

## Decolonizing Primate Conservation in Africa: BIPOCs' Perspective

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# Decolonizing Primate Conservation in Africa: BIPOCs' Perspective

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How has our field changed in the last several years? Unfortunately, the pace of decolonization in primate conservation in Africa has been slower than we wish it would be. While there are many definitions of decolonization (e.g., Tuck and Yang 2012), we consider it “a movement to eliminate, or at least mitigate, the disproportionate legacy of white European thought and culture in education” (Nordling 2018). Although there are some encouraging signs, many of these seem superficial. For instance, some Western primatologists now advocate that the colonialist term, “Old World,” must be abolished and instead use the term “Afro-Eurasian.” But if they, for example, continue to operate with colonialist attitudes in their interactions with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), then they are not decolonizing the field.

The leadership positions of most primate conservation projects in Africa are often exclusively guarded by Western scientists and conservationists even when local collaborators are more knowledgeable. The project leaders' approach to local partners is often blatantly paternalistic. They frequently engage in a centralized decision-making system, othering competent BIPOC scientists, thereby proliferating parachute science (e.g., Fernández et al. 2019). This stark reality gives undue advantages to those in the West with structural privilege.

RMG is a Japanese immigrant and primate conservationist living in the USA who conducts conservation research in Africa. She has encountered numerous episodes of discrimination, microaggression, and colonialist attitudes in her career. EAE is a black Nigerian conservationist who witnessed many colonialist conservation practices in the last two decades. When he publicly criticized some white academics' colonialist attitudes, his career almost stalled. We both identify ourselves as BIPOC, who share similar negative experiences in primate conservation projects in Africa. Although our positionalities differ, our shared experiences give us a unique perspective allowing us to offer advice to conservationists in Western countries and BIPOC conservationists. The frequent thread among those with colonialist attitudes is a lack of sociocultural-psychological sensitivity and knowledge. We acknowledge the enormity of this issue but offer some practical and meaningful suggestions.

To conservationists in Western countries: Conscientiously create a team with people who do not look or speak like you in raising funds for a project, decentralize decision-making, and strive toward transparency. In your daily life, practice reflexivity or critically self-reflect on your positionality and recognize your privileges, cultural biases, and assumptions about racial stereotypes, and consider how these may influence your interactions with collaborators and community members. Stop forcing your own culture and manners from your geopolitical centers as normal upon us. Stop invalidating our feelings; instead, start treating us with respect and listening to different views.



To BIPOC conservationists: When we encounter colonialist attitudes that marginalize us, our experiences often solidify as trauma, but our internal struggles are invisible if we keep silent. We must voice against such attitudes, but with empathy for Western conservationists' obliviousness. This is far from easy—or fair—because we fear repercussions and wish not to be recognized for our colors and accents. Nonetheless, we must be brave and speak up!

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## Rethinking a Class: on Mushrooms, Molds, and Society

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Inspired by the Black Lives Matter Movement, I changed my teaching to try to center equity; this involved centering the students and centering climate change. So, while the class I'm teaching is still Mycology, now I'm also teaching about history and culture, colonialism and agriculture, reindeer and termites, climate change and interdependence, entrepreneurship and listening.

I am still on a wobbly path of centering equity in the class. To do that, I focus more on student interests, student perspectives, and student ways of interacting with information. In that effort, I have made time to meet students one-on-one outside of class and ask them what they're interested in. Some students told me they wanted to learn more about

