1 September 2021

A Proposal for ASECS Meetings From 2025 to 2030

I. PROPOSAL & REPORT SUMMARY

> **PROPOSAL: Beginning in 2025, we propose that ASECS start a six-year trial in which the Society offers remote alternatives to the in-person annual meeting every other year. These remote alternatives would take place in 2025, 2027, and 2029. In 2029-30, the ASECS Executive Board should evaluate the experiment, in consultation with the membership, to determine whether to make this alternating schedule permanent.**

REPORT SUMMARY: This report makes the case for ASECS shifting to a national conference schedule alternating between in-person and remote meetings, beginning in 2025 for a six-year trial. The initial imperative that led us to propose this change, as this report lays out, is the pressing need to reduce the carbon footprint of the Society and its members. With the successful 2021 online conference behind us, we have come to recognize that remote conferencing brings an allied good: increasing the accessibility of the annual meeting, making the intellectual community ASECS supports available to scholars who would otherwise be unable or unlikely to participate. In short, the alternating conference format allows us to nearly halve the carbon footprint of the Society, while reducing costs and increasing access. This report also offers recommendations for actions that ASECS might take to raise awareness among members of the Society's carbon footprint and to bring greater visibility to climate change and other environmental issues. Finally, we see the alternating conference format as providing a benefit to affiliate societies, who may choose to host smaller and/or more regional in-person conferences in years when they do not need to compete with a national ASECS in-person conference.[1]

II. ISSUES

When ASECS was established in 1969, the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide was 324 parts per million (ppm). As ASECS begins its sixth decade as a scholarly society, the atmospheric concentration is above 420 ppm. In a significant sense, the founders of ASECS were closer to the world of the eighteenth century, with its relatively stable 280 ppm of carbon dioxide, than they were to our world. We are in a climate emergency, on a path, by most accounts, to a global mean temperature increase above two degrees Celsius, and perhaps significantly higher, by the end of this century. The primary cause of anthropogenic climate change is greenhouse gas emissions—carbon dioxide, above all—generated in the burning of fossil fuels.

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[1] An ad hoc committee of Society members concerned about issues of equity, accessibility, and the environment has prepared this proposal: **Joseph Bartolomeo**, ASECS Treasurer; **Mark Boonshoft**, ASECS Executive Director; **Mita Choudhury**, ASECS Member; **Alison Conway**, ASECS Member and Former CSECS President; **Jeffrey Leichman**, ASECS Member; **Tobias Menely**, ASECS Member; **Jeffrey Ravel**, ASECS Former President; **Rivka Swenson**, ASECS Affiliates Coordinator.

There is no more historically urgent task than decarbonization. In recent years, universities, corporations, and nations have all pledged to achieve net zero carbon emissions. The University of California aims to achieve carbon neutrality by 2025 (though it is relying on questionable carbon offsets to achieve this). Apple claims that it will be carbon neutral by 2030. More than 60 countries have pledged carbon neutrality by 2050.

The carbon footprint of a scholarly society such as ASECS derives primarily from flights to the annual conference. While the precise footprint of a given conference varies based on its size and location, national in-person conferences are estimated to have a carbon footprint of between 65 times and 200 times that of a remote conference. A roundtrip flight between SFO and JFK emits around 1.5 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalents per passenger. The average carbon footprint of an American or Canadian is around 15 metric tons per year (compared with a global average of around four metric tons). To limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, as called for by the Paris Climate Accord, emissions would need to drop to around 1.6 metric tons per person annually. In other words, a single passenger's roundtrip cross-country flight uses up almost all of their annual carbon emission allotment, according to the Paris calculations.

In the early months of Covid-19, some commentators proposed that the pandemic might provide an opportunity for us to reexamine our habits, institutions, and infrastructures. "The virus," as Kim Stanley Robinson wrote in the *New Yorker*, "is rewriting our imaginations. What felt impossible has become thinkable." The 2021 ASECS annual meeting provided an unexpected and heroically organized test case for future remote conferences. By many accounts, it was a great success. The online platform allowed us to meet as a society and share our research one year after the canceled 2020 meeting. It also showcased the potential advantages of virtual conferencing. Recorded sessions allow us to watch talks that we would have otherwise missed. As many of us discovered in our remote teaching, the chat box opens up a secondary medium for asking questions and making comments, allowing more perspectives to be shared. Future remote conferences might support asynchronous online discussion forums, allowing conversations to continue for weeks after a session. Recorded content can be archived. Most importantly, the remote format, as we learned at the presidential session on the "Carbon Footprint of ASECS," made the annual meeting accessible to scholars unable or unlikely to attend in-person meetings.

In addition to halving our society's carbon footprint, moving to an alternating conference format would increase the accessibility of our conference and the intellectual community it supports. As biologists Cassandra Raby and Joah Madden observe in an article in *Ecology and Evolution*, "in-person conferences provide barriers for delegate attendance, despite steps to make these events more inclusive, and could therefore be driving inequality within academia." Nicole Lee Shroeder, a PhD candidate in History at the University of Virginia and the founder of the Disabled Academic Collective, writes about the challenges disabled people face in accessing in-person academic meetings. "Digital conferences," she tweeted in the days after ASECS 2021, "suit my access needs." At the presidential session, we heard from an independent scholar who noted that she is unable to attend in-person conferences due to the expense of travel and registration. Several members referred to the accessibility advantages of remote conferences and regional conferences at the "Inclusion, Accessibility and Equitable Involvement" breakout session at the 18 August ASECS town hall meeting.

A biennial remote conference would also increase access to the society for the many members (and potential members) without access to research and travel funds. Graduate students, independent scholars, precariously employed scholars, and even tenure-track faculty may find the cost of travel to the annual conference prohibitive. There are also scholars who are choosing to fly less or not at all as part of a commitment to reducing

individual carbon emissions. As the climate emergency intensifies over the next decade, it is likely that more and more members of ASECS will be looking for less carbon intensive ways to participate in scholarly community.

There are drawbacks of a shift to a biennial in-person national meeting. Members look forward to the annual conference as an opportunity to catch up with friends and colleagues. Certain types of convivial interaction, informal conversation, and serendipitous meetings occur only at an in-person conference. Such drawbacks must be weighed against the benefits of shifting to an alternating conference format: significantly lowering the carbon footprint of ASECS and its members, increasing accessibility, and, potentially, redirecting attention to less carbon-intensive regional in-person meetings in years when the national ASECS conference meets remotely.

III. LESSONS FROM OTHER SCHOLARLY SOCIETIES

Scholars across the disciplines have begun calling for a significant rethinking of carbon intensive academic conferencing and have begun experimenting with alternative formats, even before the pandemic-enforced experimentation of the past eighteen months. In April 2019, Caroline Levine and eleven other scholars published a letter in *Inside Higher Ed* arguing that "our institutional practices should shift to reduce academic air travel." Earth scientists, unsurprisingly, have been at the forefront of initiatives—such as "No Fly Climate Sci"—to draw attention to the carbon footprint of academic travel and develop alternatives.

The Environmental Humanities Initiative at UC-Santa Barbara has hosted a number of flightless academic conferences, starting with "Climate Change: Views from the Humanities" in 2016. In 2019, the Department of English at Georgetown organized a flightless conference on "Ecology and Religion in the Nineteenth Century," with four regional nodes and a digital livestream. The North American Victorian Studies Association has planned a Flightless NAVSA in 2024, with meetings at regional hubs. This was the result of a long conversation within NAVSA, led by Dino Felluga. The model they proposed, before the pandemic, was a national conference alternating every other year with regional hub conferences. The 2024 conference is a trial of this model. Beyond the carbon footprint, a central justification for the hub model was avoiding the expense, headache, and environmental irresponsibility of using big corporate hotels (at least every other year), which is also an advantage of our approach. We believe that the virtual ASECS 2021 has shown the effectiveness of remote conferencing, and that this model is simpler and more accessible than the centrally-planned hub model, especially given the opportunity for regional and affiliate societies to plan their own in-person meetings in years when ASECS is scheduled to meet remotely.

The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) has, since its founding in 1992, met biennially. It is a flourishing and growing scholarly society.

IV. OUR CARBON FOOTPRINT BETWEEN NOW AND 2025

The first opening in the ASECS annual meeting schedule is in 2025; the Society has already signed hotel contracts for Baltimore (2022), St. Louis (2023), Toronto (2024), and Philadelphia (2026). The next section of this report makes the case for a biennial meeting launch in 2025. In this section, we want to suggest some actions the Society might take before 2025 to reduce its carbon footprint and raise climate change awareness among the membership. These actions fall into two categories: actions we might take each year in the run-up to the annual meeting and its aftermath, and long-term goals we might pursue that are not tied to our annual calendar.

First, we recommend that the Society conduct a poll of its members in Fall 2021 to ascertain membership views on alternate-year meetings, beginning with the open year in 2025. Such a poll would determine support for the alternate-year proposal set forth below, and it would also put the matter before the membership in a concrete manner that would lead to the actions we recommend below. We provide a draft survey as **Appendix A** to this report. Second, we propose piloting a ride-sharing page on the Society's web site that would allow members within driving range of Baltimore to carpool to and from the conference. We might also include links to Amtrak and bus service to Baltimore from the major East Coast population centers. We should explore whether Amtrak would offer discounts to our conference attendees. If this initiative is successful, we should continue it for St. Louis in 2023 and Toronto in 2024. After the Baltimore meeting, we should use an online carbon footprint tracker to estimate our footprint. An easily used, freely available tracker can be found here. We should continue this practice after the 2023 and 2024 meetings as well, to chart our effectiveness in reducing our carbon footprint over time.

The Society should also consider buying carbon offsets after each in-person meeting to mitigate our environmental impact. We might wish to add a small carbon offset charge to the meeting registration fee to pay for offsets. That said, carbon offsets are controversial. Some of the projects to which donations are made oversell their impact, while some critics argue that governments and individuals should take on the work of reducing their own carbon footprints, rather than assuaging their guilt by making donations to carbon offset projects. For an introduction, see the MIT Climate Portal page on carbon offsets. If the Society chooses to purchase offsets, the Executive Board should constitute a committee, perhaps chaired by the Society's Treasurer, to determine the most effective and responsible places to purchase them. Reliable guides to available options include the Voluntary Gold Standard and the Verra Standards for a Sustainable Future.

In addition, we might rely on the Society's publications and the energies of its caucuses to raise the visibility of climate change issues among the membership. For example, we might suggest that the editor of *Eighteenth-Century Studies* consider a themed issue devoted to environmental approaches to the eighteenth century. We might ask the editors of *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* to make additional efforts to solicit for each year's volume papers which touch on issues of climate, history, and culture in the eighteenth century. We should include a regular column on environmental issues in the triannual online News Circular published by the Business Office. Regarding our caucuses, we might encourage the Science Studies Caucus to focus on these issues in its annual panel and in its outreach work throughout the year. Furthermore, we should ask the Executive Board to establish an Environmental Humanities Caucus and provide it with seed funds. This newly constituted caucus might choose to join forces with the Science Studies Caucus to raise environmental awareness among our members. Finally, we might encourage members to submit panel proposals for the 2023 ISECS meeting in Rome, although a virtual panel for the Rome conference would be more consistent with our concerns than in-person presentations.

V. RETHINKING THE ASECS ANNUAL MEETING, BEGINNING IN 2025

As the primary source of carbon consumption directly attributable to ASECS member activity results from travel to the national conference, the most significant reductions can be achieved by reconceiving this signature activity of the Society. This highly significant decision should be undertaken in close consultation with the Executive Director, Board, and membership so as to mitigate harmful climate effects while preserving the important intellectual, social, and institutional functions of our Annual Convention. In light of this, we

propose three cycles of an alternating-year Annual Convention format. Under this proposal, **in-person annual meetings would occur every other year from 2025-2030**. This means that following the 2024 meeting in Toronto, ASECS would not organize an in-person meeting in 2025. Similarly, following the 2026 meeting in Philadelphia, 2027 would also be a year without an in-person ASECS meeting. Following the 2028 in-person meeting (location TBD), the final year of the experimental remote-conference series would fall in 2029. Permanent changes to how the Society conducts its Annual Convention can then be debated in light of the effectiveness of experimental formats in meeting pre-established goals.

In years during this experimental period when the Annual Convention would be in person (2026 in Philadelphia, 2028, and 2030), the Society has an opportunity to reconsider often-overlooked accessibility issues that achieved greater visibility as a result of the COVID-mandated remote meeting in 2021. As hybrid conference models present a set of challenges which differ in important ways from fully remote or fully in-person gatherings, protocols around hybrid participation (in order to accommodate those who do not wish to participate in person, whether for logistical, health-related, or other reasons) will need to be carefully assessed in terms of their feasibility, cost, and impact on scholarship. Creative advanced planning (and data collection for post-event assessment) can help the Society confront these challenges with a variety of strategies, including recording keynote lectures for asynchronous viewing or designating certain panels as online-only, even during in-person years.

The years in which ASECS does not organize an in-person Annual Convention, the Society has an opportunity to re-think the future forms of its scholarly community by organizing activities that meet both established and emerging needs in eighteenth-century humanistic inquiry. As ASECS 2021 has shown, remote conferences can be successfully modeled on the in-person experience via video conferencing software, essentially reproducing traditional panel or roundtable formats for presentation and exchange. Given that the remote-conference industry has only very recently attracted a significant customer base, it is reasonable to expect that software, services, and pricing for this new sector will continue to evolve rapidly - developments that must be taken into account when planning remote gatherings.

Under this scheme, 2025, 2027, and 2029 also present a unique opportunity to re-think the modalities of our scholarly exchange, up to and including the possibility of *not* holding a traditional-style remote conference that takes place in spring over the course of one intensive week. Possibilities for fundamentally re-thinking this aspect of the Society's activities are numerous, and deserve in-depth evaluation and debate well in advance of implementation. In considering how to perform new models of scholarly exchange, we strongly recommend participation (and, where possible and appropriate, leadership) from emerging scholars and graduate students, as these colleagues are often the most versed in the affordances of new technologies and potentially have the longest-term stake in the future practices of the Society. At the same time, there is an important equilibrium to maintain, in order to ensure that innovative formats do not exacerbate generational divides or perceived status inequalities, but rather serve to foster meaningful dialogue that advances the Society's diverse research on the eighteenth-century world. Buy-in at all levels of the profession is essential for these kinds of initiatives to fulfill their environmental and intellectual promise, and strategies to promote participation from the totality of our membership, from senior scholars to graduate students, should figure into the conceptualization and design of proposals for these years. Possibilities for series or one-off events include sessions predicated on mentoring, in which established researchers work with junior colleagues to develop both content and presentation skills; early-career working sessions; structured debates around particular publications or ideas; collaborative or additive digital conversations that develop asynchronously; and formats that experiment with longer or shorter

interventions, graphically oriented communication, or other digital artifacts. See also the NAVSA and ASLE experiences referenced in Section III above for further ideas. We imagine that the Society's Program Committee in 2025, 2027, and 2029 will take the lead in implementing these proposals. We urge the Program Committees in these years to experiment with different formats each time, so that the Society will have a robust set of options to consider when deciding whether to adopt this alternating format permanently.

These are highly consequential proposals that have the potential to re-shape how the Society conceives of its work, and how the membership perceives its relationship to the Society. As such, careful planning and consultation well in advance of adopting any potential changes in 2025 is an urgent and important task. Should ASECS decide to move forward with soliciting or studying proposals for re-thinking its in-person conferences, or for new ideas around participation in remote events, we strongly urge that metrics and data collection be a prominent prerequisite for all proposals. In addition to contextually specific data collection for evaluating individual experimental formats, a uniform subset of questions and/or data collection rubrics should be developed to permit cross-comparison of divergent models, in the interest of guiding future discussions around more permanent changes to the regular practices of the Society.

VI. RETHINKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE AND THE REGIONALS AND AFFILIATES

Another advantage of alternating in-person years for the ASECS Annual Convention is that it gives an opportunity for regional and affiliate societies to hold conferences in years when their members will not also be traveling to attend the national meeting. The hope is that this new calendar might help increase participation in regional affiliate society meetings that generally require less carbon-intensive travel for members to attend, as meetings will tend to be geographically closer to their institutional homes, while still encouraging in-person scholarly exchange. In this scenario, care should be taken to avoid the emergence of a two-tier system, in which more senior scholars only ever participate in the national meeting (thus increasing pressure to get a paper accepted, as there will be half as many in-person slots over any given two-year period). ASECS and the regional affiliate societies may wish to coordinate their outreach around these calendar proposals, including targeted appeals or incentivization (e.g., additional special or sponsored panels at regional meetings), as deemed necessary.

It should be noted that the regional and affiliate societies exist independently of the national society. ASECS, therefore, is not in a position to dictate scheduling or format to these groups. Through the ASECS Affiliate Coordinator, however, we can reach out to these societies between now and 2025 to think creatively about how alternating our yearly formats might also benefit them. Might ASECS sponsor sessions at the in-person regional and affiliate societies in 2025, 2027, and 2029? Are there other ways, in terms of advertising, finances, and technical support, that we might collaborate with our affiliates?

To begin to assess the views and needs of the regional and affiliate societies, Affiliates Coordinator Rivka Swenson, one of the co-authors of this report, conducted a survey of these groups earlier this year. Of the thirty-one societies and organizations under her purview, sixteen responded. Three critical issues emerged. First, almost half of the respondent societies (43.8%) did not hold any kind of meeting or event at all during the pandemic, even virtually. Second, the overwhelming majority of respondents envision a future for their respective societies that consists of holding hybrid annual meetings and/or meeting on a reduced schedule . Only three respondents of the sixteen said they would continue to hold exclusively face-to-face meetings. Third,

when asked which factors were leading them to consider a hybrid or virtual model going forward, 56% of the respondents indicated that cost was an important factor, while 43.8% noted the importance of increased accessibility in leading them to consider these options.

The survey also revealed that everyone likes having some interaction in person. Even so, most people are open to thinking about reducing their carbon footprint. Most respondents are willing to consider joining forces with another society for a meeting. Interestingly, given a list of societies to choose from, half the respondents said they would like to meet jointly with ASECS itself. Finally, most of the respondents had not thought about the pragmatic or financial costs of adding a virtual component. Those who had, though, are keenly concerned that there might be steep financial costs and outlays of labor. Some suggested that ASECS might help in these areas, whether it be providing technical support, granting subsidies, or other options.

Alison Conway, another co-author of this report who has just stepped down from the presidency of the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (CSECS), polled her membership last spring regarding the possibility of holding biennial meetings, alternating years with ASECS. She received thirteen responses, eleven of which were wholly positive regarding this option, while two expressed ambivalence. Respondents noted what would be lost in the absence of meetings, including in particular networking opportunities for graduate students and early career faculty. But they also remarked on the greater accessibility afforded by virtual meetings and the opportunity for alternative kinds of webinars when meeting remotely. Possibilities include sessions for PhDs pursuing non-academic careers and independent scholars who want to remain connected to eighteenth-century studies but lack the funding and support that would allow them to attend meetings in person.

In short, the results of these two surveys suggest an interest on the part of regional and affiliate societies in coordinating scheduling and logistics with ASECS. We should use the 2022-2024 period leading up to our proposed six-year experiment to explore ways in which we might work together with the regional and affiliate societies to reduce our collective carbon footprint while increasing accessibility and affordability for colleagues across North America.

VII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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APPENDIX A; Draft Survey of Member Attitudes Towards Biennial Meeting

ASECS SURVEY OF MEMBERS (2021)

I. Please select the category which comes closest to your current relationship with the academy:
- Independent Scholar
- PhD Candidate
- Adjunct Professor (annually renewable contract)
- Tenured Professor
- Tenure-Track Professor
- Retired Professor

II. How long have you been a member of the ASECS?
- Less than 5 years
- 5 to 10 years
- 11 to 20 years
- More than 20 years
- Occasional panelist/ participant

III. Are you also a member of an ASECS affiliate?
- YES
- NO
- Occasional panelist/ participant at affiliate meetings

IV. How did you travel to the last ASECS meeting that you attended in person?
- Train
- Plane
- Bus
- Automobile
- Car Pool
- Other

V. Did you attend the 2021 ASECS virtual convention / Would you ever attend another virtual ASECS convention?
- YES
- NO

VI. Would you support an ASECS initiative to hold alternate-year conferences beginning in 2025 in order to reduce our collective carbon footprint?
- YES
- NO

VII. If ASECS opts for an alternate-year cycle of in-person national meetings, would you be more likely to attend an in-person ASECS [regional] affiliate conference in the alternate year?
- YES
- NO