

# Safety in Field and Ocean Sciences: Best Practices for Preventing and Responding to Harassment in Remote Research Settings



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# THE PROBLEM OF HARASSMENT IN FIELD SCIENCES

Harassment is pervasive in the academic workplace, especially in STEM-related fields. It undermines professional and educational attainment, diminishes mental and physical health, damages research integrity, and often results in the victims switching careers to avoid field work or leaving academia altogether. This represents a failure on the part of science to provide the safe and inclusive space that everyone deserves.

Participants in field science already face acute safety concerns related to the remoteness of the field site or platform, and the isolated nature of field science is shown to exacerbate the risks of sexual harassment. Longstanding cultures of “what happens in the field, stays in the field” in many field research environments encourage harassment and bullying. Small group settings can amplify toxic climates and interpersonal power imbalances. Isolation and unfamiliar environments can both empower harassers towards more extreme behavior, and limit targets’ ability to seek safety and assistance. Physical distance from home institutions, as well as multi-institutional teams, lead to a lack of comprehensive policies, oversight, and reporting. Intersectional minoritized identities and associated societal biases can compound these impacts, and lead to decreased support and response. There are often multiple institutions bearing responsibility for those participants and the field site or platform, leading to a challenging environment for addressing and handling incidents of sexual and gender-based harassment.

# PROJECT GOALS

The goal of the workshop was to assemble a suite of best practices to prevent and respond to harassment and related misconduct in remote field and ocean research settings.

## Prevention

Workplace climate and culture is a big part of harassment prevention (or enabling). Additionally, institutional structures for training, reporting, and support for targets helps to reinforce institutional commitments to ending harassment, which can deter potential harassment.

## Reporting

Targets of harassment often do not report because they feel reports won't get taken seriously, they fear backlash, or they may be unaware of appropriate reporting resources. Reports are often not kept consistently within or across institutions, permitting serial harassers to continue to harm.

## Response / Support

Academic institutions center their responses to reports around illegal misconduct. Most harassment experienced is legal, while destructive. Responses generally are little more than conversations with HR, and rarely, termination. Few institutions provide meaningful support for targets of harassment, nor do they attempt to repair any harms. Finally, the cross-institutional nature of field science allows incidents to fall through the cracks as institutional jurisdictions are unclear.

## Responsible parties

Harassment prevention and response must take place at all levels of work, from field crews to university and professional societies.

# METHODS: WORKSHOP PROCESS

## Participants

Workshop participants were invited from a cross section of field and ocean science community leadership, including academic institutions, research platforms, and professional societies. Experts in harassment, inclusion, law, and policy also attended. The National Science Foundation, who sponsored this workshop, also sent several non-participating



## Process

The workshop was conducted over three days, entirely virtually due to COVID-19 safety precautions. Participants had highly diverse backgrounds and expertise, and most were strangers to one another, discussing sensitive topics. The workshop

included highly choreographed facilitation and a trained informed listener on standby in order to create a productive conversation and provide psychological support to participants.

Day 1 set shared goals and values. Experts in diversity, equity, inclusion, and harassment in sciences shared knowledge to create a common base of understanding for all participants.

Day 2 carried the bulk of the work, as participants broke out into moderated working groups to tackle the topics of 1) prevention and climate practices, 2) reporting & institutional obligations, and 3) monitoring and sustainability practices.

Day 3 wrapped up the working group's efforts and participants created plans for moving these recommendations forward.

## RESULTS: RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES

The workshop resulted in 52 concrete, actionable recommendations grouped across four topic areas: culture change, accountability, policy development, and reporting.

### Culture change (17 recs)

The intensely hierarchical and relationship-based culture of academia fosters a culture of in-groups and out-groups, and provides fertile ground for hostile behaviors and harassment of minoritized scientists. Best practices include providing career incentives for fostering collaborative and supportive work environments, and embedding safety and inclusion into everyday practices.

### Accountability (7 recs)

Academic leadership needs to create and enforce metrics and incentives for combatting harassment, fostering inclusion, and supporting targets. Leadership must be held accountable for enforcing these practices.

### Policy Development (23 recs)

Current policies focus on unlawful behaviors, but policies must be developed to incentivize inclusive practices, deter legal-but-harmful misconduct, and provide support to targets of harassment and misconduct. Policy development must include representation from the entire community affected.

### Audience

These 52 recommendations are aimed at all participants of scientific field research, including PIs, crew leads, project managers, professional societies, funding agencies, research institutions, and universities.

## CALL TO ACTION

The authors ask every member of the scientific community to review the report (<https://zenodo.org/record/5604956>) and begin to implement the recommendations in their scientific communities wherever they have influence.

### Resources needed

To address the pervasive and complex issue of harassment in field sciences, institutions will need to make investments in staff time and outside expertise. Academia has institutionalized processes for monitoring integrity of health and safety, finances, and scientific quality. Similar institutional investment must be made in ensuring the integrity of inclusive and collaborative conduct.

We call on all of our scientific institutions to invest in the staff time, expertise, and institutional changes necessary to make field research a safe and accessible to all scientists.

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## ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment in STEM continues to be a pervasive barrier to women's full participation in the sciences. Many studies conclude that workplace culture and lack of clear policies and practices exacerbate the risks of sexual harassment. Remote research environments, such as field stations and ocean platforms, bring additional risk to researchers. Participants already face acute safety concerns related to the remoteness of the field station or oceanographic vessels, fewer and less clear policies and enforcement regulations are in place, and multiple institutions bear responsibility, leading to a challenging environment for preventing and handling incidents. This workshop explored the factors that permit sexual harassment in remote research, and aimed to develop practices to prevent and respond to harassment in the field.

California State University Desert Studies and the Center for Ocean Leadership convened workshop in March, 2021 to address sexual harassment in field science. Over three days, field and ocean science leadership and practitioners came together with leadership from professional societies and academia, and experts in sociology, policy, and social justice. The goals were to: 1) open a dialogue between sexual harassment experts and the field research community to develop best practices and recommendations; 2) build coordination and consistency in policy setting and enforcement across field stations and oceanographic platforms; 3) develop processes to monitor the reporting of sexual harassment instances occurring at remote field locations; and 4) promote a safe culture for scientists conducting research at remote field stations and on oceanographic vessels.

The workshop compiled and developed best practices and recommendations in four key areas: 1) culture change, 2) policy, 3) accountability, and 4) reporting. These recommendations were targeted at all facets of field and ocean sciences, from academic and research institutions, professional societies, and funding agencies, to departments and field research crews. Here we will give an overview of the workshop findings, with particular focus on the recommendations for research leadership.

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