



National Sustainability Society

Inaugural Conference
University of Washington, Seattle WA
September 9 - 11, 2024

The mission of the National Sustainability Society (NSS) is “to build an organization for shared, integrated, and globally flourishing professional practice and research for sustainability.” The National Sustainability Society’s inaugural conference facilitated knowledge sharing and cross-sector engagement at the forefront of the science and practice of sustainability. The conference is one part of our effort to build an organization that can serve the broad community of leaders, managers, researchers, and students working on sustainability and climate. The NSS solicited a variety of contributions that advance innovation, close the implementation gap, and support workforce development at all levels in a suite of domain areas.

The conference had 562 registrants, of which 390 were speakers. The majority of participants (86%) were affiliated with US-based institutions/organizations. Others came from Canada (4%); China (2%); and Germany and Italy (1% each). 22 additional countries were represented by another 36 attendees.

71% of participants were in academic institutions (19% of the total participants were students); 13% in the private sector; 6% in the nonprofit sector; 5% from non-academic research institutions; and 5% in governmental organizations. This 70%/30% split between academics and practitioners represents moderate success in cross-sectoral engagement for our first conference.

The NSS will strive to continue to strengthen cross-sectoral engagement and grow relative representation from non-academic institutions and organizations.



The Conference Program

Fourteen 90-minute, fee-based **workshops** were offered during the morning prior to the start of the main program. Workshops addressed themes, tools, and skills applicable to sustainability work, including: multidisciplinary, behavioral and cultural change, educational competencies and frameworks, decarbonization, participatory and collaborative approaches, and science at the interface with policy and corporate sustainability. Workshops were filled to capacity.

Three **plenary keynotes** offered perspectives from corporate, non-profit, and academic leaders in sustainability. The presenters addressed topics related to the implications of artificial intelligence in sustainability (Amy Luers, Microsoft); moving toward a solution orientation for climate change (Jon Foley, Drawdown Project); and the role of social justice in sustainability (Julian Agyeman, Tufts University).



Program cont.

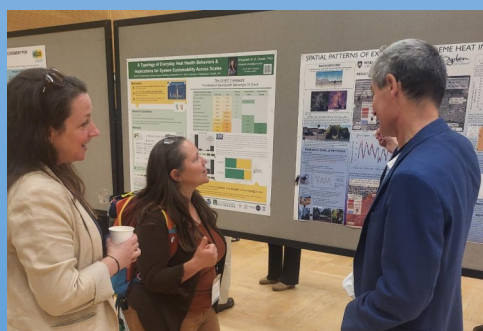
Parallel sessions included 28 **panels**, designed to engage cross-sectoral conversations on key topics in sustainability, including): mobilizing private capital for climate action; green jobs and workforce development; university-industry collaborations; community science and cumulative impacts analysis; justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI); Indigenous knowledge and STEM integration; and AI and sustainability.



Solicited 15-minute presentations were organized in 44 **oral sessions and symposia**. Symposia were invited through special calls on four specific topics: Commoning and Social Change; Everyday Adaptation to Climate Change; Sustainability Transformations; and Sustainable Supply Chains. The success of these special calls suggests a benefit from greater use of special calls and focused topics in future meetings.

The remaining submissions were organized into sessions on themes that included transforming lifestyles and behaviors; sustainable cities and transportation; agriculture and food systems; energy and technology; social equity and environmental justice; biodiversity and conservation; education and workforce development; health and well-being; governance and policy; and cultural and indigenous perspectives.

"**Spark sessions**" were solicited to spark participant-led creative thinking, conversation, innovation, and learning, based on an identified topic and prompts suggested by the facilitator. The 13 spark sessions engaged participants in discussions about interdisciplinary collaboration, practical skills development, and innovative approaches to sustainability challenges. They also discussed the role of education, communication, and community engagement in driving sustainable change.



Flash talks provided a brief (3-minute) opportunity for presenters to describe the highlights of their work.

Many of the flash talks, organized in two sessions, were paired with **posters** (36) displayed in the main event space throughout the meeting.

Program cont.

The conference plenary prize session featured the **2024 National Sustainability Society Annual Achievement Award Winner**, Minnesota's Climate-Smart Municipalities Program (full press release [here](#)), as well as the North American **National Champions for the Frontiers Planet Prize**: Dr. Jason Rohr (University of Notre Dame) and Dr. Umberto Berardi (Toronto Metropolitan University).



During an **interactive plenary feedback session**, we learned what NSS activities were important to participants. Building relationships across and between industry and academia was most frequently ranked first, and networking and inclusion was most frequently ranked second. Participants listed networking and cross-sectoral collaborative events, resources, and opportunities as the top actions that NSS should focus on. There were also calls for the NSS to continue to hone our mission, purpose, goals, and to “walk the talk” in terms of sustainability. Participants were also asked about the values that guide their own work: Collaboration, equity, justice, interdisciplinarity, kindness, compassion, impact, inclusion, transparency, and accountability were among the top responses. Participants were also asked to share the name of a network/society/group that NSS should consider trying to partner with. 74 groups were named, with AASHE, USDN, GreenBiz/Trellis, AAG, UN, and Second Nature being the most frequently mentioned groups.

Social and Networking Opportunities

Because of the importance of building a community and networks, the conference program included several opportunities for informal conversation and gathering. Six pre-conference tours in Seattle guided participants in visiting and learning about sustainability practices. Additional networking opportunities included: daily coffee socials and lunches; an evening reception; an evening “block party” with live entertainment, food, and beverages; an “early career breakfast” for students and early-career professionals; small group chats with senior scholars; and the Whova app with capabilities for public and 1:1 messages, article and resource sharing, and meet-up organizing.

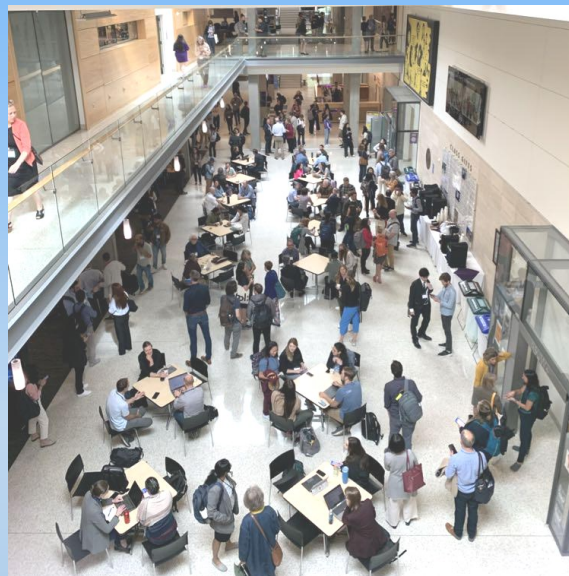


Participant Feedback

We had a 22% response rate to a post-conference survey, with participation reflective of the attendance: 23% Practitioner, 72% Academic.

Participant highlights included the plenary keynotes, the workshops, and sessions with equity, justice, and Indigenous themes, as well as those that focused on sustainability education, and competencies. In general, the mix of formats, content, and attendee types was noticeable and appreciated, with a desire for more representation from private sector, policymakers, and Indigenous voices.

On a scale from 1-4 (very unsatisfied to very satisfied), on average, participants were satisfied with the conference content (3.3), format (3.1), networking opportunities (3.2), the venue (3.6), food and refreshments (2.7), organizer communications (3.6), and cost (3.1).



Regardless of sector, 87% felt that the conference effectively fostered a sense of community within the National Sustainability Society.

Looking towards the next NSS conference, participants gave the following suggestions:

- ◆ Practice sustainability with refreshments: no plastic, buffet style, keep the variety, add protein.
- ◆ Consider greater emphasis on sessions that facilitate broader exchange about shared/collective ideas/practice/momentum (i.e., cross-sector panels, problem-solving sessions, debates).
- ◆ Continue experimenting with non-traditional and experimental formats, content, and participants: welcome some tension and encourage debate (for example, on AI; on degrowth); practitioner chats; offer the conference as a platform for exchanging curricula and syllabi, and for advertising internship and other opportunities; include the arts and humanities (poets, musicians, “the dreamers”); include lighter sessions (yoga, meditation, breathwork, karaoke), longer breaks, more practitioners, and hands-on sessions.
- ◆ Utilize insights and expertise from NSS members in consulting, coaching, and facilitation spaces who have the skills we need and want to help: *“More industry-led programming. More professional development. More opportunities to co-create on the fly and develop action networks. Less attempt to be “traditional.”*
- ◆ Continue working towards the goal of more diversity: *“The magic is in the mixing.”*
- ◆ Increase the focus on equity and justice (Indigenous views, other ways of knowing, just sustainabilities)
- ◆ Enhance the presence of the workshops. Make them longer and distribute them throughout the entire conference.

SUPPORT

The organizers thank the following groups and individuals, without whom the meeting would not have been as successful.

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