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When pigs virtually fly

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UNPRECEDENTED. Since February 2020, the word “unprecedented” has become commonplace to describe the uncertainty that the COVID-19 pandemic has injected in our personal and professional lives (Messmer 2020). For many in academia, the everyday life of teaching, research, professional meetings, and conferences has come to a grinding and dramatic halt. Travel restrictions and social distancing coupled with the cancellation or postponement of planned events have become the new societal norm. And yet the work of wildlife management and research presses on.

One thing that has not changed is the need to exchange scientific information and research in a timely manner, share tools and techniques with fellow colleagues, and continue to collaborate and develop new ideas. This perpetual responsibility of the scientific community to produce and disseminate information means the tools and techniques in which we communicate must also adapt to these unprecedented times with innovation and resourcefulness.

Fraser et al. (2016) published an essay in *Conservation Biology* to little fanfare, entitled “The value of virtual conferencing for ecology and conservation.” In the article, the authors implored fellow scientists to adopt virtual platforms for conferencing, citing the need for better inclusivity and environmental consciousness. Fraser et al. (2016) identified the many benefits of purely virtual conferencing such as cost-effectiveness and reduced travel without compromising the high levels of professional communication and networking that in-person events afford. The element where these authors missed the mark was in stating that “virtual conferencing will not entirely replace in-person conference attendance in the near future” (543). For little could they predict that an impending global pandemic would turn their essay from a mild proposition to “practice what we preach” with regards to environmental conservation, to a template for scientific conference organizers who

chose to hasten their creativity and adaptability in the virtual conferencing world. The biennial Wild Pig Conference hosted by the National Wild Pig Task Force (NWPTF) was one such example of this ingenuity.

Wild pigs (*Sus scrofa*; feral pigs and/or swine), an invasive and destructive species, are among the greatest global threat to our ecosystems and native wildlife (Figure 1). Costing the United States alone >\$2.5 billion in economic losses, emphasis on control and removal of wild pigs has accelerated over the past decade with research and operational management in the scientific spotlight. In 2012, the NWPTF (nwptf.org) was formed to unify and engage all constituents affected by wild pigs through the exchange of pertinent information on techniques, tools, and research findings. The main product of the NWPTF and the venue for information exchange is the Wild Pig Conference, held every other year in varied locations typically throughout the southeast United States. The conference has been streamlined in recent years to include technical training, vendor spotlights, state updates on wild pig status, research findings, new management strategies, plenary sessions, international partnerships, and the always famous “shoot from the hip” session where organized brainstorming takes place. The NWPTF also holds their annual meeting at the conference where its critical subcommittees can meet and plan activities for the year. Any lag in timely dissemination of information from either the wild pig conference or NWPTF annual meetings could impede the translation of research findings and utilization of on-the-ground management, possibly leading to increased damage caused by wild pigs.

The 2020 Wild Pig Conference was scheduled for Jacksonville, Florida, April 6–10, and was to be hosted in part by the University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA. Planning for the event was well underway until March 10, 2020,

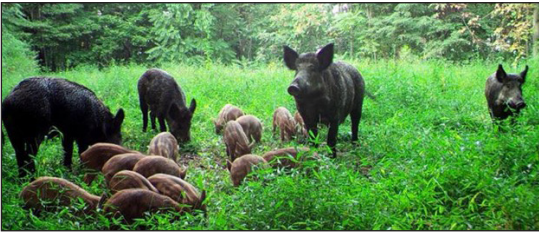


Figure 1. A group of wild pigs (*Sus Scrofa*), called a sounder, roots in a field of fresh vegetation in search of high energy food.



Figure 2. The YouTube banner for the 2020 Virtual Wild Pig Conference.

when word was received that federal travel was placed on indefinite hiatus due to COVID-19. The NWPTF leadership, led by chair Dr. Jim LaCour, and conference organizers took immediate action to cancel the conference and then later announced they would host the first totally virtual wildlife management conference (Figure 2).

On June 1, 2020, the 2020 Virtual Wild Pig Conference YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpzNKfCPdg5om8PFmRRNUUA/>) was launched to >3,300 registrants in 23 countries around the world. The conference included >80% of the original program presentations as well as workshops, plenary talks, state status updates, a poster session, and an overview of the National Feral Swine Damage Program housed within USDA Wildlife Services. To date, >35,000 presentation views have been logged, and the collaborations, particularly with international partners, continue to grow.

Virtual conference organizers, led by the Berryman Institute at Utah State University, chose to coordinate this unconventional conference in a simple and user-friendly format using universally known YouTube as the video platform. All presentations were pre-recorded and could be viewed at the leisure of the “attendee” for up to 30 days. It was also decided that there would be no cost for

registration to this novel event, and conference sponsors were solicited to help cover some of the administrative costs. With 3,317 total registrants to date, the NWPTF considers the virtual conference format to be a success in the goal of information dissemination. The group of scientists and managers who comprise the NWPTF and contend with wild pig damage on a daily basis are no strangers to utilizing unconventional solutions to ever-present challenges. Innovation and adaptation, after all, are among the paradigmatic principals of scientific advancement.

To build on the conference impacts and facilitate the science and management dialogue, *Human–Wildlife Interactions* will publish a special issue containing papers based on the 2020 Wild Pig Conference presentations. Dr. Dale Nolte, program manager for USDA’s National Feral Swine Damage Management Program, has been recruited by HWI to serve as associate editor for this special issue (see the call for papers in this issue). For questions regarding the organization and format of the 2020 Wild Pig Conference, contact Dr. Jessica Tegt at jessica.tegt@usu.edu.

Literature cited

- Fraser, H., K. Soanes, S. A. Jones, C. S. Jones, and M. Malishev. 2016. The value of virtual conferencing for ecology and conservation. *Conservation Biology* 31:540–546.
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