Introduction

The A.D. Latornell Conservation Symposium is an annual event that provides a forum for practitioners, students, academics, politicians, government, private sector, and non-government organizations working in Ontario’s conservation field to network and share information as well as learn about new tools, techniques and strategies to address challenges around natural resources management in Ontario.

In preparation for the 20th anniversary of this popular event in 2013, organizers of the Symposium conducted a strategic review in order to confirm its current viability and ensure that the event would continue to be relevant to current and future delegates. The review began in June 2012 and ran until October 2013.

Three main focus areas for the strategic review included:

2. Program – relevancy and format
3. Logistics - location and timing

The evaluation tools used included:

- **Online Survey**: Symposium organizers provided 2012 delegates and others with an online survey tool to collect their opinions about the current Symposium and advice for future events.

- **Focus Groups**: Two focus groups were organized. One was held with a diverse group of invited delegates (both new and long term) at the 2012 event and a second was organized with the Symposium Organizing Committee.

- **Delegate Statistics**: Map past and current statistical data about the delegates

A total of 142 people participated in the strategic review, including representatives from Conservation Ontario and the University of Guelph.
Highlights of Survey Results

The surveys showed us that people attend the Symposium first of all to learn, and secondly, to network. Most respondents are satisfied with the event being held in November, and despite such logistic challenges such as limited hotel rooms, and ‘chopped up’ layout, they are also satisfied to meet at the Nottawasaga Inn just outside of Ontario.

Many of the respondents to the surveys attend more than one conference per year and it was felt by a high majority of them that the Symposium provides good value for the cost and that it ranked as one of their top choices, if not the primary one.

It can safely be said that the Symposium has a leveraged effect and actually impacts not just delegates, but the environmental sector as a whole:

- The high majority of respondents said they take information from the Symposium back to the office to share with their colleagues frequently or sometimes.
- A total of 66 percent of the respondents said they changed some aspect of their work as a result of something they learned at Latornell either sometimes or frequently.
- Over half of the respondents said they sometimes or frequently started new collaborations as a result of networking at the symposium.

Delegates overwhelmingly agreed that they felt that the Symposium provides an important forum to address the most important environmental issues facing Ontario. Only five people disagreed.

The biggest barrier for the Symposium identified by just over half of the respondents was the cost. So while respondents indicated they felt that the event was good value for the money, this result reflects the tight budgets being experienced within some of the conservation community. Only about a third of respondents provided suggestions when asked about the Symposium’s weaknesses and they identified location, need for more learning and networking opportunities and a couple of people suggested the date be changed.

The survey results and focus groups indicated that the social events at the Symposium such as the Amazing Race, pick up hockey games, hospitality rooms, silent auction, golf games, etc. are important components for the event because they are enjoyed very much.

There was strong support for the fundraising efforts undertaken at the conference, particularly given that that they support additional delegates to attend.

And, almost everyone said they liked the opportunities provided for younger delegates such as the Student Poster Call, moderators, and Young Conservationist Professionals graduation. In addition, respondents strongly supported acknowledging the achievements of people in the conservation field with the A.D. Latornell Pioneer Award.

Areas for improvement were identified as well. Focus group participants felt that the Symposium was a bit dated and needed to freshen and modernize the ‘look of Latornell’ referring to the logo and the name. Incorporating mentoring components was also a suggestion for future conferences.
Conference Trends

Most, if not all conferences are experiencing a 20% decrease in attendance. This is mainly due to two conditions – a tighter economy coupled with changing needs of delegates. Events such as the A. D. Latornell Conservation Symposium need to be nimble and adaptable, and they need to take advantage of developing technology such as live streaming, podcasts, and social media. Successful events use strategic approaches and keep track of their delegates and partners’ needs and perceptions on a regular basis.

This Strategic Review undertaken by the A. D. Latornell Conservation Symposium is something often striven for by events, but rarely undertaken. This combined with regular evaluations done by the Latornell Organizing Committee provide a good basis to assess the value of the Symposium today and moving forward.

Lessons Learned:

1. **Know and target your audience**

   There are two main types of delegates attending all conferences: those who are late 20s and 30s (millenniums or Generation Y) and those in their late 50s or older (Aging Boomers). This creates a unique challenge for event organizers because these two groups learn, communicate and socialize differently.

   Older delegates are looking for the ‘deep dive’ – meaty programs with lots of time to explore issues and solutions with each other whereas younger delegates prefer their information in ‘bite-sized’ bits. Older delegates are good at looking at the big picture, like to consider fresh perspectives and are competitive and goal-oriented. Younger delegates rely on social networking using new tools such as twitter, facebook, and LinkedIn when working and training. They multi task, rely on the internet and expect to use tools such as webinars, blogs, podcasts, YouTube and others. They expect training opportunities such as the Symposium to be dynamic and flexible.

   While the two types of delegates may have different ways of learning, where they agree is in good content and learning experiences. Although the way they network may differ, both age groups do like to network and work in teams.

   Meeting the needs of two such diverse delegate types requires offering a variety of program options and opportunities.

2. **Conferences need to incorporate current and developing technology**

   Organizers today need to provide a variety of ‘touch points’ for delegates. They need to integrate a combination of onsite face to face opportunities (plenaries and sessions) intermixed with offsite virtual activities (webinars, live streaming, twitter, LinkedIn).

3. **Offer a variety of learning styles in the sessions**

   Delegates are looking for both the ‘deep dive’ approach to sessions and more interactivity such as discussions, brainstorming, problem solving.
4. Conference delegates are developing ‘ecosytems’ with event-related life beyond the actual conference.

Many new delegates are looking for experiences outside the event itself with pre-conference events (webinars, workshops), online chats, or mentoring opportunities. Some conferences are connecting other events to the conference.

5. Other general conference trends include:

- Incorporating keynotes who are different and out of their usual field
- Expect events to ‘walk the talk’ and incorporate ‘green’ practices
- Successful conferences will be multi-agency collaborations
- Despite a trend towards incorporating more offsite or virtual opportunities, the face-to-face model will remain strong
- Smart conferences are tracking participants opinions and needs, and doing an analysis of their event

Symposium Demographics

Generally, the majority of delegates who attend Latornell are Conservation Authority staff, followed by Provincial staff and private sector consultants.

Symposium Participants By Sector (2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservation Authorities</td>
<td>39.1%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private / Consulting</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other participants include nongovernmental organizations, municipal representatives, academic such as students and/or professors, and Federal representatives.

Number of Participants Over the Years

Although earlier numbers are not available, the number of participants attending the A.D. Latornell Symposium grew from 600 people in 2001 to a high of 1,148 in 2008 and has leveled off at between 886 – 998 for the past two years (2011; 2012). Delegate numbers were
significantly higher during the mid to late 2000s with the availability of source protection funding provided to Conservation Authorities by the Province. The Symposium was used as a forum by Conservation Authorities and Province to transfer source protection information and build capacity among the Conservation Authorities.

What Does This Mean for the Symposium – Recommendations for Moving Forward

Generally, the strength of the A.D. Latornell Conservation Symposium is that it knows its audience and focuses on developing a program and event that meets their needs. This has proven to be a very successful formula since the Symposium began in the mid-1990s. However, trends indicate that the needs of conference participants are changing and a successful event has to be adaptable and take advantage of new technologies. What has worked for the past 20 years will not work as effectively for the next twenty years because things are changing. We are moving into a new generation of participants. The way we communicate and work has changed significantly and the Symposium needs to reflect those changes in its program and tools.

Focus on learning
Delegates have told us their primary reason for the Symposium being at the top of their list is because they like to learn. Organizers need to continue to track issues, concerns and priorities for watershed practitioners in Ontario and incorporate these into themes, sessions and keynote addresses.

Continue to provide good networking opportunities
Networking is the number two reason why people attend the A.D. Latornell Conservation Symposium. Continue to offer hospitality suites, a social gathering event, organized mentoring opportunities, and other strategic activities to ensure effective networking.
Continue to ensure that the Symposium provides good value for money
Tweak the current structure of the Symposium in order to provide three full days – either together as a package – or individually to more people. With three full days and no half days, people will continue to receive value.

Incorporate new technologies to extend the reach of the Symposium
Continue to build off current social technologies such as e-blasts, twitter, facebook, blogs and Linked In. In addition to onsite face-to-face opportunities, consider extending the reach of the Symposium to new participants remotely through live streaming, podcasts, webinars, or off site related workshops. All of these enable more people – with smaller budgets and limited capacity – to learn and participate in discussions around Ontario’s environment.

Continue to encourage the involvement of key partners in Ontario’s watershed management sector
Conservation Authorities work very closely with a wide variety of partners including all levels of government, nongovernmental organizations, as well as the private and academic sector. Continue to use the Symposium as a forum to nurture these important partnerships. This can be done through the development of programs, on the organizing committee, as exhibitors, and as funding or other partners.

Continue to regularly track and evaluate the experience of Symposium participants on an annual basis and consider conducting another strategic review in five years.
It’s important to know your participants and be able to adapt to their needs as they change. Developing a strategy to collect additional data on participants’ needs can be easily incorporated into the registration process.

Continue to work towards a more sustainable funding model
The Symposium typically just recoups or subsidizes some of the costs of the event for participants. Evaluate the activities being offered and ensure that the cost of the event reflects the cost of the activities.

Continue to offer social events throughout the Symposium
Research indicates that participants like to have fun in addition to working hard a conference. It provides a relaxed atmosphere in which to build relationships and share information. Continue to incorporate a variety of activities to participants in the off hours.

For the future, consider collaborating with other organizations on full or partial joint events
Conference trends indicate that collaborative conferences are a current trend, especially among organizations or agencies who share targets. These partnerships provide a budget conscious approach.

Red Flags:
- Cost of attending all or at least part of the Symposium needs to be within reach of Conservation Authority budgets
Be aware of ‘Symposium burnout’. Ensure the size of the event is within the workplan capacity of hosts and organizers. The A.D. Latornell does not have to be all things to all people. A good event knows its audience and is focused on those targets both in terms of budget and program.

Conclusion

Some of the participants in the focus groups helped to identify the A.D. Latornell Conservation Symposium’s brand. They told us that Symposium is collaborative, hardworking, fun, and creative – characteristics of the participants. If we were to summarize the current Latornell brand, it was suggested it could be: Work Hard. Play Hard.

By tweaking some of the features of this popular event, leveraging its reach offsite, incorporating some new technologies and ensuring we stay focused on the relevant and important issues, our brand could develop further to: Innovate. Create. Collaborate.

Coordinators of the 2013 Strategic Review for the A.D. Latornell Conservation Symposium:
Jane Lewington, Marketing & Communications Specialist, Conservation Ontario
Chris Hachey, (former Chair of the A.D. Latornell Conservation Symposium), Grey Sauble CA

Chair of the 2013 Symposium: Deborah Martin Downs (Credit Valley Conservation)