

Conference Networking: building bridges and alliances towards conservation success

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Image



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Over the past five years, the worldwide reality of COVID-19 restrictions has greatly affected the next generation of conservation professionals. Students and emerging professionals between 2019 and 2022 felt discouraged from developing their networking skills due to a lack of group project collaboration and in-person conference participation. While these unprecedented circumstances did encourage an increase in international broadcasting of conferences online, virtual settings did not compel one to engage in conversations beyond “Greetings from...” As a result, there have been concerns regarding confidence in the rising generation of conservators’ social skills and their ability to enter the job market confidently.

When COVID-19 restrictions were finally lifted, in-person conference settings began to resume. However, after years of social disruption, many found this experience daunting and overwhelming. For that reason, conferences targeting emerging conservators and students have had a pivotal role in promoting the improvement of networking skills within the profession.

By the end of 2023, two such conferences took place that allowed the next generation of conservators to meet individuals within similar career stages. The first was the 7th Conservation-Restoration Luso-Brazilian Meeting, 2-4 November, at the NOVA School of Science and Technology in Lisbon. This event takes place every two years between Portugal and Brazil. The second conference, the 7th Students and Emerging Conservators Conference (IIC-SECC) entitled Testing the Waters, took place 16-18 November in person at the University of Amsterdam. Notably, this conference had an online modality. Although both events focused on the same professional field, the purpose of the meetings was different. The first was an academic event with presentations on research and case studies, while the other conference was aimed specifically at students and emerging conservators with a more practical agenda including discussions about the challenges of professional life.

While both conferences offered fascinating and thought-provoking presentations, their most rewarding component was the in-between session coffee breaks which provided casual environments for group reflection, discussion and opinion-sharing of experiences and struggles inherent in the world of conservation. Topics of discussion included the regulation of the profession, democratization of the heritage field, decolonization, low-budget conservation, salary disparity, public investment, sustainability within documentation and digitization, conservation in times of conflict, disaster control, personal ethics, health and safety, and social media outreach.

The IIC-SECC also organized Institutional tours which were a great way for attendees to meet people from various professional environments (academic, governmental, and private settings) allowing them to reflect on their career path and their current institution of employment.

Networking continued beyond the formal setting of the conference halls in the form of ice-breaker activities. The Luso-Brazilian conference included spontaneous dinners and tours of Lisbon. The IIC-SECC conference included a pop quiz. International friendships were formed allowing for cultural exchange, future travel opportunities, and the ability to participate in future projects beyond borders. How delightful it was to hear success stories of recent graduates finding employment and even successfully opening their own private practices!

In the dynamic world of conservation, where passion meets purpose, the journey becomes more rewarding when shared. Embarking on the path of conservation is not just about acquiring knowledge, but is also about building meaningful relationships. Beyond the confines of conferences, it is fundamental to actively participate in events, engage with fellow enthusiasts, and forge connections that extend beyond the duration of these gatherings.

Networking with peers can have many advantages: it can be the answer to many struggles; it can provide the opportunity to meet others with similar problems and work through a solution to those problems; it can also lead to new and exciting projects like the writing of this article, for example. Networking can also lead to international connections which contribute to cultural enrichment, help raise awareness of what characterizes the profession in other countries, and encourage more tolerant behavior.

One of the benefits of networking is that it doesn't have to end when the conference doors close. Online platforms offer a continuous avenue for collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and support. Let's take advantage of these virtual spaces to extend our network, exchange ideas, and stay connected long after the physical events conclude.

Conservation students and early career professionals are always encouraged to find mentors. While accomplished mentors are very helpful in building a career, peer relationships can be just as important to one's career development. Students and recent graduates would have many shared experiences and lessons to learn from those who have attended a degree program or who have started their career journey during COVID-affected years. Conversations with peers on their training experiences, struggles, and current trending topics—which resulted from these unique circumstances—within the field may help in developing a path and even a contingency plan for a successful career journey.

So, while we should continue to encourage the pursuit of mentors, let's also champion the idea of seeking guidance from peers who have recently trod the same path. Their firsthand experience of current challenges and emerging trends makes them invaluable allies in our collective journey toward successfully launching a career in conservation. Let's build bridges, form alliances, and create networks that not only support our individual growth, but that also contribute to the collective advancement of conservation. Together, we can make a lasting impact on the world we are dedicated to preserving.

Author Bios

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