

GEORGE FLOYD AND AQUATIC SCIENCE

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Editor's Note: Ben Cuker is Professor of Marine and Environmental Science at Hampton University and Program Director of the ASLO Multicultural Program which he founded in 1990. He was the first recipient of both ASLO's Tommy and Yvette Edmonson Distinguished Service Award (1993) and Ramon Margalef Award for Excellence in Education (2009) for his work on diversity.

The viral video of the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis Police sparked an uprising in the U.S. and around the world. People of all colors and backgrounds continue to flood the streets to decry Floyd's murder, and demand both justice and deep social change.

What does this have to do with us as aquatic scientists? Everything.

We either practice or aspire to pursue a career in the aquatic sciences or some related field. Such a pursuit is but one of thousands of occupations that forms the fabric of our society. The social fabric is woven from the vast diversity of the world's people and their talents. The integrity of the social textile is threatened by missing threads—the absence of people effectively denied participation and the sharing of their talents by the history and continued practice of racism. This weakened fabric costs society the contributions of countless individuals and causes those same individuals to suffer the economic and social consequences of second class citizenship.

This matters for the aquatic sciences for two reasons. First, racism and discrimination limit the diversity of voices and perspectives needed to sustain the vitality of the field. Second, and more importantly, all people must take a stand to end racism. Aquatic scientist, banker, sanitation worker, farmer, and so forth, we must all do our part. We are all part of the social fabric and must work to make it a whole cloth.

WHY NOW?

The murder of George Floyd at the hands of state-power or proxies is nothing new. It is not an aberration. It is the way things have worked for African Americans and other people of color for

centuries. Previous murders and brutalities gave rise to protests, but nothing ever on this scale. Was it simply the final straw on the back of oppressed people, or are we experiencing a seismic shift in the social order? An attempt to reweave the social fabric? Historians and social scientists may be able to answer this question in the future. Clearly, the Covid-19 pandemic allowed the world to see and experience the vast disparity in wealth, access to health care, and opportunities afforded to the various sectors of our population. Perhaps the knee on the neck of George Floyd is for many a metaphor for all the spools of social injustice that entangle people of color and other disadvantaged groups.

RACISM

Most aquatic scientists focused their studies on various scientific courses and cognitive fields such as mathematics and statistics. Few of us are serious formal students of history. And even those who studied history to some degree may suffer from courses and professors who taught a view generated by those in power. As, such, I offer a quick explanation of the origins of institutional racism in the U.S.

The European colonization of the New World engendered an economic system based upon the exploitation of people of color. It began with murderous warfare against the native peoples to obtain their land and wealth. This was followed by the wholesale introduction of industrialized agriculture (primarily for sugar, followed by other commodity crops) built on the labor of enslaved people stolen from Africa. The taking of lands from Native Americans and the system of chattel slavery (meaning owning people and their children) of Africans required a social and moral construct to justify and ensure the continued success of these practices. That was and is the *institution of racism*. In 1706, Boston theologian, Cotton Mather wrote, "The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist That Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity." Mather was an adherent of the philosophy of the *prosperity gospel*. This was a moral argument that rationalized slavery. It said that slave owners are rewarded by God for taking care of and converting the people they owned to Christianity. It is much deeper than that and essentially provides a religious and intellectual justification for the superiority of white Christian people over all others. In the U.S., well before the Civil War, churches split north and south along the lines of embracing and rejecting such institutional racism.

While the U.S. Civil war ended chattel slavery in the U.S., it left in tact the institution of racism built to justify enslavement. Racism went on to justify the continued oppression of African Americans and other people of color during the post-Reconstruction era of Jim Crow laws and social norms that extended well into the 1970s. Racism continues to live. It informs everyday life, ranging from interactions with the criminal justice system, to health care, job opportunities, education, housing, and much more. It also enables a system of *white privilege* that both affords more opportunities to white folks and protects them from suffering many of the consequences of breaking laws and social norms. The degree of white privilege depends upon class; poor white folks have some, while wealthy white folks have lots more.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

The current uprising around the issue of racism is an amplified echo from the U.S. Civil Rights movement that took shape between the 1930s and the 1970s. The Kennedy administration is credited with introducing *Affirmative Action*, a set of policies designed to correct for the ills of past discrimination. The ASLO Multicultural Program originated in 1990 as an affirmative action program to address the virtual absence of people of color in the aquatic sciences. It went beyond saying that African Americans and other people of color are welcome to join the American Society of Limnology and Oceanography (Now the Association for the Sciences of Limnology and Oceanography), but put into practice a program to fund and facilitate, promote and celebrate such participation.

One no longer reads much about affirmative action, as opponents used lawsuits and political efforts to rebrand it as "reverse racism." These opponents to affirmative action said it was unfair to white people who were vying for the same jobs or admissions to colleges. Government agencies, companies, and NGOs retreated from using the term affirmative action to avoid lawsuits and the actions of unsympathetic politicians. Others disliked the term, as it offered a way for those with white privilege to denigrate people of color who had some success in the system. White privilege talk would explain the presence of a black person in a job or in a prestigious college as an "affirmative action hire" or an "affirmative action admission." Of course, affirmative action has always been practiced to assure the continuation of white privilege. For example, under-performing

white students who were children of alumni still have easier access to prestigious universities.

RACISM HURTS ALMOST ALL

African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and people of color in general suffer the brunt of racism. However, white working class folks often unknowingly also suffer from racism. Racism evolved to facilitate the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small class of wealthy white citizens. That meant that white workers had to be convinced to not make common cause with workers of color. Such an alliance would enable labor unions and other organizations to press for higher wages and fairer distribution of wealth. Racism propelled white workers to often act against their own self-interest, supporting the oppression of their black, brown, and yellow coworkers. This meant lower wages for all. While the burden of police brutality and other overt acts of racism falls on the shoulders of people of color, white workers suffer the milder consequences of racism in the form of lower wages and benefits. Perhaps the rainbow nature of the current uprising reflects the realization on the part of newly awakened white allies that it is in their own self-interest to fight racism. In the end, it is the responsibility of white folks to take the lead in fighting racism. When that happens, we will see the beginning of the end of racism.

CHANGE FOR A CHANGING SOCIETY

Despite the persistence of institutional racism, society is changing. I live in Virginia. Until 1967, it was illegal for a black and white person to marry each other in Virginia. Recent U.S. Census data revealed that 10.2% of married couples were interracial of one sort or another. And this is an increasing trend. When I review applications for the ASLO Multicultural Program, I see a big increase in those students who self-identify as multiracial, gay, nonbinary, and so forth. Society is changing in many ways. It is our job to reimagine a new future free of racism and other forms of oppression that stresses our social fabric. This means opening our minds to new perspectives and releasing ourselves from conventional ways of thinking. Know that racism worked not only to justify oppression, but also to place fear and doubt in the minds of its victims. It is so much easier to use a social weapon to control and oppress people than using bands of armed men.

EXPECT THE BACKLASH

Every moment forward against racism has been followed by a *white backlash*. This is when opponents of equality and justice organize to try to reverse social progress. The advances of Reconstruction were turned back by the Jim Crow laws that were enacted when Federal troops were withdrawn from the southern states in the 1880s. Extra-legal groups such as the KKK and police departments teamed to thwart the civil rights movement. Law and Order politicians of the 1960s fought hard to sustain segregation. These same forces went after affirmative action programs in the 1970s. Today some politicians at the very highest level are working to undermine the current uprising. They are supported by gun toting militia groups. The same forces that reject science are aligned to reject the fight against racism. We must prepare ourselves for the inevitability.

SEIZE THE MOMENT

We are at a golden moment in history. I urge everyone to seize the opportunity to actively work to end racism in all its forms and to help create a new future. I have made fighting racism and building diversity in the aquatic sciences a central feature of my near 40-year-long academic career. I had and have white privilege and tried to use it to do the right thing. Yet, I do not pretend to have all of the answers of even most of them. We must look to the diversity of all the spools of thread that comprise the fabric of our communities to develop novel and effective ways to move forward. This means honoring the new ideas of our youth and some of the wisdom of our elders.

WHAT TO DO?

Ending institutional racism requires both institutional and individual work. Institutions such as ASLO must evaluate their policies and practices. What is being done to promote the full participation of marginalized people in the organization? Are there specific goals articulated? What paths are outlined to obtain those goals? What resources are allocated for this? Who is in charge of the effort? What metrics are used to evaluate progress?

While institutional programs are essential for progress, they do not replace the efforts of individuals. In our own lives, we must use the powers we possess to promote inclusiveness and diversity. This may start with recruiting people of color or other marginalized folks for a position in our lab, as a colleague in our department, as a guest speaker, and so forth. But it must not stop there. We need to work to empower that person, to

celebrate their contributions, to make them comfortable, to help build a sense of community where they are not the token or only such person in the room. An act of kindness and affirmation can go a long way. Taking the time to work with a student or new colleague, listening to them, and providing interactive-mentoring can help build intellectual giants. Valuing differences is also important. While senior folks can offer wisdom and opportunities, they must also celebrate what they can learn from their mentees. If one's students are not teaching them new things, then that mentor should stop and rethink the way they work.

It is not just black and white. We need to appreciate intersectionality. Class, race (an artificial construct), gender, sexual identity and orientation, migration status, family history, and more converge to make us who we are and how others treat us.

We must embrace new ways of thinking. The deconstructionist approach of western male-dominated science has produced much understanding of how nature works. But it also misses a lot. Ecofeminism and other scientific world views bring different approaches to the table. Emphasis on cooperation rather than competition makes for more fruitful work. Taking a holistic approach rooted in history and informed by traditional knowledge produces a valid and powerful approach understanding nature. Promoting diversity will bring to the table the voices and perspectives to improve the way we do science and the quality of what we produce.

See something. Hear something. Do something. Finally, we must use whatever power we have to fight racism and its artifacts. If we see a policy that is exclusive or not inclusive, we must speak up and propose a change. If we see someone being treated unfairly, or subjected to a macro or micro aggression, we must step up to address this. This means being willing to confront our own deficiencies as well as those displayed by others. Do not turn everyone into an enemy if they make a mistake. But do not let them off the hook either. Work with your network, to help everyone improve. The aquatic sciences are but a small fraction of our social fabric, but it is our responsibility to make our corner of the bolt of cloth to be as strong, colorful, and functional as it can be.

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