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Alleged Sexual Misconduct at Smithsonian Tropical Institute

By [Colleen Flaherty](#) // December 10, 2021

Dozens of scientists asked the White House's Gender Policy Council Thursday to protect women and other marginalized researchers working in the sciences from discrimination, harassment and violence. [Their request](#), (https://www.ildunlaw.com/uploads/1/1/8/7/118710949/2021.12.09_open_letter_gpc_w_signatories.pdf) sent by civil rights lawyer Laura Dunn, references an [article](#) (<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/nishitajha/smithsonian-tropical-research-institute-metoo>) published by *BuzzFeed News* the same day regarding 16 women scientists' allegations of gender-based harassment and discrimination at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama. *BuzzFeed* found that employees accused of misconduct were often issued verbal warnings or social restrictions but allowed to keep working with new, junior female scientists. The institute took additional disciplinary action against accused scientists starting in 2019, according to the article, with one retiring that year. The other accused scientist left and a third continues to work there. (A chef and intern were accused of misconduct, as well, but they were not the focus of the article.)

The institute declined comment on specific allegations, which range from inappropriate sexual comments to rape. Joshua Tewksbury, director, told *Buzzfeed*, "We are sorry if anyone has experienced harassment at STRI and are grateful for those who have come forward to tell us of their experiences." He added, "We take this responsibility very seriously and we have clear protocols in place to investigate and address people's concerns as they arise."

Egbert Leigh, a former emeritus staff scientist, and the 2019 retiree, was accused of harassment. Leigh reportedly apologized, acknowledging via email what he called "the substantial truth" of the allegations, and said that he'd been stripped of his emeritus title. Benjamin Turner, who led the institute's biogeochemistry lab, and who was accused of raping a woman at an off-site conference and harassing others, did not respond to a request for comment. He has previously denied the allegations and asserted to colleagues that he was the subject of harassment by one accuser, according to *Buzzfeed*. Edward Allen Herre, a current staff scientist accused of making unwanted sexual advances and meeting with women scientists while wearing a towel only, told *Buzzfeed* that "none of the substance of any of these accounts about me" has to do with preventing harassment in science. The federal Government Accountability Office [found](#) (<https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-20-414r>) in 2020 that the Smithsonian Institution had harassment prevention policies but that supervisors lacked written guidance on addressing complaints and processes for tracking those complaints.

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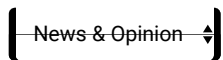
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