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ATLAS (the Association for Tourism and Leisure Education and Research) has been hosting its Annual conferences since 1994. In 2020, the conference was due to be hosted by AMBIS in Prague between 8 and 11 September however due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the conference was postponed until September 2021.

Whilst ATLAS could not host an on-site event, the Association was keen to provide opportunities for connection, networking and knowledge exchange in these challenging times. In collaboration with AMBIS in Prague, ATLAS put together a series of webinars around the conference theme “Tourism as a driver of regional development and collaboration” during the scheduled conference week in September. Six events were hosted between Wednesday 9 and Friday 11 September and attracted over 200 registrations from almost 50 countries – similar numbers to registrations for the last two on-site conferences (Girona – 2019 and Copenhagen – 2018).

Keynote speakers Carina Ren (Aalborg University, Denmark) and Mike Robinson (University of Birmingham, UK) provided the content for the first webinar co-hosted by AMBIS, Prague and ATLAS. The two speakers were asked to reflect on the conference theme and the current global situation to provide some “interim” thoughts. They approached the topic very differently and this led to thought-provoking questions and debate. We hope to see their Keynote presentations at the Annual Conference in 2021 and it will be interesting to see how they follow up these on-line presentations.

The second event featured four industry speakers: Iris Bakker (Visit Zuid-Limburg, The Netherlands); Jitka Zikmundová (CEE Marketing Manager of Upper Austria Tourism Authority); Eli Keegan (Lloret de Mar Tourism Board, Spain) and Anders Bjernulf (Destination Sälenfjällen, Sweden) around the theme “COVID-19 and reflections on the summer of 2020 from the field”. Chaired by Rene van der Duim, this session showed how destinations in different parts of Europe have approached the challenges of the pandemic and provided some insights into future planning. By circulating the discussion between the speakers, Rene encouraged lively dialogue between the speakers and over 140 participants. What this session illustrates, as I stated in the recent ATLAS Reflections publication, is the necessity of collaboration and dialogue between the tourism industry and tourism educators and researchers.

ATLAS Special Interest Groups (SIGs) hosted the other four webinars. The first webinar saw the inaugural meeting of the Climate Change Special Interest Group. This new SIG

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was proposed at the 2019 Annual Conference in Girona and came to fruition in this web-based event. Hosted by Ioanna Farsari (Dalarna University, Sweden), Harold Friedl presented some ideas for the group resulting in a lively question and answer session providing lots of follow-up activities for this new SIG. The second webinar, from the revived Urban Tourism group, led by Melanie Smith (Budapest Metropolitan University, Hungary) and Ko Koens (InHolland University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands) saw a number of interesting presentations and a discussion on a future research agenda for the group.

Another new SIG, the Visual Tourism Special Interest Group hosted a webinar towards the end of the conference week. The session was chaired by Nika Balomenou (University of Hertfordshire, UK) and Brian Garrod (Swansea University, UK). Featuring four speakers covering a wide array of innovative methods, the Visual Research SIG demonstrates the importance of constant advancement in tourism scholarship. The final webinar of the ATLAS on-line conference involved the Volunteer Tourism Special Interest Group. Led by Elisa Burrai and Davide Sterchele (Leeds Beckett University, UK), the meeting provided directions for the future of the group and 2021 looks to be an exciting year full of activities.

The ATLAS Annual Conference webinar series for 2020 was more successful than we could have hoped. It allowed the Association to grow and develop its social media presence with ATLAS's YouTube channel seeing sizeable growth in number of subscribers and views in the second half of 2020. It has also meant wider accessibility of tourism research, discussions and projects. Through hosting and recording on-line events, ATLAS has ensured that conference resources will be valuable to tourism educators and researchers long beyond the normal conference time-span.

At the same time, virtual events do not have the same co-presence affect as on-site, in person events. Engaging participants, and keeping them engaged for long periods of time, remains challenging. Social interactions and networking opportunities are also much harder, if not near impossible, to achieve through on-line webinars and conferences. The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has undoubtedly changed how ATLAS will host conferences. As an Association, we were already working on trying to be more sustainable, not only at conference venues but to be cognizant of how our delegates travelled to our events. ATLAS will work with its members and the tourism community to ensure a future of relevant, sustainable conferences that will retain the friendly atmosphere ATLAS is known for whilst taking into consideration the emerging "new normal" of conference travel and attendance.

Looking forward, we remain hopeful that we can celebrate ATLAS's 30th year at the ATLAS Annual Conference in Prague in September 2021. However, we are carefully monitoring the pandemic in Europe and globally, and are taking note of guidelines, recommendation and restrictions that may impact on this event and future conferences. In the meantime, ATLAS will continue to offer members and non-members on-line events throughout the rest of 2020 and into 2021. This includes a webinar on 9 December 2020 hosted by our ATLAS Africa chapter that will look at the impacts of COVID-19 on the tourism industry in Africa.

For ATLAS, the 2020 Conference webinars were wonderfully successful but 2020 has also been a very challenging year and we do not see this changing as we move into 2021. We would like to thank all ATLAS members and everyone who has joined the

2020 Annual conference webinars for their continued support. Please engage with ATLAS through our website (www.atlas-euro.org), Facebook, YouTube and Twitter (@tourism_atlas).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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