

# Minutes of the Third General Meeting of the Society of Australian Systematic Biologists

Lecture Theatre, Alexander Library  
Francis Street, Perth  
5.45 pm Tuesday 7 December 1999

Attendance: 42 members.

## 1. Apologies

Bill Barker, Robyn Barker, Steve Donnellan, Robin Wilson.

## 2. Business arising from Minutes of Second Annual General Meeting

All to be dealt with under other items.

## 3. President's Report

Mike Crisp summarized the current status of the Society, pointing out the broad base of members within systematics, the electronic communication, and the initial rapid growth.

We have had a quiet year in 1999, with the main event being the biennial conference "Dampier 300". Many thanks to the organisers, especially Mark Harvey and Alex George.

In November, Mike attended a unique event, "Science Meets Parliament Day", at Parliament House, Canberra, organised to raise the profile of Australian Science with Commonwealth politicians. At least two other SASB members were there too: Tim Entwisle and Judy West. (All three were representing systematics, although not strictly as SASB members.) This event was organised by the Federation of Australian Science and Technology Societies (FASTS). SASB is not a member of FASTS. There were one-to-one interviews with politicians as well as some plenary sessions, and the media coverage was good. It was a big event involving 170 scientists and 135 politicians. Mike's interview was with Dick Adams (Labour member for Lyons, Tasmania), who was very interested, and receptive too, and some useful points were made in favour of systematics. One of the most valuable outcomes was the establishment of individual points of contact that will be used in the future when politicians need advice, and when we need to lobby them. It is essential that more of our members develop such contacts, so that we have multiple conduits to the sources of power.

In December 1998, Mike wrote to The Hon. Dr David Kemp MP, Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, expressing concern on behalf of SASB at proposed changes to the Australian Research Council funding model. The letter and the reply are posted on the SASB Web site. Since then, a lot of water has gone under the bridge, and a new set of proposals have been put forward in the green paper by Dr Kemp (see the DETYA web site). This alleviates some of our concerns, but raises some new ones. This is just part of a long-continuing battle over science funding in this country.

SASB has joined the International Federation of Systematic Societies, a society of societies. Its main aim is "to encourage more international interaction in the systematic community and to use that interaction to call attention to the importance of systematics as well as to foster joint research projects". Membership is free. It has been initiated by the Society of Systematic Biologists (SSB), based in the U.S.A. The main benefit we have gained so far is improved access to the journal *Systematic Biology*, with our own associate editor; currently this is Dan Faith at the Australian Museum. To learn more about the Federation, see the correspondence with Vicki Funk, President of

SSB, on our Web site.

Mike expressed congratulations to Winston Ponder, the incoming President. He also welcomed one new member - Chris Lambkin. Chris is a mature-age PhD student with David Yeates at the Department of Zoology and Entomology, University of Queensland. (She is replacing her supervisor on Council!) Her field is the systematics of Bee Flies (Diptera). Many thanks to retiring Councillor David Yeates for his contribution to the Society. Thanks likewise to the other members of Council -- David Morrison, Steve Donnellan and Robin Wilson -- who have been re-elected, and will continue to contribute.

Mike also pointed out that the current SASB constitution prevents members of Council from serving in one post for more than one consecutive term. An exception is made for the Treasurer and Secretary. Thus, after only one year as President, Mike is already stepping down. This potential problem may severely limit the development of "corporate memory" on Council in all positions except the two noted above. Also, it gives the President too little time to develop and follow through major initiatives. Therefore, it may be necessary that the limit be relaxed to two years (or longer -- we should discuss how long). Such a change to our Constitution would require a referendum, so will have to be developed by the incoming Council.

Our next biennial conference will be held in Melbourne in 2001. We will meet jointly with the Australasian Evolution Society, and the organisers will probably be Robin Wilson (incoming SASB Vice-President, Museum of Victoria) and Mark Elgar of the Evolution Society. More details will be announced as they come to hand.

Mike suggested that a high priority on the SASB agenda should be to join FASTS. This organisation is now doing some serious and effective work to promote science with those who matter politically in Australia. We should be in there representing our interests with our colleagues from other disciplines. Have a look at the FASTS web site (<http://www.usyd.edu.au/su/fasts/>). The catch is that they charge a \$5.00 fee per member per year, which means that SASB would have to start charging membership fees too. This is probably inevitable, in any case, if the Society is to deal effectively with the issues that concern members. Such a move has always been an agenda item for the Council, and the incoming Council will need to address it. A regular income will bring benefits, such as the initiation of new activities.

Electronic publishing is an issue that was high in the minds of the founders of SASB, and one that Mike was interested in exploring while on Council, but hadn't gotten around to yet. It is one reason that Mike is continuing as a Councillor. Robin Wilson also is interested in this issue, and a discussion paper for the Society is planned in the near future.

#### **4. Treasurer's Report**

This was presented by Mike Crisp, in the absence of Steve Donnellan.

The Society currently has a balance of \$2,716, as a result of its role in the 1997 Joint Conference in Adelaide.

The sum of \$1,000 had been loaned to the organizers of the "Dampier 300" conference, which was due to be repaid; Andy Austin was reimbursed for two airfares totalling \$764; and \$44 was spent on refreshments for the 1998 AGM.

#### **5. Secretary's Report**

David Morrison reported that as at 3 December 1999 the Society had 277 members. This was a 5% increase over that reported at the last meeting. He also provided a brief summary of the membership, and a comparison with that for the Inaugural Meeting in 1997:-

## **Geographic Distribution 1997 1999**

Australian Capital Territory	42	44
New South Wales	40	52
South Australia	30	34
Queensland	28	39
Victoria	27	39
Western Australia	15	18
Tasmania	13	19
New Zealand	8	13
Northern Territory	5	6
Other Overseas	8	13

## **Location 1997 1999**

University	96	124
Government	87	114
CSIRO	26	26
Private	7	13

David also pointed out that the problems associated with the current location of the SASB World Wide Web Home Page highlighted at the last meeting had abated somewhat, but there would be ongoing problems. Such problems included the continuing financial pressure on universities, which would make it impossible for them to continue to provide such infrastructure at not cost to the Society. It will therefore be necessary to keep an eye on this situation, with a view to moving the Web pages elsewhere.

## **6. Discussion of Matters**

With regard to the length of the terms of SASB Officers, Mark Harvey, who drew up the initial draft of the SASB Constitution and By-Laws, provided a brief history of the process, but pointed out that there was no compelling reason to restrict Officers to a single term. Andy Austin, the inaugural President of SASB, suggested that single terms were intended to create a flow of members among the Council. Winston Ponder pointed out that "corporate memory" was retained to some extent by the fact that the Vice-President automatically becomes the President, thus effectively serving two terms. John Clarkson pointed out the potential nuisance of having fixed terms, as incorporation of the Society automatically triggers the terms of office through the requirement for a General Meeting every year.

There was considerable discussion with respect to FASTS. John Clarkson noted that the FASTS fee is levied mid-year, and that there are administrative problems with regard to financial versus unfinancial members at that time. Peter Cranston pointed out that a few would effectively be an imposition on members, given that we currently have no other financial requirements, and that it would be better to keep the finances of the Society minimalist. Furthermore, most of the members are likely to be members of FASTS several times over, as a result of membership of other scientific societies. Judy West supported Peter's ideas, questioning how useful SASB membership of FASTS is likely to be, while being supportive of FASTS itself. Dave Walter mentioned his experience as secretary of a society, which indicated that unless there is someone in Canberra to deal directly with FASTS, in terms of highlighting relevant issues for SASB, then there may be very few benefits. Roberta Cowan supported Dave's point, suggesting that her experience as treasurer of a society was that they received very little direct benefit. Tim Entwisle was supportive of FASTS as a means of dealing with broad issues in science, and noted that it is common to have one person representing several societies for FASTS, as a means of dealing with the issues raised above. Alison McCusker

noted that the clout of FASTS as a negotiating body comes from representation of societies, and therefore it needs more societies irrespective of how many times people pay to be a member of it. Ebbe Nielsen pointed out that we need more societies pushing systematics as part of FASTS' agenda, and that other societies are not necessarily doing so. Finally, Judy West suggested that we should talk to FASTS about means of support for electronic societies such as SASB.

This led to discussion of the issue of levying fees, as membership of FASTS was the only immediate stimulant to doing this. Vicki Funk mentioned her experiences during three years as a treasurer, describing it as a horrendous job, and she suggested avoiding making the job any more onerous than it currently is. Andy Austin suggested that we should avoid fees for as long as possible. However, he also pointed out that he wouldn't like to see the profits from conferences going to pay FASTS membership, as a result of no fees. He suggested that it might be possible to encourage donations to the Society. Penny Gullan was supportive of the idea of donations, noting that other scientific activities are run in this manner (e.g. the Southern Connections Newsletter). Lesley Warner emphasized that the Society should decide exactly what it wants to do with any potential income and then decide whether it is worthwhile to levy fees for those purposes.

The consensus among the members present was that SASB membership fees should not be levied in the immediate future, or at least not for the main purpose of membership of FASTS.

As part of the discussion of the International Federation of Systematic Societies, Vicki Funk was introduced to the members, and gave a brief summary of the rationale for the decision by the Society of Systematic Biologists to initiate the Federation, emphasizing the role of more international co-operation. SASB was actually the first to join with the SSB, and the Federation now includes societies from New Zealand, the U.K., South Africa, the U.S.A., as well as the Hennig Society. It is intended to have informal meetings among the executive when at conferences. Also, a Web page needs to be created that links the home pages of all of the member societies, as well as a searchable list of all of the individual members, preferably with taxa interests. On the Web page it should also be possible to provide reports from Diversitas and other international efforts; further suggestions are welcome. Such a page should be available by next February--March (ie. 2000).

Dick Olmstead was also introduced to the members, as the editor of *Systematic Biology*. Dick noted that a brochure was available at the meeting, for those who wanted more information or who wished to subscribe. He particularly encouraged students, as the journal is a bargain for them (\$US15, whereas it costs \$US17 to produce!). The journal is currently the fifth-ranked evolution journal in terms of impact; there are no page charges, and it is possible for some pages to be in colour for free. The Editorial Board exists to help make executive decisions, and each of the member societies of the Federation has an associate editor.

Dan Faith was then introduced to the members, as the associate editor representing SASB. Dan noted that his role gave members "special access" to the journal. Manuscripts could be sent directly to him -- a copy would be sent to Dick, and the manuscript would then be processed in the normal way. Dan proposed to put an "ad" on the Web page outlining the procedures.

In the discussion concerning the status of the Web page, it was made clear that, if necessary, the members would be in favour of using the Society's money to relocate the Web pages to a commercial server.

## **7. Other Business**

Pete Cranston raised the issue of electronic communication of information as an important role for the Society, in particular the dissemination of taxonomic information. Pete keeps updating his accumulated information on the Chironomidae, as it is an ongoing work, and the published information is therefore often incomplete or out of date. He has the updated information in a web-available form, and proposed making this available on the SASB Web pages. Andy Austin supported this move as an example of what SASB should be doing if it is to be at the forefront of

systematics. It was therefore agreed to proceed with Pete's offer, and see how it goes.

In response to a query from David Morrison, Judy West noted the need for "standards" for web publication in the longer term, if this avenue is to be explored. Dan Faith pointed out that the Hennig Society now reviews web page contributions, and Buzz Wilson noted that physicists have a whole system of pre-submission activity, and that quality control comes from the pre-release comments.

## **8. Close**

There being no other business, Mike Crisp thanked everyone for their attendance at the meeting, and handed control of the meeting to the incoming President, Winston Ponder.

Winston Ponder offered his thanks for his efforts to Mike on behalf of the members, and to David Yeates as the outgoing Councillor. He introduced Chris Lambkin as the incoming Councillor, pointing out that she was a postgraduate student, which is a pleasing departure from the normal makeup of the council for societies such as this one. He also highlighted the fact that if the Society continues to expand its activities then it may require a restructuring of positions such as that of the Web page manager.

The meeting closed at 6.45 pm.