

COMMENTARY

Decolonizing field ecology

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1 | WHAT RELATIONSHIPS DO VISITING FIELD RESEARCHERS HAVE WITH THEIR TROPICAL HOST COUNTRIES?

Ecologists from the Global North often justify their research agendas by reference to dominant paradigms, with their work adding to the understanding of tropical systems globally. But often research priorities are not aligned with the interests of the host countries, either in terms of the focus or the roles played by participants. In this sense, field research can be a colonial exercise, in which an incoming set of established researchers impose an agenda and set of practices that reflect uneven power dynamics. Ecologists from the Global North must critically examine the ways in which they conduct fieldwork and how they relate to and reinforce existing inequalities.

Within the humanities and social sciences, a growing recognition of this issue has led to calls to “decolonize” research practice by interrogating and seeking to move away from European modes of knowledge production (see, e.g., Radcliffe, 2017). While a process of collective reflection on decolonizing has altered the way in which research is planned, conducted, and presented in fields such as human geography and anthropology, the discussion has yet to percolate through the ecological sciences. Periodic attempts have been made to prompt this reflection among tropical biologists (e.g., Raby, 2017; Toomey, 2016), though to date the impact of these calls has been relatively modest. The objective of this commentary is therefore to bring current debates on decolonizing research practice into contact with field ecology. Here, we summarize the current debates on decolonizing research practice for the readers of *Biotropica*; the 50th anniversary of the journal's publication is an opportune moment to

both demystify this issue and advocate for its adoption its community of readers.

Postcolonialism, the body of cultural and literary critique that interrogates the pervasive legacies of colonialism, has been a staple perspective in a variety of disciplines including history (Grove, 1996; Raby, 2017), political ecology (Biersack, 2006), and human geography (Robinson, 2003) since the early 1990s. More recently, focus has sharpened from postcolonial critique to decolonizing the practices of knowledge production (e.g., Noxolo, 2017; Radcliffe, 2017). These debates, however, remain relatively bounded to human geography and cognate disciplines (such as anthropology), and there remains little engagement from those working on the natural or physical environment.

Some may seek to excuse the relative absence of ecologists from post- and decolonial discussion on the basis that ecological systems are conceived as part of the physical world, and therefore distinct from the human histories of European and US imperialism. However, colonialism was (and remains) a project of domination over physical space, a mastery in which Victorian-era geographers and later ecologists played a significant role (Driver, 2001). Ecologists from Europe undoubtedly benefited from the access to land afforded by colonialism in the establishing of permanent study stations for long-term field research (Raby, 2017). The present-day geographic distribution of tropical ecological research reflects this, with a greater number of North American ecologists working in Central and South America and Europeans predominantly working in Asia and Africa (Raby, 2017). In these regions and their study stations, key theories and values have developed, forming the foundation of ecology and related disciplines (Grove, 1996).

Acknowledging a colonial legacy to research in the tropics, with the aim of bringing current debates on decolonizing research practice into contact with field ecology, we offer three areas of focus to stimulate thought on decolonizing field ecology: (a) scientific objectivity; (b) local knowledge and collaboration; and (c) researcher positionality.

2 | OBJECTIVITY

A central concern of postcolonial writing is the way in which a perceived “neutral” authorial voice from the Global North analyses and “objectivity” represents the people and places of formerly colonized areas of the world. The Indian scholar and theorist Gayatri Spivak questioned the role of a “First World¹ analyst” who “masquerad[es] as the absent non-representor” (1988, 292), arguing that claims to “objectivity” ignore the historical effects that influence (scientific) authority and that the subsequent claims to knowledge—from the “First World”—return the postcolonial South to a “resource” for exploitation (1999, 388). Spivak thus draws connections between the colonial practices of extraction—of land (raw materials) and people (labor and slavery)—and contemporary modes of knowledge extraction where our knowledge of a diverse world remains entrenched in narrow post-Enlightenment frames of scientific “objectivity”.

For a “First World” ecologist (*sensu* Spivak, 1988), this presents a challenge to current research practice. Being objective is central to notions of “good science,” and the extraction of resources (ecological data) from the postcolonial South is most often followed by supposedly objective intellectual labor from our offices in the Global North. Accordingly, we must consider how our data—most of it quantitative—carry a trace of our interpretive frames (see Scott, 1998). Werner Heisenberg asserted that “what we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning” (1955). Infusing such a philosophy of science with decolonial critique means careful consideration of how nature is constructed through the choice of measurements taken and, consequently, those which are not, and what the predominance of one body of collected data means for the myriad of others that are left behind—numbers are never innocent (see Sayer, 1984). However, even if a diverse dataset is amassed, we might then ask, so what? This is not to advocate for an anthropocentric form of ecological science, but to raise questions about the ethics of studying ecological patterns without dealing with the realities of those—often poor, often marginalized—communities that are always the most vulnerable to ecological threat. Ecologists should therefore commence study by consulting participants, which could be local communities or local scientists, on how outcomes can be aligned to local concerns, and build these in from the outset. We can thereby ensure that our promises in impact statements are rooted in local needs and can be used to effect meaningful actions on the ground.

¹“First World” is used in this paper in the context of Gayatri Spivak's original words; the authors of this paper prefer to use “Global North”

3 | LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND COLLABORATION

Ecologists from the Global North often describe distant field sites as “remote.” They are not: They are only “distant” and “remote” from a Eurocentric or North American perspective. In fact, in the majority of such field sites the presence of people tells us that remoteness is actually “home” and our research rests on exchange and collaboration. Turning attention to local knowledge requires us to consider in full the meaning of ecological field sites and relations to space and place. Links between Western science and local communities have focused on science dissemination or local people taking on roles such as fieldworkers (Toomey, 2016; Malhado, 2011). Recent years have brought calls for a greater focus on co-creation and collaborative research in the tropics (Stocks et al., 2008; Toomey, 2016), but while some successful participatory models have been documented, they remain on the margins of established methodologies. A more decolonized approach would imply a research culture in which local scientists take the lead in designing and implementing studies, and in which outsiders from the Global North act as supporting collaborators.

In the consideration of measurements and methods, our scientific instruments “do more than simply record the presence of land as a resource: they are integral to assembling it as a resource for different actors” (Li, 2014, 589). As we take field measurements, we render locations legible to the discourses of science—extracting information about the Latin names of species and their relative abundances—but at the same time, we obfuscate other ways of interpreting and using the land, and how it constitutes place for (especially) local people. This is not to suggest that ecologists should forego research to understand and conserve species and habitats; instead, it is to recognize that the natural environment does not exist in a vacuum. Ecologists routinely “write out” local people and communities, which may be considered unethical on two counts. Firstly, science tells only a partial story that disregards—and therefore silences—local and indigenous knowledges. Secondly, the writing out of communities in research outputs and teaching neglects to recall that the research would not be possible without the logistical help, hospitality, and geographic knowledge of local people. This was the case, for instance, in the research of one of the authors (K.B.) whose collaboration and reliance on local field assistants was not given enough prominence (Baker, Chadwick, Kahar, Sulaiman & Wahab, 2016; Baker, Chadwick, Wahab & Kahar, 2017).

In this way, many disciplinary norms are complicit in the reproduction of colonial-era relations. There are some moves by ecologists to acknowledge such complicity: The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) has now included indigenous and local knowledges in their assessments of the state of ecosystems and services, and a recent panel discussion at the 2018 conference of the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation highlighted that scientists from outside arrive in poorer parts of the world with preconceived conservation values that demean local knowledge and traditions

(Gokkon, 2018). Several papers in *Biotropica* have reflected on biases in the composition of contributing authors (Cayuela, Granzow-de la Cerda & Méndez, 2017; Stocks et al., 2008) and provided suggestions to improve engagement and knowledge exchange with local stakeholders (Duchelle et al., 2009; Perez & Hogan, 2018). In a similar vein, political ecologists, who are interested in the relationships between political, economic and social factors with environmental issues and changes (Biersack, 2006), have explored the social impacts of protected areas and conservation practices, demonstrating that environmental conservation can lead to “winners and losers” (Brockington, Duffy & Lgoe, 2008) with the losers usually being the rural, indigenous and poor (Ybarra, 2017).

Criticism from thinkers in political ecology has often been met by skepticism (or even hostility) by conservationists and ecologists (Brockington et al., 2008) who do not see any problem with their current fieldwork practices and engagement with local communities. Ethical concerns should be constructively engaged with; they can stimulate thought of how indigeneity to place necessitates rich bio-cultural knowledges—“an ever-changing array of other ways of knowing and doing” (Briggs (2005), 673)—and can contribute positively to our understanding of ecological systems (Endicott, 2016). Engaging with such knowledges would make research relevant to those who live in the sites under study (see Overdeest, Huyck Orr & Stepenuck, 2004; Whitmer et al., 2010). If ecologists neglect to incorporate these perspectives, and to reflect work through local idioms, then research will fail to reach the very people it purports to represent.

4 | RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY: WHAT CAN I DO?

Positionality is a mature ethical research in human geography given that exchanges with people are a necessary product of their research. Although for ecologists dealings with people are mostly logistical, these issues cannot be entirely elided. An ethical issue for human geographers is the extent to which “local” voices are appropriated and mobilized to the ends of “high-impact” research publications. Accordingly, scholars have sought to move away from models of “speaking for” others toward different approaches—“talking back” (Hooks, 1989), “being with” (Probyn, 2010), and “abiding by” (Ismail, 2005)—that each attempt to incorporate the voices of the people and communities (including local scientists) that inform and facilitate their research (see Griffiths, 2018). These models and approaches are imperfect but nevertheless address the issue of how perspectives from the South are included or excluded from research outputs.

To describe research as if carried out from a neutral perspective is to pretend to a “view from nowhere” (see Shapin, 1998) that has been robustly critiqued by both feminist (Haraway, 1988) and postcolonial writers (Spivak, 1988). Instead, researchers should act to make visible the structural privileges that are integral to the production of knowledge. It matters what passport we carry, the color of our skin, our assigned sex, where we work and study, and the

language we speak, because their perceived status is tied to histories of colonial domination and exploitation. This is true, of course, for this commentary: We each owe our ability to be heard to desirable passports, whiteness, and affiliations to prestigious European institutions. We are thus situated within the skewed geographies of knowledge production in which the overwhelming majority of submissions to this journal and the *Journal of Tropical Ecology* are made by lead authors based outside of the country in which research is conducted (see Stocks et al. 2008). Ecologists should consider how race (Besio, 2003), gender (England, 1994), and social class (Griffiths, 2017) enable or hinder the processes of research.

There is no ready solution but one method from humanities research, and one that we have chosen to use below, is a positionality statement that explains something of the power relations that made the research possible. A further step could be a more meaningful approach to acknowledgements that goes beyond a generic appreciation of “local staff.” Where essential intellectual input has come from local people, there seems little reason not include them as co-authors (e.g., Moore et al., 2016), though this in itself is insufficient. There are some positive examples of new authorship models that avoid the whole issue of lead authorship (See DRYFLOR, 2016 and LPWG, 2017). We should also be ready to build the capacities of those who are not able to access the educational and publishing platforms based in the Global North and collectively work toward a day when capacity building is no longer necessary.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

In this commentary, we have sought to connect tropical ecologists and conservation biologists with literature from human geographers, political economists, and historians of science on the topic of decolonizing research practices. We hope that this initial exploration of the areas of objectivity, local knowledge, and positionality can provide a platform for ecologists to reflect on the design and conduct of field studies. Questions to ask may include: How many local scientists are involved in collaboration or co-creation? Are the local scientists also authors on the published work? Who has access to and interprets the resulting datasets? Who applies knowledges? Consideration of such questions should be undertaken alongside—and led by—partners at field sites, from researchers and practitioners in the Global South to the communities whose lives can depend on ecological systems. Only through such critical examination can ecologists recognize and reduce uneven power relations in research practices and thus work toward a decolonized approach to fieldwork in tropical host countries.

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POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

The three authors are academics based at European universities and have research interests in a number of tropical countries. K.B. is a geographer who has conducted aquatic field research in Negara Brunei Darussalam. Reflections on this issue were triggered after realizing that the literature being produced by social scientists, environmental historians, and cultural geographers on the topic of decolonizing research was not being engaged with ecologists or physical geographers. This lack of engagement was causing frustration and a divide between the disciplines. M.P.E. is a forest ecologist who has worked with Orang Asal peoples in Malaysia. His reflections were triggered by Tok We, senior shaman of the Che Wong group, who remarked that although he had worked with many international researchers, nothing had ever changed. M.G is a human geographer whose work focuses on the ethics of fieldwork in the Global South. He is a British citizen whose work in India and Palestine recognizes and interrogates the colonial histories that are detectable in contemporary political struggles in both states.

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