



WILLAMETTE RIVER  
INITIATIVE

# *Case Study* Within Our Reach

*Within Our Reach* was a biennial conference and the preeminent convening strategy for the WRI.

From the outset, the WRI realized that infusing funding into the system was not enough to catalyze the kinds of change that needed to happen to make significant headway in the health of the Willamette. The WRI team had a unique vantage point that enabled them to see what was happening across the basin and how it could happen more effectively and innovatively if done collaboratively. Both grantmaking and convening were essential to ensure that people were aligned around a common vision and goals, had a shared understanding of what was happening across the Basin, and had a community of support.

At its core, the conference was a nexus of knowledge and practice that brought together many people and ideas that would not have come together otherwise. The content of *Within Our Reach* celebrated the successes and highlighted the challenges that were faced across the Willamette Basin. It convened speakers from outside of the Basin to put these successes and challenges in the broader context and to seed ideas to move

the work forward. It provided relevant research from within and outside the basin in an accessible format to build a shared understanding of science to strengthen practice. Most importantly, it fostered basin-wide, cross-sector conversations and connections that facilitated community-wide strategic thinking to provide direction for the work in the years following the conferences.

*Within Our Reach* was built on the tremendous momentum and energy that came with a new funding source and the launch of new partnerships. After five conferences over a decade, that same sense of possibility and opportunity still remains. People value *Within Our Reach* for both learning and connecting. They see it as essential to sustaining the purposeful and productive relationships that have been developed through the WRI and as an invaluable tool for bringing new people into the work. Uncertain of its future, many expressed a sense of loss and deep hope that this event will remain as the WRI sunsets.

# Critical Components

The WRI employed many strategies to make *Within Our Reach* an exciting and impactful event:

## 1 Strategic

*Within Our Reach* was not just a conference; it was a critical tool to further the WRI's aims. It was one of many intentional, interconnected strategies to advance the work and bring people together to make basin-scale information and action attainable. The WRI recognized their unique ability to convene a wide array of people and perspectives from throughout the entire region.

## 2 Intentional

The conference was intentionally designed to maximize the potential of learning, collaboration, and relationship-building. The WRI carefully curated speakers and sessions. They meticulously created an environment where people could meet and interact with each other. This intentional planning and coordination required a great deal of work and preparation. The WRI team constantly reflected on what new knowledge could be shared, what accomplishments could be celebrated, what new subject areas have been overlooked that needed to be explored, and how they could engage community in the process. They modeled in the design the values they wanted to see in the work – letting the community drive the conversation, building cross-sector partnerships and making the conference accessible by reducing barriers to participation, among others.

## 3 Modeling

Through *Within Our Reach*, the WRI's intent was to model the kind of basin-wide, shared vision and mindset perspective they desired to see throughout the work in the Willamette. They realized people need to experience cross-sector partnership building before they could replicate and multiply it new ways. Part of the theory of change embedded in the conference was that if they could create an opportunity for people to come together who may not see eye-to-eye, but still find common interests and ways to partner in support of a healthier river at a conference, then they will be able to adopt and replicate that in their work outside of the conference.

## 4 Participatory

The WRI approached the design of *Within Our Reach* with participation as a core value. The WRI had ongoing dialogue and solicited targeted feedback from the field to understand what would be most valuable to them and what gaps needed to be filled. They convened a planning committee from the field to help select the conference theme and shape the event. The planning committee provided ideas for session topics and speakers, reviewed proposals for break-out presentations, and provided vital insight to WRI to ensure the content was relevant and meaningful. In many cases, they also recruited speakers, coordinated sessions, and served as speakers or moderators. The planning committee exemplified how the WRI made every effort to make *Within Our Reach* an expression of the best thinking of the restoration community instead of simply a program administered to the restoration community.

## 5 Responsive

In planning *Within Our Reach*, the WRI listened and learned from the feedback they received. They used input from the field to provide content that felt relevant in the moment and push fresh thinking in new topic areas. They selected topics and speakers that highlighted the work in the Willamette and shared lessons learned with the broader community to advance partnerships and deepen knowledge. Not only did they ensure the design of *Within Our Reach* reflected the field's input, but they also adjusted their grantmaking and programmatic strategy in response to what they heard at *Within Our Reach*. This demonstrated the value of the work accomplished during the convening and modeled the value of responsiveness from the convening.

## 6 Interdisciplinary and Relevant

*Within Our Reach* sought to bring together a wide variety of people involved in improving the health of the river. To do this, they created an interdisciplinary conference that reflected the multifaceted nature of the restoration field and the diversity of the communities engaged in the river. They carefully knit together streams of content that were pertinent to people from a variety of disciplines while unifying them toward a common purpose.

## 7 Celebratory

One of the defining characteristics of *Within Our Reach* was the celebratory nature of the event. From the beginning, there was a sense of energy in the convening from the opportunity of WRI funding and the experience of bringing people together for a common cause. The WRI sustained the energy and excitement in a variety of ways. They featured accomplishments from across the basin that demonstrated the efficacy of projects. They highlighted ways people were designing new projects, taking on new challenges, mobilizing for new opportunities, and reaching new levels of scale and scope. As one participant said, "This got people thinking that the Willamette was more than the sum of its parts." They also provided tokens of celebration to help people feel a sense of value and belonging.

## 8 Relational

The WRI recognized the importance of developing strong, supportive relationships to work effectively together to improve river health. To this end, they designed *Within Our Reach* to provide a mix of content and relationships, subjects and socializing. They created a context where people could experience meaningful conversation both formally and informally throughout the events. In many ways, their investment in relationships outside of the context of the conference enabled people to come from a place of trust within the conference and generated a sense of eagerness for relational connection.

## 9 Catalytic

*Within Our Reach* provided an opportunity for people both to reflect on the progress and challenges of the past and to look forward and plan together for what was to come. *Within Our Reach* sessions balanced sharing information about what had happened and working together to address challenges and thinking collectively about what was next. The strong relationships fostered through the WRI and welcoming environment of *Within Our Reach* created a sense of safety and belonging that promoted openness to new ideas. The years between the conference continued the "what's next" conversation. By the next *Within Our Reach* conference, people were ready and eager to report on progress and plan for more. This ensured that *Within Our Reach* was more than just an event. It was a catalyst for developing strategy across the Willamette River Basin.

# Lessons Learned

Through the series of *Within Our Reach* convenings, there were a number of lessons learned:

## Maximize the power of convening.

Bringing people together was an important achievement of *Within Our Reach*, made even more powerful with strategic and intentional planning. Many people report that *Within Our Reach* was the most appreciated and influential aspect of the WRI. It fundamentally helped to align priorities and coordinate action for river health, build the capacity of the restoration community, and advance diversity, equity, and inclusion within river restoration efforts. It provided resources, relationships, and inspiration that catalyzed change in each of these strategic areas. For future convenings, giving the same kind of attention to how the convening builds upon and pushes forward strategic change will be critical to maximize the benefits of bringing people together.

## Foster a culture of ownership and involvement from the field.

Planning *Within Our Reach* was both a time-intensive and thought-intensive process. The burden largely fell to the WRI team to avoid adding stress to those in the field. While in some ways that was intentional, it also meant that there might have been missed opportunities to engage different perspectives and share ownership of the conference more broadly with those in the field. This might produce vulnerability for sustaining the quality of convenings going forward. In the future, giving greater attention to developing systems to effectively activate and share ownership with the planning committee and the field more broadly would serve the conference and those planning it well.

## Strategically integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Integrating an emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion with restoration proved to be a strategic opportunity and a significant challenge. *Within Our Reach* provided a tremendous opportunity to bring more people into the conversation about DEI in watershed restoration, exposing and challenging the field. Because *Within Our Reach* was such a beloved event, shifting to a greater focus on DEI was challenging for some who valued the narrower focus on the practice and science of river restoration over the years. While those who were deeply involved in the DEI work of the WRI, such as those participating in learning cohorts with the Center for Diversity and the Environment, readily saw the benefit of this shift, those who had little connection to WRI outside of *Within Our Reach* struggled to remain engaged. Developing a strategy to bring those who were less involved along could have possibly helped them navigate the adaptive challenge they were facing to embrace DEI learning as an opportunity for growth, both for the broader effort and for them individually.

## Balance expanding the audience with creating common purpose.

One of the accomplishments of the WRI was to have *Within Our Reach* raise the visibility of restoration and, later, DEI in restoration among the broader public. The event became more accessible and inclusive of a broader range of people who are working on river and community health. The content broadened to support



a more diverse audience. As this happened, some expressed concern that the content was shifting toward greater specialization instead of toward advancing the kind of shared understanding and public purpose it appeared to have in years past. While there were more diverse content offerings, the physical separation among more tracks of content meant that people weren't hearing the same things or having the same kinds of exchanges that had been so valuable to them. Striking a balance between providing content relevant to a broader range of people and creating a common agenda will be important going forward.

## Keep the conversation going.

One of the most powerful characteristics of *Within Our Reach* was that it was one part of the conversation, not the entire conversation. What happened at *Within Our Reach* did not simply begin and end with the conference. It was the largest, most public version of multiple smaller and more localized conversations. It was not a stand-alone event, merely one key expression of many ongoing convenings. This made the event exceptionally valuable to everyone involved and to achieving the goals of the WRI. It will be critical to sustaining the work of convenings, including a regular gathering for everyone, to ensure that conversations throughout the field are ongoing and that *Within Our Reach* is a living, evolving conversation rather than a moment in time.

## Create capacity to keep convening alive.

*Within Our Reach* had immense value for achieving the goals of the WRI and was universally beloved by everyone who was a part of it. It also took a significant amount of staff time and energy to plan and implement. To continue the momentum and broaden participation, it will be imperative to provide ample support to plan and implement an event of this kind in the future.

## Maintain focus on relationship building in all aspects of the work.

The success of *Within Our Reach* was intrinsically tied to relationships that were built through other aspects of the WRI. These relationships enabled people to come together from a place of trust and see this as a collective effort for the health of the river. *Within Our Reach* was designed to be a welcoming environment for the variety of people who are a part of this work and to involve a broader range of people to support this work. Moving forward, it will be essential to ensure that strong relationships are the backbone of the convenings.

# Building a Movement

*Within Our Reach* was a critical component of the WRI's strategies to build a movement for the health of the Willamette. It brought people from a variety of backgrounds together and developed a shared commitment and momentum toward a common vision. It catalyzed and continued conversations about what was best for the health of the river and its people. It provided resources, shared knowledge, and built relationships to drive action. It celebrated successes and connected people to the bigger picture to help them see what is possible. Of all that the Willamette River Initiative accomplished over 11 years of leadership, *Within Our Reach* was one of the most powerful and effective investments.

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