"It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the ISARS symposium of 2010…". That abbreviations was necessary, "Welcome to the International Symposium for the Advancement of Boundary Layer Remote Sensing of 2010", didn't flow of the tongue with quite the same ease. But with the prospect of linguistic gymnastics avoided, we moved on to the first of the presentations.
Dwarfed by the presentation slides projected onto the wall behind him, the glow of the laptop illuminated the face of the first speaker; his eyes scanned the rows of faces staring back. Perhaps he was judging our mood, or maybe he was just nervous, ready to reveal the results of his labours, and unsure of the reception.
As the talks began, blank notebooks started to fill with scribbles. Miles of ink was deposited on acres of paper, recording the development of Radars, Lidars, and Sodars; with measurements of storms and clouds, turbulence and wind turbines, all tied up within. Here, then, was the heart of a conference; as the presentation progressed, horizons expanded. New ideas formed in the audiences' minds. Fresh science that we could attempt; new techniques to interrogate our data; or the solution to a problem that had halted progress for years, might all be revealed in the next few minutes.

The weather in Paris that week was warm, and just a few miles beyond the gates of Versailles, Saint Quentin-en-Yvelins was feeling the brunt of it. By break time, a cup of coffee was no longer a priority; the cool beyond the conference hall, however, was. Delegates streamed from the lecture theatre to swamp the coffee tables, as the surrounding corridors filled with the rumble of distant conversation. Here was an opportunity to catch-up, to meet those colleagues who had slipped from ones mind after previous meetings; an opportunity to scrutinise recent talks; or just to stand, cup of cool water in hand, and contemplate the return to the conference hall, and the start of the next session.

On the second day, it was my turn; not to stand in from of the rows of filled seats and talk, but to entice colleagues towards my poster. And here is the challenge for the young scientist: As the poster rooms fill for lunch, people drift from room to room, and groups seem to form around everyone else's work. There they stay, locked in debate and discussion, until issues are resolved, or differences agreed.
As those crowds break up, the dilemma arises; we stand keenly by our posters, hoping our titles will pull in our peers, but as their eyes scan the title, we struggle to make that decision: Do I jump in and talk? Or wait for their first questions, which might never arise?
After a few hours, the tide of people had ebbed back down the corridors. The dregs of conversation occupied only small patches of the rooms, with just a few delegates locked in quiet contemplation in front of a deserted poster.
I had survived the poster session, and learned a valuable lesson along the way; it was one of my colleagues who pointed out that "I'd rather have someone explain a poster than have to read it all myself". Another lesson for this young scientist then: Jump in; you've got nothing to lose.

By the afternoon, however, my experiences in the poster session felt like a distant memory. Paris' late June heat wave smothered a row of coaches lined up in front of the conference building. Their engines idled as they waited for us to board, ready to transport us to the afternoon's activity: The field seminars.

For many, this was the highlight of the conference, and as we pulled up to the field site, we were eager to start. A flood of scientists flowed from the coaches, all heading for the large white tents to get the best seats before the seminars began.
All afternoon the sun remained strong, as the seminars rolled on. Demonstrations of the latest instruments, and talks on the recent science they had generated, were all punctuated with sporadic applause escaping from the canvas of another marquee, before it emptied and people spilled back out into the sunshine to sip at an orange juice or a welcome glass of water. Small groups drifted around the field, as recent graduates talked with seasoned experts in huddles around sodars or a towering weather mast. The feeling of formality dropped, here was the opportunity to soak up knowledge that might otherwise take years to acquire.

That day finished on the River Sienne. Darkness overtook us as we ate the conference dinner, inside a long river cruiser. The boat was swinging round the statue of liberty, to head back towards its birth, as I climbed up to the open deck, and as crowds of small figures streamed back across the bridges above us, I recalled the past few days. What had I learnt from this conference? There had been hours of talks, hundreds of posters, and the field seminars to digest too. All had shown me new techniques, and revealed fresh directions in which to take my research; and from the coffee time discussions, and walks around the field site, I had met new friends who had shared their own ideas, and challenged me to defend mine. But above all, I would leave with a different outlook. It is easy to get tied up in our own research problems, becoming blind to the range of work that goes on around us: A conference is the reminder that there's a whole world of atmospheric science beyond our own desks, and a wealth of solutions to our own research problems, if we take the time to look for them.

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On the ISARS Symposium, June 2010 in Paris.