

Virginia Native Plant Society Communications Workshop
Exploring Ways to Grow Membership and Increase Diversity
Charlottesville, VA

On December 1, 2018, sixteen people from seven VNPS chapters (Jefferson, John Clayton, Piedmont, Pocahontas, Potowmack, Prince William, and South Hampton Roads) met to discuss ways to increase diversity and grow membership. The meeting was inspired by the challenges presented by two compelling speakers at our annual meeting — Jessica Hawthorne and Kevin Bryan (see article on the annual meeting).

Facilitated by First Vice President Janet Pawlukiewicz, the participants reviewed the VNPS mission and work we currently undertake. Through small and large discussions, they “brainstormed” potential actions and challenges to address. Then, to identify priorities, each participant had 5 votes to distribute over the proposed actions.

Here are some actions that the group identified you might want to consider in your chapter:

- Encourage localities to adopt an official native wildflower.
- Publicize your events to non-traditional groups. Choose publicity photos that reflect the diversity you’d like to encourage. Consider offering a “Meet Up” on native plants (see [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com)).
- Engage youth, for example 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs. Provide scholarships for nature camps. Ask them to help out at plant sales. Arrange transportation to events and field trips and provide docents for those outings.
- Actively reach out to make contacts and offer presentations or sponsor tables at non-environmental meetings and festivals. Perhaps reach out to national groups such as Outdoor Afro ([outdoorafro.com](https://www.outdoorafro.com)), Latino Outdoors ([latinoutdoors.org](https://www.latinoutdoors.org)) and the Student Conservation Association ([thesca.org](https://www.thesca.org)) to meet and discuss potential common goals and activities.

The group also recognized some challenges and solutions for taking these actions. For example, there is limited staffing and capacity at both the chapter and state levels. We need to find the members with passion for the activities and support them in their endeavors. Also, there is a need to balance these actions with other important priorities—be strategic. Clearly, it is not always easy to approach groups with apparently different interests and cultures. So, it is important to start by sitting around the table together in order to search for an intersection of goals. Finally, it is most important to focus on inclusion in addition to diversity. Strive to make people feel welcome and included once they do join us or try us out.

In conclusion, the group decided to send the proposed actions identified at the workshop to all members and the board. So, be on the lookout for these. Give some feedback and additional ideas. Let us know what inspires you.

Submitted by Janet Pawlukiewicz, VNPS 1st Vice-President, December 5, 2018