

Minutes of the Fifth General Meeting of the Society of Australian Systematic Biologists

Economics 2 Theatre
University of Melbourne
11.40 am Wednesday 18 July 2001

Attendance: 23 members.

1. Apologies

Mike Crisp, Dan Faith, Muhammad Iqbal, Carden Wallace.

2. Business arising from Minutes of Fourth Annual General Meeting

All to be dealt with under other items.

3. President's Report

This was presented by Robin Wilson. He started by pointing out that the principal item of Society business since the Society of Australian Systematic Biologists (SASB) last met has been change to the constitution.

The Constitution of the SASB, developed principally by founding members Andy Austin and Mark Harvey, is a model shared by many other such societies, in which the President-elect holds the office of Vice President for one term before becoming President. This model ensures some continuity and "corporate memory" on the Council of the Society, although as widely discussed and agreed at previous AGMs, the 12 month term of the President works against continuity. The recent referendum extended that term to 2 years. At the November 2000 AGM in Sydney, the retiring President, Winston Ponder, agreed to be nominated as Vice President but he was thus, according to the Constitution, President-elect. Winston declined what would have been his second term as President in quick succession. The second change to the constitution put to the members in the recent referendum was therefore to make any Council member eligible for nomination as President. Among current and recent Council members, David Morrison, Winston Ponder and Robin Wilson agreed that the change allows for more flexibility in choosing the President while retaining the intent of the original President-elect model. We felt, and still feel, that the inability or unwillingness of the Vice-President to become President is a situation that is likely to arise more than once. However, the architects of the constitution, Andy Austin and Mark Harvey, see no need to change the explicit President-elect model.

Andy Austin has raised what he and Robin feel is a more important issue, our failure to allow a two month period of discussion of any constitutional change before voting, as required by the constitution. When putting the recent referendum to members, David and Robin both interpreted the two month voting period as also being the period during which discussion could occur, as it had been interpreted for all previous referenda. On re-reading the constitution Robin feels that this view is incorrect; there should be a two month period for discussion by email, followed by another period for voting. This period of discussion has thus been ignored on previous occasions also. If there is any support at all for the explicit President-elect model that is still favoured by Andy Austin and Mark Harvey then the incoming Council can put two or more new options out for discussion, and to then formulate a new referendum. Robin still felt that the Society is better served by the slightly more flexible method of electing a President -- all the more so with the term being extended to 2 years, which means that the President-elect must anticipate her or his availability up to 4 years in

advance. But he also felt that we should put this to rest as soon as is reasonable. It would be very unfortunate if the main business of the Society was to be repeated discussion of our own Constitution. It is also unfortunate that a gender imbalance persists on Council, and he hoped that in future more female members will be nominated.

Robin's term as President has been largely occupied with organising the joint conference (with the Australasian Evolution Society, AES). He suggested that the Society will get better value if in future someone other than the President takes on the task of conference organisation. The conference seems assured of success, with over 160 participants having registered for the conference. It is particularly pleasing to note that 66 of these are students.

The Melbourne conference has also included a workshop on on-line publishing of systematics, and Robin was pleased that a committed and enthusiastic group of current editors and publishers had agreed to participate in that workshop. Robin's discussion paper on that subject (<http://www.sasb.org.au/online.html>) raises some of the issues, and he was gratified that a number of members took the time to respond with their own views and reactions. It may be overly optimistic to hope that the workshop will agree on a clear direction, but it is in our own best interests as systematic biologists to make our research visible and useful to the widest possible audience. We are certainly not doing this yet, and fostering the use of digital technology and the web is an area where the SASB could have a role in bringing together journal publishers, the Australian Biological Resources Study (ABRS), and others. After the conference Robin will report to SASB Council and members on outcomes of the workshop, and he hopes that one or two members of the incoming Council will take up the issue.

There have also been events both happy and tragic that occurred during the past year. In 2001 SASB member Gareth Nelson, together with Chris Humphries, was awarded the Linnean Medal 1888, the highest award of the Linnean Society of London. On behalf of all members, Robin congratulated Gary and Chris on this richly deserved honour. Finally, the Society must record our great sadness at the recent death of Ebbe Nielsen and offer our deep condolences to Ebbe's family and friends. Ebbe was close friend to many SASB members and his strong support for research initiatives in systematics and biodiversity was without equal. Too few of us are prepared to sacrifice our research careers in order to seek greater support for systematics, and Ebbe will be greatly missed.

Discussion of the Report centred around the issue of the terms of Council members. Andy Austin requested that the comments on the issue be passed on to the incoming Council, who might review them in the light of other aspects of the Constitution. Winston Ponder commented that this issue has been discussed over several years, without much apparent resolution. Robin wished to have a situation where the President could continue if doing a good job. Alternatively, Winston wished to also avoid ending up with a stagnant presidency (e.g. if a "nice guy" is being left to do the job). Mark Harvey commented that constitutions are not meant to shackle a society nor are they meant to be movable feasts. There are other more serious matters to be dealt with by the Society, such as ABRS and Australian Research Council funding for systematics. We could see if the Society members are happy with the outcomes of the current change after it has been operating for 4-5 years.

To avoid any further confusion about the conduct of referenda, Andy suggested that the incoming Council could come up with guidelines for the timing and wording of future referenda (e.g. discussion document first, then formal proposal, then shorter voting time).

4. Treasurer's Report

This was presented by Steve Donnellan. The Society currently has a balance of \$3,680.87. There are no outstanding commitments, except to support the next conference.

Financial Statement 1 July 2000 to 4 May 2001

Assets at 1 July 2000	\$	\$
Westpac Cheque account	4,345.30	
TOTAL ASSETS		4,345.30
Income		
Interest	37.81	
TOTAL INCOME		37.81
Expenditure		
Bank Charges	2.24	
2001 Conference deposits	700.00	
TOTAL EXPENDITURE		702.24

Assets at 5 May 2001

Westpac Cheque account	3,680.87	
TOTAL ASSETS		3,680.87

The society now has an Australian Business Number (91 696 841 350), which should be used on the letterhead from now on (it is also displayed on the Web Home Page). After extensive consultation with the Australian Taxation Office it was decided not to register the Society for the Goods and Services Tax (GST). If the Society has an income of less than \$100,000 then we can retain GST-free status.

Robin Wilson pointed out that dealing with GST imposes a huge burden on the Treasurer, which is not worth their time. However, this means that the Society cannot provide proper tax invoices, which only GST-registered organisations can do. Furthermore, this can potentially create difficulties with the running of conferences if the Society is responsible for the handling of money, as the accommodation payments can easily reach that level of income. Steve suggested that therefore accommodation costs should be clearly separated from direct conference costs; and Winston Ponder noted that conferences are often officially run by a hosting institution rather than by a professional society such as ours in order to avoid such potential problems.

David Yeates emphasized the need to recoup conference costs. Robin Wilson noted that his "best guess" of the financial position of the current conference was a possible profit of \$3,000, which would be shared equally with the AES. He pointed out that the organisers had been interested to maximize student participation rather than profits.

Andy Austin noted that the lack of income from membership fees limits the options for Society activities (e.g. fostering young systematists). We may need to re-think our priorities and exactly what it is that we want the Society to do.

5. Secretary's Report

David Morrison reported that as at 28 June 2001 the Society had 318 members. This was a 6.7% increase over that reported at the last meeting (the previous numbers were:- 2000: 298; 1999: 277; 1998: 264, 1997: 216). There is a constant trickle of new members throughout the year, usually from the on-line form on the web page. During the history of the Society, reductions have occurred due to: death (2 members), retirement (3 members), and resignation due to a change of career (6 members).

David also provided a brief summary of the membership, and a comparison with that for previous summaries:-

SASB Membership			
Geographic Distribution	1997	1999	2001
Australian Capital Territory	42	44	48
New South Wales	40	52	56
South Australia	30	34	35
Queensland	28	39	38

Victoria	27	39	49
Western Australia	15	18	18
Tasmania	13	19	17
New Zealand	8	13	11
Northern Territory	5	6	8
Other Overseas	8	13	38

Location	1997	1999	2001
University	96	124	139
Government	87	114	123
CSIRO	26	26	32
Private	7	13	24

Systematic Interest (rough groupings)	1997	2001
Insects/spiders	64	92
Angiosperms	51	76
Other invertebrates	44	53
Vertebrates	24	40
Parasites/micro-organisms	10	15
Biodiversity/curation	8	10
Non-vascular plants	5	10
Fungi	3	6
Fossils	3	7
Unknown	4	9

David pointed out that the most notable change in numbers has been the increase in the number of members residing overseas, 22 of whom are in the U.S.A. Unfortunately, in many cases this does not represent international members, but instead Australian postgraduates who have found jobs overseas rather than in Australia. This "brain drain" has the potential to become quite serious for the future of systematics in Australia.

There are currently 7 members who are "uncontactable", as they have changed their email address without informing the Secretary. Chasing such members is a continual (and unnecessary) drain on the Secretary's time -- most members are eventually traced in one devious way or another, but only after considerable effort. Given that these people should not really be counted as members until they are re-contacted, the Society is still losing members as fast as it is gaining them.

Bob Mesibov raised the issue of more closely interacting with ABRS as a means of increasing membership.

6. Other Business

At this point, Robin Wilson thanked the other Council members for their efforts during the past term, and handed control of the meeting to the incoming President, Steve Donnellan. Robin then raised the issue of student prizes for presentations at the Society's conferences. He pointed out that the current conference had sponsored prizes for students, which he felt was worth pursuing at future conferences. Mark Harvey noted that the previous joint conference in Perth had offered financial assistance for students to attend, rather than prizes.

Andy Austin felt that the Society should pay for and underwrite student support. Winston Ponder suggested that getting publishers to donate books would be a cost-effective strategy. Rod Jones

queried whether prizes were intended to be solely for Society members. Steve Donnellan noted that student support could be built into the conference budget, and be the first debt repaid before any profits are divided.

No explicit decision was made, but the consensus was that students should be actively supported in some appropriate form.

There was lengthy discussion about the next SASB conference meeting. It was queried whether the members present explicitly wanted a joint meeting, and the consensus was that they did. Robin Wilson noted that there are too many small societies to hold separate regular meetings, and this also reduces interaction among the societies.

Mark Harvey emphasized that we need flexibility of who to have meetings with and when; and Winston Ponder noted that joint meetings need to provide actual overlap of conferences not back-to-back meetings. Mike Lee raised the issue of providing fieldwork opportunities in conjunction with conferences.

Andy Austin noted that SASB was currently in phase with the meetings of the AES and the Invertebrate Biodiversity & Conservation group. Marco Duretto queried the timing of the next Australian Systematic Botany Society meeting. David Morrison pointed out that there is a standing invitation to hold a meeting with the Systematics Association of New Zealand.

The final consensus was that the Council should explore the idea of having a meeting in two years time somewhere on the east coast, with whichever society seems to be the best option.

David Morrison noted that he would not be continuing as Secretary of the Society beyond the current term. The most important outcome of this decision would be the problems associated with the current location of the SASB World Wide Web Home Page, as it will be necessary to move the Web pages from their current location at the Faculty of Science at UTS.

Given the healthy financial situation, the possibility of using a commercial server was discussed, especially as this service can provide a unique domain name for the Society. This would probably result in the imposition of membership fees at some time. Several government and semi-government organisations were discussed as possible "free" hosts. No decision was made.

This discussion led to the more general issue of a membership fee. Robin Wilson emphasized the potential role of the Society in electronic publishing, which would probably involve the Society in providing a more advanced Web presence than it currently does. If so, this would be providing tangible benefits to members in exchange for a membership fee. In this regard, Jim Grimes mentioned the Web page of the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne as an example of one mode of electronic publishing, and noted that it would be beneficial if other institutions had formal links among such pages. Lars Jermin also noted the potential benefits of promotion of the Society in the media, and the possible need to attract sponsors. Andy Austin emphasized that he thought the higher priorities of the Society might centre around issues such as students.

7. Close

There being no other business, Steve Donnellan thanked everyone for their attendance at the meeting, and offered his thanks for their efforts to Robin and the outgoing Council on behalf of the members.

The meeting closed at 12.45 pm.