RMBL community committee on diversity, equity, and inclusion

Annual report to the community - 2023

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Mission Statement
(developed by the committee in summer 2023)
The RMBL community DEI committee is committed to:

- Engaging the voices of, and building collaborative relationships between, all scientists, students, and staff in the community
- Empowering BIPOC and LGBTQ+ members of the community
- Advocating for the physical and emotional/mental health of all community members
- Educating the community on social justice issues relevant to biological field stations
- Taking anti-colonial actions to support longer-term decolonization and re-imagination of relationships to land

Our work this year

Overview / thank yous

Our work this year would not have been possible without the ideas, energy, and help of so many people in the community. To everyone who attended an event or perused a resource we distributed, thank you. To everyone who gave us constructive feedback, thank you. To the RMBL staff who said ‘yes’ to helping make our ideas a reality, thank you. We are grateful to everyone who participated this year, in big ways and small. What follows is a brief recap of what we were able to do together this past year.

Educational resources

In June, we created a DEI resources table in the bbCC with readings about the history of marginalized groups in Gothic/Crested Butte, peer-reviewed papers on DEI-related topics in ecology, event flyers, land acknowledgment zines, and a copy of Project 562: Changing the Way We See Native America. The Gothic/CB-focused readings and the DEI-related publications were picked up by community members and restocked by Laurent and Val after the first two weeks. Nearly all of the land acknowledgment zines were claimed by the end of the field season, with others placed near the Barclay classrooms also picked up by students. The land acknowledgement zines were created in 2021 by Caleb Bohus, Kevin Flores, Lena Heinrich, Molly Long, Willow Lovecky, Ceci Rigby, Rina Talaba, Michael Troutman and Lydia Wong.

Updated website

We created a website (https://www.rmbl.org/rmbl-community-dei-committee/), with our mission statement, contact form, names and pictures of co-facilitators, and DEI resources. This page will soon be integrated into an overall RMBL diversity webpage that will be more easily findable from the homepage.

Events, workshops, and socials

We hosted several events for the community in Gothic. For the first time since the start of Covid, we hosted all events in-person.
We celebrated **Pride month** in June by inviting Jeremie Fant (Chicago Botanic Garden, identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+ community) to give a Tuesday Talk about his research and a workshop: “Identity: why is it important?”. We also celebrated Pride month by hosting the 3rd annual Pride dance (most undergraduate students and several graduate students attended).

For **Juneteenth** this year, we first focused on disseminating information about the holiday to ensure Black researchers did not have to explain the significance of the day to their peers. We sent out a Juneteenth flier in the newsletter and had physical copies available in the bbCC. The Melanin Mountain Project (https://www.melaninmountainproject.com/), a local grassroots organization, hosted a number of events for the broader Gunnison Valley community to celebrate the holiday; we organized rides for RMBL community members to attend these events. With help from the bbCC dining hall (thanks to the support and planning of Matt Yeates and Robert Burskik-Lechner), we were able to arrange a Juneteenth dinner at the bbCC.

In July, we organized an **inaugural trip to the Ute Indian Museum in Montrose** to learn about Ute history, language, culture, and contemporary life. Twenty-five people joined us on the trip, and we anticipate running this event annually for the foreseeable future. Special thanks go to RMBL for providing transportation and admission support and to our drivers, Katie Harper and Dave Basden. The trip was advertised extensively via email, fliers, and word of mouth. Attendees were able to learn about Ute history, ethnobotany, and contemporary culture thus inspiring them to think more about anti-colonial practices they could take. Prior to the trip we sent out a list of Ute ethnobotanical resources and a conceptual paper addressing how colonialism has benefitted conservation research. Following the trip, we hosted a community reading of the article, *Towards Settler Responsibility in Conservation* and discussion of anti-colonial actions possible at RMBL (notes from the discussion are available here).

We continued to organize a weekly **BIPOC Safe Space** (Tsismis Table) meeting throughout the summer, led by Manogya and Laurent. In previous summers the safe space was exclusive to undergraduates, in 2023 we opened it up to all BIPOC researchers at RMBL. During meetings, attendees had the option to vent, discuss their achievements, share resources, and receive feedback on research presentations. To foster a greater sense of community, we also planned and facilitated such things as BIPOC only hikes and group outings.

**Field safety**

We worked with RMBL staff to provide a set of field safety resources for the website and for PIs. We also developed a field safety checklist for undergraduate students that was distributed as part of the education program orientation.

**Craft nights with mental health resources**

Annie, Blair, and Janelle (with support from Brett Biebyuck and Karla Alvarado) organized several craft nights in the aim of creating a safe space where community members are able discuss mental health and well-being, seek out resources or just exist in a space where they know the people around them value their presence and open to talking but not forcing anything. Committee members provided watercolors, embroidery string for friendship bracelets, paper,
pens and drawing supplies, with additional supplies provided by a person in Crested Butte via RMBL staffer Brett Biebuyck. (thank you!). We had a huge turn out with about 30 attendees and completely filled the bbCC board room. Besides the scheduled craft nights, there were several instances where impromptu crafts nights were hosted using the supplies after some unfortunate situations faced by RMBL this summer. These impromptu nights were initiated both by DEI committee members, as well as other RMBL residents, who felt the need for a space to decompress. At the end of the season, when reminiscing about some of the best parts of the summer, the craft nights (both scheduled and impromptu) were mentioned as being some of the brighter moments in some otherwise dark times.

Collaborating with the education program
Many of our most successful events were well-attended by undergraduate students, and several were available as RCR (Responsible Conduct of Research) sessions. The committee worked closely with the education program coordinator and DEI liaison, Susan Washko. Via Susan we were also able to share key safety information and resources at the beginning of the summer, and provide new students a welcome to the community.

Feedback on strategic planning
We worked with the Board to participate in their July event to solicit DEI-related feedback on the RMBL Strategic Plan. Unfortunately attendance at this event was very low and discussion was dominated by other topics (e.g. RMBL leadership transitions) so little engagement occurred. We anticipate that the Board will explore strategies to increase community involvement around DEI topics as the strategic planning process continues.

Inclusive mentoring workshop
Valerie and Xochitl led an inclusive mentoring workshop in collaboration with the RMBL Buddies program organized by Jackie Fitzgerald. The content was adapted from a presentation by Ebony McGee and Chris Pfund of the Aspire Alliance. Attendees were given a take-home reading, Cultural Competence and Inclusivity in Mentoring, Coaching, and Advising (Vaccaro & Camba-Kelsay 2018). Approximately ten mentors, including graduate students and postdocs, attended the workshop. Slides from the workshop are available here.

Accessible participation in the community
We advertised our gear closet to undergraduate students during the pre-field season orientation, and to the RMBL community via Discord. With special thanks to Brett Biebuyck for donating donated REI dividends (accumulated from personal and RMBL), we were able to purchase rain pants, a backpacking tent, and materials for fixing tents, clothes, and shoes (i.e. patches, tape, shoe adhesive, etc.). Lydia Wong completed an updated inventory of gear closet items; however, new items were added during the season, so a re-inventory in 2024 will be helpful. Over 40 gear requests were submitted this summer with most requests coming from REU students and graduate students. Gear was also lent out to students in the Wildlife Biology course for their overnight trip to the Black Canyon. The most commonly requested items this summer were tents, sleeping pads, sleeping bags, bear cans, and backpacking backpacks.
We also worked with RMBL staff to make changes to grocery delivery services to improve access based on community feedback. A special thank you goes to Brett Biebyuck for approaching this issue with creativity and compassion. Our discussions with RMBL staff led to (i) an adjusted delivery schedule to better accommodate folks whose work or care obligations prevented a mid-day pickup, and (ii) a no-questions-asked fee waiver option for community members to whom the new fee structure was a hardship.

Steps toward anti-colonial actions at RMBL

Approximately 50 Land Acknowledgement educational booklets were distributed to RMBL undergraduate and graduate students. This resource was created by Willow Lovecky, Kevin Flores, and several additional undergraduate students during and after the 2021 education program.

We followed up on the efforts of the land acknowledgement group from 2021 (see above) by writing an open letter to the RMBL Board and staff requesting they consider a set of anti-colonial actions relevant to this goal. The letter first defined the unique position of biological field stations in the context of coloniality and the land-back movement. We then explored what decolonization means and what a more ethical/anti-colonial RMBL could look like. We also include an example land acknowledgement and list of actions that RMBL could pursue. The letter was opened to critique and feedback by community members directly on the document; signatures from the community also served to illustrate an estimate of support for these issues. The letter was controversial and received both positive and negative reactions from a large number of community members. The letter requested a response, and we understand that this is currently being prepared. We look forward to thoughtful, constructive collaboration with the community, Board, and staff as we advance towards these goals.

Field safety planning

We continued to advocate for mandatory risk assessment plan review for PIs as part of research plan renewal. We are working together with RMBL to ensure that field safety resources are easily accessible to all research team members on a newer website.

RMBL strategic plan contributions

Feedback session
We helped to support a summer feedback session on the RMBL strategic plan to encourage community participation. Amy Iler, chair of the Board Diversity Committee, presented the results from the 2022 RMBL climate survey, updated data on RMBL demographics, and the draft DEI section of the new RMBL Strategic Plan. Attendance of the feedback session was low, so we reached out to the committee via email to solicit further feedback that was shared privately.

Ongoing support
We continued to work closely with the Board committee on diversity (chair, Amy Iler) to ensure community needs were reflected in the RMBL strategic plan, and to work to ensure mutual
awareness and alignment of each group’s efforts. A few representatives from this committee have been included in further Board committee meetings and are providing feedback on an ad-hoc basis on a range of topics.

Future actions

Expand upon and continue to facilitate community events and DEI-relevant workshops
We received feedback on how to foster a better sense of LGBTQ+ pride at the lab. Currently, our pride dance is the only queer event we have been able to organize. During the pride dance, we ask the community to help create a playlist to celebrate queer artists and messaging. A number of songs from this year were not by queer artists + featured heteronormative messaging. In future summers, we will ensure the playlist is only focused on celebrating queerness. Further, we also received feedback on songs being skipped, these often being the only queer songs in the playlist, thus we will ensure that songs will not be allowed to be skipped by having a designated “DJ”. We will also have a suggested entry donation at the pride dance, with all donations going to an LGBTQ+ advocacy group. We hope to run at least one other pride event during the month, so that there are multiple ways to celebrate Pride Month as a community. Ideas for additional events include a LGBTQ+ safe space and facilitating hikes and other social events throughout the summer exclusive to queer individuals at the lab.

For Juneteenth, we will continue to distribute information about the holiday to ensure non-Black community members understand its importance. We will also continue to facilitate rides to events held at Crested Butte that are put on by the Melanin Mountain Project. Starting in 2024, we plan to make Juneteenth dinner free for all community members. We also plan to follow up dinner with a mini Juneteenth celebration at the lab in the form of a dance - community members can add songs by Black artists to a playlist.

We also plan to facilitate workshops from the Melanin Mountain Project and Parker from KWEEN Werk, a Justice, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (JEDI) strategist (KWEEN: Keep Widening Environmental Engagement Narratives; https://www.kweenwerk.com/). KWEEN Werk has done workshops on the importance of DEI to conservation, examining unconscious bias, understanding privilege & power, the impact of microaggressions, and visioning for effective allyship. We will continue to facilitate a BIPOC safe space and attempt to increase attendance each year.

We will also plan to host workshops or events to celebrate Native American communities and provide education on relevant issues.

Anti-colonial actions
We recognize that the actions called for have been controversial, and will work to further educate ourselves and the community around these topics, as well as engage further discussion with the RMBL community through listening sessions and more substantial outreach to key subcommunities. In collaboration with the RMBL Board committee on diversity, we will continue
to work together to implement further anti-colonial actions at RMBL. This will at minimum involve continuing to organize yearly trips to the Ute Museum, working on achieving action items from the letter, fostering a better relationship with the Ute community, and. We also plan to continue efforts to invite CJ Brafford (Ute Museum Director) to the lab to give a talk and/or workshop about Ute history & science.

Collaborations with the education program

The committee will continue to work with Susan Washko and Rosemary Smith to foster a greater sense of inclusion and equity for undergraduates. As education program coordinator, Susan works to ensure each individual program student finds comfort, community, and support (both scientific and personal). To collaborate in achieving this, we will continue to organize DEI-based discussion events and workshops that students can attend as part of the RCR (Responsible Conduct of Research) series.

Field Safety

The committee will continue to cultivate a high standard of field safety in our community. Because our request for a robust safety plan and training requirement was not implemented by the lab, our activities are limited to filling the gaps that we can identify and address with limited resources. We will continue to collaborate with RMBL and the Education Program to broaden access to safety resources, particularly focusing on empowering research team members to ask their PIs about plans, providing trainings, and publishing resources (e.g. safety template plans for PIs) to promote safe fieldwork. We plan to solicit more community-led mini workshops focused on specific skills—first aid, changing a tire, etc.—and we’d like to give a special shoutout of thanks to Nick Hight for leading several of these workshops this past summer. Please contact us if you are interested in leading a mini workshop.

Budget usage

The committee was given access to a reduced budget from the RMBL administration than in 2022 consistent with other cutbacks across the institution. All of the above activities were accomplished with a direct allocation of $800 for 2023 (vs. approx. $2,000 spent in 2022). We were able to maintain a large portfolio of activities in part by depending more heavily on in-kind support from RMBL, including refreshments provided by the dining hall for several events and, notably, staff time and van/fuel usage for the trip to the Ute Indian Museum in July.

The majority of these funds were spent in 2023. Funds were used for:

- Partial cover of travel costs for Tuesday Talk speaker chosen and invited by the DEI committee: Jeremie Fant ($600).
- Snacks for the Pride Dance and craft supplies ($60).

The remainder of funds (approximately $140) were budgeted to run an antiracism workshop, but were not spent due to difficulty recruiting a workshop facilitator. The funds will be rolled over to 2024, and we plan to use them for their originally-intended purpose. billy barr is helping us set up a RMBL Held Fund for our allocations. This will allow us to more easily handle similar
situations in the future if unanticipated circumstances prevent us from fully spending our budget as intended. Additionally, access to a held fund will allow the committee to accept direct donations to support our work. We hope to continue allocating resources to support DEI speakers, trainings, and events in the coming year.

Membership

Current membership (alphabetical by last name)

Kaysee Arrowsmith
billy barr
April Bermudez
Benjamin Wong Blonder (Board liaison)
Janelle Bohey
Paul Caradonna (advertising coordinator)
Manogya Chandar
Laurent Duverglas (co-facilitator)
Elsa Godtfredsen
Melanie Kazanel
Valerie Martin (co-facilitator)
Will Petry
Sam Pierce
Blair Stokes
Stavi Tennanbaum
Susan Washko (Education Program liaison)
Lydia Wong (gear closet coordinator)

Member and role transitions

This summer was **Lydia Wong**'s last full summer at RMBL, so we are seeking a new Gear Closet Coordinator for 2024. **Valerie Martin** will be out of the United States during the coming year, so her co-facilitation role will be taken up by **Janelle Bohey**. We are grateful to Lydia and Valerie for their contributions. We are also very grateful to RMBL previous staff member **Kelly Sudderth** for her leadership and support of our work.

Participation

Membership of the committee was composed primarily by graduate students, with growing faculty participation. There was also some involvement by postdoctoral researchers, undergraduate students, and RMBL staffers. The undergraduate student and graduate student communities participated most in events, with a notable increase in graduate student participation over the last two seasons.
Joining the committee

The committee is open to all interested community members who are able to make a time commitment to these issues (staff, students, faculty, RAs, PIs, etc.). Please contact diversity@rmbi.org to join. We have group meetings once per month during the summer (in-person + Zoom) and less frequently during the rest of the year (Zoom). We welcome new voices. Current roles open to new members or current committee members include:

– Gear closet coordinator
– Weekly/biweekly/monthly summer event coordinators
  – e.g. BIPOC Safe Space, Craft Nights with mental health resources
– Event advertiser