

**National  
Sustainability  
Society**

**2nd Annual Conference  
University of Notre Dame, Indiana  
October 20 - 22, 2025**

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## **Post Event Report**

The National Sustainability Society (NSS) mission is: “to foster a thriving cross-sectoral, transdisciplinary, and intersectional society that advances a just, resilient, and sustainable world” and is guided by the vision of “A thriving and resilient future empowered by sustainability professionals leading transformative change.”

As part of our growing effort to build an organization that can serve the broad community of leaders, managers, researchers, and students working on sustainability, the National Sustainability Society’s conference facilitated knowledge sharing and cross-sector engagement around the science and practice of sustainability. The NSS solicited presentations, posters, workshops, and panel discussions that spoke to a wide range of topics under the overarching theme of transformative change for sustainability.

The NSS received almost 350 contributions, accepted around 325, and ultimately hosted a conference of 390 total attendees, the majority of whom were speakers on panels, in symposia, in spark sessions, presented posters, and/or facilitated a workshop. overarching theme of transformative change for sustainability.



# Agenda Summary

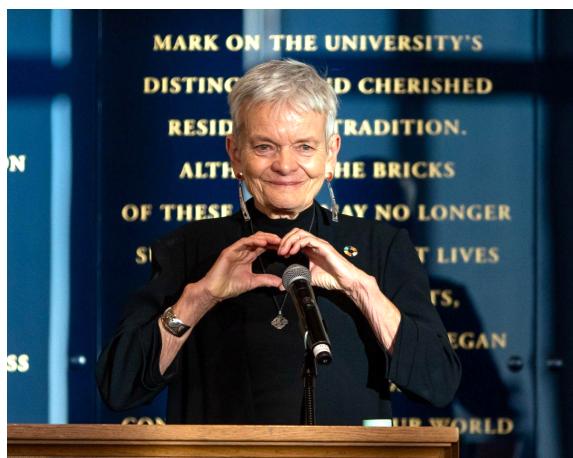
## Workshops

Ten 2-hour workshops were offered during the half-day prior to the start of the main conference program for a fee. Workshops addressed themes, tools, and skills applicable to sustainability work, including multidisciplinarity, behavioral and cultural change, educational competencies and frameworks, decarbonization, participatory and collaborative approaches, and the intersection of science with policy and corporate sustainability.

## Main Program

The conference was organized around multiple types of sessions to provide a variety of opportunities to learn, engage, and interact. *Plenary Keynotes* were selected to offer leadership perspectives from academic and non-academic contexts.

Professor Lisa Graumlich, professor emeritus, and ordained clergy provided scientific and spiritual insights on the “inner climate crisis.”



Kathleen McLaughlin, executive vice president and chief sustainability officer, Walmart, Inc. positioned sustainability as a shared value that requires a systems, multi-disciplinary, and expansive problem-solving lens. Catherine Zhu of Egon Zehnder and Tom Reynolds of University of Notre Dame, chaired the discussion.



During a “Conversation with our Nation’s Deans,” Christopher Boone (Public Policy, University of Southern California) Patricia Culligan, (Engineering, University of Notre Dame), and Joseph Messina (Humanities & Sciences, University of Alabama) argued that colleges and universities must integrate sustainability across programs and train students in order to be ethical. This panel was moderated by Nicole Ardoin of Stanford University.



Laura Rasmussen, professor, University of Denmark and lead author of the 2025 award-winning paper of the Frontiers Planet Prize, shared research on the joint environmental and social benefits of agricultural diversification.

## Closing Plenary Prize Session

This session featured the 2025 NSS Annual Achievement Award Winner, the Natural Capital Project's People, Planet, and Prosperity initiative; the NSS Emerging Scholar Award winner, Elizabeth Tellman, University of Wisconsin-Madison; and the NSS Innovations in Sustainability Education team award, The Circular Economy Program at the University of Pittsburgh. Read more about our winners here: <https://www.thenss.org/2025conferencehome/2025awards>

## Panels

23 panels were assembled on a diverse range of sustainability-related topics, with a strong focus on bridging academic theory with real-world applications and integrating social equity into environmental action. Panel themes (summarized with AI-LLM) included, but were not limited to: climate and energy (decarbonization, renewable energy, planetary health); equity and justice (human rights, social

accountability in sustainability efforts, community-led innovation, grassroots organizing, and addressing inequalities in global sustainability); education and curriculum (curricular innovations, pedagogy, and experiential learning in higher education); business and economics (circular economy, operationalizing human rights principles in supply chains, and integrating economic concerns with environmental goals); and various dimensions of transformative change (education, values, implementation pathways).

## Oral Sessions and Symposia

A total of 160 individual oral presentations were given across multiple oral sessions and symposia, the latter organized on pre-identified themes and the former based on conference contributions. Like the panel sessions, these presentations emphasized interdisciplinary applied research and practice on topics similar to those listed above.

## Sponsored Session



NSS partnered with the Frontiers Planet Prize to showcase and elevate the work of three people who are not only award-winning scientists, but also expert science communicators. Ed Kolodziej (University of Washington, North American National Champion of the Frontiers Planet Prize, 2023), Laura Vang Rasmussen (University of Denmark, and lead author of the 2025 Frontiers Planet Prize winning paper), and Jason Rohr (University of Notre Dame and 2024 international champion of the Frontiers Planet

Prize) spoke of their research with passion and commitment. They demonstrated a conviction that transformative change will only happen through interdisciplinary, collaborative research and effective interdisciplinary communication.

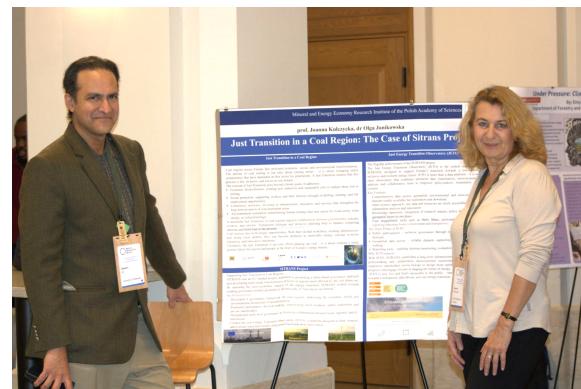
## Spark Sessions

These sessions provided opportunities to spark participant-led creative thinking, conversation, innovation, and learning, based on an identified topic and prompts suggested by the facilitator. This year there were three spark sessions: “Research design and codes of practice for maximizing the impact of energy and climate social science” (Benjamin Sovacool); “Global minerals trust for sustainable infrastructure transition” (Saleem Ali); and “Up in the air: Increasing accountability for air travel emissions and a conversation about NSS carbon offsets” (Shelie Miller and Rose Weeks). From the latter, we discovered that our members are in favor of offset contributions that are shared with local nonprofit organizations doing sustainability work, rather than to a larger offset organization. To this end, NSS matched the voluntary contributions of participants and made a donation to Cultivate Food Rescue in South Bend. Cultivate participated in a panel session and they also partnered with our event caterers to rescue excess food.

## Flash Talks and Posters

Flash talks offered a brief (4-minute) opportunity for presenters to highlight key aspects of their work. A total of 17 flash talks were presented, many of which were paired with posters (25) displayed in the main event space throughout the meeting.

## Social and Networking Opportunities



We recognize the importance of building a community and networks; the conference program included several opportunities for informal conversation and gathering.

- Five pre-conference outings allowed participants to visit and learn about sustainability practices in the City of South Bend and on the Notre Dame (UND) campus. The outings included two campus green tours, a tour of the UND power plant, a field trip to Rum Village Nature Area, and a field trip to Indiana's Continental Divide Park.
- Daily coffee socials and lunches (included with registration)
- Poster sessions during coffee sessions

- An evening reception
- Lunchtime sustainability chats provided space for informal gatherings on various topics: a sustainability book chat, a discussion on NSS student groups, and peer networking. Several sustainability experts also led informal lunch chats: Rachelle Gould (Univ. of Vermont), Zan Dodson (PNAS), and Frank Niepold (NOAA).

## Networking and Engagement

(via the Whova app)

- 89% of attendees downloaded the Whova app for agenda access, networking, and other conference resources.
- The conference Whova app included:
  - 423 community-board messages, including 33 article links, 31 discussion topics, 16 job postings, 23 “ask organizer” questions, 17 ride-share messages, and 35 break-the-ice messages
  - 3309 profile views
  - 42 business cards scanned
  - 863 private 1:1 messages sent

## Sustainability practices

We live our values by taking every opportunity to practice sustainability. Here are a few of the sustainability actions in our 2nd Annual Conference:

<https://www.thenss.org/post/sustainability-in-action-at-the-2025-nss-conference>



# Attendee Summary

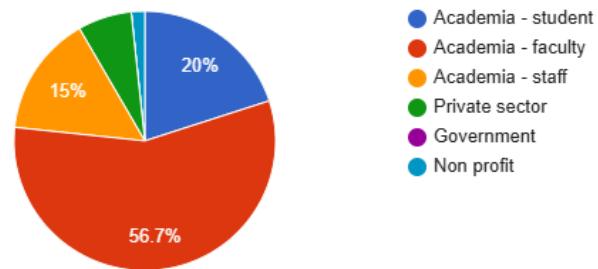
390 sustainability enthusiasts registered to attend the conference. The majority of attendees (93%, n= 361) were affiliated with institutions/organizations based in the United States. U.S. representation was 7% higher than our inaugural meeting. 29 international attendees represented 17 non-U.S. countries (down from 26 non-U.S. countries at our inaugural meeting), including the U.K. (4), India (4), Germany (4), and China (3).



A goal of NSS is to bring together sustainability scholars and non-academic professionals. Our inaugural meeting included 76% academic scholars and 24% non-academic professionals. This year, 344 attendees were from higher education institutions (88%); 29 (7%, down from 13% in 2024) participants represented the private sector; 9 (2%, down from 5% in 2024) represented the public sector; and 11 (3%, down from 6% in 2024) represented non-profits. In future years, we will continue to work to bridge these sectoral gaps, welcoming representation from non-academic institutions and organizations.

## Post-conference Participant Feedback

Respondents n=60



A goal of this conference was to offer a mix of session types that offered both presentations and discussion. Which session types did you enjoy the most?

|                |       |
|----------------|-------|
| Panels         | 41.6% |
| Symposia       | 26.5% |
| Spark sessions | 15%   |
| Flash talks    | 9.7%  |
| Poster session | 7.1%  |

***At what point during the conference did you feel the most engaged?***

Sessions that (1) were deemed “high quality content,” (2) were interdisciplinary and provided diverse perspectives, (3) offered new, inspiring, and provocative ideas, and (4) were followed by ample and rigorous Q&A time were seen as fostering high engagement. Although a quarter of respondents described the event’s general atmosphere as “engaging,” fewer than expected (1%) mentioned the reception and lunch hours, suggesting a missed opportunity to facilitate desired engagement during those unstructured times.

### **Who or what captured your interest?**

1. **Keynote Speakers** and other Specific Presenters were the single most frequently mentioned element that captured interest. These speakers' expertise, inspirational message, and/or pioneering role in the field captured our participants' interest:
  - a. Lisa Graumlich (almost half of the respondents highlighted her keynote)
  - b. Kathleen McLaughlin
  - c. Professors Jonathan Patz and Kristie Ebi, as pioneers in their field
  - d. Saleem Ali, is an engaging speaker who could speak successfully about a topic to non-experts
  - e. Alicia Harley and Bill Clark, as facilitators of the "Teaching Sustainability" workshop
  - f. Krista Hiser, as facilitator of the "Accreditation" workshop
2. **Content:** A significant number of respondents highlighted the diversity of topics covered. Respondents specifically mentioned the following sessions or topics:

- a. Planetary health
- b. Energy transitions
- c. Education, pedagogy, and experiential learning
- d. Humanities, spirituality, storytelling, and the "somatic governance" session
- e. Midwest and Great Lakes regional focus

### **3. Format**

- a. A few participants indicated that the welcome reception and communal lunches stood out as engaging moments; while networking is desired, at this conference, it was *less memorable* than the content of the formal agenda.
- b. Keynotes and panels were the most enjoyed sessions
- c. "Panels are always nice because I get to hear a more personal take on how people feel about the issues and theories they are working with

### **How satisfied were you with:**

| 1 = very unsatisfied<br>4 = very satisfied | 1      | 2      | 3      | 4      | Average Score |
|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------------|
| Conference content                         | 0%     | 21.70% | 43.30% | 35%    | 3.2           |
| Conference format                          | 5%     | 21.70% | 36.70% | 36.70% | 3.1s          |
| Networking opportunities                   | 0.80%  | 18.70% | 39.80% | 40.70% | 3.0           |
| Venue                                      | 0.80%  | 7.30%  | 27.60% | 64.20% | 3.6           |
| Food and refreshments                      | 11.40% | 33.30% | 33.30% | 22%    | 3.0           |
| Organizer communications                   | 0.80%  | 9.80%  | 21.10% | 68.30% | 3.5           |
| Conference cost                            | 0.80%  | 19.50% | 45.50% | 34.10% | 3.0           |
| Sustainability practices                   | 1.70%  | 6.70%  | 25%    | 66.70% | 3.6           |

## Summary of Improvement Feedback

Feedback for next year's conference was brief, as the majority of respondents were very happy with the conference. Some feedback highlighted that logistical and structural tweaks are needed for the next conference, in particular, adjusting the physical layout and agenda format to enhance discussion and engagement opportunities.

- Fewer parallel sessions, and/or more creative ways to incorporate discussion
- More facilitated cross-sector and employer-networking opportunities
- Catering to a diet beyond vegan (while keeping sustainability standards)

Beyond the annual conference, we asked participants which of these activities the NSS should focus on in the coming year:

| Post Conference Survey |     | IRL “Dot Voting” |                    |
|------------------------|-----|------------------|--------------------|
| Academic journal       | 19% | 19.0%            | Job board          |
| AI                     |     | 16.5%            | Academic journal   |
| Workforce training     |     | 15.7%            | Workforce training |
| Job board              |     | 15.7%            | Mentorship         |
| Mentorship             |     | 13.1%            | Sector research    |
| Local chapters         |     | 9.8%             | Local chapters     |
| Sector research        |     | 9.8%             | AI                 |
| Continuing education   |     | 7.2%             |                    |

## Other Comments

- I enjoyed the style and the friendly atmosphere a lot!
- Thanks for hosting such an important meeting that made me feel like I belong!
- Thank You for a great event overall
- I love attending this conference. It's a feel-good, intellectual experience.
- This year, I attended as a participant, presenting my graduate studies and university. However, as I transition into my professional career in the private sector (architecture and design), it would be very beneficial to offer courses or panels that provide continuing education credits or LEED credits. This would create an incentive for employers to support and accommodate employees' attendance at the conference, making it more accessible and valuable for professionals.

- Many people from academia stopped to talk to me about what skills the private sector wants from new graduates joining the work force.
- Desperately need a curriculum repository
- Small paid meetings on special topics targeted to the sustainability (S\*) practitioners
- Work with the state government
- Better private sector presence, putting theories into practice and collaborative workshops
- It would be interesting to figure out how to link better with corporate involvement and investment.
- I enjoyed the panel with the mix of academics and industry together. It was encouraging to hear a success story of collaboration across sectors. Also, it was valuable to hear perspectives on what industry needs... and trying to break the silos that exist.
- If you make it fun and inclusive, they will come.
- Need this to be more engaging and multi disciplinary
- There were multiple sessions focused on engagement in the classroom and I was curious how groupings of presenters were made. Could seniority level be more mixed next time?
- I think you should do less, and do less really well. The eclectic mix of session topics was too broad, and within a panel there was shoehorned coherence. I suggest doing a landscape analysis of what other conferences offer, and then fill the gap. I wonder if doubling down on transformation science and transdisciplinary practices would be the right lane and would still allow for engagement with practice/industry leaders.
- Less options for sessions (5+ seems to many?), more focused agenda
- I think it would be cool to have a student poster award.
- Please, please don't jump on the AI bandwagon too quickly -- especially for an organization focused on sustainability. There are serious ethical and ecological impact problems that we need to work through before advocating for more AI use.

## Conference Planning Committee

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Saleem Al, University of Delaware  
Nicole Ardoin, Stanford University  
Ashley Bennett, University of Notre Dame  
Alisa Bonsignore, Clarifying Complex Ideas  
Dan Brown, University of Washington  
Maggie Davis, Oak Ridge National Laboratory  
Jim Hanna, Microsoft  
Jay Golden, Syracuse University  
Garrick Louis, University of Virginia  
Tanus Marquette, TRC Companies  
Shelie Miller, University of Michigan  
Cassidy O'Block, University of Notre Dame  
Jason Rohr, University of Notre Dame  
April Toler, University of Notre Dame  
Cristy Watkins, University of Notre Dame

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