Human Dimensions: Raising Black Excellence by Elevating Black Ecologists Through Collaboration, Celebration, and Promotion

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While tutoring at inner-city schools in Cleveland, Ohio, as an undergraduate, I (Sealey) had the opportunity to promote science careers to Black students who were unsure if a career in STEM was suitable for them. They were excited to hear about my research and expeditions. However, when they asked me whether there were spaces that specifically promote scholars of color in scientific achievements, I had no good answer. It was not until I met Dr. Nyeema Harris, Assistant Professor at the University of Michigan (UM), that I would have the opportunity to develop my answer and refer students to the Black Ecologists Section (BES) of the Ecological Society of America (ESA).

At the Centennial ESA conference in 2015 in Baltimore, MD, Black faculty and students gathered to discuss prominent issues in ecology, evolution, and behavior. This discourse prompted Drs. Nyeema Harris (Assistant Professor, UM), Jasmine Crumsey Forde (Lecturer and Undergraduate Program Coordinator, University of Georgia), and Senay Yitbarek (NSF Post-Doctoral Fellow, University of California, Berkeley) to establish the Black Ecologists Section (Yitbarek 2018). The Black Ecologists Section was founded to provide international scholastic communication and support for individuals of ethnicities and nationalities underrepresented in STEM fields. It is important to specify that the term “Black” is inclusive, referring to African Americans, Africans, Caribbeans, Latinos, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans; further, non-Black nationals are welcomed to join this section as promoters.

Given the rise of awareness in racial discrimination within America and across the world, what support looks like for Black scientists has expanded into conversations within the science community. And this dialogue is essential for active demolition of anti-Black racism. It is a burden for Black ecologists to continue being productive in academia not only during the COVID19 pandemic, but also while processing the horrors of racial injustice and police brutality. Dedicating energy to output intellectual merit...
when we are 24/7 targets of hate crimes, no matter where we sleep, or what we do, requires more emo-
tional energy and mental investment. Consequently, the lack of support in the work that we contribute
and the mentorship we receive while learning how to be professionals in the science community often
and justly steers away young, potential scientists.

One of the major challenges of retaining and recruiting students of color in science is a lack of repre-
sentation, particularly in the field of ecology, ~1% of ecologists identify as Black or African American
(Beck et al. 2014). Racial disparities exist between students of color, particularly Black students, when
they are advised by mentors who cannot identify with “their issues” (McCoy et al. 2015, Barker 2016).
Lack of representation presents a challenge for current Black students who often speak of isolation in
their departments. This isolation reinforces the false notion that ecology is not for them. When a student
feels as though they neither belong in science nor can identify as a scientist, they are dissuaded from
further pursuits in STEM, increasingly homogenizing these fields (Chavous et al. 2018, Fisher et al.
2019). Promoting diversity and inclusivity in science is now attractive and recognized as a critical need
for addressing the challenges of the 21st century (Jimenez et al. 2019). Yet ethnic and cultural diversity
remains low in ecology, with only 7.5% of Ph.D. recipients self-identifying as non-Caucasian since
2000 (Hampton and Labou 2017). To encourage talented Black students and professionals in STEM,
institutions need concrete initiatives that actually foster and develop diversity at every academic stage.
Providing spaces for Black students and professionals to gather, collaborate, vent, and mentor that are
free from the pressures of mainstream stereotypes and isolation is one of many such initiatives (Ong
et al. 2011). The Black Ecologists Section provides this unique and much-needed space to build, heal,
courage, uplift, and solidify our presence.

We hope this section assists the next generation of Black ecologists to feel more comfortable and
supported in ESA, while also providing help with funding and networking. The mission of the Black
Ecologists Section is to understand and change the lack of diversity in ecology by highlighting the works
of Black ecologists while strengthening and building community among Black ecologists. Specifically,
our section aims to:

1. Promote the professional well-being of Black ecologists within the international scientific com-
munity and within the society at large;
2. Assist in the recruitment, retention, and advancement of Black ecologists in both academic and
   non-academic career opportunities by promoting the international professional success of Black
   ecologists in the scientific community;
3. Create and support efforts to increase opportunities for Black ecologists and the visibility of their
   scientific and service work;
4. Develop activities and programs that highlight and enhance the benefits of the scientific contribu-
tions that Black ecologists provide for the society;
5. Raise the knowledge and appreciation of ecology in the Black community;
6. Facilitate and encourage collaborations among members and non-Black nationals through sympos-
ia, organized oral sessions, and advisory boards;
7. Build and strengthen community among Black ecologists through event planning, virtual plat-
   forms, and working groups.
Before BES, Dr. Christopher J. Schell (Assistant Professor, University of Washington, Tacoma) reflected on attending scientific meetings as a graduate student and he described the experience as isolating and overwhelming, largely due to there being no people of color. He was uncertain if he wanted to continue attending such meetings and self-inflicting such distress. Dr. Zakiya Legget (Assistant Professor, North Carolina State University) has been serving on ESA committees, and doing community service since the late 90s, and only recently has she started to witness a shift in students of color achieving leadership roles. Because of this change, and because of the support she knows they will receive in the Black Ecologists Section, she feels more comfortable bringing her students to ESA meetings. Dr. Samniqueka Joi-Weaver Halsey (Assistant Professor, University of Missouri) has attended ESA meetings since 2013, and she recalled incidents where colleagues questioned her belonging at the conference while presenting her research. Now, the BES has increased her network of Black ecologists, which made her feel more welcomed as part of the scientific community and not an outsider (Fig. 1).

While these perspectives are essential for understanding the necessity of our section, the Black Ecologists Section is unique in that this community ensures a space where we can talk less about our “journey” and more about our science. It is imperative that Black students and professionals have a space to gather, collaborate, and heal that is free from the pressures of mainstream stereotypes, code-switching, and racialized harm (Blackwell 2018). All too often, the majority extends invitations into advertised inclusive spaces only for us to share our “scars” and comfort their insecurities. The BES is not a section solely dedicated to assist non-Black colleagues to unpack racism and discrimination, but instead to promote and facilitate Black achievements and collaboratives in ecology.

Fig. 1. Black ecologists come from all walks of life, and we engage in various forms of science. We uplift Black undergraduate students, enlighten our communities, and work in the field; we are ecologists. Photo credits: Briana Sealey, DeAnna Beasley, Samniqueka Halsey, Zakiya Leggett, and Nyeema Harris.
We are not just Black or ecologists, we are both. We bring this fused perspective to our science that cannot and should not be separated. Dr. DeAnna Beasley (Assistant Professor, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga) and Dr. Schell emphasize that the Black Ecologists Section encapsulates a sense of home within a larger community. ESA conferences should provide a space that ensures that young and experienced scientists alike can interact with those who are excited about their work and provide opportunities for new perspectives, questions, and solutions, opening up different avenues for the future of ecology. The BES has claimed and offered that space to us.

Despite our efforts as a section, Black ecologists face very specific obstacles at their individual institutions. Faculty and graduate students continue to share egregious stories about climate issues including overt racism and their invisible labor in justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) committees, with little success in making tangible changes in their departments or any credit for their work (Grollman 2015; Matthew 2016; Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group 2017; The Editorial Board 2019; June 2015). Dr. Nyeema Harris’ decision to join the academy was explicitly driven by a passion to incite change by broadening participation of brown and Black people in knowledge production as well as represent an integrated academic profile that elevates engagement and capacity building. The Black Ecologists Section also provides a space for Black ecologists around the world to gather and collaborate on ideas and share resources for how to solve issues of JEDI at their home institutions. These joint collaborations enable us to workshop solutions and provide a framework for scientists of color to discuss these issues in a safe space and receive recognition and credit for their individual efforts.

Black ecologists around the world often have broader definitions of impact because we, as a collective, come from different walks of life and thus think, speak, and act differently. Promoting inclusive environments for us entails recognition and acceptance for our diverse contributions. Thus far, the Black ecologist authors contributing to this article have published over 70 peer-reviewed articles and received over 30 grants and fellowships to fund our research. We have also established socio-ecological projects designed to integrate and nourish public-science programs into home and host country communities. Our goal is to expand this success to more Black students and faculty, enforcing our place and competency in ecology. To achieve this goal and facilitate community and growth within our section, our next big projects are to:

1. Study implicit, harmful biases in the scientific and public communities
2. Create a special session: Socio-ecological interactions in urban environments
3. Develop a workshop: Climate change from the Black ecologists’ perspective
4. Fundraise via t-shirts sales to provide seed grants for collaborative research projects
5. Develop public engagement activities associated with conference locations
6. Create special issues in ESA and other journals to feature all black scholars as lead or senior authors

Learning the ways in which implicit biases occur can help ESA leadership assist early career scientists as well as promote institutional change to remove systematic anti-black racism. At future ESA conferences, special sessions, workshops, and public outreach events that focus on these themes will assist our scientists in engaging with communities, practicing public speaking, and empowering the public with different strategies for how to combat environmental challenges. Designing and distributing BES merchandise will help spread awareness of our organization across the nation and internationally,
promoting unity and fellowship.

To support these plans and the Black Ecologist Section in the future, the ESA can help us by:

1. Spurring partnerships with other sections
2. Funding recruitment efforts and workshops
3. Organizing representation from each section to be a part of ESA planning for future meetings
4. Award travel grants to graduate students of color
5. Increase the nomination of scholars of color for leadership roles
6. Ensuring ESA leaders (governing and editorial boards) undergo annual bias and JEDI training

Encouraging interactions across sections can help Black ecologists find allies, unite with other sections and their purpose, and share ideas on strengthening unity within and across sections. There are awards such as the Commitment to Human Diversity in Ecology Award (formerly the Diversity Award) in the ESA that recognize scientists in their efforts to promote equity and inclusion. However, including financial support with such awards or creating new funding opportunities for graduate students of color would assist young scientists in attending ESA meetings to present their research, build communities, or collaborate with other inspirational scientists. With this support, we aspire to diversify our organization, plant the seeds for success early on, and demonstrate to students and faculty that do not know us yet or are uncertain about our section, that we can help define ESA as a home for them. Now in the future, when students ask about opportunities for how they can become more involved in the scientific community, I (Sealey) will have my answer and encourage their involvement in BES.

Recent events have painfully shown us that Black lives still do not matter. Those who wish to be promoters must be willing to take on the uncomfortable work of breaking the white silence and taking tangible steps toward an anti-racist society. Such efforts must start within our broader ecologist community and include not only the much-needed conversations about white supremacy, but also undertaking actions that break down the historical barriers that aggressively attack the success of many talented Black ecologists. Like other sections within ESA, the Black Ecologists section serves as a means of support. It is a meaningful step in diversifying our community. We challenge the leadership in ESA to go further, to share the burden that Black scholars have disproportionately shouldered. It is no longer acceptable to say and do nothing. It is no longer permissible to be willingly ignorant and passive about the systemic racism that permeates all of our lives. We challenge you to not only say BLACK LIVES MATTER through impassioned statements, but do the hard work to make it a reality in our community by elevating, supporting, funding, mentoring, collaborating with, citing, and recommending Black scholars.

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