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2023 IAT recipient of the AAALAC International Fellowship Award

A journey into American Biomedical Research— The 2023 AAALAC International Fellowship

When I applied for the AAALAC Fellowship, I had been considering it for years. While I became a RAnTech to have my expertise recognised by my peers and show the world that I could adhere to some robust ethical principles, the potential to apply for the Fellowship had always been the cherry on top.

The application itself was online and straightforward. In addition to some information about myself and my contribution to our field, letters of recommendation were required. I chose for example, to ask the Chair of my ethical committee and some Institute of Animal Technology (IAT) colleagues to support my application. I am truly convinced that their kind words played a vital part in securing this Fellowship for me. Thank you. Despite nearly 15 years working in animal research, when I pressed submit, I felt that other applicants might have more to say about their achievements. If this is your case, please do apply anyway, because you miss a hundred percent of the chances you do not take.

And indeed, a few weeks after my application, I was informed that I had been chosen as the 2023 AAALAC Fellow. I was both elated and slightly panicked. Now I had to go to the United States of America (USA) on my own and navigate their entry requirements. However, I was lucky to share most of my trip with the 2022 UK Fellow Adam Stevenson whose trip was postponed because of the Global pandemic. You can read more about Adam's experience [here](https://www.aaalac.org/awards/fellows/):
<https://www.aaalac.org/awards/fellows/>

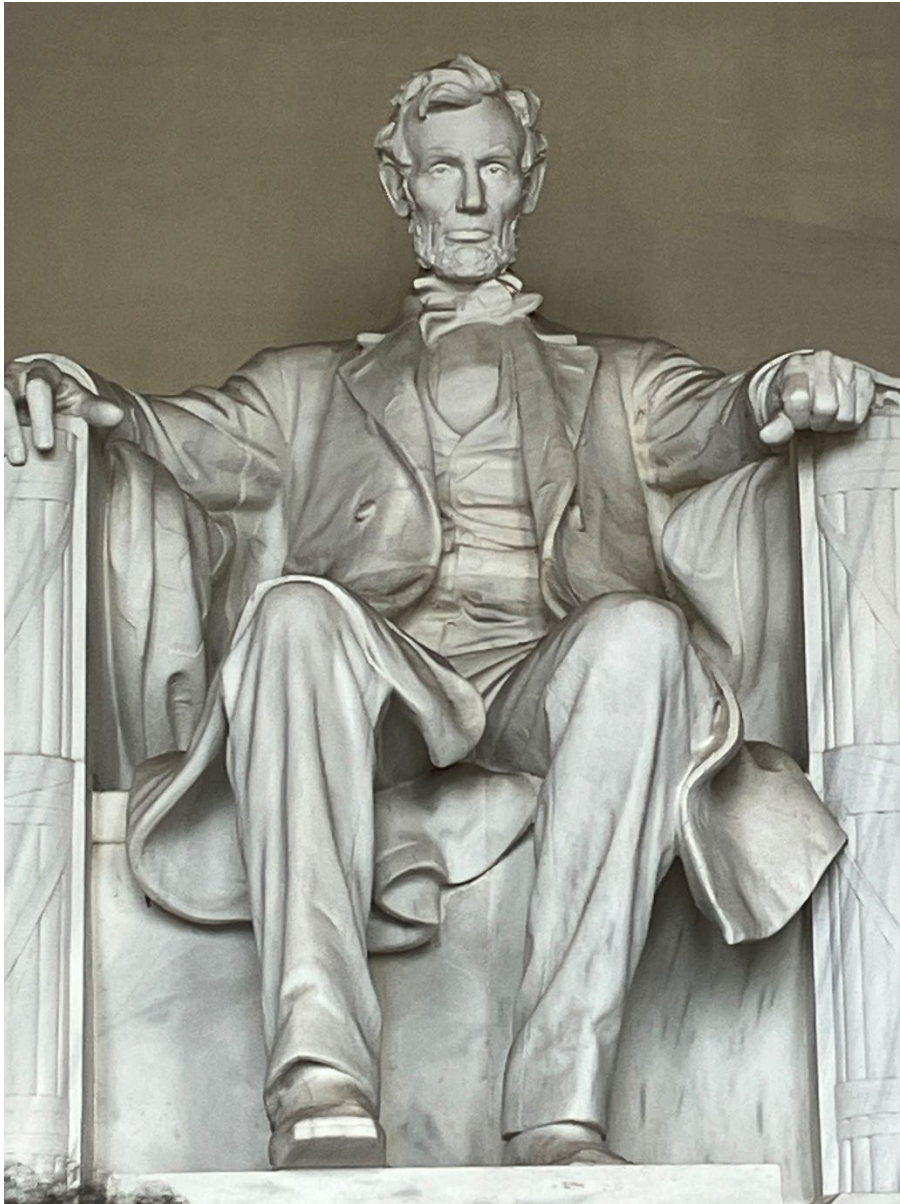
The travel and everything else were quite easy to navigate, the team at AAALAC kindly guided me through the steps of applying for my Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA), booked my flights, my hotel and organised my visit perfectly. In a word they did almost everything for me. I'll be forever grateful to everyone, but in particular to Teresa Dayhoff at AAALAC International for her friendly support.

And so, a few weeks later, my bag was packed, and I was on my way to Washington Dulles from London Heathrow on a Saturday morning. After a pleasant flight, I was picked up by a driver who guided me to the biggest Chevrolet car I had ever seen. And during the short drive to my hotel, while trying to make small talk and learn about the area from my driver, I couldn't help but think that this car could never be parked in London nor driven in North Wales.

The Sunday morning was left as a free day to explore. After desperately trying to sleep later than 3am, I went to the gym, had a breakfast, and made my way to Washington D.C City Centre.







After a sunny day exploring and taking in all the obligatory sights such as the Capitol, the Lincoln Memorial and the White House, I decided it was time to rest and found my way to a pub showing the Rugby World Cup. France was playing South Africa, and despite being all the way across the world, I wasn't going to miss that. Unbeknownst to me, the only pub I could find showing Rugby, was indeed the only pub or so in the whole area showing Rugby. Therefore, the French Embassy had recommended it to all the local expatriates, and for a few hours, I felt as if I was in France. This sense of kinship away from home would be a theme during my visit, and when meeting fellow peers.

If you are following Rugby, you will know why I'm not mentioning the result of the game. However, if this is any indication, there were a few friendly South Africans in the pub as well, and the ten of them were louder than a full bar of French by the end.

On the next day, the official tours and real reason of the visit started. It was an early start at 07:15 on a mid-October Monday, made easy by some remnant of jetlag. And I had the pleasure to meet Dr. Rob Weichbrod and Adam Stevenson, for the first time, in the hotel lobby.

Rob kindly drove us to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Bethesda campus which we were due to visit on the day. While I was afraid of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) when arriving in the country, the border crossing was efficient and pleasant. The NIH security turned up to be as serious. Ahead of my visit, I had sent one form to TSA but a few more and proof of vaccination to the NIH. And despite having pre-arrange everything, and a friendly security guard, it was obvious this was a very secure place. Which made me feel very grateful to be granted access thanks to AAALAC International and Rob's connections.

We started the day meeting with our local hosts who were part of the National Institutes of Health research program and provided us a thorough overview. We discussed our background as well as similarities and differences between the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK). I could relate to their efforts to promote the 3Rs in such a vast organisation with many facilities. I also was inspired by their commitment to remember the contribution animals have made to science by both having an animal tribute memorial on site and a dedicated annual day of remembrance.

We started the visit by touring a large-multispecies facility. It was interesting to see large animals held and encouraging to see that we are working toward the same standards and that science knows no borders. For example, I saw a fantastic, ready to be used new non-human primate (NHP) facility which considered the animal's needs, giving them more space and enrichment, without being impractical for the scientists and technicians. It reminded me of another facility I had seen in the UK. When I mentioned this, I was told that it was inspired by that very facility and designed in collaboration with them.

We then visited the mouse imaging facility (MiF), where I enjoyed the passion displayed by our host as well as the pride she had in her work. Working as an animal technician can be mentally challenging, with the cost of caring and compassion fatigue. It was absolutely refreshing to meet someone who would wholeheartedly focus on their contribution to science and how much refinements they implemented during their careers.

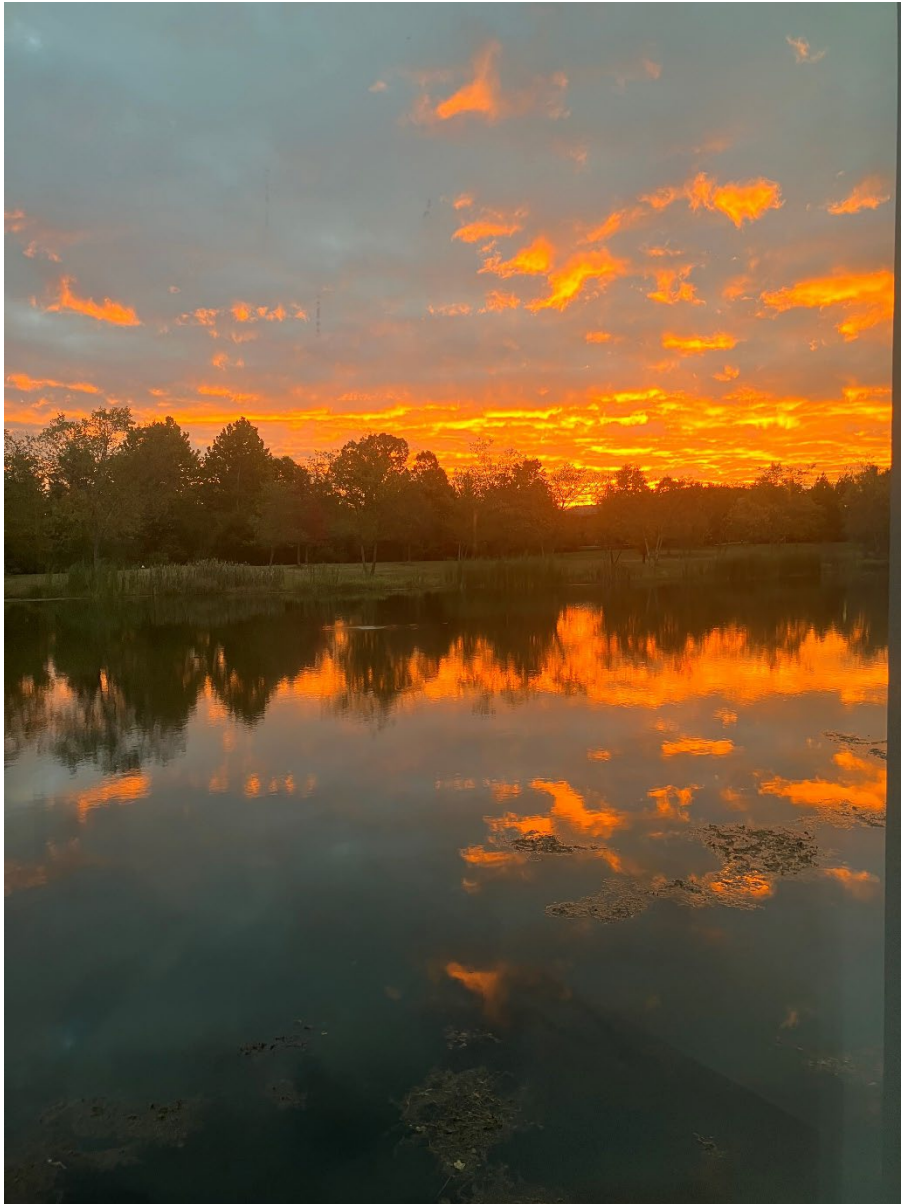
After lunch, we visited the zebrafish facility, which was undergoing some work to upgrade their physical plant and water treatment capabilities. We then had a tour of a state of the art, large rodent facility. It was an amazing facility, but for some reason, the main things I will remember, because I'd never seen it before, was a flagging system utilized by each holding room. There were durable, coloured flags allowing a technician to leave the room as checked, with some attention needed, or more urgent follow up attention needed utilizing the flag notification system to alert the facility staff. This could be seen in the corridor, far outside the door, and allowed for a more experienced technician to know instantly if their help was needed, just by walking in the corridor. The size of the facility clearly prompted this approach and I found myself weighting the pro and cons of this approach compared to the way things are flagged in my facilities.

It is hard to convey in a few short words the sheer size of the NIH. A whole day of visit only allowed us time to visit a few of the many facilities on site. And this was by taking the campus bus between each building. And each of those facilities would be considered big by most UK standards. I saw challenges there that are impossible to avoid in an operation of this size. For example, while all the buildings were functional, some were more recent than others. But I saw an absolute determination from everyone, not to stay idle and move forward. I was impressed that program improvements were not just talked about but being put in place, everywhere we went. And as always when talking to the technicians, there was a lot of love and passion going into caring for the animals.

After our visit we met Rob again who once again taxied us to our next location where we would have dinner and stay overnight before commencing our visit in the morning. It was inspiring to talk with him during the drive, hearing about his career and involvement with AAALAC. As a Technician, I'm very aware that many opportunities that have and keep being available to me, such as this Fellowship and IAT education, would not exist if it wasn't for the dedication of volunteers such as Rob and others like him.

We arrived in the evening to the Howard Hugues Medical Institute (HHMI) Janelia Research Campus where we met some of the people who were to host us in the morning over a delicious dinner. Looking at the menu, and requiring some explanation from our hosts, I realised that while science knows no border, food might not be.

In France, a starter is called an entrée, but in the USA, this would generally mean what the British would call their main course. Being internationally confused didn't prevent me from enjoying my meal and the company, and at least red wine happened to be straightforward.



HHMI

I woke up the following morning to a stunning sunrise over the onsite pond, and after an outstanding breakfast, the day was started with presentations, from Adam and myself, about our professional career journey to this point. I talked about my transition from working in France to working in the UK, how I had experienced compassion fatigue at some point in my career, and how much I learned by volunteering in different capacities, both with the IAT but also before with the French Red Cross.

The HHMI is an extremely innovative place. Most things I saw that day would have been worth a Netflix documentary. Interestingly, I talked a lot about openness during my fellowship visit, and I expect Netflix is not the platform for our field yet. Among the projects I found to be groundbreaking, were the rat city project, the outdoor area and a tongue surgery. I hope some of you attended the rat city presentation at the American Association for Laboratory Animal Science (AALAS) meeting in Salt Lake City, UT. Despite being early on the last day, after quite a party (thank you QUIP Laboratories), it was worth waking up early for.

Again, I saw absolute passion from all the technicians, but also the desire to be forward thinking and innovative. From a governance perspective, a conversation with the chair of the ethics committee was enlightening. The difference in government oversight between the UK and USA, encourages institutions in the USA to look toward achieving AAALAC International accreditation. While in the UK, following Animals Scientific Procedures Act (ASPA) is not optional and is enforced, joining AAALAC International is a local choice. However, many funding opportunities are not available to non-accredited institutions, which is demonstrating that being accredited by AAALAC International is the standard Institutions should aim for.

HHMI was also innovative in that regard. The finance model with long term (5 years) funding, meant that once selected, researchers spent most of their time doing or publishing research. When with another design, applying for grants and funding can be a substantial part of the workload placed on researchers. Everything was also designed to be supporting their work and it was clear that the many services understood their mission as well as their contribution to science. The innovation carried on. The building was designed to encourage collaboration, with long corridors naturally creating those water cooler conversations and many living spaces available, including gyms, a sports hall and bouldering wall. I could sense a commitment to the work life balance and employee wellbeing. Most people I met had worked there for many years, and when asked why, they all mentioned being considered, especially during the pandemic and having great benefits, which included the environment they work in. HHMI was innovative in that sense as well. They were not afraid to have non-traditional work patterns, with three teams covering different days of the week to allow personal time to recover. If you want to know more about this, I'm sure our host at HHMI would be happy to discuss his clever approach to their work pattern.

After a full day of learning, which I believe finished later than planned, because Adam and I were so full of questions, our host drove us back to our hotel. And we took the opportunity of the drive to discuss staff retention and work patterns more, as well as ensuring we knew how to meet up again at the AALAS meeting. This was a lovely side to our visit. Going to a conference abroad on your own can be daunting, however, we met countless people who were planning to attend the AALAS meeting during our visit. And indeed, as in during the IAT congress in the UK, I rarely walked a corridor at AALAS without seeing a known friendly face.

The following day, Rob drove us to the AAALAC International Executive office where we were gracefully hosted for lunch while we learned more about the organisation's mission. It was a pleasure to see peers dedicated to improve animal welfare standards in research facilities across the world. Furthermore, we finally had a chance to meet and thank in person, everyone who made this wonderful trip possible for us.



AAALAC goodies bag

In the afternoon, Rob drove us into Washington DC, to meet the team at the National Association for Biomedical Research (NABR) and the Foundation for Biomedical Research (FBR). They offered a culturally interesting insight on American views on animal research and how lobbying in the capitol worked. The story felt somehow similar to the UK and Europe, where sister organisations such as Understanding Animal Research (UAR), and the European Animal Research Association (EARA), try to prevent misinformation with a much smaller budget than associations such as the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). And that in today's low attention world, explaining a complex truth is much more challenging than a simple lie or simplification.

On the fifth day, I had time to kill in the morning before flying to Utah for AALAS. Therefore, as an animal technician, I naturally decided to visit the Smithsonian National Zoological Park Zoo. It was only a few Metro stops away and it was free. I probably spent more hours there than I should have, mesmerized by all the animals and enjoying a nice sunny pre-Halloween day. As someone caring for animals, I can never decide how I feel about zoos. But I thoroughly enjoyed this one, animals had space, enrichment, and the many newborns I saw suggested a real commitment to conservation.



Smithsonian

After a few hours there, I barely came back to the hotel in time to meet Adam and the taxi driver AAALAC had organised for us to go to the airport. We arrived in Salt Lake City, UT in the evening after another pleasant flight and settled into our hotel, just outside the conference centre.

On the next day, now the Friday before the start of the conference, our hosts for the day met us at the hotel. During this whole trip, we never had to worry about finding our way or getting lost,

we had a lot of support. To anyone thinking about applying but being worried about this aspect: Don't! Everything is made extremely easy for you.

This year was the first time a local visit was organised for fellow. In my opinion, it was a roaring success. It made the experience unique and gave us local knowledge and ideas to occupy our free time.

Our hosts were terrific again, and we discussed differences between the UK and the USA, exchanged recommendations on equipment and saw species that I would have never expected to see in a research setting. I was marked by the challenges to maintain sufficient humidity in an animal room in Utah. In the UK the external environment is somehow less likely to fight against attempts to raise the humidity in animal units. Helpfully, I had noticed a presentation on this topic on the conference program.

The University of Utah, on the other hand, benefited from something that we lack in the UK, which is space. They had big, fantastic well used rooms giving plenty of space to all of their animals. After a lunch, in a room with a view over the whole city, Adam and I cheekily requested to see some species that were mentioned during the morning but were not clearly earmarked for a visit. Our hosts were very gracious with their time and obliged. We were therefore lucky to see some pigeons and hear how they are used to trace genetic traits. Because of this, some had fancy collars and feathered claws. We then went to see the alligator laboratory. On entrance, we were told by the technician to let him go in first to check that none of the animals had escaped on the floor. When asked what the procedure would be if one had indeed escaped, we were explained that this was a two-person task. One technician would need to protect its leg with a board and distract the alligator while the second person walked behind the alligator and restrained it from the neck. I couldn't help but to look at the technician's hands and count fingers. This was a fascinating facility, especially when I tried to understand the journey behind setting it up. Unsurprisingly, such an unusual species offered less guidelines to follow and our colleagues at the University of Utah strived for the best nonetheless, instead of settling for none existing minimal requirements.

After the visit, colleagues from the UK were starting to arrive for the conference. And as a fan of the Big Bang Theory, who despite a slightly inaccurate portrayal of animal science, has the merit of mentioning it on a major TV channel, we went for dinner at the Cheesecake Factory.

This proved to be a good choice as I filled my free day on Saturday with a local 5K Halloween run and a hike to Lake Blanche in the stunning UTAH mountains.



Runtastick Halloween 5K- photo Credited to Mollie Millington



Beginning of the walk to Lake Blanche



Lake Blanche

On Sunday morning, I attended the most recommended thing to do on Tripadvisor, a performance by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Regardless of your religious views, I can highly advise it if you are in Salt Lake City. The music and the room were fantastic.

At 5pm, the AALAS national meeting was opened. As it goes with the conference, this one was a nonstop whirlwind of presentations, food, drinks, things to discover in the exhibition hall and more presentations, food and drinks (not at the same time).



AALAS Exhibition Hall



There was so much to offer, that I found it regularly difficult to select which session to attend. And therefore, I did attend many, yet still managed to find time to visit the wide trade exhibition area and view many of the posters. The social element only meant that I mostly did it on very little sleep.

As a praise to AALAS, I enjoyed and learned a lot, and have already implemented some changes where I work based on this experience and the visits organised by the AAALAC Fellowship. I also enjoyed small details like the capacity to email copies of the poster to yourself from the Conference App.

On the social side, there was always something going on, from the LabDiet dinner, the AAALAC International luncheon, the Quip party, Zebrafish Husbandry Association (ZHA) social and others. The Fellowship has been a fantastic learning experience, but it also has been incredibly fun!



AAALAC international luncheon- presentation of the fellowship award from the sponsors (Datesand) and AAALAC international

And so, after the conference, I decided to stay in Salt Lake City another day which I used to do some more hiking, starting from the same valley as the Saturday before but going up the opposite mountain. However, it had snowed quite a lot overnight, and it made for a completely different experience.



Beginning of the walk to Gobblers Knob



Near Gobblers Knob summit

Arriving to the summit for the day, a place called Gobblers Knob, I enjoyed the view of the city below and while eating an incredibly bright piece of jerky I took a second to appreciate the incredible experience this Fellowship has been.



Crisps at higher altitude



The brightest beef jerky

I have felt an incredible sense of kinship with people I had never met before, because we shared the same passion, whether it was animal care or Rugby. I have learned so much about our field that will make a difference to the animals in my care and my colleagues. And I deeply enjoyed everything in the process and discovering a fascinating, varied country that I never visited before. My only regret is that I can only do it once.