

**Virginia Master Naturalist Program
Diversity and Inclusion Working Group
Draft List of Action Items
Updated July 2021**

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to provide potential action steps that may be taken by chapters, volunteers, and the statewide program office of the Virginia Master Naturalist program to increase diversity and inclusion within the educational programs provided by its volunteers and within the program itself. The intention is not to provide a list of actions that all chapters must take, but rather provide a vetted list of possibilities. Different chapters may be at different stages in these efforts, and they differ in terms of their capacities as well as in terms of the populations of the communities in which they are active. The actions are divided into the categories of Developing Partnerships, Public Relations and External Communications, Curriculum and Training, Projects and Service, and Creating Inclusive Environments. Within each category, both state-level and chapter-level actions are provided.

This document is also not a comprehensive list of all possible actions. It is meant to be a starting point from which we can work together on the broad goal. Over time, chapters may share additional actions that have been effective for them, and we can continue to add these to the list.

Process

This list of action items was developed by the Virginia Master Naturalist program's Diversity and Inclusion Working Group, a team of sixteen volunteers and state sponsoring agency representatives. It was refined by input from dozens of members of the VMN Diversity and Inclusion Feedback Team and by key individuals in several sponsoring agencies and partner organizations. The work was supported by a grant from the Virginia Environmental Endowment and by the many individuals who donated to the Virginia Tech Foundation in support of the VMN program.

Future work will include identifying benchmarks to measure our success in achieving our objectives, seeking resources where needed to help implement actions, and continuing to communicate with and support our volunteers and chapters as they work locally to increase diversity and inclusion in their programming.

Goals and Objectives

Broad goal: Increase diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout the VMN program and the environmental education our volunteers provide in their communities.

Objectives:

- Increase participation in the VMN program among groups that are currently underrepresented
- Increase inclusivity within the VMN program so that all feel that they are welcome, that they are valued, that they belong, and that they can participate, regardless of demographic identity
- Engage more diverse audiences with the education and outreach that VMNs provide in their communities
- Reduce barriers to participation for both the VMN program itself and the educational programs provided by VMNs, particularly barriers that disproportionately affect populations underrepresented in our programs
- Increase VMN volunteers' knowledge, skills, and abilities related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in natural resource education programming, both as part of basic training and as part of continuing education

Definitions

- **Diversity:** The differences among us based on which we experience systemic advantages or encounter systemic barriers in access to opportunities and resources. Race and ethnicity is not the only way in which we are diverse as a group. There are countless visible and invisible facets of diversity (Avarna Group).
- **Environmental justice:** Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people – regardless of race, color, national origin, or income – with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies (US EPA, VDEQ).
- **Equity:** An approach based in fairness to ensuring everyone has access to the same opportunities and resources. In practice, it ensures everyone is given equal opportunity to thrive; this means that resources may be divided and shared unequally to make sure that each person can access an opportunity. Equity is therefore not the same thing as equality. Equity takes into account that people have different access to resources because of systems of oppression and privilege. Equity seeks to balance that disparity (Avarna Group).
- **Inclusion:** Celebrating, centering, and amplifying the perspectives, voices, values, and needs of people who experience systemic barriers, mistreatment, or disadvantages based on their identities in order to ensure they feel a sense of

belonging. Inclusion is not merely tolerating or accommodating differences; it's about actively valuing and honoring it. Inclusion is also not about surmounting, overcoming, or transcending differences to focus on "our common humanity." Diversity is what we are, and inclusion is what we do (Avarna Group).

- ***Underrepresented groups:*** Populations of people who are fewer in number within a program compared to the overall population. For example, in the VMN program, we have some data to suggest that younger adults are underrepresented in the program. Likewise, we know that people from essentially all non-white racial and ethnic groups are underrepresented in our volunteer population compared to the overall population of Virginia. In some cases, these groups may also be underrepresented in the educational programs that VMN volunteers provide in their communities. There are many other forms of diversity that we have not collected data on within our volunteer membership or educational contacts, so we do not know whether those populations are underrepresented or not.

Sources:

The Avarna Group, <https://theavarnagroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Vocab-Sheet-v6.pdf>.

US EPA, <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice>

Action Items

Developing Partnerships

State Level Actions

- **Develop a template for conversations with potential partners.** The template will provide a potential framework for conversations initiated by local VMN chapters with potential local partners that serve diverse populations. Encourage chapter leaders to identify these potential partners and to have preliminary conversations for which the goal is to listen and learn about the needs of that organization and its clientele.
- **Develop state-level partnerships.** Initiate state-level conversations with potential partners that have a state presence, rather than local presence, and work to build and sustain those relationships.

Chapter Level Actions

- **Initiate conversations with potential partners.** Identify local organizations that serve diverse populations. Using the conversation template if needed, set up and have conversations with these potential partners. Through such

conversations, begin to identify areas of overlap between the interests of the potential partners and the kinds of service and opportunities that VMNs are able to offer.

- **Engage in other organizations' events.** Watch for events and presentations from local organizations serving diverse populations and encourage volunteers to participate. In this way, VMN chapters can support the programming of these organizations, rather than only asking them to support VMN programming.
- **Engage students from HBCUs and community colleges.** Identify Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that are in proximity to the chapter. Offer scholarship opportunities for HBCU students to participate in VMN training and/or look for ways to fit in with their curricula with project opportunities. Community colleges may be another potential partner serving diverse populations of young adults.
- **Engage high school students.** Offer community service opportunities and educational/programming support to enrich high school natural resource and environmental science curricula.
- **Serve as a resource for communities facing environmental equity issues.** Serve as experts or conveners of experts to offer informed opinions/information to empower communities and to help bring about environmental justice
- **Build relationships with indigenous communities** of their geographic areas; include land acknowledgements on their websites and in basic training (if it is part of building a relationship).
- **Practice environmental justice.** Extend the services that VMNs provide to communities that haven't benefited from the work that we do. Before a project, gain understanding of that community, build a relationship, and determine whether they want the VMN assistance and how they prefer to be involved in a collaboration. The US Environmental Protection Agency's EJSCREEN tool (<https://www.epa.gov/ejscreen>) is one potential tool for identifying areas with potential environmental quality issues and for finding demographic information for these areas.

Public Relations and External Communications

State Level Actions

- **Develop values statement on diversity and inclusion specifically for the VMN program.** Articulate what diversity and inclusion mean for our program, why they are important in our work, and what actions we are taking to improve.
- **Create a video and/or presentation to articulate for diverse audiences the value proposition of the work VMNs do.** For example, discuss how stream monitoring and evaluating water quality benefits communities, show how VMNs are stewarding places that matter to target groups.

- **Encourage chapters to regularly share stories about their projects that engage diverse populations.** Use these stories in newsletters, websites, and social media.
- **Update the VMN brochure and website.** Include our statement on diversity and inclusion, more photos that show a diversity of people involved, and to invite students to join by considering resume building as one of the positive aspects.
- **Share More Stories.** Create digital stories that highlight what groups or individual VMNs are doing in order to amplify voices of VMN volunteers who are people of color, people with disabilities, younger people, or who otherwise reflect the diversity we would like to foster in the program. These digital stories can be a tool for people to learn more about the program and perhaps see someone like themselves, and used also to incorporate some stories of projects that chapters are doing or have done that relate to diversity and inclusion. Post prominently on VMN website.
- **Create educational videos.** Create video-based natural resource content that is targeted toward more diverse audiences, perhaps in partnership with VA State Parks.
- **Develop educational materials in Spanish and/or other languages.** In particular, provide alternate language versions of educational materials used at chapter booths.

Chapter Level Actions

- **Develop local public relations.** Share stories with news media that show diverse groups of volunteers.
- **Identify and use new public relations channels.** Identify and use local media and PR channels that are accessed by diverse populations to continually get the word out about the VMN program and what it does.
- **Share More Stories.** Make stories about projects engaging diverse populations a regular part of chapter newsletters and communications. Share stories with the state office for inclusion in the newsletter, website, etc.
- **Ensure that communications such as documents, social media, and websites meet accessibility standards.**

Curriculum and Training

State Level Actions

- **Examine each topic in the VMN basic training curriculum** to identify ways that diversity, equity, and inclusion could be woven in with examples. These

could include ways that the environment has influenced humans (e.g., settlement patterns) and how that ties in to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

- **Create a series by topic of diverse examples of naturalists in VMN curriculum:** Build quotes, examples, and stories from a more diverse array of naturalists into the VMN curriculum, particularly if they have a Virginia connection.
- **Add Environmental Justice component to VMN curriculum.** Include information on what environmental justice is, guidelines/examples of how it relates to VMN work, and what chapters can do to help. Write up case studies or examples from VMN chapters that have done this work successfully. Emphasize that volunteers need to first gain understanding of that community, build a relationship, and determine whether they want the VMN assistance and how they prefer to be involved in a collaboration.
- **Provide materials for the VMN curriculum on the language of diversity and about language choices.** Describe how there are national and international discussions about terms such as citizen science and community science, native and non-native species, Master Volunteer, etc. There is not widespread agreement that any of these terms is better or worse in all situations. Let VMNs know they should be aware of their audiences and make appropriate choices about framing and language based on the audience.
- **Provide chapters with a self-assessment tool to help them identify where they are in terms of cultural competencies and diversity, equity, and inclusion understanding.**
- **Develop a diversity, equity, and inclusion reading list.** Develop a concise list of reading materials and other educational resources that VMN volunteers can use to learn about diversity and inclusion in natural resources.
- **Compile resources on the website.** Develop a website with resources and stories for chapters to use in their quest to diversify their membership and their outreach
- **Revise American Naturalists curriculum** to include a greater diversity of examples of naturalists and what they do.
- **Build Interpretation and Teaching Skills curriculum.** Include concepts of how to create a welcoming atmosphere and other aspects of inclusion. This might be the place to include a self-assessment tool for volunteers to determine their cultural competencies and diversity, equity, and inclusion understanding.
- **Develop a CE class on diversity and inclusion.** This could be designed to be given as an on-line class and at the state conference, or trainers could be trained to give this class within the chapter setting. (i.e. a cadre of trained presenters for in-person teaching).

- **Work with chapters to identify potential basic training and CE presenters who are experts and also reflect the diversity we would like to see in the program.**
- **Recruit presenters from diverse backgrounds for state-level CE offerings, such as the webinar series and state conference.**

Chapter Level Actions

- **Increase the diversity of people delivering the program** (presenters at training courses). Look for and engage with potential VMN basic training and continuing education instructors who reflect the diversity that we hope to achieve in the program.
- **Consider diversity when choosing schedule, time, and location for both basic training and public events.** Try to use accessible training locations, near to transit (in communities that have it) and that can accommodate people who use wheelchairs or who have limited mobility. Make sure field locations have options for people who are differently abled or that there are alternative learning experiences. Communicate about the accessibility of the site, such as type of terrain. Look for opportunities for more central locations and opportunities to hold trainings or parts of trainings in neighborhoods with populations we hope to reach. Consider holding a program in every zip code.
- **Build community within the basic training program.** While the training class itself is a community, establishing mentors for individuals or groups of trainees would help new members adjust to the chapter at large and make them feel welcome. Mentor relationships should extend at least 1 year after the end of the training course. In some cases, a representative of a partner organization could be a mentor.
- **Provide flexibility for completion of training and service requirements.** When needed, allow for case-by-case extensions of time and options for completing requirements.
- **Offer scholarships consistently.** Provide a reduced training fee for those who could not otherwise afford to participate in the program.
- **Offer more online training options.** Offer opportunities for online basic training and continuing education to support individuals who live longer distances from normal training facilities.
- **Use and encourage instructors to use state-level curriculum materials that have diverse examples of naturalists.**
- **Make researching and presenting about different nationalities/cultures in the Chapter area part of the basic training course.** It could be a fun presentation like bringing some sample food, sharing videos of cultural presentations (i.e. dances, music), presentation on cultural values, norms,

traditions, and must also include research on issues facing the community etc. This is a good way to learn about other cultures in a more in-depth way and can be made into a fun learning experience and often used in cultural diversity efforts in other places and in language learning classes.

Projects and Service

State Level Actions

- **Revamp the project proposal form and process to include a diversity component/question into project proposal form or process.**

Chapter Level Actions

- **Support volunteers in leading more public educational activities.** Especially encourage education and outreach activities developed in response to needs expressed by partners working with diverse audiences. These could include offering VMN-type training to other groups, aimed at increasing their skills and knowledge rather than recruiting them to be VMN volunteers.
- **Conduct a base assessment of diversity in the community and in the chapter.** Using a combination of strategies, such as exploring demographic data, talking to partner organizations, and brainstorming with chapter members, describe the diversity of the areas served by the chapter in order to increase understanding of the potential audiences to engage. This can be a starting point for discussion and learning among chapter members.
- **Incorporate project proposal form and process changes as developed at the state level to address accessibility for underrepresented populations.** E.g., if doing an educational program, what will be done to engage underrepresented audiences? If building a trail, are there things that can be done to improve accessibility?
- **Have an outreach committee and chair** with a focus on expanding the VMN audience.
- **Try community-based service instead of project-based.** For example, look at what a particular community needs related to natural resources and help them problem-solve. Let communities generate their own projects, with VMNs assisting, versus providing a menu of what VMN volunteers do.

Creating Inclusive Environments

State Level Actions

- **Train a small group of VMN volunteers to be facilitators to lead diversity and inclusion conversations in their chapters.** These facilitators could also be points-of-contact within the chapter for individuals who have an issue related to inclusion that needs to be addressed.

Chapter Level Actions

- **Build community and foster inclusion in the membership** (outside of training.) With so many volunteers selecting their favorite project and only showing up for special chapter events, the opportunities for community development are dependent on the way an individual chapter operates. Some suggestions:
 - Regular chapter meetings with dedicated social time.
 - Picnics
 - Chapter Projects – either ones that they have developed or where an expectation is set that all members should try to participate.
 - Mentor relationships with trainees that continue for at least a year after the completion of basic training.
 - Make diversity a regular discussion at chapter meetings and recognize creative efforts to reach diverse populations.
- **Continue mentor relationships with trainees for at least a year after the completion of basic training.**
- **Make diversity a regular discussion at chapter meetings and recognize creative efforts to reach diverse populations.**
- **Consider whether location of projects is a barrier.** For some individuals, there may be traumatic history associated with the location.
- **Have a point-of-contact within the chapter for individuals who have an issue related to inclusion that needs to be addressed.**
- **Hold chapter-level facilitated discussions about diversity and inclusion.** These discussions could be facilitated by willing chapter champions or by a team of state-wide trainers or facilitators. The idea is to follow on from the basic CE as described above and help a chapter dig deeply into their own community and find creative ways to move forward. The concept is to have a facilitated conversation after a CE on diversity and inclusion, though the two can be merged into a training with a facilitated discussion.
- **Consider how to keep the conversation in front of chapter members.** For example, include regular articles in chapter newsletters or webpages that showcase new articles or stories.
- **Dedicate a chapter meeting, or part of a yearly chapter meeting as a forum for talking about diversity and inclusion issues.** This could include talking about new potential initiatives, showcasing new initiatives in the chapter, evaluating past initiatives and how they worked, etc.