

Report on the implementation of Virtual Networking Support¹

Action number: CA18201

Grantee name: Živa Fišer

Virtual Networking Support Details:

Title: Virtual Networking Support for ConservePlants

Start date: 22.7.2021 - 31.10.2021

Reference to the Action strategy on virtual and hybrid networking (MC approved)

<https://www.conserveplants.eu/en/virtual-networking-strategy>

Description of Action benefits realised through virtual and hybrid networking activities

One of the most important benefits of COST actions are networking activities that enable participants, especially early-stage researchers and those from ITC countries, to build or strengthen their research networks. This is definitely very true also for the COST Action ConservePlants which is aiming at improving conservation of endangered plants across Europe and beyond. Conservation activities in Europe are not distributed evenly. For example, southern Europe represents a centre of European plant diversity, but conservation activities in that region are less pronounced than in central European or northern countries.

Although at first, it seemed that Action activities will slow down due to the COVID situation, the COST Action ConservePlants adapted quickly to the new situation and moved its activities online. Although many activities planned within ConservePlants were first planned to take part in the field or classrooms, the Core Group decided to carry on with activities in a remote mode. In a way, this enabled not only to deliver the activities (training schools, WG and MC meetings) but also to involve more people than originally planned (for example, the training school on Plant translocations was attended by approximately 60 participants, which is much more than was planned in the in-person mode). Although the structure of the training schools changed to a certain extent (all preformed training schools were organised as introductory courses), the idea is to organise second modules of these training schools in a in-person mode.

The possibility to use the virtual activities proved not only beneficial for many applicants, but also for the Action itself. Many training school participants learned about the Action from training schools and have later on started to participate in Action activities. Some of them later applied for STSMs or VM grants or became involved in different tasks of the Action.

¹ This report is submitted by the grantee to the Action MC for approval and for claiming payment of the awarded grant. The Grant Awarding Coordinator coordinates the evaluation of this report on behalf of the Action MC and instructs the GH for payment of the Grant.

Following the example from the online MC meeting in November 2020, all WGs have also adopted the system of online meetings. One of the Working Groups (WG1) is organising WG meetings regularly, periodically every 4 months, while other WGs are meeting more sporadically.

The VNS grantee also prepared a survey to learn about the needs of Action participants regarding how virtual events can help meet the Action objectives and what barriers to participation that they experience. Most members indicated some barriers prevented them from participating in ConservePlants virtual activities and only a few members noted that there were no barriers to participation in virtual activities. Time and difficulty to build relationships or networks virtually were the most common barrier to participation. Slow internet and incompatibility with technology also hindered several members from participating in virtual activities. However, most participants were in favour to continue with online activities. The results of this survey will be used in the future to improve the planning of online activities.

Description of virtual and hybrid networking activities supported by the VNS

Virtual networking activities have enhanced the ability of CA18201 members to communicate and be innovative in their research and networking activities to improve plant conservation in Europe and worldwide. These opportunities have been especially beneficial to early career researchers, researchers from Inclusiveness Target Countries (ITC), COST Near Neighbour Countries (NNC) and International Partner Countries (IPC).

The grantee was involved in the organisation of several online and hybrid meetings, among which many occurred even before the grantee obtained the grant itself.

Here we mention the most important events and activities:

- 1) the hybrid MC meeting in Bologna (14th October 2021) was streamed live over ZOOM. 17 participants attended online and 30 in person. The hybrid mode enabled participants to attend the meeting even if the Covid situation in their own countries prevented them to participate. Some participants had to cancel their attendance last minute and attended the meeting online.
- 2) Hybrid WG2 meeting in Bologna (ZOOM), 15th October 2021. 21 WG members attended online and 6 in person. Hybrid mode enabled participants to attend the meeting even if the Covid situation in their own countries prevented them to participate.
- 3) Organisation of hybrid guest lectures in Bologna (14th October 2021): John Thompson, Renata Soukand and Yuilia Prakofyeva. The three guest speakers were planned to present their talks in a in-person mode, but one of the guest speakers was unable to come at the last moment and the talk was presented online. All three speakers were streamed online via ZOOM. Moreover, guest lectures were recorded and edited in such a way that they are ready to be published on the ConservePlants website. A new section on the ConservePlants is being established and all videos will be uploaded there (by 30 November at the latest).
- 4) Help with the organisation of the online Training School Species Distribution Modelling (ZOOM). 30 participants attended the training school. The grantee also sent a survey to all participants of the training school to obtain feedback and provided the participants with a certificate of completion.
- 5) Online posting of short videos by STSM trainees and VM grantees. This activity was started as part of the dissemination of research results to ConservePlants participants, the general public and other stakeholders. The short videos are being distributed across different media (Facebook, Youtube) but also published at the devoted tab on the ConservePlants webpage. All participants who were awarded the STSM and VM grant were asked by the grantee to prepare short 3-5 minute videos about their projects. Unfortunately, only a few participants responded. Their videos were uploaded on the webpage and the social media platforms (or upload is planned shortly).

Most online activities were organised by using ZOOM (with the support of the VNS grantee), except one of the training schools which was organised by using MS Teams.

Other Activities performed in support to the Action

The grantee was involved in the organisation of online activities even before obtaining the grant.

- A three-day online event which included the MC meeting, WG meetings and the CG meeting was organised by the grantee in November 2020.
- The grantee offered support at the organisation of the training school Flower biology and pollination ecology in March 2021.
- The grantee was also actively involved in the Cowslips initiative which is led by one of the Action MC members (Tsipe Aavik, MC Estonia). The grantee was involved in the national coordination of the initiative (for Slovenia) and had meetings with some of the Slovenian partners (representatives from Eco Schools). The grantee also produced a short video sent to the coordinators of the initiative that was used for promotion purposes.
- The grantee is working closely with the dissemination team and disseminating the activities on different media.