

## The History of SSAR’s Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee

Membership diversity is a widely recognized predictor of organization success, particularly among volunteer-driven, nonprofit groups (National Council of Nonprofits 2022). Organizations with higher levels of gender, racial, and ethnic diversity exhibit greater creativity, problem-solving skills, innovation, and profitability as a result of access to broader perspectives and opinions (Hong and Page 2004; Hewlett et al. 2013; Lorenzo and Reeves 2018). Employees or members of organizations that authentically promote equity and inclusion are more likely to describe belonging to a supportive community, which further aids in recruiting, sustaining, and engaging a diverse workforce or membership (Downey et al. 2015; Rosales et al. 2022). Engaging individuals with diverse identities requires cultural competency and an ideological commitment to genuine inclusion. In other words, it is not enough to simply invite members of underrepresented groups to join organizations and serve on committees and boards (i.e., tokenism); we must listen deeply, value their lived experiences and contributions, and be prepared to follow their lead with actionable plans.

Despite the well-documented benefits of infusing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI; Box 1) into professional societies, efforts to do so have proceeded slowly, primarily as a consequence of systemic barriers, including a lack of diversity in the leadership of most organizations (Grindstaff 2022). Fortunately, the gender gap is shrinking for graduate enrollment in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), although disparities persist for degrees earned in some disciplines (e.g., physics, earth sciences, engineering; NCSES 2023). Similarly, the number and proportion of STEM degrees earned by members of historically underrepresented groups has increased across all degree levels over the past decade, although this trend is less pronounced for graduate-degree earners (NCSES 2023). Likewise for STEM careers, underrepresented group participation in the workforce increased from 9 to 13% over the period from 2003 to 2017 (Pew Research Center 2021). Within life science careers in the USA, women are approaching gender parity in terms of raw numbers (48%; Pew Research Center 2021), yet other forms of inequity remain. For example, some underrepresented groups, particularly those identifying as Black (6%) or Hispanic (8%), are still grossly underrepresented relative to their distribution across all careers (11% and 17%,

respectively; Pew Research Center 2021). Similar demographic data are not available for herpetologists, but if either the Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles (SSAR) membership or attendees at annual Joint Meetings of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists are considered representative of both student and professional herpetologists in the USA, the paucity of diversity (in many of its facets) has been a glaring oversight for decades. These lingering disparities in representation in science generally, and herpetology specifically, have become even more conspicuous following the broader awareness of racial, cultural, and social inequities in recent years. Within this context, SSAR recognized that its scientific, educational, and conservation missions can be achieved only through the efforts of a diverse, creative, and engaged membership. This realization set the stage for institutionalizing DEI as core values, and is leading to fundamental change in policies and practices within the Society, as described in this contribution to *Herpetological History*.

### FORMATION AND CHARGE OF THE DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION COMMITTEE

On 21 June 2020, SSAR President Martha “Marty” L. Crump invited Jennifer M. Deitloff and Robert E. Espinoza to co-chair a newly envisioned SSAR Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee (DEIC). Both agreed to serve as co-chairs and invited Jessica L. Tingle to be the third co-chair, based on Marty’s recommendation and Jessica’s longstanding efforts to support DEI in the Society. President Crump suggested several additional SSAR members to contact, and over the course of fall 2020, Itzue W. Caviedes-Solis, Kate Jackson, Fausto Mendez de la Cruz, Evan S. H. Quah, Ann V. Paterson, Phillip Skipwith, and Greg Watkins-Colwell were recruited by the DEIC co-chairs and agreed to serve on the inaugural committee. In late 2020, these individuals were officially appointed by President Crump to serve on the DEIC.

Soon after the committee formed, the co-chairs of DEIC set out to define their committee’s charge. With input from the entire DEIC, the charge was formalized as follows:

The charge of the DEIC is to identify, promote, and implement strategies that recruit, support, sustain, and engage a diverse membership in SSAR. While diversity is essential, it is not sufficient. The DEIC also supports equity and inclusion as foundational and pervasive principles that should be infused into all Society matters, including but not limited to SSAR governance, participation in annual meetings, and publishing in our journals. Here, diversity is defined as all facets of human identity—be they based on biology, social constructs, life experiences, etc.—such as: race, ethnicity, creed, color, sex/sexual identity, gender/gender identity, age, (dis)ability, national origin, language, culture, military/veteran status, socio-economic status, political perspective, religion/spirituality, etc. Likewise, equity refers to practices and policies that enable all members to participate in, and similarly experience, all SSAR-associated endeavors. Note equity is different from equality, insofar as the

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latter assumes everyone's experiences are the same, whereas the former acknowledges the structural inequities (historical and current) that advantage some groups while disadvantaging others. Finally, the purpose of inclusion is to engender a sense of belonging and respect for all members by providing fair and just opportunities to fully participate and achieve their potential in Society matters.

The DEIC shall engage the Board of Directors on substantive matters, such as those that may require changes to bylaws, traditional practices, official statements, and initiatives with financial or broader implications for the Society, and with the chairs of other SSAR standing committees as appropriate.

#### ACCOMPLISHMENTS THROUGH 2022

Upon formation, DEIC commissioned several Progress Pride Flag-themed variants of the SSAR logo, which were created by artist/herpetologist Cynthia J. Hitchcock, based off the traditional SSAR logo created by David M. Dennis (Fig. 1). Concurrently, DEIC began assembling a list of action items to promote DEI in SSAR, which are organized into three major themes: (1) fundamental changes to SSAR's organizational policies and practices, (2) support for attendance and engagement by members of underrepresented groups at SSAR meetings, and (3) professional development and recruitment.

In its first 2.5 years, DEIC worked with Society leaders to accomplish several DEI goals to better serve SSAR members, as well as the broader community of professionals and the next generation of herpetologists. These achievements are outlined below and featured along with future plans on the SSAR DEIC website (<https://ssarherps.org/dei>).

*Toward Fundamental Change in SSAR's Policies and Practices.*—Ensuring equity and inclusion for all members of a professional society requires a critical examination of the internal policies and practices, as well as an assessment of the experiences and perceptions of current and former members. SSAR has a long history of outreach to individuals and groups who often have not been included in professional societies, and for investment in a global herpetological community (Adler 2019). Although those efforts have helped to create a thriving community, like other professional societies, SSAR has not achieved equity and inclusion for all. Accordingly, DEIC made an early commitment to identifying areas in need of improvement, and working with Society leadership to prioritize changes within those spheres. With that information, SSAR can continue the process of creating an inclusive environment that welcomes, supports, and engages members from diverse backgrounds. And by building a broader sense of community and belonging, more members will be invested in sustaining the Society.

To this end, DEIC created and disseminated a membership diversity survey in April–May 2021. The purposes of this survey included: (1) establishing a benchmark for future assessments of SSAR's efforts towards recruiting and retaining a diverse membership through initiatives that promote DEI; (2) recognizing and welcoming the many identities of current and future members; and (3) helping SSAR equitably serve the needs of all members. We received responses from 537 members, which at that time represented 46% of SSAR's membership (N = 1156), including 97 of 239 (41%) student members, and 100% of the 46 officers, editors, and committee chairs. DEIC prepared a detailed report of the survey results, including a list of the main findings,

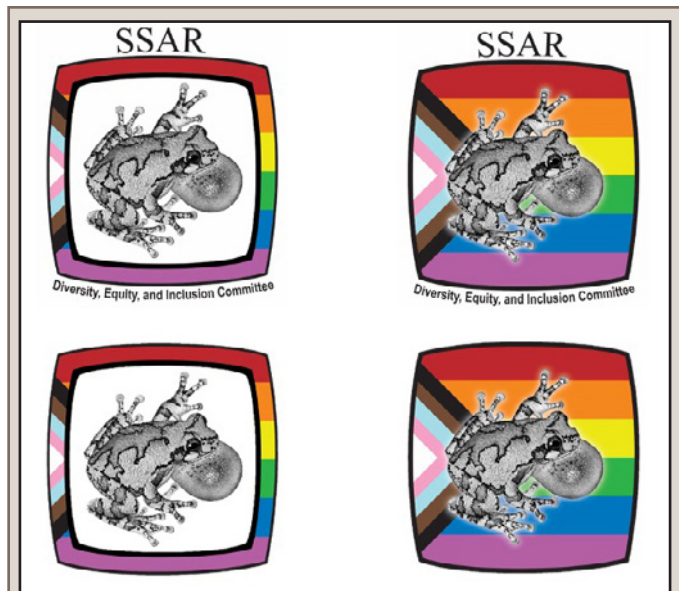


FIG. 1. Four DEI-themed logos commissioned by SSAR's DEIC. David M. Dennis created the original artwork for the SSAR logo, which was modified for DEIC purposes by Cynthia J. Hitchcock. Daniel Quasar, the creator of the Progress Pride Flag used in the logo backgrounds, gave us permission to use the progress flag variant in DEIC logos and future initiatives. The modified logos were approved by Dennis and the SSAR Board of Directors in 2021.

tables and figures presenting quantitative data, and summaries of participant comments. Our report was shared with the SSAR leadership and membership on the DEIC website (<https://ssarherps.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/SSAR-Diversity-Survey-Report-2021.pdf>). DEIC plans to conduct future surveys at 2–3-year intervals to track our progress and provide structured opportunities for members to share feedback.

In October 2022, as a follow up to the membership survey, DEIC convened a meeting of SSAR leadership (officers, editors, and committee chairs) to prioritize organizational changes that would support our DEI goals. We emphasized establishing a timeline and holding ourselves accountable to both near- and long-term goals. The SSAR Board of Directors (BoD) and several committees committed to working toward accomplishing each unit's goals, and DEIC will assess their progress in April 2023. That meeting left us energized, grateful, and optimistic with the sense we can accomplish our goals with supportive SSAR leaders spearheading initiatives to broaden participation in the Society, and in herpetology generally.

Concurrently with our longer-term efforts to survey the membership and enact fundamental change, SSAR initiated one practice that quickly demonstrated our steadfast commitment toward equity and inclusion among our elected leaders: since the 2020 elections, candidates have been required to provide statements describing their past actions and future plans for promoting DEI in SSAR, and more broadly. These statements help members assess the holistic leadership potential of the candidates.

Organizational change involves revamping internal structures, as well as external communications. Leaders of professional organizations should routinely engage with their membership, including sharing on-going plans (e.g., equity and inclusion initiatives). Building and maintaining effective lines of communication supports the complementary goals of

membership satisfaction and organizational sustainability, as engaged members feel more fulfilled with their professional affiliations (Markova et al. 2013), which is essential to organization viability (Ilyas et al. 2020). The activities supported by DEIC have contributed to SSAR's goal of communicating and engaging with its members. For example, we authored an official statement committing SSAR to DEI as foundational and pervasive principles in all Society matters, which the BoD unanimously adopted (<https://ssarherps.org/ssar-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-statement/>). We created an anonymous feedback form on the SSAR website (<https://ssarherps.org/ssar-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-feedback-form/>). We helped elected leaders craft statements condemning various forms of bigotry and violence. And, we are continuing to work with elected leaders and chairs of SSAR committees to identify areas of future improvement. Leveraging the far-reaching readership of SSAR's journal, *Herpetological Review*, DEIC members (Tingle 2020; Caviedes-Solis 2021) and our colleagues (Alvarez 2022; Mendelson 2022) authored DEI-themed articles promoting broader participation in various facets of our field.

Future opportunities for SSAR to effect positive organizational change may include: (1) assessing the SSAR constitution and bylaws for universal accessibility and opportunities to improve transparency and DEI; (2) further diversifying the candidate pool for elected offices, perhaps by identifying creative ways to encourage broader participation in the nominations process; (3) providing advanced leadership and cultural competency training for Society leadership (i.e., beyond the typical diversity training required at most professional organizations); (4) updating standards for editorial boards, such as mandating double-blind peer reviews to reduce reviewer bias (Tomkins et al. 2017), and establishing protocols to identify and respond to unprofessional peer reviews, which disproportionately harm members of underrepresented groups (Silbiger and Stubler 2019); and (5) continuing to improve communications so members are well-informed of SSAR's progress in the DEI arena.

*Supporting Underrepresented Groups at SSAR Meetings.*— Like many academic fields and society at large, herpetology has long struggled with equity and inclusion issues. SSAR members and especially its leaders have taken steps to promote inclusion over the decades, including electing the first female president of a major herpetological society (Margaret “Meg” M. Stewart in 1979), and increasing the safety of our annual meetings by banning threatening individuals as early as the 1980s. However, SSAR and other professional societies exist in a larger society rife with racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of prejudice and hostility. These barriers to equity and inclusion make it substantially more difficult for members of certain groups to pursue an education and a career in the field of their choice (herpetological or otherwise). Fortunately, open hostility and other offensive behaviors have become increasingly uncommon at our professional meetings, as SSAR and its partner societies have created new ways to identify, dissuade, and penalize individuals who commit these shameful acts. Nevertheless, the paucity of attendant diversity remains visible at meetings held even within the past decade. While gender diversity of meeting participants has notably increased in recent years, other facets of personal identity lag far behind. One readily perceptible example is racial diversity: herpetologists from the USA are disproportionately white compared to the country's general population. The consequences of this disparity

include awkward and occasionally outright hostile conference experiences for herpetologists of color. As recently as 2017 and 2018, Black students reported having uncomfortable experiences at the Joint Meeting of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists (JMIH), in part because they were frequently the only Black person in the room, but also as a result of actions (or lack thereof) by fellow attendees (pers. comms to JLT). This is clearly unacceptable and SSAR, along with other JMIH-society DEI committees and officers, are instituting changes that seek to eliminate future occurrences of this nature.

To that end, both DEIC and SSAR leaders have spearheaded initiatives to create safe, inclusive, and student-friendly meeting environments within which all herpetologists should feel welcomed and respected. Many of these plans focus on facilitating positive one-on-one and group interactions. For example, at JMIH 2019 in Snowbird, Utah, SSAR Secretary Marion R. Preest formalized her idea of having established professionals take students out for a meal through a simple sign-up sheet. This humble yet brilliant proposal created numerous professional networking and mentoring opportunities, while reducing the financial burden on students. For JMIH 2022 in Spokane, Washington, DEIC promoted this idea and shared a digital sign-up sheet. By the end of that meeting, 61 established members and 110 students had signed up! Student participants we spoke to noted the less-stressful environment and additional time available for sharing ideas, while professionals expressed enthusiasm for the interactions, expected some to lead to long-term mentoring or collaborative activities, and said they looked forward to participating in future events.

In a separate effort to promote inclusive annual meetings, DEIC hosted an alcohol-free social event at JMIH 2022 in Spokane, Washington. Many JMIH attendees cannot or do not drink alcohol for myriad reasons: (1) being underage; (2) health conditions or medications; (3) pregnancy; (4) religious reasons; (5) dislike of or discomfort with alcohol in a conference setting; or (6) personal motivations. Therefore, alcohol-free opportunities for socializing should improve the meeting experience for a broad cross-section of herpetologists. The theme for the JMIH 2022 DEIC-hosted social event was Game Night, which centered around a herpetology-themed game (“Herpictionary”) created and hosted by DEIC co-chair Espinoza (Fig. 2). The competition was spirited, with many talented artists and implausibly gifted illustration interpreters battling amongst the teams (Fig. 2). One team comprised almost exclusively of SSAR's Founders' Fellows (pre-college herpetological enthusiasts: <https://ssarherps.org/ssar-awards/pre-college-award/>, and described below) performed remarkably well against the other primarily graduate student-led teams. Students on the winning team were awarded SSAR memberships for 2023, which was funded through DEIC's annual budget. Attendees reported having a lot of fun, and we received positive feedback from both students and established members who were delighted to have the opportunity to socialize without the pressure of drinking alcohol.

Complementing DEIC's initiatives at JMIH 2022, several other SSAR-sponsored events and programs contributed to a palpably more inclusive meeting feel than in previous years (summarized in Preest 2022). SSAR President Kirsten E. Nicholson invited DEIC member Kate Jackson to give the Presidential Travelogue, an hour-long presentation that kicks off the first night of JMIH. Kate shared a compelling history of her work in the Congo, weaving together both snake and human elements. Robert D. Denton continued leading the SSAR Mentorship Program for first-time



FIG. 2. SSAR's DEIC-sponsored Student Game Night featuring "Herpictionary," which took place at the Joint Meeting of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists in 2022, Spokane, Washington, USA: (A) Competitors in five student-led teams watch intently in an attempt to decipher the subject of a rapidly drawn, herp-themed illustration; (B) Robert E. Espinoza, DEIC co-chair, created the prompts and served as host; (C) Lizzy Patton, Team *Bauericeps*, shows off her masterful drawing of a Marine Iguana (*Amblyrhynchus cristatus*).

JMIH attendees. This year, mentees were given the opportunity to share any identity information they wished to have considered in the pairings. John C. Maerz expanded the Founders' Fellowship for Pre-College Scholars Program to serve more very early career herpetologists than ever before (Crump et al. 2022).

Also new for this year was an online professional development program to build community among the Founders' Fellows several months prior to JMIH. A day-long symposium titled *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Ichthyology and Herpetology* organized by Itzue Caviedes-Solis, Jennifer M. Deitloff, Robert D.

Denton, Lori Neuman-Lee, and Jessica L. Tingle was sponsored by SSAR, the Herpetologists' League (HL), the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists (ASIH), and the National Science Foundation. Participants gave presentations on identity-based discrimination in fieldwork, disabilities in science, involvement of youth from underrepresented groups, and queer inclusion, among many DEI-related topics (<https://ssarherps.org/2022/07/symposium-announcement-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-in-ichthyology-and-herpetology/>). The diverse funding sources for this symposium supported supplemental activities, including travel grants for students from underrepresented groups, a student-focused luncheon, and a workshop. All of these enhancements to JMIH dovetailed with efforts taken by fellow JMIH societies, the Meeting Management and Planning Committee, and local hosts to increase inclusion and accessibility.

JMIH 2022's decidedly more inclusive vibe manifested in several ways. Numerous attendees commented on the broader racial and ethnic diversity—well beyond what they had witnessed at prior US-based herpetological conferences. The visibility of LGBTQIA+ members reached an all-time high. In personal communications and on social media, members reported a dramatic positive improvement in their overall experience relative to previous years. SSAR recognizes JMIH 2022 as a step in the right direction, and we are excited to keep up the momentum towards making our annual meetings welcoming, productive, and fun for all attendees. The chairs of the DEI committees for the four JMIH societies (SSAR, ASIH, HL, and the American Elasmobranch Society) have teamed up with the Meeting Management and Planning Committee to further improve accessibility and inclusiveness at future meetings. SSAR has also worked independently to infuse DEI-related goals into our symposium application and selection process (<https://ssarherps.org/meetings/symposium-proposals/>). Having experienced the benefits of our collective efforts realized in 2022, we are motivated to continue our DEI advocacy at our future meetings.

*Professional Development and Recruitment.*—DEIC is advancing several professional development and recruitment projects, some of which will be offered in 2023. For example, we are planning a virtual workshop tentatively on the topic of equity and inclusion in field settings for spring 2023. We would also like to host an in-person event at JMIH 2023, provided these can be supported by our budget. SSAR will also continue to host a spreadsheet that matches prospective graduate students with advisors, which was initiated in 2020 under the purview of the Web Committee (<https://ssarherps.org/herp-lab-recruiting/>). Additionally, SSAR recognizes a strong need to financially support students from underrepresented groups. In 2022, the Society received an extraordinarily generous gift of \$500,000 from the Carl Gans Collections and Charitable Fund, Inc., which will be used to establish new conference travel awards. The goal will be to award at least 20% of these travel grants to non-U.S. citizens. And although this new program is open to all student members of SSAR, HL, and ASIH, the SSAR BoD also decided to prioritize members of underrepresented groups among the USA-based students receiving the awards. Given the tremendous generosity of this gift and the permanent nature of the program, we expect these awards to have a transformative impact on our membership-diversity goals over the coming years.

## THE FUTURE OF DEI IN SSAR

In recent years, taxon-focused professional societies, including SSAR, have experienced membership declines. The loss of members has created both fiscal and operational challenges for many organizations, so many have established membership committees or similarly focused groups to identify the causes of membership loss. Surveys of former members have identified the lack of a sense of belonging as a widely cited reason for membership declines across professional societies. As described in this contribution to *Herpetological History*, SSAR is making progress towards becoming a more welcoming professional society for its increasingly diverse membership by taking concrete actions towards improving equity and inclusion. DEIC is grateful to operate within a professional society that has long sought to broaden and improve the experiences of its members, particularly students. Over the decades, SSAR's leadership has instituted numerous measures (often behind the scenes) to promote DEI, even before it became a widespread social movement. Although a retelling of those efforts is beyond the scope of our contribution, suffice it to say we are proud to stand on the shoulders of a dedicated cadre of professional herpetologists who have paved a path for us. SSAR's creation of a committee focused on DEI has served to boost this forward momentum, allowing us to expand our goals and reduce the time needed to achieve them. Members of the DEIC have found it rewarding to play an active role in improving the experiences of SSAR members, particularly during our annual meetings. We have found it equally gratifying to see contemporary SSAR leaders play key roles in efforts that will continue to improve DEI in our Society. Fortunately, SSAR's leadership acknowledges that meeting our DEI goals will require broad participation across the organization until these principles are infused into our policies and practices as core values. Thus, DEI values are not separate from other Society goals, but complementary to our effectiveness (and even survival) as an organization. By maintaining momentum in these collective efforts, we can ensure that SSAR will thrive for decades to come.

*Acknowledgments.*—We thank Marty Crump for founding the SSAR DEIC, members of the DEIC for their hard work and thoughtful efforts to improve our Society, and the SSAR leadership and BoD for their support during our committee's tenure. We are grateful to Kraig Adler for corrections and his helpful comments on an earlier draft that greatly improved this contribution.

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Box 1. Definitions of terms used in this contribution to *Herpetological History*.

**Cultural Competency.**—The ability to understand, appreciate, interact, and work positively with others with diverse backgrounds, especially those with identities different from your own.

**Diversity.**—The range of human differences, which varies in multiple dimensions including: gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, national origin, age, parental status, socioeconomic status, military service, physical (dis)ability or attributes, value or belief systems, and other categories.

**Equity.**—Promoting (or removing barriers to) justice and ensuring fair treatment and access to resources and opportunities for all. Note that unlike equality, which means providing the same to all, equity recognizes that we started from different places, so adjustments may be needed to rectify imbalances.

**Inclusion.**—Promoting equity in access to resources and opportunities, especially among those who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized; fostering an environment or culture where differences are embraced and all feel welcomed and a sense of belonging.

**Historically Underrepresented.**—A subset of the population that is numerically underrepresented in educational, professional, social, or other categories of life because of historic and institutional prejudices, discrimination, or other inequities related to their identities. These identities may include gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, national origin, age, parental status, socioeconomic status, military service, physical (dis)ability or attributes, and value or belief systems, among additional categories.