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The virtual field: Collaboration in a crisis

By ARCHBOLD BIOLOGICAL STATION

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Senior Research Biologist, Dr. Eric Menges, will discuss the effects of fire at Archbold Biological Station.

FILE PHOTO

On March 25, 2020 the newly formed Community Response Team at Archbold Biological Station received an invitation: to join a pilot program focused on a clever idea for field stations across the country (like Archbold Biological Station), to mitigate for the loss of biological field opportunities for students under the COVID crisis, and to create and present multi-site virtual field trips. Dr. Claudia Luke of Sonoma State University in California sent out the call to the Organization of Biological Field Stations (OBFS), for those who would like to collaborate. So began a whirlwind of activity, with Archbold's Community Response Team members Laura Reed and Dustin Angell committed to furthering this field station goal.

The 'OBFS Virtual Field Trips' collaborators met weekly to hone in on what various learning opportunities would be suitable to present. Dr. Hilary Swain, Archbold Executive Director, is a co-lead collaborator, alongside Dr. Luke and Dr. Kari O'Connell at Oregon State University. Swain explained, "We used our connections with other professional research and education organizations, and identified and applied for

federal funding. By mid-April, OBFS received notification of a significant award from the National Science Foundation. *The Virtual Field: Educational Mitigation for the COVID-19 Pandemic* program will be managed from Sonoma State University in California. It will make a significant contribution to enhancing virtual training among the all the field stations involved.”

Archbold is investing some of this funding in professional video production training for the OBFS group, provided by consultant Jennifer Brown. Brown’s company, Into Nature Films, has produced several inspiring films for Archbold, including the recent ‘Colors of the Florida Scrub,’ featured recently on Earth Day. Brown has already shared her expertise with the field stations across the country through interactive virtual Zoom meetings and has provided critiques of the ‘first time’ draft videos being filmed by the scientists at field stations across the nation to improve their skills. She is producing a ‘How To’ video to help train these scientists in this new skill. Individual field station teams are producing and editing short videos aimed primarily at students and faculty, showcasing the unique habitats at their stations and illustrating ecological concepts. Brown states: “Each of these field stations has a unique ecosystem story to share. Using just their cell phone video cameras and free editing software, we will create a series of educational, engaging videos to share with students and the public. The collaboration is a testament that anybody can create a nature video after learning the basics of documentary video production and storytelling.”

As well as making the site videos, the other activity of the OBFS award funded is to prepare ‘real-time’ field experiences for students and faculty from colleges and universities across the world and to learn from the research experts in the field. Swain added, “Although nothing will ever replace the reality of being in the field, this will give a new opportunity, something like you are on a field trip in nature with three professors in three totally different places all at the same time. This has the advantage that students will be able to compare and contrast ecological patterns and processes across locations, a skill that is fundamental to enhancing their ecological understanding.” Archbold is happy to announce the first of these cross-site real time virtual events will be held on July 1st:

Live from the Field: Fire Research across the Continent is a free virtual event hosted for OBFS by Archbold and featuring fire ecology research from Archbold Biological Station, Pepperwood Preserve in California and Southwest Experimental Garden Array in Arizona. This inaugural virtual event features Archbold Senior Research Biologist, Eric Menges presenting ‘Fire Effects in Florida Scrublands.’ The Live from the Field series of events is geared toward college students but this inaugural one is open to everyone by registering through the Archbold website: www.archbold-station.org.

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