



From the Chair of COSPAR's Scientific Program Committee



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The Program and its preparation are unique in many ways.

This is the first COSPAR Assembly since the development and adoption of COSPAR's 2019 Strategic Action Plan, driven by feedback from previous Assemblies and the membership to improve equity and access. The first version of the Program, ready in March 2020, implemented multiple changes. These included revising the time allocations for Events based on the number of abstracts attracted, limiting the number of solicited and contributed abstracts submittable as first author, attempting to improve the gender and geographical diversity of solicited and other speakers and introducing an abstract fee. Almost 3,500 abstracts were submitted, with almost 8,800 named authors.

The Covid-19 pandemic forced deferral of the Sydney Assembly from August 2020 to January 2021 and redesign of the presentation mode from 100% in-person to either 100% virtual presentation or a mix of virtual and in-person presentations (COSPAR-2021-Hybrid). The desire to have a globally-accessible Assembly led to the idea of presenting the scientific program in two blocks, Block 1 in the period 0715 – 1200 Australian Eastern Daylight Time (AEDT) and Block 2 1815 – 2300 AEDT. Block 1 is best for the Americas, Sydney, much of Australia and Asia, and western parts of Europe and Africa. Block 2 is best for Europe / Africa, Australia and Asia (especially India and west Asia).

Another major aspect of the re-design was the recognition that the most valuable time for the Assembly's speakers and audience members, putting aside the opportunity to present to peers, is the time spent asking and responding to questions and discussing presentations, whether in-session or outside. Thus, this Assembly's focus on extended question, answer, and discussion time during the Live Q&A Sessions, InterDisciplinary Lectures [IDLs], and Breakout Rooms (for panel discussions especially). Author presentations are available on-demand by video as both complete presentations (15, 20 or 30-minute durations) and as summaries (3 and 6-minute durations). In addition, each Live Q&A Session starts by playing the spliced-together summary videos for the talks, followed by dedicated question time for each speaker present and then extended question time and discussion. In addition, questions can be asked outside sessions via direct Chat, direct 1-to-1 video links, and a Networking Lounge in the platform.

A final aspect of the second program design was the opportunity for submission of new abstracts and the revision (and even withdrawing) of old ones. This again required major work by the Program Committee, Main Scientific Organisers (MSOs), and Deputy Organisers (Dos).

The preparation and uploading of video summaries of both talks and posters, plus videos of the complete oral presentation, required speakers to develop major new recording skills and to prepare their presentations 1 – 2 months in advance of the Assembly. These aspects proved challenging to many people, due to the significant changes in behaviour and approach required. Accordingly, a third version of the program design was prepared in January 2021. This version sought to remove holes and rationalise sessions, allowing the audience and speakers to most efficiently see presentations and discuss scientific progress.

The final Program has over 2,000 video summaries and 1,500 videos of complete presentations, plus posters, organised in 147 Events, with on average 4 1/4-day sessions per Event. Including posters approximately 24,00 presentations are expected at the Assembly, representing about a 70% rate of progressing from abstract submission to presentation. This conversion rate is believed similar to previous recent COSPAR Assemblies. To do this well is very impressive, given the difficulties faced and the major efforts and changes in organisation required to address COVID-19 evolve to a 100% virtual Assembly from 100% in-person and then to a Hybrid format and the Strategic Action Plan.

Let me close by acknowledging the great efforts made by all of you, the authors, the MSOs and DOs, the Program Committee, the COSPAR Executive and Secretariat, Russell Boyce and the Local Organising Committee, TC and his team at ZARM, and Selina Moscott, Emma McPartlan, Emma Bowyer and the team at ICMSA. Thank you all very much.

Best wishes for your scientific success and an excellent, enjoyable, and long-lasting Assembly. Without further ado, welcome to the Scientific Program for the 2021 COSPAR Assembly.

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