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COVID-19 and The Next Generation of Conservation Leaders

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COVID-19 has disrupted our lives, exposed ruptures in our institutions, and left too many families with an empty seat at the table. In the middle of this disruption, anxiety, and loss, I recently had a chance to participate in something antithetical to the global pandemic – something hopeful, healing, and nurturing. It took place in a now-familiar meeting space, the gallery view of a Zoom meeting. But it almost immediately felt different. There were 32 of us, most seeing one another for the first time, full of anxiety for being together in a new space, yet surrounded by familiar environs, and cocooned in the yellow outline of our box on the screen. We were welcomed by our young facilitators to this new meeting space for emerging conservation leaders to come together to explore our shared interests, share our anxieties, and consider what we might do simply by sharing our life journeys and hopes for what lies ahead.

The provocative start to the meeting posed the question of whether any of us needed another Zoom meeting or another networking opportunity in our lives just now. As many of us were surely thinking the answer was no, the facilitator said that she thought this gathering, this network, this conversation was exactly what we needed right now because its only purpose was to help us all find our voice and find our path as conservation leaders.

The conversation wasn't scripted, wasn't even all that lively at times. Instead, it was reflective, somber, marked by recognition of the tumult of the current pandemic as well as reflection on the pain carried by too many people from social and institutional injustices. And yet, in the quietude of the conversation, there was an upswelling of compassion, nods of understanding, and a chat box full of messages saying that we could do better. Perhaps most notably, the group coalesced around the idea that conservation leaders need to be leaders in fostering inclusive dialogue grounded in respect for diverse voices and perspectives. The sentiment seemed to be that if conservation success comes at the expense of others' well-being, then the ends do not justify the means.

Time will tell where our conversations will go in the months ahead, but I'm confident that this group of emerging leaders will continue to explore some of the most critical issues facing us as we continue to grapple with and eventually emerge from this pandemic and begin to explore what is needed to achieve the on-the-ground outcomes we all desire.

The Emerging Leaders conversation is being hosted by the Western Collaborative Conservation Network (WCCN), a regional network of conservation practitioners in the Western United States, and is open to all. For more information, and to sign up for future meetings, please visit the Connecting and Networking page of the WCCN's website or reach out to me at shawn.johnson@umontana.edu.

Have news? Share updates or reflections from your organization or country by contacting [Shawn Johnson](mailto:Shawn.Johnson@lincolninst.edu) or by emailing ilcn@lincolninst.edu