

Field Trips and Scientific Debut

STUDENT ARTICLE



Cortney Cameron, SA-5313
Graduate Student
North Carolina Central University
cortney.cameron@gmail.com

On Field Trips

This year I had the pleasure of attending the Carolina Geological Society field trip, led by USGS Research Geologist Arthur Merschat and others, to the Grayson Highlands area in the southern Appalachians. I shared a self-aware sense of amusement with passersby at seeing over a hundred adults (myself among them) huddled on the roadside, inspecting and gathering rocks with childlike wonder. These treasures, stored in those bottom compartments typically reserved for luggage, slid and clanged beneath us as the tour buses hugged the mountain curves. Without belaboring the specifics the trip taught me, two broad themes stand out. First, although oftentimes hidden by age and vegetation, the East Coast boasts an amazing record of geology for those curious enough to look. By rock and mile, the trip transported me back to an era where glaciers and volcanoes raged in the now-docile mountains of Virginia; in western North Carolina, hundreds of miles inland, I found myself standing beneath an ancient ocean and watching as ultramafic intrusions snaked their way through fresh crust. Few other fields offer such an exhilarating time-machine ride--a sobering, tangible testament to the meaning of a half-billion years, to the power of the great earth engine churning beneath our feet. Second, the trip showed me the importance of staying active in local geological groups as a means to maintain connections--with other professionals and with the geology around you.

The Scientific Debut

This October, I conquered the seemingly monumental (to me) task of at once attending and presenting at my first scientific conference. Approaching the podium, my presumptuousness could not escape me—that is, for a fledgling like me to stand before a room filled with some of the greatest minds in the field, whose publication histories exceeded my age twofold, and present my nascent work. At the same time, my exact particular grain, picked from among the mountains of science, had remained heretofore unexplored except by me, and a certain thrill lay in sharing my exclusive knowledge with these greats, who, unlike most of my acquaintances, showed genuine interest in my work. Later, I found myself thinking the trial reminiscent of an aristocratic debut, with an advisor officially presenting a blushing protégé as ready to engage with the community—the obvious difference and advantage, compared to a traditional debut, is that the scientific debut leans more meritocratic. I, of course, survived the experience better for the wear, and despite the tortures the darker side of my imagination had predicted, the responses were constructive and helpful. Presenting at the conference forged a dimension of realness into my work, and indeed, as if I had synergistically absorbed some of the passion and knowledge of the scientific betterers there, my inner geoscientist left the event feeling refreshed and reconnected.



Carolina Geological Society members at a stop on Whitetop Road in Virginia (36.70806°N 81.61692°W) during a Society field trip on Oct. 29th, 2016. The author is at center holding an orange field book. Society members are examining an amygdaloidal metabasalt flow in the lower Unicoi Formation (dark color) which is overlain in the upper part of the picture by marine quartzites of the upper Unicoi Formation. (Photo by C. Cameron)

Cortney Cameron holds a B.A. in earth science from Duke University and is an NSF Graduate Research Fellow and M.S. candidate at North Carolina Central University. Raised in the foothills of the Appalachians, these mountains fostered her initial interest in geoscience.

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