

Southeastern Archaeological Conference
Meeting of the Executive Committee and Image Policy Petitioners
11 April 2023

In (remote) attendance: Kandi Hollenbach, Ramie Gougeon, Jane Eastman, Lee Ann Wendt, Carol Colaninno, Shane, Miller, Tony Boudreaux, Rob Beck, Lindsay Bloch, Jessica Crawford, Jim Knight, Vin Steponaitis, Deanna Byrd, Karen Stevens, Carrie Wilson

[R Gougeon, reporting]

Jim Knight opened the meeting by recounting how their petition to rescind the “image policy” came to be. The policy was adopted by the Executive Committee in November 2022. He and other petitioners held a listening session afterwards which was centered on the question of whether what they viewed as a substantive change to publication policy should have been voted on by the entire SEAC membership and not just the Executive Committee. They drafted a petition, worked up the language of their resolution, and got 30 signatories. The gist of the petition, which has been published in a SEAC newsletter, is to rescind the image policy and re-start a discussion with the entire SEAC membership.

Vin Steponaitis noted that the image policy came “out of the blue” and had major implications and impacts that were seemingly unconsidered. These included the shutting down of a major area of research for Southeastern archaeologists, the negative impacts on up-and-coming archaeologists, as well as raising issues surrounding academic freedom.

To the first point, the petitioners note the importance of photographs (specifically, and as superior to drawings) to iconographic, style, and chronological research. They argue that the proposed work-arounds are not perfect: drawings are often not detailed enough, and putting supplemental materials in other locations defeats the ability to make an argument in an article, not to mention introducing challenges in the management of articles and images in different locations.

The petitioners suggest that the image policy creates an embargo on research undertaken by master’s and doctoral students who now have no sense that their work will be publishable or accessible in the future.

Lastly, the petitioners see the image policy as an academic freedom issue, citing growing challenges from both the ‘left’ and ‘right’ ends of the political spectrum. They cite the 1967 University of Chicago ‘Kalven Report’ where it was proffered that ideas of different people may be in conflict, but it is not the role of the institution to shield people from these ideas.

Other petitioners on the call suggested that some Tribes (ex., Quapaw Nation) have no problems with the taking of photographs of funerary objects. The individual suggested the image policy represents an attack on tribal sovereignty. Other individuals associated with Tribes on the call suggested that the collaboration required by the new image policy may result in materials published in a separate, supplemental way. Readers and researchers would then have agency to access the materials.

The petitioners argued that as the journal is read by a professional audience, sharing images is akin to sharing information in a medical journal that the general public would find problematic. The uses of imagery in articles about Southeastern archaeology are not gratuitous but instead serve an important purpose. They argue that the editor has the discretion to publish (or not) images, but they need to be

mindful of quality, not content of articles. Some discussion included whether to publish separate, redacted versions of articles in question, and whether putting images in another location would jeopardize the accessibility of all of a researcher's materials over time.

The current Editor asked when SEAC stopped publishing images of human remains. Did membership-wide discussions happen at that time? Two former editors of the journal who are among the petitioners could not recall the specific year nor any wider discussions, but suggested it was more of an 'organic' process. Editor Bloch countered that the current image policy is also part of an organic change in SEAC's approach to the publication of materials that some Indigenous peoples find offensive. A later point was raised about how the journal Editor and Executive Committee had previously made major decisions about the journal without going to the membership. As a representative board, making these decisions on behalf of the membership was viewed as appropriate behavior. The petitioners disagreed, stating that the decision to enact a new image policy was "bad governance."

There was some discussion of rescinding the policy was not "anti-collaboration," noting that Native American traditionalists helped with a Mississippian iconography project in the 1990s that used photos and images without controversy or protest. Counterpoints were made that suggested SEAC is not a neutral entity and that in the past there was no voice for Native Americans. As the SEAC membership changes, so too should our policies and practices. A final point was made by a previous editor: namely, that the intention of the policy is to eliminate harm and increase readership (among individuals who would otherwise avoid the harm of seeing an image they view as inappropriate for publication).

At the end of the meeting, President Hollenbach made plans for the Executive Committee to discuss how to bring the petition to the membership for a vote.

Meeting adjourned 2:31pm (Central)