NAMS News - October 1998

President's Letter

Our NAMS Newsletter editor tells me that you should see a new face (mine) in the upper right-hand corner of this page, replacing Mark Leckie's, as this year's NAMS President. I'd like to thank Mark for his work with the NAMS officers on your behalf during the last year. He will continue to provide us sage advice, however, as our current Past-President. I'd also like to thank Sally Zellers, our outgoing treasurer, for her fine service through the last three years!

You've already guessed: if Sally and Mark are both moving on, it must be time for another

NAMS election. Please have a look elsewhere in this newsletter for details on the slates for President-Elect and Treasurer, then VOTE! I thank you in advance for taking a few minutes to excercise this important responsibility; our candidates will certainly appreciate it as well.

I'd like to take the rest of my space in this letter to step up into the "bully pulpit" for a while, and discuss some issues that wore bantered about at the last NAMS Executive Board session at the 1998 Salt Lake City AAPG-SEPM meeting, as well as at several recent Intercompany Biostratigraphy Coordinator (IBC) meetings throughout the oil patch. In the light of ongoing Felow crude oil prices, and a possible replay of petroleum industry "merger mania", I'd like to share some thoughts with those of you involved in petroleum company, consulting industry, and academic settings as micropaleontologists. Quite simply, I want to offer some observations and suggestions regarding what each of these three groups can do to help develop and support what I choose to call "The 3-Way Relationship". I ask you, the NAMS membership, to send me your thoughts and ideas on this topic after you have a look at my rantings below, and we'll give your ideas greater circulation in the next edition of this newletter.

The 3-Way Relationship. Some background. Since the major petroleum industry downsizings of the mid 1980's in North America, three things have happened to micropaleontologists: 1) hundreds of them are no longer employed by petroleum companies, 2) many, but certainly some lesser number than hundreds, have moved on to successful positions in a rapidly expanding consulting industry, and, 3) there are fewer new graduates in micropaleontology, who are finding still fewer employment opportunities within their specialties. I offer these as

givens; I didn't need to be particularly astute to have noticed these major trends in our profession.

Here's the concept, then. I'll posit that a mutualistic symbiotic relationship exists between industry, consulting, and academic micropaleontologists that needs to be nurtured. We must develop additional ways to support each other's activities, if our specialties are to flourish, as I firmly believe they should. I'm not embarassed to tell you that I'm still a "true believer" - having just passed my 20th year as, at core, a petroleum industry biostratigrapher/micropaleontologist, I continue to see the demand for quality paleontologic data and interpretations ever increasing. Some suggestions/thoughts/harangues for members of each of the three sectors mentioned above:

1 - Petroleum Company Micropaleontologists - We need to accept that we're never going back to the large, in-house staffs that we last saw back in the early 1980's, and we should find better ways to support and develop our external consultants. Please remember - many of the individuals that you now critically depend upon to generate top-quality data and interpretations used to be in the offices right next door to you, as co-workers. Bring them back into your facility for project work and meetings; this kind of partnership simply works better. The "proprietary data" argument against having them there is a true "red herring". If you don't trust your consultants - they shouldn't be your consultants. Make sure you're involved in your own "succession-planning" when you begin to think about leaving your present position. For that matter, try to bring in two biostratigraphers to replace you. If you've been around a while, I guarantee that your accumulated knowledge comes to at least what two less experienced folk will bring in with them! Find ways to fund work-study programs internships and post-doc positions in your work unit. I've found it particularly effective to match carefully chosen students to work on focused, business-unit funded projects. Yes, this sometimes requires a considerable search effort, but it allows (forces) you to expand your own network of contacts, which then come in handy further down the road. Develop research funding, as either sole support, or through consortia alliances, with the academic or consulting sectors, for those research initiatives that you can no longer do in your own shop. Prepare papers for our professional society meetings and journals; make a special effort to attend research conferences and other venues where you can meet faculty and students. Contribute funds to organizations (yes, NAMS is one of them) that fund student scholarships in micropaleontology.

2 - Consulting Industry Micropaleontologists - Please make sure you don't neglect your continuing education needs, even though a large corporate structure may no longer be there to support you. If you have a going (growing?) business, you too, should be thinking of succession and expansion issues. Don't let your business just disappear simply because it's time for you to move on; develop younger colleagues through work-study programs, internships, and post-doc offerings, just as the petroleum companies do. Involve partners in either a formal or informal sense. Talk with the petroleum companies that you do business with about having your own relatively inexperienced personnel do internships with them, attend their training courses, or support you in training your own new hires with additional projects which will be closely monitored by you. Don't be insulted by narrow-minded petroleum company managers as to your true worth. Continuously ask to "come inside" the organization as part of your own work process improvement. Try to make it clear (as tactfully as you may!) that you represent an important "value-adding" component in your client's geoscience evaluation effort. Become involved in professional society activities; it provides you with the opportunity to give back to the field, and it represents an important opportunity for networking that you may be ignoring to your own detriment.

3 - Academic Micropaleontologists - Develop reasonable employment scenarios with your M.S. and Ph.D. students. While it is still certainly true that the very best will find a position in their specialties, the fact remains that not every student with a specialty in micropaleontology will find a position in micropaleontology. Understand that more trained micropaleontologists work in the petroleum industry today in areas outside of micropaleontology than do in their original specialty. Know that micropaleontologists are often recruited quite avidly by petroleum companies to become more generalized exploration and production geologists because of their particular prowess in physical stratigraphy, correlation, and sequence stratigraphy. Ensure that your students also receive an appropriate broader training in earth science applications. Investigate spending some of your sabbatical leave with a petroleum company; one of the easiest ways of developing this type of opportunity is by staying in touch with former students and colleagues now in the petroleum business. Should you do this, you'll return to the classroom and laboratory with insightful accounts for your students, and you'll be able to provide them with considerably better career counsel. Attend petroleum industry oriented meetings to observe trends, and increase visibility for yourself, your projects, and your students. Consider having a

department booth at an AAPG meeting; they only cost ~$400 for a non-profit organization, and bring your students along to help staff the booth. Ask for industry support for your research programs and student projects; very little "fundamental research" in biostratigraphy is (can be) done in the greatly reduced research organizations of the major oil companies today. Of course money is tight, but a well-reasoned, scientifically relevant proposal stands a far better chance of funding now from the petroleum industry than it does from the National Science Foundation of the United States.

Enough of my prattle; what do you think we can do together? All the best,

NAMS President Tom Dignes