

Defenders of Wildlife Listening Session Report

[INSERT DATE]

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Between November, 2020 and January, 2021, the Avarna Group engaged with 144 staff at Defenders of Wildlife (“Defenders”) in the following ways:

- 14 formal listening sessions organized by team (e.g. Field Conservation, Conservation Law, Government Relations, Communications, Marketing, Development, Human Resources, CCI, Finance, Operations, and Leadership). Most, if not all, staff from each team were present in these meetings.
- 2 affinity listening sessions based on identity (one for LGBTQ-identifying staff and one for staff identifying as Black, Indigenous, or a person of color)
- 8 individual conversations with staff who reached out. These were provided to those who could not attend a meeting and/or had additional thoughts they wanted to share outside of the formal meeting context.
- 10 individual e-mail communications from staff who shared additional information and thoughts.

The purpose of these engagements was to hold space for staff to share their perspectives and experiences regarding diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) at Defenders to ensure the DEIJ plan we build is reflective of Defenders’ needs.

What’s in this report:

This report contains the Avarna Group’s summary of the high-level themes from these engagements, paraphrased to increase comprehension of a large data set and preserve anonymity. We are sharing this report to reflect back to Defenders’ staff what they shared with us in these sessions and to ensure we are transparent with Defenders’ staff in our own process as we continue forward to build out a plan.

This report neither contains a nuanced analysis nor our recommendations. Instead, this report is a reflection of what staff have shared with us – this includes both first-hand experiences (“___ happened to me”), perceptions based on first hand experiences (“based on ___ happening to me, I think ___”), and feelings (“I am frustrated that ___”). In writing this report, we did not consider perceptions based on second hand information or rumor (“I heard ___ is”). Additionally, because this report is a reflection of conversations rather than an analysis of the data, readers will find contradictory views shared. This is to be expected as staff have varying experiences and perspectives on DEIJ work at Defenders. We will use this report and other data to create a plan that reflects the voices of Defenders’ staff, which will both institutionalize the good work Defenders is doing and lay out concrete strategies and tactics to pursue new opportunities and address areas for growth.



In addition to sharing bright spots and pinch points, staff shared a host of great ideas and resource needs related to DEIJ. We have not shared this data here but it is our role at the Avarna Group to translate this data into a plan, and (in collaboration with the Leadership Team, DEIJ Focus Group and eventually all staff) help Defenders identify priority strategies and tactics.

Methodology:

Staff were asked the following three questions in each meeting:

1. What are bright spots of work that are happening as it relates to DEIJ at Defenders; in other words, how have you been able to successfully connect the dots with your work and DEIJ or what successes do you see happening in the organization, both internally (i.e., workplace and culture) and externally (i.e., programs, policy, legal, research, marketing and communications)?
2. What are the pinch points you have experienced as it relates to DEIJ at Defenders; in other words, where do you feel challenged or stuck or where do you see the organization being challenged or stuck with this work, both internally and externally?
3. What resources do you need, or ideas do you have, to better integrate DEIJ into your work or for Defenders to better integrate DEIJ into its DNA?

We transcribed staff input in as close to verbatim format as we could in our own notes, and then reviewed the 100+ pages of notes to identify high level themes. High level themes were identified primarily based on the frequency of unique staff mentions. That said, the number of mentions did not always correlate to the importance of a theme (for example, some themes could only be spoken to by a few staff members with that particular knowledge set and expertise). Finally, whenever a document or memo is referenced, it is included because it was referenced by staff in the meeting and then sent to the Avarna Group for further review.

In this report, “Executive team” refers to the President, Chief of Staff, Senior Vice President of Operations, and Senior Vice President of Conservation Programs. “Leadership team” refers to the Executive team as well as Vice Presidents. “Leadership” and/or “leaders” is used as a more general term when staff mentioned leadership, but did not specify whether they were referring to just the Executive team, just the Leadership Team, or both the Executive and Leadership teams.

“BIPOC” refers to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, and broadly covers racial and ethnic identities that are not White.

COMMITMENT TO LONG-TERM DEIJ EFFORTS

Staff report they appreciate opportunities to learn together, they are motivated and passionate about DEIJ work (to the point that two teams have proactively proposed their own DEIJ plans), and they feel more empowered to have difficult conversations. Staff also have many actionable ideas for furthering DEIJ work at Defenders.



Specifically, Leadership team members expressed that they have experienced personal growth related to DEIJ and are having more intentional conversations with their teams about DEIJ work. Leadership team members feel that the Leadership team is committed to DEIJ and feel they have demonstrated this commitment by: creating a strategic priority around DEIJ, hiring the Avarna Group, including social issues into the Defenders transition memo, improving community and tribal partnerships, and improving the internship program. Finally, the Leadership team members reported being impressed by the level of motivation their own staff have had around proactively building DEIJ plans for their teams.

However, the Leadership team also expressed significant concerns about DEIJ. Most prominently, they simultaneously expressed concerns about not moving fast enough, resulting in staff disappointment, while also moving too fast, resulting in a lack of strategy and coordination. Relatedly, the Leadership team expressed a fear of failure not only as it relates to pacing and strategy, but also as it relates to meeting different staff needs, providing a clear vision for Defenders' DEIJ path, bridging generational gaps in approaches and knowledge related to DEIJ, and external policy stances (e.g. policy to increase wildlife habitat can come into conflict with equitable access). The Leadership team expressed concern that these challenges could result in splintering or fracturing in the organization. Finally, the CEO reported the importance of her shifting role and noted that with the incoming Biden administration, she understands her role as focused on external work to address the intersection crises of biodiversity loss and social justice issues rather than internal work.

Beyond the Leadership team, though some staff report they are hopeful that this particular DEIJ process will “stick,” overall more staff were skeptical than hopeful. Those staff expressing skepticism report concern that this effort will not effect change (using phrases such as “box check,” “lip service,” “symbolic,” and “in vogue”) and will be tabled once the Avarna Group's scope of work is complete. When we explored the source of this skepticism, there were some themes: there is a perception that key leaders (particularly Executive Team members) are resistant to DEIJ work. These staff report this push back shows up in a few different ways, including statements that DEIJ is mission creep, that it won't generate a return on investment, that it is too much of a risk, that DEIJ will result in political blowback, and that internal culture work is less valued by key leaders compared to programmatic DEIJ work. Some of the skeptical staff report receiving specific instructions not to publicly talk about DEIJ issues for these reasons, and others who are ready to implement their DEIJ ideas report getting barred from moving forward by leadership on the grounds that leadership doesn't want staff to move forward without an organization-wide plan or efforts that are not in lock step with the rest of the organization. Staff who are skeptical also report that one of the reasons for their skepticism is that they feel there has been a lack of clarity around DEIJ efforts past and present. Regarding past efforts, some of these staff report that not much has changed since two other consultants have reported similar issues, and that they are unclear how other consultants' data and recommendations were operationalized. Regarding current efforts, skeptical staff reported that they were confused about Avarna Group's scope of our work and outcomes of this particular process.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE



Organizational culture rose to the top as a major pinch point in DEIJ work at Defenders. However, it should be noted that there are some bright spots in Defenders' culture. First, staff repeatedly reported caring and feeling cared for by many of their immediate co-workers and immediate supervisors. Second, staff have appreciated the opportunity for connection in the BIPOC caucus group. Third, staff report Defenders' culture is generally welcoming of LGBTQIA+ staff.

Culture of fear: "fear," "culture of fear," and "afraid" were mentioned in this context over 50 times primarily by staff not in positions of leadership. When staff were asked what they feared, the main fear was around being fired or reprimanded for bringing up DEIJ issues such as the lack of an inclusive culture (phrases such as "am I next?" and "being made to feel small" were raised in this regard). Staff also reported a hesitance to come forward with new ideas related to external DEIJ work (e.g., strategies in marketing and communications, programs, advocacy, research, and more) for fear of being prohibited from moving forward with any of their ideas and having the extra work they put into imagining DEIJ solutions be for naught. When asked who staff were afraid of, the primary source of fear was not immediate supervisors, but specific individuals on the Executive Team, including the CEO. One Executive Team member expressed that they believe staff's pointed critique of the CEO stems from gendered expectations that the CEO be more warm and nurturing because she identifies as a woman, without considering how a woman CEO might have to assimilate in a field historically dominated by men.

Lack of Transparency: Staff also report feeling there is a lack of transparency by the Executive and Leadership Teams with key information and processes impacting staff. This leaves staff feeling unclear and unable to meaningfully contribute to decisions and advocate for themselves in an informed way. Some of main areas cited by staff as lacking transparency include various HR processes (see below) and DEIJ-related efforts.. Regarding lack of transparency on DEIJ, staff have felt unclear about the role of the Avarna Group, the outcomes for this work, how they can engage in this process, and many reported that they believed the findings of the last consultant were scrubbed before sending them to staff.

Lack of Accountability: Staff report experiencing a lack of accountability for DEIJ among the Executive Team and some VPs. Staff report this lack of accountability manifests primarily in a couple of ways: (1) not taking ownership over DEIJ work, and instead assigning it to junior staff (and particularly BIPOC staff), placing the onus on passionate junior staff to spearhead the work; and (2) not holding each other accountable when they behave in ways that are contrary to DEIJ (e.g., microaggressions, tokenism, acting in self-interest versus what's good for the organization). Staff feel stuck regarding how to hold leadership accountable. Staff are also secondarily concerned how they themselves will be held accountable for engaging in DEIJ work because work plans are not institutionalized at Defenders (beyond weekly reports in some teams on community engagement).

Lack of Trust in HR: The dynamics above are further exacerbated by a lack of trust in Human Resources, which has left staff unable to voice their concerns. When asked why they don't trust HR, staff mentioned HR's involvement in a number of involuntary terminations that staff



deemed either arbitrary or retaliatory, a perceived lack of confidentiality, and a perceived allegiance to the Executive Team which they believe hinders HR's agency to make decisions (e.g., salary decisions, personnel decisions).

Unwelcoming culture for BIPOC staff in particular: Though the culture issues above have impacted staff of all identities, staff report these issues most clearly impact BIPOC staff. It should be noted that this data comes from staff of all identities, not just BIPOC staff, and that issues impacting BIPOC staff were often raised by their white peers. Staff report that BIPOC staff have to assimilate to Defenders' white dominant culture and try not to make waves, though they continue to experience tokenism, microaggressions, cooption of ideas, and bear the brunt of the emotional labor of DEI work. Staff also report that BIPOC staff experience a pronounced lack of upward mobility and ability to engage in substantive work (when compared to their white peers) because of the confluence of three factors: (1) there is a sense that BIPOC staff predominantly hold positions that are not driving programmatic work (e.g., coordinators, assistants, and support positions), (2) the reality that these positions generally lack upward mobility, and (3) the perception that people in these positions are less valued for their contributions and treated with less respect. The BIPOC caucus has supported staff in navigating some of these issues, but staff still report a lack of structures to support BIPOC staff in particular, who staff report often leave Defenders.

While BIPOC staff are most negatively impacted by organizational culture, staff also raised organizational culture issues impacting LGBTQ+ staff. Some staff report witnessing or experiencing microaggressions around gender identity and sexual orientation and notice some staff lack an understanding of issues the LGBTQ+ community may face (e.g. the importance of pronouns).

RECRUITMENT, HIRING, & DEMOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION

Longer-term staff report noticing an increased racial diversity within staff, particularly on the operations team. Staff also cited the new paid internship program as a bright spot. However, many staff noted that Defenders continues to be a largely white organization. Specifically, staff noted that the Board and Executive team are predominantly white; the VPs are mostly white; and most conservation VPs are white men. Staff also report that there is a dearth of Black, Indigenous, or Latinx staff in leadership positions and that they perceive biases in recruitment and hiring contribute to this homogeneity. Staff are concerned that leadership positions are recruited from the federal government (two staff referred to this as an "Old Boys Network.") and that there is an age divide between leadership and staff. They also report biases that favor advanced degrees and unnecessary numbers of years of work experience in the field, and biases in what is deemed a "qualified" applicant based on background. Staff report that these biases are reinforced by the lack of consistent training for hiring managers around this topic. Most recently, staff have reported frustration around the announcement of the transition of the VP of People and Culture to VP of DEI. Specifically, based on their perception about the details of the new position, staff report frustration about the lack of a robust and public hiring process (such as conducting an external search).



COMPENSATION, BENEFITS, & WORKPLACE POLICIES

Staff report that the HR department is working to create consistent policies and revise existing policies and cite many specific policies that could be revised to improve inclusion. Policies that have shifted in a positive direction include same gender spousal benefits, secular and non-culturally appropriate celebration of holidays, supervisor trainings, parental leave, gender neutral bathrooms, a nondiscrimination policy that includes gender identity and expression, and nursing/lactation policies.

The two biggest areas of concerns: are around pay and around processes for evaluations, promotions/demotions, and terminations. Concerns persist around perceived pay inequities (with some staff expressing concern that there are racial inequities) and lack of transparency in pay scales. Staff also cite several concerns around the lack of clear and consistently applied institutional processes for evaluations, promotions/demotions, and terminations, that there is no ability for staff to provide feedback up the hierarchy, and that performance improvement plans are reportedly not required as a matter of course prior to termination of an employee.

DEVELOPMENT, OPERATIONS & FINANCE

The Development, Operations, and Finance teams had the least data to report regarding their substantive work. This is by no means a reflection on a lack of commitment from these teams, but more of a reflection on the difficulty connecting the dots between DEIJ work and development, operations and finance. Development did report some bright spots related to data gathering and identified some areas for improvement (such as needing to diversify the donor base, collect better demographic information, and address exclusionary donor behavior) that will be reflected in the plan.

MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS

Staff report a number of successes in marketing and communications. They report new communications projects are analyzed with a DEIJ lens to identify multiple perspectives; new stories are being shared in blog posts and social channels (especially Indigenous voices); they are testing messaging with younger and more racially diverse audiences (both in national polling work and with members); and they are reaching out to new channels and partners to increase diversity. Staff report being more intentional about language used in communications (e.g., possessive language around wildlife and lands), and have revised the Defenders style guide with a DEIJ lens. And finally, staff report the Defenders website has been made more accessible to people with disabilities.

The main pinch points around marketing and communications are fourfold. First, the ability to tell more diverse stories hinges on field staff connecting with community partners in the field (issues related to field staff's ability to connect with communities is discussed below in community engagement). Second, staff feel challenged telling stories and sharing imagery of marginalized communities in a way that doesn't feel tokenizing and inauthentic to Defenders'



work. Third, staff report that public messaging around DEIJ (e.g. statement about Black Lives Matter or LGBTQ rights) feels disingenuous given the lack of substantive support from Defenders after the statement. Additionally, staff lack bandwidth to navigate public blowback and hateful comments on social media and by members. Fourth, staff report that Executive Team members have communicated to them that it is important that Defenders receive credit for successes (versus sharing the limelight), which makes it difficult to center partners' voices in public statements.

PROGRAMMATIC WORK

Staff across Defenders' program departments (Field Conservation, Landscape Conservation, Government Relations, CCI, and Conservation Law) provided notable examples of how they've woven DEIJ into their external work. These examples fall under the following themes:

1. More intentionally including people and communities' interests in wildlife conservation work (e.g., Border Wall issues, Green Groups transition memo, Wildlife Conservation transition memo, National Biodiversity Strategy bill, including traditional ecological knowledge in climate resilience documents);
2. Successfully engaging with tribes and Indigenous communities across geographies (e.g., successful partnerships with Native Village of Tyonek around Beluga work, Gwich'in Steering Community re: Arctic Refuge, 19 Pueblos and the Navajo Nation, and the Paiute re: the Air Force use of ancestral lands in Nevada for bomb training);
3. Engaging more BIPOC in programs, research, and letters of support (e.g., Orcas Love Rain Gardens, other programs in the PNW, greater diversity in scientists for research and signing letters);
4. Building broader and more racially diverse coalitions (e.g., Colorado Gray Wolf Reintroduction ballot measure); and
5. Tying social justice issues to wildlife issues (e.g., Heirs Property legislation in Florida, addressing environmental justice in ESA analyses, consulting with environmental justice groups on issues impacting them in California State Water Board work).

However, staff report six main challenges related to engaging in DEIJ in their conservation work:

1. Staff perceive that Defenders will only engage in DEIJ work when it is politically expedient or convenient. For example, staff report Defenders was initially opposed to rematriation of the National Bison Range to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and only withdrew its objection when it felt "pointless" to speak out against the water compact, and that Defenders will support immigration organizations "when it serves our purpose" but forbids staff from directly commenting on the human rights violations and racism related to the border wall policies and construction.
2. Staff report a lack of investment in community engagement, leading to opportunistic or transactional partnerships with marginalized communities. One bright spot is that the Alaska field office has dedicated a full time coordinator position to community outreach. Staff in other field offices expressed a desire for a similar full time position dedicated to community and tribal outreach, as well as having time built into their schedules to support their fostering community relationships without expectations. Staff also report



that Defenders doesn't support Indigenous and tribal issues before making asks of these communities to support Defenders' work.

3. Staff report Defenders doesn't currently support organization-wide urban coexistence work (where there is opportunity to engage BIPOC communities), and staff feel this is due to a lack of perceived benefit.
4. Staff report that some leaders have communicated to them that DEIJ work is at cross purposes with Defenders' conservation philosophy, which staff report is grounded in American exceptionalism, biocentrism, and a strong attachment to certain policy and legal remedies to wildlife issues (including the National Wildlife Refuge System). This has particular impacts on Indigenous relationship building (e.g. opposing tribal hunting rights and Indigenous wildlife management).
5. Staff report that a competitive and individualistic culture and attachment to receiving credit for wins makes collaborating with other organizations and communities difficult. A few staff brought up concepts around power hoarding and refusal to power share as issues. In some cases, staff say, Defenders blazes its own path without consulting important stakeholders because it feels it is the expert.
6. Exacerbating these challenges is a lack of rubrics or guidelines to support staff in working through these complex issues methodically and uniformly. Staff report there is no formal process to determine which partners, organizations, and tribes are essential partners to be consulted and which ones are optional.

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