systems*. Social-ecological systems that have been presented at GRIN meetings include estuaries, protected areas, agricultural landscapes, cities, fisheries and catchments.

During its first 2 years, the Meeting was referred to as the Garden Route Interface Meeting (GRIM), but delegates voted for a happier acronym (GRIN) during the 2019 gathering. To date, GRIN has attracted about 70 delegates per year, including from South Africa (>50%), France, Finland, Spain, Canada, Kenya and Nigeria. GRIN is jointly organised and hosted by South African National Parks (SANParks), Nelson Mandela University (specifically its Sustainability Research Unit located at the George Campus), the French National Centre for Scientific Research (specifically their International Research Laboratory REHABS located at the George Campus of Nelson Mandela University, with financial support from the French Embassy) and the Southern African Programme on Ecosystem Change and Society.

Feedback from previous meetings highlight that the most valued features of GRIN are: (1) active engagement of managers/practitioners (>20% of delegates) through discussions and presentations; (2) ample time for networking and socialising, such as that during a GRIN braai, a 5-km sunset walk or a mid-meeting field excursion; and (3) presentations on the latest developments in social-ecological systems thinking. Presentation themes that have emerged to date and that remain relevant for future meetings are: understanding of human–nature connections (including through the use of social media data); strategies used to promote knowledge exchange among science, policy and practice; sustainable resource use and balancing benefits and conflicts related to services from nature; multiscale governance challenges (from rural towns to estuaries and peace parks); establishing long-term social-ecological research sites; resilience, adaptations and transformations in social-ecological systems; responding to climate and other drivers of change; social networks, social learning and collective action; and methods/approaches for studying social-ecological systems.

Because 'sustainability science' is a young and emerging field of study that departs substantially from conventional and disciplinary modes of inquiry (see Haider et al.⁷), the increasing number of postgraduate students pursuing studies in this field may not find optimal exposure in their often disciplinary (whether from social or natural sciences) university departments. GRIN provides a space for mutual learning about experiences such as applying mixed-methods research (combining qualitative and quantitative techniques), engaging stakeholders and facilitating knowledge co-production, and the challenges of doing a transdisciplinary PhD. To further cater for the specific needs that are commonly expressed by these students, a multi-day Spring School (2018) and half-day workshop (2019) on social-ecological systems research have been presented back-to-back with previous GRIN meetings.

GRIN 2020 is scheduled to take place from 6 to 8 October at Pine Lake Marina near Sedgefield (in the Western Cape, South Africa), and is expected to be followed by a Spring School on social-ecological systems research. A formal announcement and first call for abstracts will be circulated by the end of the first quarter of 2020. Detailed information about the 2020 meeting and Spring School can be found at GRIN2020.

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