

REPORT



PRESIDENT'S REPORT FOR THE 40TH ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM ON SEA TURTLE BIOLOGY AND CONSERVATION, PERTH-ONLINE, AUSTRALIA, 25-28 MARCH, 2022

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40th International Sea Turtle Symposium

When the Board of the International Sea Turtle Society was forced to make the difficult decision to cancel the 40th International Sea Turtle Symposium in Cartagena, Colombia, in March 2020, the world was facing an unknown future as the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic started to emerge. It was a tough decision but in hindsight we feel it was the right one. The decision was also made to switch the location of the symposium to Perth, Western Australia and delay it until 2022.

The 40th International Sea Turtle Symposium (ISTS40) was therefore held between the 25th and 28th March 2022. The event was originally planned as a face-to-face symposium. However, with the ongoing global pandemic it was moved to an online event hosted on the Gather.Town platform and was managed by a team of people from Perth, Western Australia. Organising this event, the first ever online international sea turtle symposium, was incredibly challenging and would not have happened without the tireless work of our sea turtle biologist colleague, Dr Paul Whittock. In the two years leading up to the symposium, he single-handedly revamped the Society website, set up and managed the ISTS40 website (ists40perth.com.au), organised the online platform

Gather.Town, managed the planning for regional meetings and workshops, worked out the program schedule, assisted the Session Chairs in session planning, drafted the Symposium Program, and responded to the hundreds of emails asking for help and advice. Paul's contributions to the Society and to the ISTS40 event were critical and without him it would not have been possible.

Over the four days of ISTS40, we attempted to recreate as many of the events found in a face-to-face Symposium as possible. On Friday 23rd March, we programmed and hosted 11 Workshops and seven Regional Meetings with up to 110 registered participants in some of them. On Saturday 24th March, we kicked off with a formal opening session which started with an Acknowledgement of the Traditional Custodians of the land upon which we met, for those of us in Perth the land of the Wadjuk Noongar, and a Welcome to Country by Traditional Custodian Nick Abrahams who welcomed the Symposium delegates to his Country. This was followed by keynote addresses by Abigail Ross (Principal Marine Environmental Advisor, Fortescue Future Industries), Dr Scott Whiting Principal Research Scientist and Coordinator of NWSFTCP, Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (WA State Government), and Albert Wiggan, a Bardi, Nyul Nyul and Kija man, Indigenous Leader, Environmental Consultant and Social-Emotional Wellbeing Officer. This opening session started the three days of online presentations managed via the VirtualChair and ConfTool programs in the Gather.Town space. The space provided attendees the ability to view presentations in real time and for up to two weeks after the event, and gave people the opportunity to meet and chat via video streaming.

Statistics for this symposium :

- o Held across 3 days and 43 hours of online content;
- o Participants from 85 countries registered to attend (ranked #1 for all ISTS Symposia);

- o 675 registered individuals (ranked #14 for all Symposia; ranked #4 of all ISTS Symposia outside USA after Loreto (1,016), San Jose (1,000), and Crete (700));
- o 11 workshops were hosted;
- o 7 Regional Meetings were hosted;
- o 110 oral presentations delivered;
- o 130 posters presented;
- o Allowed students to attend for a cost of between US\$5 - \$20, making this the most accessible Symposium ever held by ISTS; and
- o Despite the low registration costs, the event was one of the most profitable ISTS Symposia ever held.

As the first online Symposium held by the ISTS there was an enormous learning curve since none of us had ever done anything like this before.

I want to recognise the huge effort by Dr Paul Whittock and the whole team at the Pendoley Environmental office for giving up their weekend to help out and make this Symposium possible.

I also need to acknowledge all those people who embraced the online approach and went out their way to help make the event happen, specifically:

- Dr Nancy FitzSimmons for stepping up and taking on the Session Chair role, she and her committee were the heart of this Symposium, selecting and programming the 110 talks and 130 posters from 221 oral submissions. Nancy and the global committee accepted the challenge and embraced the new approach to accepting, reviewing, and selecting abstracts via a completely new abstract management program (ConfTool). This was all done while she was deep in our Southern Hemisphere field season, on a remote island with no internet and dodgy mobile phone reception that required a hike up a hill to communicate. In every way she went above and beyond.
- The oral and poster authors. When the call went out for abstracts, we were nervous that nobody would respond. But you did and in that typical last-minute flood of submissions you gave us a Symposium.
- Dr Manjula Tiwari for being the brains trust, holding all the thousands of pieces of information in her head that forms the corporate memory of the Society and always available to answer numerous questions. Her steady hand, wisdom and gentle diplomacy guided us through, and was all the more important in these COVID impacted years.
- Student Award judges, Awards Committee, Nomination Committee, Speed Chatting with Experts volunteers, Student Committee, Workshop and Regional Meeting organisers and assistants, and our future proceedings compilers.
- Our keynote speakers, for their passion, enthusiasm, and firm belief in the messages they delivered. They brought us new and challenging ideas to think about and introduced us to concepts and ideas beyond our own worlds and our own way of thinking.

While the online forum was not the first choice for those people who regularly enjoy attending the face-to-face Symposiums, it did provide an opportunity for people who may not otherwise have been able to attend, the chance to join an ISTS event. There were many benefits that came out of this online meeting, including:

- Substantially reduced carbon footprint.
 - o Using published criteria, the online Symposium produced ~10kg CO₂ per person compared to an in-person Symposium which produces ~1900kg per person. Travel, primarily long-distance flights accounts for 91–97% of total emissions.
 - o Blaine Friedlander of Cornell University in a *Nature Communication* piece concluded that moving a professional conference completely online reduces its carbon footprint by 94%, and shifting it to a hybrid model, with half of attendees online, reduces the footprint to 67%.
- Consideration of our personal contributions to global warming, something that we as marine turtle biologists and conservationists should be conscious of since turtles are so hugely impacted by climate change.
- Accessibility, reduced discrimination, and promotion of diversity and equal opportunities; the online event provided an opportunity for anyone who was interested to attend and allowed a greater inclusion of:
 - o Non-European/non-North American researchers, students, and junior researchers and conservationists who otherwise would not have the opportunity to attend or present at the conferences due to travel, accommodation

and registration costs.

- o Parents and family caregivers who may not be able to leave home.
- o People who do not have the luxury of personal leave time to travel.
- o People who need to present at a Symposium for career advancement are not discriminated against if they cannot afford the time or costs of attending or travelling to a Symposium.
- Pre-recorded presentations that were efficient, predictable, and had no time zone restrictions
- The availability of presentations online for 2 weeks after the meeting gave everyone the chance to watch at their leisure

While the online event did have a few teething

problems, overall the feedback was very positive, particularly from students and people who had neither the time or money to attend otherwise. For many I spoke to it was the first ISTS Symposium they had ever attended, and they loved it. I believe now might be the time for the ISTS membership and board to seriously consider different models for the annual ISTS Symposium, including; biennial international face to face meetings, online meetings, domestic satellite regional meetings, or a hybrid mix of all options.

So, thank you all for trusting my team and I to bring you an online Symposium. Thank you for stepping up, interacting, and trying out this new approach to an ISTS. We hope you enjoyed the virtual world we created for you and we look forward to catching up with you next time, either face to face in Cartagena, at another online meeting, or at some hybrid of these options. Who knows where the world will be in 12 months?