

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

Bragg Lecture Theatre
University of Adelaide
5.30 pm Wednesday 2 October 1997

Attendance: 56 members (plus several interested non-members).

1. President's Report

Andy Austin took the chair, and welcomed everyone to the meeting. He introduced the newly-elected Council members (Mike Crisp: Vice-President; Steve Donnellan: Treasurer; Cheryl Grgurinovic: Councillor; David Morrison: Secretary) for the benefit of those who had not previously met them, and noted the absence of Mark Harvey (Councillor) due to last-minute family commitments (photos of the new family member, supplied by the proud father, had previously been distributed by Pete Cranston during their joint conference presentation).

Andy Austin summarized the current status of the Society as being essentially an electronic society, relying on the Internet, in the form of email and the World Wide Web Home Page, for formal communication among the members, and with no formal subscription fees nor specific membership requirements. This arrangement would continue for the foreseeable future, as it made the organization of the Society much easier than that of a paper-based fee-paying group. Andy then moved a vote of thanks to David Morrison for creating and maintaining the email distribution service and the World Wide Web Home Page. In reply, David pointed out the invaluable role played by Andrew Watts, Faculty Computing Officer of the Faculty of Science at the University of Technology Sydney, in maintaining these services.

Andy Austin also noted that the relationship between the older-established Australian Systematic Botany Society and SASB had been raised in some quarters as a potentially contentious issue. However, meetings between the Presidents of the two societies had revealed no necessary conflict between these societies, and the Annual General Meeting of ASBS on the previous evening had agreed that the two societies were complementary in their roles and would continue to co-exist.

The Council had formally met for the first time on the previous afternoon and agreed on the following list of agenda items as requiring the most attention at the meeting:-

- Constitution
- Conferences / Meetings
- Society Logo
- World Wide Web Page
- Position Statement
- Future Plans
- Other Business

2. Constitution

The possible need for a formal constitution was discussed, because if it is needed then its creation would be an immediate job for the Council. The discussion centred around the possible future directions for the Society, and how these would constrain the need for, and the nature of, a constitution. The two main possibilities were to remain as a loosely-knit electronic-based society, which would not necessarily need much in the way of a formal constitution, or to proceed in the

direction of a formally-constituted and incorporated society.

The two main issues arising from the discussion were:-

(1) The potential need for money in order to implement some of the activities that the Society was likely to become involved in in the future (for example, the hosting of the Web page may incur a direct cost to the Society). If money is involved, then a formal constitution would be needed. Andy pointed out that there was likely to be a small profit from the Conference, and so this would become an immediate issue in any case.

(2) Legal protection of the office bearers. Incorporation of the Society provides the best protection for the office bearers as well as the other members of the Society. Possible locations for incorporation were discussed, and it was pointed out that while Canberra has several advantages it also has the strictest requirements, and this may seriously affect the ability of the Society to remain electronically-based.

It was proposed (moved Andy Austin, seconded Laurie Haegi) that a move towards setting up a formal constitution should proceed as soon as possible, with specific attention being paid to the electronic nature of the Society and its relationship to incorporation. This motion was passed *nem con*.

Andy Austin then explained that Mark Harvey is the most experienced of the Council members for this role, as he had just completed a review of the constitutions of several other scientific societies. Mark would therefore undertake to provide a proposal for a constitution forthwith.

3. Conferences

David Morrison summarized the results of the recent referenda concerning the timing and arrangement of future meetings: that meetings should be held every second year, and that they should frequently be held in conjunction with another society. Thus, a meeting does not need to be arranged immediately, but a decision needs to be made soon about where, when and with whom such a meeting should be arranged.

Andy Austin pointed out that most of the members are also members of other scientific societies (such as the Ecological Society of Australia, the Australian Entomological Society, the Australian Society for Limnology), and that it would be appropriate to hold future meetings in conjunction with one or more of these common societies, as had been done with ASBS for the current meeting. Furthermore, joint meetings could also be arranged with overseas systematics societies; and David Morrison pointed out that such an approach had already been made by the Systematics Association of New Zealand.

Council agreed try to have an organising committee for the next conference, a venue, and an approximate date decided by the end of the year. This would give the committee enough time to get everything organised.

Council also agreed to explore what other societies SASB might join with in the future. It was agreed that an email message would go out to the members asking them what other societies they are currently members of and would like to see hold future joint meetings with SASB. The Council would then contact these societies with a proposal for future joint meetings.

4. Society Logo

Andy Austin was extremely disappointed to note that a proposal for a logo for the Society had been received, as it meant that his own (unrevealed) hand-drawn cartoon would not now be needed.

The only proposal received was from Chris Lambkin, of the Systematic Entomology lab at the University of Queensland. The proposed logo neatly side-steps the potential problems with the multi-disciplinary nature of the Society, by eschewing pictures of organisms, and focussing instead

on evolution and the southern hemisphere. Several versions of the logo were presented, including one with a coloured background.

In the discussion it was pointed out that the proposal had possibilities for use as a simple logo (using just the Society's initials but no background), a full logo (with the Society's name spelt out but no background), and as a symbol (using the continental background). This proposed logo was accepted *nem con* by the meeting.

Andy Austin thanked Chris for her effort, and Chris agreed to send the computer files to David Morrison, who in turn agreed to incorporate them into the Web page as soon as practicable.

5. World Wide Web Home Page

David Morrison briefly reviewed the current status of the Web page, explaining that it had been kept as simple and straightforward as possible so that the pages could be accessed by older versions of the different Web browsers as well as by slow servers. He also pointed out that it was currently hosted by the Faculty of Science at the University of Technology Sydney at no direct cost to the Society, and maintained mostly by one person working in their spare time. This situation would continue for the foreseeable future, but it should not be relied on forever.

Possible future directions for the Web page were discussed, and it was agreed that it was unwise to attempt anything too fancy in the way of presentation, as this could create future problems with maintenance. The basic information pages should remain simple, with little in the way of pictures or customized presentation, so that they can be accessed and downloaded easily. However, the logo could be incorporated in a more distinctive fashion on the main page.

David Morrison also raised the issue of the content of the Web pages. Currently he has complete authoritarian control over the contents of the Home Page, a situation that should not persist in perpetuity. After some discussion, it was agreed that the Council should have the final authority for approval of the contents of all parts of the Home Page, but that the person maintaining the pages should have authority for day-today updating of the general information.

Andy Austin pointed out that one of the most useful parts of the Home Page was the "Internet Links" section, which provides direct access to many of the sources of systematic information throughout the world. In addition to this, it had been proposed that the SASB membership list should also be made available on the Home Page, so that members could find out how to contact each other. David Morrison pointed out that this should be a simple proposal for him to implement, in the form of a searchable database rather than as a downloadable file. David also highlighted the potential problems with making the information available, such as unwanted email messages (junk mail) and breaches of privacy. It was agreed that the information made publicly available would therefore not include phone numbers or private addresses.

6. Membership

David Morrison reported that as at 25 September 1997 the Society had 216 members. He also provided a brief summary of the membership:-

Geographic Distribution

Australian Capital Territory	42
New South Wales	40
South Australia	30
Queensland	28
Victoria	27
Western Australia	15

Tasmania	13
New Zealand	8
Northern Territory	5
Other Overseas (Canada, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, South Africa, Sweden, Thailand, United Kingdom)	8

Systematic Interest

(rough groupings)

Insects/spiders	64
Angiosperms	51
Other invertebrates	44
Vertebrates	24
Parasites/microorganisms	10
Biodiversity/curation	8
Non-vascular plants	5
Fungi	3
Fossils	3
Unknown	4

Location

University	96
Government	87
CSIRO	26
Private	7

This was considered to be a very healthy membership for a Society only now having its first formal General Meeting. There had been considerable growth since the Inaugural Meeting in Melbourne in October 1996, mainly as a result of notices placed by Andy Austin in the newsletters of various other Australian scientific societies. However, there were clearly still many members of the systematic community in Australia who were not yet members. These people need to be specifically targeted to become members, rather than waiting for them to apply for membership.

Andy Austin pointed out that when the membership list is available on the Web page, and can thus be searched by members, then it would be possible for the current members to target the other people at their institution, and that this should clearly be the next step.

7. Position Statement

Much of the discussion at the Conference had concerned the current status of systematics in Australia, including the forum on "Future Direction and Resourcing of Australian Systematics" hosted by the Presidents of the three Societies participating in the Conference in conjunction with the ABRS Advisory Committee. Indeed, one of the immediate impetuses for forming SASB had been the "Taxonomy in Crisis?" workshop in October 1995. Consequently, it was clear that the Society needed to take a proactive role in promoting systematics.

One immediate proposal was to formulate a position statement, which could be used as necessary by the Society when interacting with the government, industry or the general public. Such statements have proved to be of value for other scientific societies when they are asked, usually at

short notice, to provide comments or advice on particular issues.

Such a statement could incorporate a simple explanation of systematics, and the role of SASB in promoting systematics in Australia and in representing Australian systematists. This would be a valuable part of the Home Page, and would be tied to the development of a constitution in any case. However, it could also be developed in a more ambitious manner, as a means of selling systematics to government and industry as an important part of Australia's estate and as being worthy of continued and increased funding. This could ultimately involve the services of a professional lobbyist in helping to develop a presentation suitable for politicians and industrialists, as an effective means of promoting systematics. However, it was pointed out that professional lobbyists are very expensive, and may be impossible for a small Society like ours to afford. An alternative suggestion was for SASB to join the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies, as SASB could then lobby through them on some issues.

The Council agreed to pursue the investigation of what would be needed in the way of information and infrastructure for the development of a more ambitious position statement.

8. Future Plans

Andy Austin outlined the intention of the Presidents of the three Societies participating in the Conference to write to Senator Robert Hill, Minister for the Environment, concerning the funding of the Australian Biological Resources Study. There was some discussion of other means of approaching this problem. It was proposed (moved Barbara Briggs, seconded Judy West) that the meeting endorse the decision to move to meet with and lobby the minister. This motion was passed *nem con*.

9. Other Business

All of the discussions involved the possible future roles of the Society. Nothing specific was resolved, as they were all considered to be long-term issues. The possible roles discussed were:-

- (1) Vicki Funk, Treasurer of the Society of Systematic Biologists, expressed her best wishes for the Society, and outlined the desire of the SSB to interact closely with SASB in the near future.
- (2) Steve Donnellan raised the issue of quality control of systematic work in biological surveys. There was some discussion of the possible role of SASB in providing accreditation for people involved in such work.
- (3) Steve Donnellan also raised the issue of maintaining the standards of systematics in published works, and the possible role of SASB in influencing editorial policies.
- (4) The role of SASB in collection management support was also raised, and it was discussed as a possible theme for a future conference.
- (5) The role of SASB in the promoting discussion about, and the development of, nomenclatural codes, such as the proposed biocode, was also discussed. SASB was seen as a valuable forum, as it represents all of the branches of systematics.

There being no other business, Andy Austin thanked everyone for their attendance at the meeting, and the meeting closed at 6.30 pm.