



EntoQuest: A Nod to the Past and an Opportunity for the Future

Helen McSherry Craig, Kelly McIntyre, William Lamp

"The desirability of a summer meeting was discussed and it seemed to be the general opinion that such a session should be a leisurely one, with few papers, ample time for discussion, in beautiful surroundings." (Minutes of the 1st Annual Session of the Eastern Branch of the AAEE, New York City, November 1930)

ABOVE: Group photo of EntoQuest 2022 at the 4H Center, taken by a drone. (Photo by Yong-Lak Park.)

Under a starry sky, a campfire slowly burns as s'mores are roasted and the sound of sea shanties fills the summer air. People talk to their neighbors about their opinions on cats vs. dogs and tell stories from their summers. You wouldn't guess that this is the scene of an entomology conference.

Early in September 2022, when the leaves were just beginning to change colors and the insects were still active, a group of entomologists from the Eastern Branch of ESA (the Entomological Society of America) convened at the 4-H Center in Front Royal, Virginia, for an all-new kind of conference fondly called "EntoQuest." In shared cabins, over dinner in the communal

dining hall, and while sitting around a fire, attendees talked casually about their research, ideas, and stories. By day, they took part in outdoor field workshops—collecting, learning, and brainstorming—and by night, they were connecting on a deeper level with their peers, colleagues, and professors. But where did this idea come from? Why is it useful for the field of entomology? How is it different from the other existing entomology conferences?

History of the Eastern Branch

The idea for a summer meeting is not new. The original idea of EntoQuest started in 1920, when a group that called themselves the "Northeast Entomologists" had a similar summer conference that met annually. Their goal was to form the Eastern Branch of the American Association of Economic Entomologists.

It was the start of a new age: the Roaring Twenties, a time of surging economy, redefinition of art and culture in cities, and large-scale development of technology. Think jazz, Art Deco, automobiles, radio, and moving pictures. The passage

of the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 added the Cooperative Extension Service to the responsibility of land-grant universities. The Eastern Branch started from a groundswell of enthusiasm for connection and collaboration among entomologists. Two of these entomologists wrote letters to their peers in the area suggesting an informal meeting to discuss insect problems, their research, and legislation of mutual interest. The idea was met with intrigue and approval. Thus, the first field meeting and informal discussion was held in Philadelphia on 29–30 July 1920 (Wheeler 1989). The meeting was so successful that they resolved to continue to meet during the summers (Fig. 1). Unfortunately, for reasons that are undocumented, the meetings were discontinued when the Eastern Branch was formalized in 1929. The series of 10 summer meetings ended, although the minutes of their first meeting in New York City described their desire to continue (JEE editors 1930).

Years went by without a summer meeting, until early 2021. With the COVID-19 pandemic raging and people looking to interact outside, the time was ripe to renew the summer meeting as an option for Eastern Branch members. Led by Bill Lamp, Tom Kuhar, and a committee of

▼

“THE SETTING OF ENTOQUEST IS COMPLETELY DIFFERENT FROM OTHER MEETINGS BECAUSE YOU’RE OUTSIDE AND MEETING PEOPLE IN A MORE HANDS-ON WAY.”

15, the volunteers discussed and executed plans for what was called EntoQuest 2022.

The Beginning of EntoQuest 2022

The idea of reigniting the Eastern Branch summer meeting was conceived as a way to complement the annual branch

meeting that occurs in late winter. The goal was to provide entomologists from all walks of life a more informal, natural setting to interact. Bill Lamp, University of Maryland, proposed the summer meeting and recalled, “When I suggested the idea at our Executive Committee Meeting, Tom Kuhar [Virginia Tech] responded enthusiastically, ‘Yes, Bill! I love this idea. This is exactly what we need!’” So, EntoQuest was born. The enthusiasm that fueled the project back in 1920 was once again fueling the project in 2021. A summer meeting for the current “Northeast Entomologists” was back again in September 2022 (Figs. 2, 3).

How is EntoQuest Different from the Other Branch and Annual Meetings?

When asked this question, Dr. Alan Leslie, a Maryland County extension agent, said, “The setting of EntoQuest is completely different from other meetings because you’re outside and meeting people in a more hands-on way. There’s such little downtime in the bigger meetings [that] you tend to gravitate towards people you know, but with EntoQuest, you’re able to make more connections than you normally would.” This sentiment was shared among many attendees, which was evident from the reflection report conducted at the end of the meeting. With formality at a minimum and in an outdoor environment, entomologists were able to do what they do best. “Everyone was running around in Crocs, hunting for bugs,” remarked Ali Shokoohi, a third-year master’s student at the University of Maryland. EntoQuest provided a space for hands-on learning in a low-stress environment that the other meetings don’t have the capacity to provide. As Dr. Denise Gemmellaro, a medico-legal forensic entomologist at Kean University put it, “EntoQuest just shows you the diversity that ESA offers. Most of the time, the career opportunities in front of us are filtered through our environment, resources, and faculty. EntoQuest provides exposure to other things that you’ve heard of but haven’t had a chance to dive into.”

In that same way, EntoQuest set out to be a more accessible program, maintaining low-cost requirements to allow a wider group of students to attend. Dominique Person, a self-proclaimed entomology hobbyist, spoke on the matter of inclusion: “As excited as I was for the [Eastern]



Fig 1. A group of Northeastern Entomologists at one of the first summer meetings held during the 1920s. Earnest Cory, on the far left, was a strong believer in regional cooperation and pushed for more Eastern Branch meetings (like EntoQuest) to collaborate with other entomologists. (Retrieved from the University of Maryland Library Archives.)



Fig 2. A group of entomologists from the University of Maryland attend EntoQuest 2022. In contrast to Fig. 1, this image represents the transition of the Eastern Branch to a more inclusive community of people. (Photo by Eric Day.)

Branch meetings, I felt very left out since I had a hard time keeping up. I have a processing disorder where it's hard for me to retain auditory information, so I didn't feel like I got a lot out of the Branch meetings. EntoQuest was perfect for me—I felt included and like I belonged with that group. Everything was very hands-on and I (for once) didn't feel like I had to work harder than [others] to get the most out of the experience." Thanks to the environment, accessibility, and informality of EntoQuest, the summer meeting has added a complementary, novel, and relevant angle to the other branch and annual ESA meetings.

What Makes EntoQuest Successful?

Measuring the success of any professional conference can be a challenge when there is no quantitative value attached to "success." However, reflection reports and individual interviews conducted at the conclusion of EntoQuest provided a window into how attendees perceived the success of the meeting. Most attendees referred to their newly acquired knowledge, prospects for future collaborations, and personal growth

when discussing EntoQuest. These three themes emerged time and again during conversations about the early September weekend.

As is usual with many conferences, EntoQuest attendees walked away with new knowledge about the field of entomology. From different trapping techniques

to insect pinning methods, there was no lack of educational opportunities. Daniela Grajales and Gloria Raise, both undergraduates at Kean University studying forensics and chemistry, spoke energetically about their experiences at EntoQuest. Grajales recalled a moment when she was afraid of what she thought was a spider, until some other entomology students explained that it was actually an eight-legged arthropod commonly called a harvestman or daddy longlegs. "It was crawling all over their hands and I thought, "Wow, that is so cool!" Grajales said. Raise had a similar experience: "I started learning about insects only because of forensic entomology, and that's all I knew. I didn't really know much about the other things you can do with insects. That also gave me the prompt to think about entomology as a career. It was the first meeting that I went to that was pure entomology and I discovered I really like it." EntoQuest has the special ability to bring together people from different corners of the field of entomology and provide them with an opportunity to share their knowledge with one another in a way that sparks inspiration and deeper, lasting connections.

In 2022, attendees of EntoQuest represented a diverse group of entomologists working in extension, teaching, forensics, IPM, and medical entomology; the group included U.S. Army entomologists, museum curators, graduates, undergraduates, and people who were only just beginning to dip their toes into the science. This diversity allowed unique collaborations to form. Kelly McIntyre, a lab technician at Virginia Tech, pointed out that "In research, collaboration is the biggest way to make anything happen." As an extension agent, Alan Leslie could relate, commenting, "I knew EntoQuest was successful when I walked away with a handful of business cards and plans for new extension programming." EntoQuest fostered connections that manifested into collaborations for many who attended.

Aside from academic and professional success, EntoQuest also encouraged personal growth among attendees. Dr. Jaree Johnson, a board-certified medical veterinary entomologist for the U.S. Army, talked about how the weekend re-inspired her entomological roots: "[It] made me feel like a kid again." Tom Kuhar, an entomology professor at Virginia Tech who has

CHOOSE YOUR OWN... (ENTO)QUEST
PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES

While all of EntoQuest is a learning opportunity, days are packed with "formal" educational sessions to enhance your experience! Here, students and professionals share their areas of expertise with the group during fun, interactive sessions. Students can even walk away with a new CV line after presenting in the poster session!

2022 RECAP:

Saturday 8:00-9:00
Poster sessions

Saturday - 9:00-11:30
1. Collecting Aquatic Insects*
2. "Spotting the Spotted Lanternfly"
3. Open time to hike on the Appalachian Trail

Saturday - 1:30-2:30
1. Intro to the Seek App - iNaturalist
2. "Demonstrations of novel collection techniques"
3. Collecting arthropods of medical importance

Saturday - 3:30-6:00
1. "Ants, millipedes, and more - collecting arthropods from the forest" hike
2. "Forensic Entomology Experience"

Sunday - 9:00-12:00
Bioblitz!!!

Interested in leading a session in 2023? email mcintyrek@vt.edu to volunteer!

Fig 3. Description of the EntoQuest 2022 program activities. (Design by Kelly McIntyre.)

attended all but one Eastern Branch meeting since 1992 and who was previously president of the branch, shared the sentiment. Kuhar spoke on how the weekend felt like camp, providing a safe space for students to find their people and come out of their shell. Dominique Person talked about the experience of finding *his* people, saying, “For me, the moment where I really felt like [EntoQuest] was a true success was when someone found an insect and [they were] suddenly surrounded by people asking to hold it and take pictures. It felt like being a child again. I can’t remember another time where so many people were excited about just one little insect.” The camaraderie and enthusiasm among EntoQuest attendees stimulated a collective feeling of youth that allowed for authentic interactions. EntoQuest reminded attendees of how fun entomology can be, and it created a joyful and accepting atmosphere.

How Did EntoQuest Change Perspectives on the Role of the Eastern Branch in the Field of Entomology?

The Eastern Branch has provided many northeastern entomologists with resources and opportunities for professional development over the years. It has been a “north star” for many entomologists; as Dr. Ashley Kennedy, the previous president of the Eastern Branch, said, “In the past couple years, [the Eastern Branch] has been a trailblazer, starting new traditions and going beyond the expectations.”

Some of the graduate students who have had fewer years of experience with the Eastern Branch regarded EntoQuest as a turning point for how they understood the Eastern Branch’s role in the field of entomology. Ali Shokoohi said, “In addition to being a figure that creates formal settings for us to present our work, the organization is also acting as a place for people to find community and connections to other entomologists.” Without connections, communication is incredibly difficult, and that’s what science is all about—communicating with one another and the public. Amanda Brucchieri, a first-year master’s student at the University of Maryland, said that EntoQuest exemplified the “values and purpose of the Eastern Branch.” It is clear that EntoQuest provided a glimpse into the Eastern Branch community and how it affects the scientific field of entomology.

▼

“FOR ME,
THE MOMENT
WHERE I
REALLY FELT LIKE
[ENTOQUEST]
WAS A TRUE
SUCCESS WAS
WHEN SOMEONE
FOUND AN
INSECT AND
[THEY WERE]
SUDDENLY
SURROUNDED BY
PEOPLE ASKING
TO HOLD IT AND
TAKE PICTURES.”

EntoQuest2023

EntoQuest is being held again this year on 15–17 September near Lewes, Delaware, at Camp Arrowhead! When asked why members should attend EntoQuest 2023, attendees of EntoQuest 2022 said:

- “It’s fun and inclusive and you network without even realizing it!” –Gloria Raise
- “They will have so much fun, and that is a factor not to be neglected.” –Dr. Denise Gemmellaro
- “There are a lot of students with molecular experience, and they would otherwise never get to do this stuff.” –Dr. Jaree Johnson
- “Most people are scared of insects, but EntoQuest is a way to relax and open your eyes to entomology.” –Daniela Grajales
- “It will be in a different location, so for people who attended last year, it will be

different insects and fauna.” –Dr. Ashley Kennedy

- “Because it’s awesome!” –Dr. Alan Leslie

At the core of EntoQuest lies a community of like-minded, diverse people who share a common love for being outside interacting with nature. We hope to see you: first-year students, experienced students, early-career professional members, established professionals, and entomology hobbyists at EntoQuest2023! Be sure to check the ESA website for up-to-date information.

Helen McSherry Craig is the lab manager and a future master’s student of the Lamp Lab at the University of Maryland. (hrcraig3@umd.edu)

Kelly McIntyre is currently a research specialist for the Kuhar Lab (vegetable entomology) and is about to begin a Ph.D. program with the Rice Lab (tree fruit entomology) at Virginia Tech. (mcintyre@vt.edu)

William Lamp is a professor in the University of Maryland Department of Entomology with interests in sustainable agriculture, conservation biological control, and plant-insect interactions. (lamp@umd.edu)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ae/tmad029>

References Cited

- (JEE) *Journal of Economic Entomology* editors. 1930. Proceedings of the First Annual Paper-Reading Session of the Eastern Branch of the American Association of Economic Entomologists. *Journal of Economic Entomology* 23(1): 128–132. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jee/23.1.128>
- Wheeler, Jr., A.G. 1989. History of the Eastern Branch. *Bulletin of the ESA* 35(3): 74–84.



Youtube Link – EntoQuest 2022 Highlights (EB ESA)

Drone video footage of the Northern Virginia 4H Center and EntoQuest activities. (Video by Yong-Lak Park.) <https://youtu.be/818p7GWIhUw>