

Taking advantage of the new normal

A look at some of the activities conducted by the Regional Representation for Asia and the Pacific (RRAP) during the COVID-19 pandemic



Over the past year, we experienced both positive and negative impacts on our work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The positive impacts of the new normal are presumably similar to those felt by all OIE staff around the world. Virtual meetings have saved us both time and money, enabling us to have more frequent meetings with a considerably larger number of participants. We have been forced to master new technologies and are now at home with the latest tools, including Zoom and other useful software. The importance of a work-life balance has been underlined, and some staff members have enjoyed more flexibility, working from home or from their home countries. On the other hand, at times, we faced some challenges in communicating among RRAP staff and with regional Members and partners.

Our main efforts to adapt were based around the shift from physical to virtual meetings and training. And it became apparent that online activities can replace some aspects of face-to-face meetings, which changed how we planned some activities. We also reframed the regional website as a platform through which to share information on our activities, as well as information from Members (e.g. good practices addressing AMR, rabies) and Reference Centres (e.g. information sharing platform). Below we take a look at some of the activities where we tried to adapt to our new normal.



The team from the OIE Reference Laboratory for rabies in India led by Dr Shrikrishna Isloor (third from left) who provided the SAARC Virtual Rabies Diagnosis Training.

Virtual training on rabies

A typical laboratory-based in-person training session usually requires a well-furnished lab with glassware, pipettes, equipment, reagents, lab technicians and trainees. Due to our current situation, instead, the attendees of the virtual South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) rabies diagnosis training ‘walked in’ through Zoom, sat for a couple of hours each day and got trained on some new techniques of rabies sampling and diagnosis. The lack of hands-on practical sessions was more than made up for by well-prepared pre-recorded videos, PowerPoint presentations, lengthy Q&A sessions, and attendance by nearly three times as many participants that could have been accommodated in a traditional training setting.

Online meeting series on wildlife health

With the survey for Members on wildlife health and the development of the new OIE Wildlife Health Framework in 2020, RRAP took the opportunity to engage with Members on this topic. Although training for Focal Points for Wildlife in the region has not taken place since 2017, we did organise a series of online sub-regional meetings, involving both the veterinary and wildlife sectors. We were able to collect baseline data on the status of wildlife health activities from Members for East Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific.

Emerging disease response – lumpy skin disease

When lumpy skin disease (LSD) was reported in Chinese Taipei for the first time in July last year, to alert Members and prepare them for the high risk of further spread, particularly over summer, we very rapidly organised a series of webinars with international LSD experts, building on the already strong engagement in regional webinars since COVID-19. These exchanges between experts, and affected and at-risk Members, reached a wide audience and greatly increased the level of understanding and preparedness in the region. The webinars were followed by a more practically focused online training developed in partnership with EuFMD, FAO and the OIE ([Link to an introductory module](#)).

Emerging disease response – sharing of positive control

Limited access to positive controls is considered to be the main gap in the early detection of emerging aquatic animal diseases. COVID has had a huge impact on the international shipping industry which has further disrupted the shipment of positive controls. For example, in response to an outbreak of Decapod Iridescent Virus 1 (DIV1), which is an emerging threat to the shrimp industry, RRAP consulted OIE Reference Laboratories dealing with crustacean diseases and uploaded a list of laboratories that may provide assistance with the supply of positive control for DIV1 laboratory diagnosis on the regional website. As of late last month, three Members have successfully obtained DIV1 positive control from an OIE Reference Laboratory and this has been considered an example of how to assist Members during other emerging aquatic animal disease challenges in our region.

Virtual internships

Since April of last year, we have hosted 13 interns for various durations to provide them with opportunities to cultivate a better understanding of our Organisation and its activities in the region. Owing to travel restrictions, these internships were conducted remotely and were managed using e-mail and video calls. Though online communication was challenging with some interns, a clear advantage was that they could remotely join more regional meetings to observe our activities, and it paid off, our interns expressed their satisfaction at the end of their internships. RRAP continues to explore ways of improving online communication and of taking advantage of the virtual format of internships.

So, in spite of the unprecedented situation we have all found ourselves in this year, RRAP came out stronger and more resilient by actively engaging our members in the region.

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