

Meet a New ASP Member

ASP is pleased to welcome many new members to the society this year. One of our new members for the summer of 2013 is Dr. Huzefa Raja, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of North Carolina (UNCG), Greensboro, North Carolina. Dr. Raja took the time to share his interests in fungi natural products and golf with us. We are pleased to become more acquainted with him.

By Mr. Dan Kulakowski

How did you hear about the ASP?

I first heard about ASP while I was working with ASP member Dr. Jim Gloer at the University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, on a project focused on isolation of natural products from freshwater ascomycetes, a group of fungi that live and reproduce in freshwater habitats. At that time, I was a graduate student at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), Urbana, Illinois, working on my Ph.D. with Drs. Carol Shearer and Andrew Miller.

Why did you join ASP?

I joined ASP after I attended a couple of ASP meetings (San Diego, 2011 and New York, 2012). In the past 2 years, I have been a postdoc with ASP member Dr. Nicholas Oberlies who works with natural products from fungi at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, North Carolina (UNCG). It was this collaboration that continued to foster my interests in the potential that fungi have in the field of natural products. To learn more about the chemistry research carried out with fungi and make new contacts in this area of research, I decided to join the ASP. Not to mention getting discounted rates during meetings.

Do you belong to any other scientific societies?

Since 2001, I have been a member of the Mycological Society of America (MSA), which is a society that is dedicated to advancing the science of mycology; this is the study of fungi of all kinds including mushrooms, molds, truffles, yeasts, lichens, plant pathogens, and medically important fungi. I would strongly encourage ASP members working with fungi to consider joining the MSA. It will help them learn about fungi and network with mycologists.



Dr. Raja

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What are your current research interests in pharmacognosy?

My main interests are in isolating novel strains of fungi for extraction and isolation of bioactive compounds. I am continuing work on bioactive compounds from freshwater fungi, as there is great potential for finding new and interesting chemistry from this poorly studied ecological group of fungi. I am currently focusing on isolating fungi from different habitats (aquatic versus terrestrial) and ecological groups (saprobes versus endosymbionts) and describing novel taxa using molecular phylogenetic tools in order to enrich the search for novel bioactive molecules and to better understand the chemical mycology of fungi.

What is your scientific background?

I earned my bachelors and masters degrees in Plant Biology (Botany) from the University of Madras in Chennai, Tami Nadu, India. Since my masters degree was mainly focused on course work, I wanted to gain research experience working in the laboratory. In order to do that, I joined the M.Phil. program at Vivekananda College, University of Madras. During my M.Phil., I worked on fungal endophytes with Dr. T.S. Sury, who was instrumental in introducing me to the fascinating world of fungi. After my M.Phil., I decided to apply to graduate school in

the United States and was accepted in the laboratory of Dr. Carol A. Shearer, where I worked on freshwater ascomycetes. For my Ph.D., I developed and addressed questions concerning the taxonomy, habitat and substrate distribution patterns of freshwater fungi along a latitudinal gradient in the Florida peninsula. After my Ph.D., I continued to work at UIUC for about 3 years as a postdoc with both Dr. Shearer and Dr. Andrew Miller (Illinois Natural History Survey). This was my first postdoc and it was focused on collecting and describing freshwater fungi along an altitudinal gradient from the Peruvian Amazon to the Andes.

What would you like to achieve through your membership?

I am interested in learning about the state of the art research in natural products with fungi; networking for future research positions and opportunities; meeting and making new colleagues and, of course, sharing fungal natural product discoveries with fellow members. I hope that someday in the future there can be a joint meeting of the MSA and the ASP. I think there is a lot the mycologist can learn from the natural products chemists and vice versa.

What do you like doing in your spare time?

I used to watch and play cricket back in India. More, recently, a good friend Scott Jarmusch (an aspiring analytical chemist) introduced me to the game of golf and I am hooked on to it. So, I like to play golf when I get a chance. I also like watching movies and hanging out with friends.

What are you currently reading?

Nothing currently, but I am thinking about reading *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien. I love the song, "Far Over the Misty Mountains Cold," from the movie.