

## **ENHANCING NETWORKING CAPABILITIES AND PARTICIPATION IN IUFRO ACTIVITIES IN A CHANGING WORLD "FINDING OPPORTUNITY IN ADVERSITY"**

*10 December 2020*

The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound impacts on almost all aspects of human life throughout the world. IUFRO's worldwide activities, including scientific meetings and conferences, thematic networking and capacity development, have been significantly affected. Most of the IUFRO meetings scheduled for 2020 have been either cancelled or postponed to 2021, or beyond. The likelihood of large international in-person events being held in 2021 is very small.

IUFRO has a responsibility to maintain our global collaboration and networking in research and education among its members and scientists. Doing this effectively will help us get through the current difficult times and build a brighter future together.

As an immediate response, but also with the scientific community's eye on sustainable practices, conferences, workshops and other meetings have moved online. Digital and hybrid/blended formats pose both technical and organizational challenges, but they also offer opportunities – for reaching wider audiences, improving diversity and equity among participants, and reducing the carbon footprint associated with conference travel. By enhancing our ability to adopt new tools, developing new ways of networking and exploring new roles, IUFRO can not only sustain global collaboration during the pandemic, but also position itself for future success in achieving our mission and goals.

### **What are the challenges and opportunities?**

#### Main challenges:

- Fewer in-person meetings limit opportunities for personal interaction. Essential aspects of networking in IUFRO, such as mentoring young scientists or brainstorming new ideas can best be done through sustained direct, personal interactions. Therefore, even with expanded online networking options, in-person activities will still be needed also in the future;
- There are technical limitations with virtual meetings, including regional differences in Internet access, the availability of platforms for joining/organizing meetings and time zone difference among participants;
- Capacity within the IUFRO network to plan and implement digital and hybrid activities and related communication activities is currently limited, though improving;
- Due to the pandemic situation, many scientists and officeholders now have busier schedules, e.g. managing online teaching responsibilities and scientific work. Younger scientists, many of whom are also parents, may be under even greater pressure to reconcile professional and personal responsibilities;
- Given the large and increasing number of available online webinars/meetings, attracting participation to virtual IUFRO events can be a challenge.

#### Main opportunities:

- Digital and hybrid formats can facilitate broader and more equitable participation in terms of geography, age and gender. Those who cannot afford to travel have a chance to participate virtually, with additional benefits (e.g. reduced carbon footprint and adaptation to pandemic limitations). These new formats and tools also offer the potential for IUFRO to broaden its constituents, strengthen global collaboration, and share science with new audiences (e.g. by

- making recordings of meetings available after events);
- Digital events can be particularly valuable for attracting and engaging young or early career scientists. For example, IUFRO could provide platforms for graduate and post-doctoral students for virtual presentations and engagement with senior peers in their field;
- Meetings organizers and their institutions, as well as participants are afforded with the opportunity to develop new digital skills;
- Digital formats offer opportunities for more online activities by IUFRO units between (major) meetings, since smaller workshops can be set up easily and organized more frequently – at minimal expense compared to in-person events.

### **The way forward: a new model for forest science networking and knowledge sharing**

It is now increasingly clear that "business as usual" is no longer adequate. Support for international travel is increasingly problematic for many within the IUFRO network due to budgetary constraints and current health and safety risks. Environmental concerns related to the carbon footprint of IUFRO's operations also require us to reduce as much as possible emissions-intensive long-distance travel. Partially replacing face-to-face meetings with online events when feasible is a clear way forward.

Virtual and hybrid events are rapidly becoming the new normal, as important for the scientific community as in-person meetings, and reaching larger audiences than ever before. IUFRO is moving towards a hybrid networking landscape where virtual and in-person meetings are intermeshed rather than disconnected, creating a broader and more diverse network of scientists globally.

Virtual and hybrid IUFRO events (conferences, webinars, workshops, etc.) will be branded, valued and treated by IUFRO in the same ways as in-person events in terms of their promotion, recognition of the organizers and their employers, and inclusion in the annual reporting of activities by Divisions, Task Forces and other IUFRO units. Such events are now included in the official IUFRO Calendar of Events and advertised and reported on through all available IUFRO communication channels, including social media and digital outreach.

In line with this new model for forest science networking and knowledge sharing the following actors will consider:

#### *IUFRO's Divisions, Research Groups, Working Parties and Task Forces:*

- Holding Division-wide meetings virtually as soon as possible (in case not yet done so), to get to know each other, and introduce some newcomers and new units. Some Divisions already have planned for virtual all-Division meetings every 6 months;
- Stepping up communication efforts in response to the challenge of COVID-19 by units, for example via Division newsletters, webinars, podcasts and other digital tools and formats;
- Developing short, focused virtual seminars (other new formats), e.g. periodic webinars on different times of the day; for 1-1,5 h and in a not too overbearing digital format;
- Developing and applying collaborative digital tools and approaches for preparing state-of-knowledge papers and peer-reviewed joint publications;
- Using best practice guidelines for organizing, hosting and reporting virtual IUFRO events and meetings.

*IUFRO HQ (i.e. the Secretariat and the Special Programmes, Projects and Initiatives):*

- Updating the Communication Strategy to reflect new ways of networking and knowledge sharing, including by drawing on the expertise of the IUFRO Working Party on Communications and Public Relations;
- Providing tools and options for branding of digital IUFRO events by the organizers;
- Continuing to enable participation of scientists from economically disadvantaged countries in IUFRO activities (including online activities);
- Organizing online training of larger audiences in methods and tools (e.g. systematic review, science-policy interfacing, science communication);
- Developing a digital platform on global forest education to support knowledge sharing and information dissemination and facilitate interactions among education and training initiatives around the world;
- Continuing to mobilize resources to cover additional costs for hybrid/digital activities.

*The IUFRO Board may consider:*

- Whether it is necessary to have annual *in-person* Board Meetings and Pre-Board meetings in every year of the Board term;
- Developing and formalizing Communication Officer positions for Divisions.

**A proposal for a IUFRO-wide 24h global forest science expo in 2021**

While new ways of networking have already been adopted successfully by many at the IUFRO Unit scale, we still need innovative and attractive ways of actively involving the largest possible number of IUFRO Units and Member Organizations on an all-IUFRO scale. One way of achieving this could be a 24-hour "digital global forest science expo" consisting of many different building blocks such as discussions, presentations, videos, virtual guided tours, etc.

A 24-hour event would allow participants from all over the world to tune in at any time convenient to them (depending on their time zones), and to showcase to their peers in IUFRO and to the world a wide variety of recent as well as on-going research work and collaboration. All parts of this "expo" would be recorded and could thus be watched and shared in smaller portions at any time after the event.

Such an event would be technically organized and hosted by IUFRO HQ and should take place in the first half of 2021. It could be called "IUFRO FORUM 1/24", where FORUM would also be an acronym for "Forest Research UnMuted", a term that everyone who has attended online meeting has become familiar with. "1/24" means that this could be the first in a series of such forums in the run-up to the 2024 IUFRO World Congress, which implies that 2-3 similar events would follow. The thematic structure and content could be aligned along the IUFRO Structure or along interdisciplinary themes or overarching topics such as forest landscape restoration, climate change or the Sustainable Development Goals.