The Conservation Stewards Program's virtual journey: opportunities and lessons learned for a hybrid future

The Michigan Conservation Stewards Program (CSP) helps individuals gain knowledge and expertise that empower them to engage in stewardship activities in their local communities. Traditionally, CSP was 100% in-person instruction, combining weekly classroom presentations and hands-on field experiences. Partner organizations help provide these enriching experiences, and in turn, receive highly knowledgeable graduates as potential volunteers for their own work.

During the pandemic, CSP transitioned to a virtual format, presenting significant challenges to maintain engaging, experiential learning. Content was delivered to participants via the university online platform and weekly Zoom sessions, and a list of field activities was provided to complete on their own. We encouraged safe interactions among participants and partners through online discussion forums, Zoom breakout sessions, and applied capstone projects.

137 individuals registered across four regional learning cohorts, with 58% earning a completion certificate. Both online material and Zoom presentations scored relatively high in the post-program survey. Responses indicated the program met their expectations, helping them to learn new concepts and connect to conservation partners.

Unsurprisingly, lower ratings from both participants and partners were associated with limited availability of in-person local activities and stewardship. Others mentioned, however, there is value in retaining some online portions for future offerings. For the planning team, coordinating and executing the shift from in-person to virtual programming was an extremely time-intensive process. In the proposed session, we will discuss the 2021 CSP transition and how input from participants, partners, and Extension staff will inform delivery of future CSP offerings.

Georgia Peterson
Dr. Georgia Peterson is an MSU Natural Resources Extension Specialist, focusing on natural resource leadership and literacy. Her primary goals are 1) to develop and deliver forestry education and outreach to private forest landowners and other citizens, and 2) to provide information, training and assistance to natural resource-based organizations on public input processes, conflict management and strategic planning activities. Over the years, she has worked with a wide range of natural resource interests, including snowmobilers, pack and saddle riders, ORV riders, loggers, conservationists, and various natural resource-based citizen advisory committees.

Bindu Bhakta

Bindu Bhakta is a Natural Resources Educator for Michigan State University Extension (MSUE) based in Oakland County in the Metropolitan Detroit area. She develops and delivers public education programs for adults and youth on a variety of topics including Michigan ecosystems, including inland lakes, landscaping for water quality, onsite wastewater management, the importance of soil testing, and helping decision makers make sound decisions regarding Michigan's natural resources. She also coordinates the Michigan Conservation Stewards Program, which empowers individuals with knowledge about Michigan ecosystems to get involved in local stewardship activities.

Alexa Warwick

Dr. Alexa Warwick is the Wildlife Engagement Specialist working jointly with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR), MSU Extension (MSUE), and MSU Department of Fisheries and Wildlife to develop outreach and engagement programs for stakeholder audiences and community members. Her role is to improve the quality and outcomes of engagement on sustainability of human environments and wildlife resources in Michigan, while also increasing the trust and confidence of the MDNR, MSUE, and other organizations responsible for public trust resource management. She received her Ph.D. in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at Florida State University and was previously a postdoc at MSU conducting research and leading programs in science education and outreach.