

There's a lot that keeps us connected, even when we're physically distant

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Finding a sense of community in this new reality

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While I'm grateful that I can hunker down and work from the safety of my home throughout the COVID-19 epidemic, it's still easy to feel far removed from colleagues, allies and other sources of hope. In-person meetings and conferences are usually a significant part of my job, but for the past three weeks, I haven't traveled farther than the grocery store. But in some ways, even during this physically-distant time, I've never felt closer to the dedicated environmental advocates I work with.

A few weeks ago (although it feels like a lifetime ago), I was getting ready to head from my apartment in Providence, R.I. to Washington, D.C. to speak at the Interstate Renewable Energy Council (IREC) annual Vision Summit and strategize with allies at the U.S. Climate Action Network. These conferences, like many I attend throughout the year, offer critical opportunities to enlist partners and deepen support for the campaigns I'm running to power our future entirely with clean and renewable energy.

But, with my bags already packed, I learned that Environment America had decided to halt all non-essential travel for staff, including my planned trip to D.C. I feared these events I had been looking forward to and preparing for would be canceled. Thankfully, they weren't -- they just changed shape.

IREC held their vision summit in-person as planned, but the event organizers were nimble and gracious enough to include stay-at-homers like myself through video conferencing. As a giant floating head speaking on a projector screen above the heads of my fellow panelists, I presented on how the benefits of clean energy directly reach consumers and local communities.



Conferencing into a panel at IREC's vision summit from my kitchen table

The next day, at the U.S. Climate Action Network's strategy meeting, I shared stories and strategies with the 100% Renewable Energy Action Team, connecting with allies from Florida to Wisconsin. This meeting went from being in-person for everyone, to virtual for everyone. So, with everyone sitting in their kitchens and living rooms alongside pets, we informed and inspired one another by building community through our work to further climate solutions, even in the midst of another crisis.

During those conferences and ever since, I've been struck by the ingenuity of the advocacy community in this new reality. For example, my colleague Steve Blackledge and the Environment America's Conservation Program recently pulled off a virtual lobby day (<https://environmentamerica.org/blogs/environment-america-blog/ame/how-we-reorganized-our-big-push-public-lands-funding-during-time>) in support of fully and permanently funding the Land and Water Conservation Fund (<https://environmentamerica.org/news/ame/statement-trump-administration%E2%80%99s-proposed-funding-land-and-water-conservation-fund-won%E2%80%99t>), America's most successful conservation program. Thanks to their meetings-turned-phone calls with 60 key congressional offices, the Great American Outdoors Act (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/3422/text>) now has 59 cosponsors in the U.S. Senate.

And I'm not just finding hope in the creative ways my colleagues are continuing to pursue much-needed progress. It's also the expression of support for one another and the "we're in this together" attitude.

Recognizing that countless parents are now juggling full-time jobs and the sudden closure of their kids' schools, Wisconsin Environment Director Megan Severson quickly pulled together a curriculum of fun and educational environmental activities for kids (<https://environmentamerica.org/blogs/environment-america-blog/ame/fifty-environmental-activities-kids-can-do-home>). These were shared with friends and colleagues in need of ideas, and picked up by parent forums across the country.

Others, like Go Solar Campaign Associate Ben Sonnega, have happily pivoted from their usual campaigns to support efforts to address the crisis at hand. And, friends I haven't spoken to in months are picking up the phone to check in.

I think we missed the mark with the term "social distancing," and some sociologists agree (<https://mcgill.ca/channels/channels/news/call-social-reinvention-while-keeping-our-distance-321228>). We may be physically distant -- and should be, as we try to slow the spread of this virus -- but we remain socially connected through the missions we share and the support we offer our communities.



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Emma oversees Environment America's national campaign for 100 percent renewable energy, working to deliver a bold vision for a future powered by clean energy one state at a time. Since joining the team at Environment America, Emma has led campaigns building and mobilizing public support for renewable energy and climate action in cities and states across the nation. She has authored reports on energy efficiency, solar energy and other renewable energy policy areas. Originally from North Carolina, Emma now lives in Boston, where she enjoys running, cooking and exploring the great outdoors in her free time.

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