

AEGIS

Ancient Environmental Genomics Initiative for Sustainability



Research Culture Code of Conduct

Preface

Dear friends of AEGIS!

The intention with this booklet is to give you, everyone working in AEGIS, a guideline and an introduction to the WHY and HOW of AEGIS.

Here you will find a description of why AEGIS exists, what our cultural principles are, how we structure AEGIS, and the mechanisms that make it work.

You will not find scientific or technical principles or descriptions. This booklet focuses on the culture, the structure, and our way of working.

The booklet describes the more static things, for example the principles and building blocks, and a few selected elements in the structure.

The more dynamic things, like activities, goals, and names of people that are involved in the AEGIS, can be found on the upcoming internal website and our Slack Channel

The culture in the AEGIS is based on a few, clear principles, that

- creates an approach and structure, that is understandable and adaptable,
- enables us to create engagement and a sense of belonging,
- establish a collaborative space that has a nice and welcoming culture,
- encourages people to take ownership and shape their work,
- and most of all, supports us in reaching the scientific goals and their application in practice.

We, the people in AEGIS, create AEGIS. We are invited to lean forward and shape the collaborative environment we want to be part of.

Copenhagen, November 2024

Our purpose

We are together because we believe that *ancient environmental DNA and other biomolecules contains knowledge that can improve the resilience of future crops and cropping systems and how to preserve wild ecosystems and we buy in to the vision and the mission.*

The AEGIS vision is to build a more sustainable and secure food production system while also preserving biodiversity in cropping systems under climate change.

The AEGIS mission is to develop the essential science and methodology needed to use ancient environmental DNA coupled with other ancient and modern biomolecule-based approaches to identify important organismal associations and genetic adaptations in natural and cropping-ecosystems that will improve future food security under climate change (figure 1).

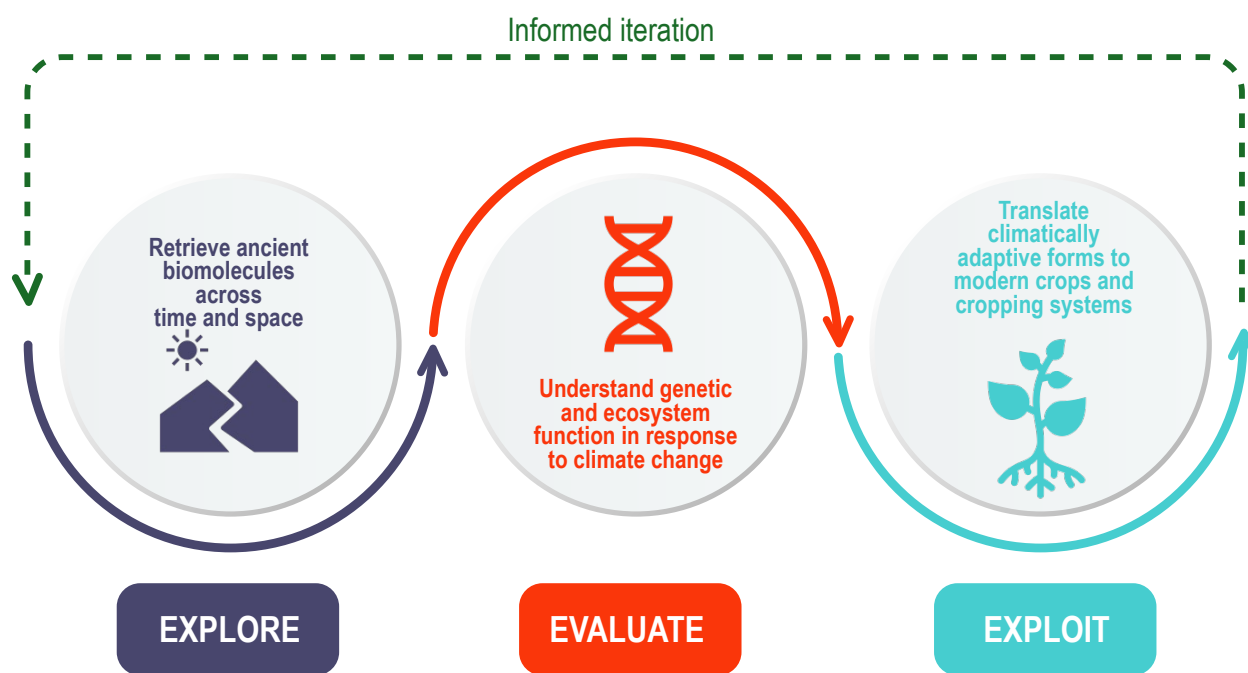


Figure 1 Tailored designs for climate resilient crops and cropping systems as well as wild ecosystems preservation strategies are delivered through exploration and iterative evaluation of ancient environmental DNA and other biomolecules from temporal-spatial geological deposits of past ecosystems exposed to a variety of changing environments.

While we are experts in the sciences required to deliver on the content of AEGIS' mission, none of us are experts in organizing the highly complex collaborative program. Nevertheless, we are ambitious in the way we work together: We want to evolve progressive, sustainable and inclusive habits of how scientists from many different institutions can work together to achieve truly remarkable insights and benefits for society.

Our context

AEGIS as our common third

AEGIS is funded by the Novo Nordic Foundation and Wellcome Trust throughout its intended life span of 7 years. In its initial stage it is bringing together more than 100 individuals across 17 institutions.

Formally, none of us are employed by AEGIS, instead we are employed by one of the participating institutions and must abide by their respective institutional practices, formal line management, national labor laws etc.

Furthermore, many AEGIS participants are not 100% allocated to AEGIS and have additional duties and loyalties we need to adhere to in addition to AEGIS. Not to mention the complex web of external stakeholders.



Figure 2 AEGIS depicted as our common third in coexistence with our host institutions (A-L), our funding bodies and a complex set of other external and internal stakeholders.

In this complexity, AEGIS as our common third can be thought of as a matrix organization, where traditional line management coexists orthogonally with the management of the co-owned program (figure 2). To be successful together, we must evolve a culture of accountability without control and influence without formal authority.

Forces shaping AEGIS research culture code of conduct

How did we get to our agreement of how we work together?

Each of the 17 institutions have articulated values, principles and desired behaviors. For example those who are employed at the AEGIS Hub at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark, will need to follow the [Code of Conduct for Responsible Research – University of Copenhagen](#). Furthermore, both funding bodies wish to induce and encourage us to reflect and be conscious as well as explicit on how we work together.



Figure 3 Snapshot from CoC workshop Oct 9, 2024

As members and leaders in AEGIS, we recognize that we are influenced by diverse values and experiences based on our unconscious cultural biases and our dreams of the ideal workplaces. This ranges from principles from, teal, agile and sociocracy over classical academic institutional hierarchies (deans>institute heads>>phd-students), and for many of us just plain intuition ultimately united by our secular science-based worldviews.

At our foundational Code of Conduct Workshop on October 9, 2024, we brainstormed and discussed our ideas for AEGIS' cultural and behavioral practices (figure 3). The outcome of the discussions at the workshop envisions a transparent, open-minded and inclusive culture where we can develop as individuals and teams, have psychological safety to challenge across seniority, emphasize feedback, value diversity and ensure sustainable workloads for all.

We accept this challenge and commit to work towards a good and better future state as much as possible (see however also the AEGIS Mandate).

These various forces have been interpreted and overlaid with an understanding of the scope and mandate of AEGIS vs the many participating institutions. The result of the integration is this version of the AEGIS Research Culture Code of Conduct.

Our principles

We care for each other

In AEGIS **we care for each other**. We stipulate that we are all whole people, which encourages us to be inclusive and involving, and to have an eye out for the well-being of the people we collaborate and communicate with.

People are people, and we take care of each other.

We want to foster a culture of constructive and encouraging dialogue across all groups and boards. In doing so we strive to recognize individual circumstances and needs as the basis for dialogue.

We aspire to interactions at all levels through kind, honest, and respectful mutual communication (spoken as well as in writing). We are open to expression of dissenting views, opinions, or concerns to stimulate the feeling of inclusivity. Therefore, we encourage that everyone, despite rank, ethnicity, gender, or background can speak up and be heard without fear of negative repercussions.

Examples of how we live it:

- We are active listening and participating e.g. keep camera on when attending online meetings
- At meetings senior members ask for input, feedback, questions etc. from the participants/audience before they speak themselves.
- The AEGIS Steering Committee members offer neutral advice to individuals at all levels who find themselves in situations where a neutral party is required and where the issue is beyond the accountability of the host institution (refer also to the AEGIS Mandate).

The Openness principle

We believe that **openness** and **sharing** is key for creating transparency, trust and psychological safety.

We aspire to that all our data, information, and decisions are made accessible for all that are involved in AEGIS. Budgets, protocols, data, code-repositories and our meeting minutes should be placed online and kept open for all in the consortium.

We encourage that AEGIS meetings are open to all AEGIS-members. It's ok to attend a meeting that you are not specifically invited to. And following that, it's ok to leave a meeting, if your time is spent better elsewhere. When we prioritize participation in meetings and activities, we strengthen bonds among team members and foster a sense of belongingness and inclusivity.

In the same spirit, it is better to share a rough draft of your ideas to get input rather than keeping it to yourself.

The Openness principle leads to the following concrete arrangements:

- All our Slack channels are open to all.
- The overall budget and the yearly follow up is placed online.

- Announcement for and minutes from steering committee meetings are shared with AEGIS members.
- When established, we use the shared depository for information sharing.

The informed decision through delegation principle

In AEGIS we engage proactively and strive towards meeting AEGIS goals. In doing so we take ownership, responsibility, and autonomy for delivering what we have promised.

We believe in **delegation** and **self-leadership**; the best decisions are made by those who have the most relevant information and expertise, and that people and teams can make decisions without micromanagement. We avoid escalation to higher levels, but we have valuable advisors amongst our stakeholders.

We embrace and practice an **informed process** for decision-making by seeking advice and input from experts or individuals with relevant knowledge and experience before deciding.

While we have formal power structures described in the contract and collaboration and plug-in agreement we encourage the use of **consent-based decision-making** to ensure that all members of a group or team are given the opportunity to provide their input and opinions on a given decision, and the decision is made based on whether there are any objections or concerns from any member. Hence aspiring to that all members buy-in, rather than relying on a single decision-maker or a majority vote.

The informed decision through delegation principle leads to the following concrete arrangements:

- As the guiding principle the steering group will use consent-based decision-making.
- Decisions on and responsibility for tasks, approaches, hires, and budget is delegated to the Principal Investigator directly leading the work.

The Good Enough For Now principles

In AEGIS we want to deliver high impact research and solutions for societal challenges. We believe in learning as the driver for excellence and want to foster a dynamic environment where we experiment and develop the science and solutions as we grow. Failed experiments are seen as opportunities to learn. We want to avoid endless discussions and

gold-plating. We don't want 'perfect and spotless' every time. We want solutions and decisions that are good enough to move forward with; **good enough** to get us to the next point of learning. They should just be good enough **for now**, thereby promising ourselves that we stop, learn, and adjust to maximize the chances that we are stimulating and capturing the good ideas and solutions that will evolve and manifest themselves as we proceed.

At the same time, we don't want to take unnecessary risks or be headless. Our solutions and decisions must be safe enough to try.

Naturally, this requires us to talk together to find common ground and mutual agreement on what enough means. And this is a nice side effect: That we facilitate dialogue, information sharing, and involvement.

The Expiration Date principle

Nothing lives forever. Every agreement in the AEGIS has an **expiration date**, at which point in time we will stop, learn, and adjust the agreement.

Maybe nothing will change, and then we just set a new expiration date. Or maybe we need to adjust some of those agreements, with a new expiration date.

The Expiration Date principle leads to the following concrete arrangements:

- This AEGIS Research Culture Code of Conduct has its expiration date set at successful Stop-Go evaluation of AEGIS, where it will expire and must be evaluated, adapted and recommitted to the AEGIS community.

Our structure

Who does what? What teams are responsible for what? Who decides? And who decides who decides?

To be effective in a large complex setup, it is essential to have good clarity on roles and responsibility of teams and individuals. At the same time, we recognize that as we

accumulate learning and AEGIS evolves, we will likely need to adapt the roles and responsibilities.

Additionally, for a cross-institutional endeavor such as AEGIS to run effectively, it is imperative that the sufficient mandate and power is clearly delegated to cross-institutional AEGIS-structures that can act orthogonally to the many different structures in the participating institutions.

Our starting structure is given by the governance and structure defined in the grant application.

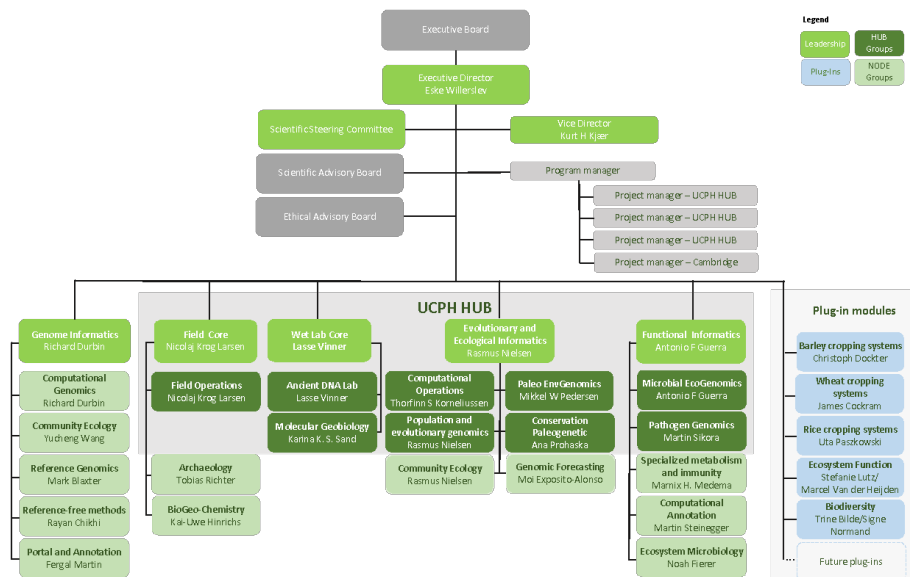


Figure 4 The AEGIS governance structure outlined in the grant application

Further clarification of the accountability and decision power of each entity (team, role, committee, function) is currently being done and will be incorporated into future versions of this document. This should include the clarification about how each function/team/committee makes decisions: Single decision maker, consensus or consent after advice process.

Our AEGIS mandate

As AEGIS is the common third for all participating organizations (see Our Context), it is imperative that we are clear about what mandate is delegated to AEGIS and what remains with institutions and funding bodies.

The delegation level for each area needs to be ultimately decided by Formal Mandate Holders (Action to be done). Being explicit and documenting agreed delegation levels is a powerful tool to create clarity and expedite decision making. This technique can be used on lower levels in AEGIS as well.

Scope of decision	Formal Mandate Holder	Level of delegation							Mandate receiver
		Tell them	Sell	Consult them and then decide	Agree together	Advise them but they decide	Inquire after they decide	Fully delegate	
Stop AEGIS entirely	The foundations	X							AEGIS steering committee
Re-arrange AEGIS budget	The Board	X							AEGIS steering committee
Hire/fire	The institutions			When recruiting consult with relevant AEGIS teams					AEGIS team
People development	The institutions	X							AEGIS team

Table 1 Delegation level within AEGIS

We recognize the request from both funding bodies and the CoC-workshop participants to invest in skill development. However, we note that currently the accountability for people development rests with the participating institutions until/unless AEGIS evolves and it is decided that these aspects will be in the scope of AEGIS and resources are shifted (see delegation level table 1).

About this document

This document rest on content developed at the kickoff workshop Oct 9th, 2024, by the current members of AEGIS and written up in an iterative process with input from the AEGIS Steering Committee.

Author: Line Olsen

Date: 26 11 2024

Version: 1.00

Purpose: To aspire to a welcoming collaborative environment for people working in AEGIS.

Status:

- 1.00 Released to AEGIS Scientific Steering Committee for comment and editing. 20 11 2024
- 1.00 Approved by AEGIS Scientific Steering Committee. 26 11 2024