

## **We held a Virtual Conference; this is what we learned**

May 2020

*Gathering/Distancing Partners planning committee includes Amy Rager, Andrea Lorek Strauss, Megan Weber, Pat Mulcahy, Emily Dombek, Angie Gupta, Julie Larson, Mary Jane Stearns, Britt Forsberg, Rebecca Montgomery*

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Minnesota, making the decision to cancel our in-person conference, known as “Gathering Partners: A conference for friends of Minnesota’s natural resources” was disappointing, but obviously the right thing to do for the May, 2020 event. Pivoting to a virtual event was not as obvious. But the planning team reacted quickly, adapted conference plans, and ultimately reached a larger-than-expected (and unprecedented) audience, garnering rave reviews. We went from “We should do something” to “Wow, that went pretty well” in just about 4 weeks.

In the very first planning meeting we made two critical decisions that served us well. First, we decided to think of the event as an experiment and offer it for free, releasing us from the strictures of expectations and allowing us to do what we could with what we had. The second was to keep the event light and fun, while still offering serious content. Mindful of the current social distancing guidelines, we changed the name from *Gathering Partners* to *Distancing Partners* to signal the different but parallel nature of the event.

We agreed on an overarching goal of helping our audiences build and/or maintain a connection with nature, each other and our program teams which served as a useful guide for making decisions.

### **What we knew about our audience**

The in-person version of the conference is held annually in rotating locations around the state. Typical attendees include Master Naturalist volunteers, Aquatic Invasive Species Detectors, citizen science volunteers, and woodland owners who trend older, whiter, and more affluent and who are able to spend time and money attending a conference related to their leisure interests.

We were just about to open registration for our in-person conference when the pandemic closures began. The audience for Gathering Partners was anxious to register, and more than 100 hotel rooms had already been reserved at the conference venue. In our favor: we knew we had a ready audience looking to us for educational opportunities and connections the third weekend in May. Not in our favor: previous program offerings have depended heavily on in-person experiences, such as field trips, social events and direct contact with expert presenters. Unknowns: Would the audience be interested in virtual offerings? Would they be willing and able to connect via Zoom or *any* technological format? Could a virtual field trip and social activities possibly be engaging when we’re not together in person?

Based on our prior knowledge of our audience, we believed they would be willing to experiment with us as long as we communicated clearly and provided good customer service.

### **What we delivered**

When we cancelled the 2020 conference, we pushed all keynote and concurrent presentations, field trips and special events to 2021 in the same location. [Shout out to the conference venue, Superior Shores Resort in Two Harbors, for allowing us to change our contract with no penalties and the majority of scheduled speakers who agreed to be available next year.] Given the short planning window, we needed to draw from presentations, field trips and events already planned for the in-person conference. But we also wanted to avoid stealing the thunder from the 2021 conference...it was a tricky balance!

Here's what the "Conference" included (see conference [website](#) and [full agenda](#)):

**Virtual Banquet** (Zoom Webinar). Just like an in-person banquet, we oriented participants to the virtual conference, recognized award winners and listened to a 30-minute keynote presentation. Unlike a regular banquet, everyone provided their own dinner.

**Content presentations** (Zoom Webinar). We identified three speakers whose presentations we had wanted to include in the 2020 in-person conference, but for various reasons would not be on the 2021 schedule. We gave them 50 minutes to present, including questions and answers.

**Virtual field trip** (Multimedia resources on a blog, then Zoom webinar/meetings). We worked with Joe, an expert local to the intended conference location, to help participants experience four north shore area habitats. Joe gathered 360 degree still and video images of the habitats and shared them with an introduction on his personal blog which contained a treasure trove of local ecological information and images. These were made available to registrants on Friday morning of the conference. Then, on Saturday afternoon, Joe and three additional experts appeared live on a Webinar and each talked about some aspect of north shore ecology. After some large group questions and answers, each of the four presenters moved to unique Zoom meeting rooms where participants could have real time conversation and Q & A with an expert (see note below about our use of "breakout rooms").

**Scavenger Hunt** (PDF list of clues, Qualtrics submission form) The Monday before the conference, a PDF list of 47 activities and challenges was posted to the agenda, and participants could choose to complete the tasks and submit their answers at their leisure during the week. Tasks included such challenges as submitting a photo of a water body near you, identifying a blooming plant down to species, describing what you bring along on nature outings, solving riddles, and taking note of specific details during the conference itself. We mailed a prize to the entrant with the most completed tasks. About 31 individuals or teams participated in the Scavenger Hunt, and they collectively submitted over 700 responses to scavenger hunt clues.

[Nature In Place Bingo](#) (PDF) This challenge was issued early in the COVID-19 closures as a way to help our audiences get creative in the ways they connect with nature. Participants were instructed to print out the bingo card which contained a grid with 24 activities (and a free space!) and complete as many activities as they liked, including contributing to citizen science, keeping a storm drain clear, or watching a nature-related documentary. Participants noted their completed tasks on the bingo card and emailed a picture of the card to program staff. A prize was mailed to the winners who were announced at the conference's Closing Ceremonies.

[Trivia contest](#) (Zoom webinar with questions, Google Form) This Saturday evening happy hour-style event included an emcee reading out Minnesota nature-based trivia questions and participants - singly or in teams - submitting answers via Google Form. The emcee checked answers and announced a "leaderboard" during intermission and winners at the end. A prize was mailed to the winner.

[Photo Contest](#) (Qualtrics survey, Padlet.com) A fan favorite from in-person conferences! To replicate this remotely, participants submitted their nature photos and a few relevant details via a Qualtrics survey. Then, support staff moved the 124 submitted photos over to a Padlet site where participants could view the images and click "Like" to vote for their favorite. A prize was mailed to a winner in each of the seven contest categories.

[Virtual Exhibit Hall](#) (Padlet.com) We invited vendors and exhibitors to make a one-page PDF, PowerPoint slide or Google Slide and upload it to a Padlet site. Programs recruited help and volunteers shared service project reports, much like a conference poster session.

[BioBlitz](#) (iNaturalist.org). Starting the Monday before the conference, participants were encouraged to make observations of nature using the app/website iNaturalist. Usually this is limited to the participants attending in person, but this time anyone statewide could participate. Prizes were mailed out later to the top observer, the top identifier, and the one who reported the greatest number of species.

Prizes for all "contests" were things we had in our offices, books, swag, etc. We did purchase iNaturalist t-shirts for those winners.

**Closing Ceremonies** (Zoom webinar, live streamed to Facebook). Although the livestream failed, we still announced the winners of the Scavenger Hunt, the Trivia Contest, the BioBlitz and made general program-related announcements. The conference wrapped up with open Q & A time with program staff representing each of the Extension Natural Resources programs.

### **Why we think it was successful**

We began planning with the intuitive belief that our audience would want such an event. When registration exceeded 100 after the first day, we knew we were on to something. Ultimately, registration exceeded 400 -- and for an event that normally lands at around 200-250 when in-person, we could see that the virtual format was allowing us to reach a much bigger audience.

During the conference weekend we received a few unsolicited replies to the activity reminder messages, including these sentiments:

- "Bravo!!!! You folks are doing a great job with the virtual conference. Would like to see everyone in person but this is the next best. If necessary in the future, I'd do this again!"
- "This is the best day of my quarantine!"
- "I had a friend who has Lou Gehrig's disease who took the walk to Lake Superior and she cried after going on the virtual hike! She said it was because it was so beautiful to her."
- "I spent nearly an hour with the virtual field trip--outstanding adventure exploring the environments, the field "notes" on all aspects of nature, the video. Because I can no longer walk these areas due to physical handicaps, it was especially meaningful. Thank you. I look forward to Saturday's session."

A Qualtrics Evaluation survey conducted after the conference (n=186) provided more detailed insight. On a scale of 1-10 (10 being highest), respondents gave the conference an overall rating of **8.32**. The speakers and virtual field trip were rated as most engaging. And, while nearly everyone found the Zoom platform Extremely easy (73%) or Somewhat easy (24%), most comments suggested that being in person is preferable to a virtual experience, as described in the following representative comments.

- *Virtual isn't ideal and doesn't replace in person interaction, but you pulled it off. Very well done!!*
- *I was surprised at how effective it was. It did not take the place of being there and I look forward to going next year, but it was pretty amazing given the circumstances."*
- *Nothing beats being there in person, but this was a great alternative -- AND we got to sleep in our own beds each night...*
- *I can see continuing with individual classes or sessions in the future, but hope the conference can be in person next time.*

Every single presentation was called out in one or more comments as a highlight of the entire conference. Social activities, especially the opening & closing sessions and the scavenger hunt were mentioned often as favorites.

### **Things we did that made it go well**

In our post-conference debrief, the planning team reflected on the factors, decisions and efforts that were critical to the success of the virtual event.

1. We already had cultivated an audience who expected programming from us that weekend, and a slate of presenters who had content ready to plug and go.
2. The event was offered for free. It's much easier to exceed expectations when you set the bar pretty low. Expenses included one account upgrade for Padlet (\$10) and mailing of prizes. The total will be less than \$100, not including staff time and the robust technology assets available to staff such as Zoom accounts and at-home work stations.

3. Registration for the event served two purposes. First, the participant confirmation message included a link to the full conference agenda, which contained links to each webinar and activity. Putting the links on a Google Doc allowed us to make last minute changes easily. And with those links behind the registration wall, we prevented Zoom bombers. Second, registration put participants on a mailing list to receive email reminders about the event.
4. Fifteen minutes before each event began, a pre-scheduled email went out containing last-minute reminders and updated links. Another, pre-scheduled final reminder, email went out as each event started. These were all scheduled ahead of time in Constant Contact.
5. With registration at 433, we set up all plenary sessions as Zoom Webinars, not Meetings, to limit interruptions and distractions. The only time we used Meetings was after the Virtual Field Trip Webinar presentation, to facilitate interaction with the guest experts (see note below about our use of “breakout rooms”).
6. Each webinar required a minimum of four people to run:
  - a. Presenter -- usually with a slide deck and screen sharing
  - b. Tech lead -- sets up the Zoom Webinar, assigns “co-host” status to presenters as needed, answers tech questions in the chat, monitors email for help requests, copies/pastes content-related questions from Chat into a designated Google Sheet
  - c. Moderator -- introduces the webinar and presenter, sorts questions in Google Sheet, verbalizes questions to presenter, monitors time and signals session ending.
  - d. Chat monitor -- facilitates the Chat stream, pastes relevant links into Chat stream
7. On the days leading up to the virtual conference, one staff member hosted multiple “Getting Ready for Zoom” sessions in which he helped *registrants* practice using Zoom’s features. Approximately 100 people attended at least one of the four introductory sessions offered. These sessions functioned as an open house, in which participants could ensure that they were able to connect to virtual meetings, gain familiarity with Zoom features, and ask general questions about the conference. Some of the topics that were commonly discussed included how to ask questions through the Zoom chat feature, how participants could mute and unmute themselves during meetings, how to create a virtual background, and what the format for various later events would look like.
8. Staff conducted a practice Zoom session with each *presenter* to check audio & video settings, practice screen sharing and review presenter supports.
9. The conference planning team informally gathered via Google Meet at the end of each day to debrief the day’s events and check preparations for the next day.

10. Most importantly, we didn't take ourselves too seriously. Between the tongue-in-cheek event name, encouragement to bring your own dinner to the banquet, requests for patience and understanding at the start of every Webinar, and inclusion of fun, nature-themed social activities, we retained the core character of the Gathering Partners conference experience.

### **What we would do differently**

First, the committee agreed that program staff spent a disproportionate amount of time managing the participants' general technology questions, including how to use Zoom, how to find the chat box, how to manage browser windows, etc. These needs could be supported easily by IT as they do not require any content knowledge. In the future, we will seek assistance from IT for general audience IT support.

Second, the participants resoundingly indicated a desire to see & interact with each other, as evidenced by these comments:

- *Would have liked more interaction between attendees -- showing our names in the attendee list unless we opt to hide it, allowing chat between attendees, etc.*
- *One of the big benefits of a live event is talking to other participants and finding out how they do their service.*
- *I was most disappointed by the one-way communication of almost all events. We did not get to interact with other attendees or even know if they were watching the same thing.*
- *...I am very appreciative that you all did this. It really helped to feel some continuity in belonging. I really missed the spontaneous opportunity to meet people, ask questions and network.*

Facilitating this type of interaction with 400 registrants may be unwieldy, but it's a worthy problem to address.

Virtual field trips could become a much larger component of our natural resource education efforts, so this experiment proved informative. The audience indicated satisfaction with the way it was presented in this event, and so the respective program teams will remember this while also considering additional approaches, tools, platforms, and formats given the level of interest shown.

### **Conclusion**

*"More interesting than I expected -- good work! While valuable, I really miss the camaraderie, the handouts, the breadth of the experience. And most of all I miss the field trips. So glad you all put together a virtual gathering as I needed the inspiration desperately -- like many, I'll be distancing indefinitely."*

*"The conference was very worthwhile and very well done. Kudos to the staff that worked so diligently to make this happen."*

Before COVID-19, the Gathering Partners conference planners had briefly considered but quickly rejected the idea of offering aspects of the conference via virtual means. Our respective programs prize very highly the in-person relationship building and field experiences, and those values have not changed.

However, almost half of evaluation respondents had never attended the in-person conference, suggesting that the virtual format can serve a broader audience than the in-person event alone can serve. For those who hadn't participated in-person, they named expected reasons (time, cost, availability, etc.) as barriers to participation, but the biggest barrier was "Other," suggesting individualized barriers. Sample evaluation comments included

- *It was a great vehicle for those who don't travel or enjoy crowds to be connected and learn, experience the physical location.*
- *Three days for an in-person conference is not always affordable.*
- *I liked that I could come and go and I could have other plans and skip some parts.*
- *Easy on my pocketbook, I didn't have to take days off work for travel.*

Balancing the obvious desirability of serving a broader, more diverse audience with the desire to foster in-person relationships and field experiences will be tricky. Offering a hybrid conference experience -- with some in-person experiences and some concurrent virtual offerings -- is prohibitively complex for the small planning team to manage. Alternating between virtual and in-person events may be a solution, and is already under consideration by the conference planning team.

The 2021 conference is planned to be in-person in Two Harbors, but like so many things right now, time will tell how we decide to proceed.

### **About "breakout rooms"**

Zoom Webinars provide a tool for moving participants into smaller group discussion spaces, called "Breakout Rooms," but we elected *not* to use this tool given the large group size we expected. Zoom limits the host to two methods for deciding which attendee ends up in which room: the host can either let Zoom randomly assign participants into small groups, or the host can manually place each participant into a room. Since our four presenters each had different content specialties, we expected that participants would want to choose which presenter's room to join. For the Webinar Host to inquire of each participant which room they wanted to join, wait for a response, then place that person manually into the correct room would be too chaotic and take too much time with the 100+ expected attendees.

Instead, we set up four unique zoom links and relabeled them with zlink addresses for ease of use, such as "z.umn.edu/AskJoe" or "z.umn.edu/AskPeter." All discussion rooms used the

same password. Toward the end of the large group presentation these four links were posted on a slide and in the Chat, and participants were instructed to copy and paste the URL into their browser bar to move to these discussion spaces where they could unmute themselves, turn on their cameras and have informal conversations with the presenter of their choice, just like standing around after a presentation chatting with the presenter.

What's more, participants were welcome to jump between discussion rooms according to their interests. All the while, our tech lead kept the main Webinar open to help people re-find the links as necessary and get assistance joining the discussion rooms. About 10% of Webinar attendees needed substantial help making the jump from the main Webinar to the small group Meeting rooms. One staff person stayed in the main zoom room to help anyone who could not figure how to get into the discussion rooms.

The planning team assigned a staff member to act as host in each discussion room to free up the expert presenter to just chat with participants. The room hosts exchanged status reports among themselves during the discussion time using Google Chats.

The small group discussions were all lively and well attended, continuing even after the designated end time.