

Director's Corner – NRLI in the time of COVID

By Jonathan Dain, NRLI Director

"Welcome NRLI Class XX!"

It felt so strange to utter those words, in person, through a microphone, on the afternoon of October 14th. As I looked out at the group of Fellows spread out before me, all wearing masks and arranged in a giant horseshoe under the shade of majestic oaks and pines, I felt awkward and uncertain. Was this a huge mistake? Those farthest from me across the circle were sitting more than 50 feet away. I could not even see their faces - I could not see anyone's face behind the masks.

Imagine trying to explain NRLI to an epidemiologist concerned about COVID-19 in Florida. *"Well, it's a program where a 4-person project team brings together 20+ people from all over the state for intensive and experiential 3-day training sessions. We do lots of small group work and make sure that everybody talks to and interacts closely with everyone else. At each of our eight sessions, we pile into 15-passenger vans for field trips and drive 20-40 minutes to visit natural resource sites where we get on small boats together or swamp buggies or maybe walk around in groups. Program Fellows room together in pairs, and we have group meals at long tables in restaurants, everyone together. Oh yes, I forgot, we also bring in additional people – local stakeholders and guest speakers – to talk to the group while we sit together in small conference rooms and have intense discussions. It's a lot, I know, but when people are tired, we use "energizers" to get the group mingling, moving and interacting. That interaction is key. And at the end of 3 days we send these 20+ individuals back out around the state, to their families, homes and jobs. One month later we do it all over again in different part of Florida!"*. Um, really...?

The NRLI Project Team spent much of summer 2020 agonizing over Class XX. What should we do? Does it make sense to hold a class? If not, then what? If yes, then how can we do it *safely and effectively*? As we considered numerous scenarios - cancel, go on-line, try to meet in person - the project team thought hard about the relationship between what we do, why we do it and how we do it. We know that for us they are inseparable. The NRLI model is predicated on experiencing the interplay between conceptual curriculum, practical, hands-on learning, a diverse set of participants who get to know each other well, and attention to both group dynamics and the free and constructive exchange of ideas and experiences. We agreed that for the program to be effective, some elements of the model could transition to an on-line environment, but others could not. We could not imagine a successful class that did not involve an in-person first session where program Fellows get to know each other and begin to develop as a cohort. We could not imagine a successful program without some form of in-person fieldtrips. As June turned to July, we looked to the *remarkable* progress

made by scientists in identifying the causes of COVID spread and slowly, a tentative plan began to take shape for holding safe, *highly planned and disciplined* in-person training events. In late July we concluded that under the right conditions we could hold a NRLI class as a mix of in-person (6) and on-line (2) sessions.

The first step was to postpone the start of Class XX from August to October. Based on what UF and other scientists were saying, we identified moments that could potentially facilitate a rise in COVID-19 outbreaks. Think the opening of public schools and Universities (early September) or family gatherings at holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas (late November and December). Starting the program in mid-October meant that we would have almost 6 weeks (post school opening) to monitor COVID-19 numbers before making a final decision about whether to bring people together in person for session 1. Using similar logic, we designed the two post-holiday sessions (December and January) to be on-line in order to minimize the potential for post-holiday virus transmission were anyone to get infected during these times of increased risk. Once these dates and sessions were decided, we felt that the other Class XX sessions could and should be held in person (barring serious and unexpected events) and accordingly selected venues outside of large urban areas, where we could meet outside and/or in very large, airy conference rooms and where we could take field trips that allowed for relatively easy social distancing. The planning took a lot of thinking, creativity and hard work by the project team for which I am grateful.

Below you will see the outcome of that planning, images of what an in-person NRLI session looks like during a pandemic. We met outdoors on the grounds of the geographically isolated Gainesville Garden Club. Over 3 days, the Fellows of Class XX introduced themselves, established group norms and discussed both their expectations for NRLI and Florida's natural resource challenges. In small groups they reflected on life under COVID-19 and on the concept of leadership. They practiced empathic listening, talked about the stakeholders they worked with and explored new ways to think about an understand natural resource conflicts. They even performed magic tricks (which I have yet to figure out). And they did it in-person and masked, with everyone showing impressive discipline in remaining at least 6 feet apart from everyone else and following all best practices. Program Coordinator Jocelyn Peskin had the idea to provide each Fellow with their own NRLI chair and, on a daily basis, an individual bag filled with snacks for the day, hand sanitizer, personal flipchart markers, whatever post-its, dots or materials were required and even a 6-foot piece of yarn (to help measure appropriate "social distance"). This all minimized the sharing of spaces, materials and surfaces.

NRLI now has a bright blue, professional grade, portable karaoke speaker with microphones (because without it, it's pretty hard to hear someone who is standing 50 feet away and wearing a mask) and it took a lot of flipchart stands to run the program outdoors, but

somehow it all succeeded. The impressive Fellows of Class XX deserve a huge amount of credit for their patience, enthusiasm and willingness to work with us – and with each other – to make an experimental, in-person session possible. We still have a lot to learn, but Class XX proved that it is possible to have NRLI in the time of COVID.

