

Dear RMBL community,

During summer 2023, the RMBL Community Diversity Committee sent an open letter to RMBL Board and Staff surrounding issues related to RMBL's role in addressing the harms of colonialism. There were a wide range of responses to the letter and the list of requests within the letter. These are important issues that should be discussed as a community. This anti-colonial letter from the Community Diversity Committee highlights that we need to formally incorporate anti-colonial actions into our broader diversity and inclusion initiatives. From our subsequent conversations with members of the Community Diversity Committee, our shared goal is to generate a larger conversation about decolonization within the RMBL community and to move forward together on anti-colonial actions. In this response letter we describe RMBL's overall approach toward anti-colonialism, summarize RMBL's anti-colonial actions, and outline our vision for the future.

Anti-colonialism simply refers to any type of resistance against colonial power. For an institution, this entails critical examination of how it has been shaped by historical practices of dispossession, extraction, and marginalization, and whether its policies may be unintentionally reinforcing colonial power dynamics. This self-examination is then followed by institutional actions and policies tailored to redress these harms. *What has clearly emerged from numerous conversations with RMBL staff and other community members, board members, and members of the RMBL Community Diversity Committee is that the RMBL community is united in prioritizing diversity and inclusion.* We frame anti-colonial actions as part of our diversity and inclusion strategy while also recognizing that anti-colonialism and decolonization can sometimes conflict with other diversity and inclusion efforts.

Values motivating our approach: RMBL's current approach and future vision for anti-colonialism is to focus on sustainable relationship building, education, and meaningful action. All actions are evaluated in terms of whether and how Indigenous communities should be engaged, being respectful of their culture, approach, and timeline. Building sustainable relationships is critical, so that our actions are not transactional or performative. It is important to understand the amount of time it takes to cultivate truly strong relationships, like the ones we have with faculty at Hispanic-serving community colleges in southern California for the REU program, or like the strong relationship that RMBL has with the ranching community in the CB area, which took 20–25 years to build. Part of this relational approach includes understanding the limitations and demands on the time of the people we are trying to engage. Ian Billick has been developing relationships with several members of Indigenous communities over the years, including but not limited to the director of the Ute Museum, visiting a couple of times each year for the past few years. We need to think about who can continue this work as we eventually transition to new leadership, or to find a liaison in the RMBL community who can commit to this long-term project. *From these developing relationships, it has been communicated that how RMBL approaches, manages, and conserves the landscape is the most meaningful thing we do, in light of the connection of the Utes to the landscape.* The Ute community has many institutions knocking at their door, and we need to be patient and mindful of their time. It is critical that we honor Ute and other Indigenous communities' culture and wishes with our actions, and we will need to work on their timeframe, being respectful of them and their time as we work with them.

We aim to build a relationship around their priorities, not our preconceived notions of what they might want or need. Relationship-building is the way to achieve this goal and helps to create the foundation for evaluating any future decolonization actions. That being said, RMBL can take other actions while we build these relationships with Indigenous communities (see **Moving forward together** section). This description of our values and acknowledgement of the time investment required should not be interpreted as an avoidance of moving forward.

RMBL's progress toward Indigenous inclusivity and relationship-building: Next we will describe RMBL's anti-colonial work. This serves as the first annual report of RMBL's activities in this area. This work adheres to the strategy of sustainable relationship-building, education, and meaningful action. First, we describe RMBL's work with Indigenous communities, which has arisen from RMBL's intentional effort in building sustainable relationships. RMBL worked with the Utes to create the exhibit in the Visitor's Center on 'Ute in STEM', which was funded by a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant to the Colorado Historic Society. The content of the exhibit was approved by Ute elders. Due to a lack of knowledge about the process for creating the exhibit, the Utes in STEM exhibit has been criticized for not explicitly detailing the forced removal of Utes from the landscape. Not surprisingly, the individuals with whom we have spoken who were initially critical of the exhibit were supportive of it after learning about how it was created. This is one example of how improved communication can help to prevent misunderstandings, and that is why communication is part of our focus for moving forward (more on that later). Another great example of working closely with the Utes is that RMBL staff teach Ute-STEM education at the elementary level in summer and schoolyear programs (funded by the same NSF grant as mentioned above). RMBL has a youth programs staff person trained to teach Ute-approved STEM curriculum, which we do in our elementary programs throughout the year. Although initially funded by a grant, RMBL now covers the staffing costs of maintaining this programming.

Next, we describe RMBL's more internally directed actions. RMBL has been offering free housing and access to RMBL land to Utes during fall hunting season for the past few years (no one has yet to take us up on this offer, but it will continue to be provided). This past summer, in collaboration with the Community Diversity Committee, RMBL provided transportation for an annual trip to the Ute Museum for RMBL community members, and this activity has been formally approved as something that will continue. Indigenous students are recruited into the summer undergraduate program, with financial support as needed. As with all underrepresented identities in STEM, RMBL has benchmarks to track progress toward increasing diversity, and we use our annual climate survey to assess whether some identities have more negative experiences than others. This feedback helps RMBL to assess inclusion and informs its future goals and policies. In 2022, the Visitor Center Staff went to the Ute Museum to learn more about Ute history. RMBL includes Indigenous uses of plants and a history of the Utes in its tours for the public, supported by passionate and dedicated Visitor Center staff members. RMBL has provided the Community Diversity Committee with a webpage as part of the RMBL website, where they can also post material about their efforts, including educational material.

Moving forward together: We will focus on conversation and collaboration as we work to put our values into practice, which embodies the spirit of RMBL. First, in response to the anti-colonial letter, RMBL has added questions to the annual diversity and climate survey specifically

focused on anti-colonial actions. We are asking community members to evaluate the importance of the list of requests from the anti-colonial letter that are either in-progress or not actively being pursued by RMBL. *We will use these data to guide our future conversations with the Community Diversity Committee as we work together to evaluate and address the list of requests in the letter.* Second, RMBL has incorporated its anti-colonial strategy into the strategic plan. Again, all proposed actions will have to be evaluated in terms of whether and how Indigenous communities should be engaged, being respectful of their culture, approach, and timeline. Third, and also a part of the update to the RMBL strategic plan, we have formalized the approach of the Board Diversity Committee, the Community Diversity Committee, and RMBL Staff working together to achieve our goals, which will facilitate improved communication among these groups. We believe this will allow us to harness the unique energy and abilities of these aspects of the community to achieve the best outcomes. Here we aim to prepare the foundation for effective engagement with Indigenous communities through education and meaningful action. The Board and Community Diversity Committees and RMBL Staff will work together to discuss other forms of education and action in which we can engage, using the survey results to inform these actions (for example, providing additional educational resources to our community and the public, providing resources to explore how Western science perspectives have excluded Indigenous ways of knowing and what actions we can take to begin to repair the relationship between science and Indigenous communities, reviewing current RMBL practices and policies to understand how the vestiges of colonialism might be doing unintentional harm, and building community buy-in to confront the problems we identify). Fourth, RMBL will produce an annual report detailing its diversity and inclusion efforts, including our anti-colonial actions, for at least the next three years. RMBL staff and board members welcome all community members to reach out to discuss ideas for building a diverse and inclusive environment. The most efficient way to get in touch with the board regarding diversity and inclusion issues is to email Amy Iler, chair of the Board Diversity Committee (ailer@chicagobotanic.org); other board members can be found on the RMBL website.

We all have the responsibility to speak out against injustice and to participate in reconciling past and ongoing wrongs. In our community, RMBL staff and board members have a role to play in enacting change, and so do you. We want our community to feel empowered to make change in a supportive way—everyone can participate. We look forward to working with members of the RMBL community to make progress on these important issues.

Sincerely,

RMBL Staff and Board of Trustees