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CALL FOR CHANGE: WHY UNPAID WORK EXPERIENCE MUST STOP

Unsalaries internships and placements hinder inclusion and diversity, say scientists petitioning for a fairer approach. **By Madeline Bodin**

Hundreds of scientists worldwide have petitioned an international marine-mammalogy society to take a stand against unpaid positions such as internships and work-experience placements, arguing that uncompensated work presents barriers to diversity and inclusion in the discipline.

The petition was sent to the Society for Marine Mammalogy (SMM) in July, asking that it change its code of ethics “to reflect that all workers in the field of marine mammal science should be compensated for their labor” and to bar any advertising for unpaid internships on its website (see go.nature.com/32pdmzb). It had circulated for about a month on Twitter,

and on a public listserv for marine-mammal science, called MARMAM, and been signed by 727 marine-mammal researchers and others.

The petition has ignited heated discussion on the listserv and elsewhere about the value of unpaid work and of diversity in science. Charles Littnan, the society’s president, says that its board of directors will wait until the issue cools down before considering whether to add guidance about pay and diversity to the society’s code of ethics. “We have taken the petition seriously,” says Littnan.

Some unpaid positions in marine mammalogy have requirements specific to field-based research; among these are full-time internships that last for months in remote

locations. But the issues that the petition addresses, including how unpaid positions limit the diversity of junior researchers in any field, are widespread. Data are not available on the number of unpaid positions across all scientific disciplines worldwide, but anecdotally they are thought to be numerous. The petition authors note that large US marine-science and conservation organizations – including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the wildlife charity WWF – employ unpaid workers.

A 2014 report by the Royal Society in London found that researchers who came from economically advantaged backgrounds were more likely to enter the scientific

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The SMM petition was co-organized by Eiren Jacobson, an ecologist at the University of St Andrews, UK; Margaret Siple, a marine biologist at the University of California, Santa Barbara; and Chloe Malinka, a zoophysiologicalist at Aarhus University in Denmark. They say that the idea for the petition grew out of this year's #ShutDownSTEM and #Shut Down Academia initiatives, which developed from the Black Lives Matter movement. Scientists and academic researchers worldwide ceased work for a day on 10 June to protest against anti-Black racism. White scientists and academics were asked to quietly reflect on what they could do to address systemic racism. The three petition organizers say that the petition is their response to that question.

Junior scientists in marine mammalogy are expected to have at least one or two unpaid research experiences to qualify for a graduate programme, Siple says. Students who must pay for their studies or support a family are pushed out because they cannot afford to work in unpaid positions, the organizers say.

All of the petition's organizers have worked as unpaid interns, but they note that not everyone can afford to do so: "If you have a family depending on you, you wouldn't be able to do

that," Siple says (see 'Striking a balance').

The organizers wanted their SMM petition to reach beyond scientists who had successfully navigated unpaid positions. "We explicitly invited people to sign the petition who were considering careers in marine-mammal science and couldn't participate because of this requirement," Jacobson says.

Those in other scientific disciplines have also picked up on the petition, says Eric Archer, a marine-mammal geneticist at the NOAA Southwest Fisheries Science Center in La Jolla, California, who co-chairs the SMM's diversity and inclusivity committee.

The petition prompted discussion and disagreement on the MARMAM listserv, which has many SMM members. Phillip Clapham, a zoologist who recently retired from the NOAA Alaska Fisheries Science Center in Seattle, Washington, says that an unpaid stint at a small non-profit research institution after his undergraduate programme was crucial to his career success. If pay is mandatory, he says, opportunities such as the one that changed him – from a young man travelling on savings and a small inheritance into a dedicated scientist – will disappear.

Auriel Fournier, a wetland-bird ecologist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, says that the scientific community does not hear much about those who are unsuccessful in science. "The people who miss out on these 'opportunities' are unrepresented in the discussion" about unpaid work, says Fournier, who has been writing about the issue for years and who co-authored a 2019 study on unpaid work and access to scientific professions (A. M. V. Fournier *et al.* *PLoS ONE* **14**, e0217032; 2019). Successful scientists talk about how they benefited from unpaid work, she says, but we hear little from people who are forced to drop out of science for reasons that include not being able to afford to work without pay, she adds.

Fournier lasted a month in an unpaid internship during her undergraduate years. She had to quit that position when she could no longer pay for her tuition, rent and other necessities. After that, she accepted only paid internships.

Today, she says, early-career scientists reach out to her to ask what they should do to curb unpaid work, when they don't have the power to make changes that they would like to see. "I think, as we move up the career ladder, we can play a larger role in making sure the way we do our science matches our values," Fournier says. "A lot of folks have internalized the idea that science is a meritocracy and their success is due only to their hard work. It is hard to realize that your success may be related to your gender, to your race or to the unpaid job that you had the money to take."

Madeline Bodin is a freelance science writer based in Vermont.

STRIKING THE RIGHT BALANCE

How to find a work-placement experience that works

Look for a paid placement. But those seeking internships and placements should be aware that studies have found that racial bias also affects who gets paid for placements, and who doesn't.

Assess your needs. If you will receive room and board, but need income, you might prefer a local position that pays a minimum wage over an unpaid position. But in some circumstances, such as in a remote location, the minimum wage will not amount to the value of the lodging and food provided with an unpaid position.

Get what you came for. You might be seeking recommendation letters for a graduate course, the chance for a paid post, the opportunity to develop a skill, or co-authorship of a paper. You need to make sure that the position you accept will offer the benefits you want.

Check with your institution. Some universities provide grants or financial-aid credit for students who accept unpaid internships.