



SYMPOSIUM

Remaining Safe Conducting Field Work While Black (FWB), and Tips for PIs, Universities, and Employers of Black Individuals

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Synopsis Field work is essential to the career of many biologists; however, when working in the field while black (FWB), everyday tasks conducted while in the field can be life-threatening. As a Black individual or as the principal investigator supervising Black individuals, safety in the field requires you to not only navigate weather and wildlife but also your fellow humans. In this article, I address some of the challenges faced by Black scientists in the field, as well as within conservation agencies, universities, and neighboring towns of field sites. I will also discuss how PIs, universities, and employers can ensure a safer, more inclusive experience for their Black friends, colleagues, and students while conducting fieldwork.

Field work while black

Conducting field work is a fundamental process for many biologists and ecologists. While outdoor settings yield their own dangers and problems, as individuals who belong to the Black or African American diaspora, we often times find ourselves not only battling the environmental dangers, such as wildlife and weather, but many times we find ourselves taking on dangers brought on by our fellow humans as well. Throughout this article, I will discuss several of the challenges that Black individuals conducting fieldwork and working in a white majority agency, organization, or university are faced with. I will also address ways that principle investigators (PIs), universities, and employers can ensure a safer, more inclusive experience for their Black friends, colleagues, and students while conducting fieldwork. The challenges that I will address in this article are ones that are a case of being “out of sight out of mind,” due to the fact that many of these challenges are not commonly experienced by individuals who do not belong to the Black Diaspora, or are not connected to any Indigenous or People-of-Color identifying groups.

According to 2020 US census data, Black individuals make up 13.6% of the US population ([Forest](#)

& [Conservation Workers 2020](#)). However, individuals who identify as Black or African American make up <3% of forest and conservation workers in the US. ([Fig. 1](#)), making us (Black/African Americans) just as rare and endangered as some of the wildlife and plant species we study. We as Black individuals possess an interest and passion for conservation, but sadly, many of us are often deterred, excluded, or punished by the historical systems of power and privilege that have been in place for centuries ([Rudd et al. 2021](#)). Knowing that we (Black individuals) are such a rare occurrence in the conservation field and that we are battling forces far outside of our control, we have developed and passed down strategies and skills to aid in keeping us safe in an ever-changing environment while we are conducting field work while black (FWB).

As we dive into the struggles of FWB, we must understand what field work is. Field work is the process of observing and collecting data about people, cultures, and natural environments. By definition, one is conducting field work in any moment that they are observing and or collecting data. It does not mean that if they are not getting dirty or going out in the woods, then that individual is not conducting fieldwork.

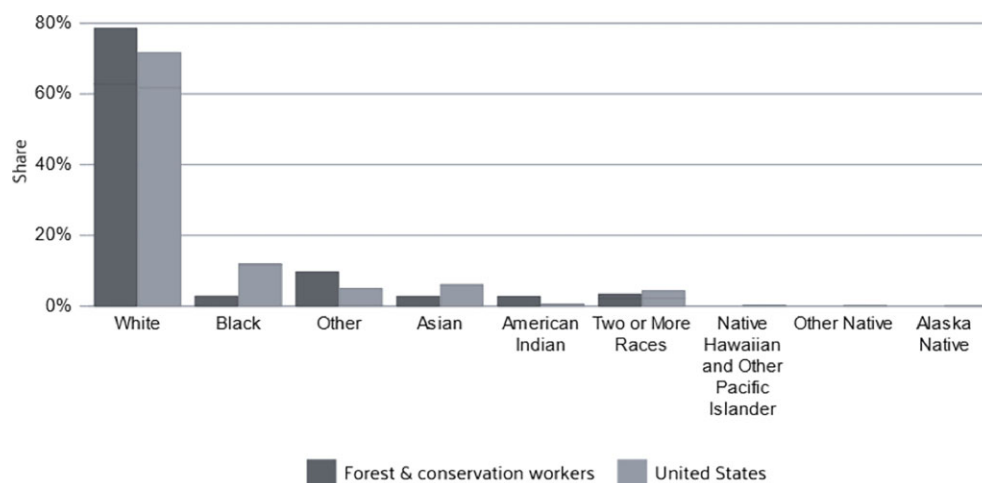


Fig. 1 Percentage breakdown of forest and conservation personnel by race, compared to the general population of the United States, data from 2020. Data and figure retrieved from (Forest & Conservation Workers 2020).

To the readers who are Black conservation professionals, I encourage you to not let anyone define your field work or nature experience. There are individuals who will try to persuade or goad you into believing that if you are not getting dirty, encountering biting and stinging insects, or returning home funky and dead tired, then you are not conducting fieldwork. I'm here to tell you, whether you are conducting research in forested areas and other wild spaces studying animals like birds, bats, or butterflies, or whether your field work trades wild spaces for the concrete jungle and suburban areas, leading you to talk to anglers or visitors of your local neighborhood park in order to conduct your research, you are still doing field work. Both types of settings come with their own inherent dangers that could put you in an unsafe situation.

Knowing that at some point we will face these dangers, how do we, as Black individuals, stay safe and keep others safe while FWBing?

What is safe?

To answer that, we must first understand the concept of "safe." As defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, "safe" can be defined in three ways: (1) free from harm or risk: unhurt; (2) secure from threat of danger, harm, or loss; or (3) affording safety or security from danger, risk, or difficulty (Safe 2023).

When it comes to being safe, there is no end point or destination. It's a fluid; like water, it is ever-changing and has the ability to take on many phases. Similar to concepts and theories in science, what is accepted today may be rejected and denounced tomorrow, as does our continued research and study provide facts that allows us to support or reject items that were once held as facts. Safety can be held in this same regard as in a state of

constant change as we learn and the world around us changes.

What is considered safe today, may not always be classified as safe; likewise, what is safe for one person may be unsafe for another. I have several years of experience working with various animal species, such as sea turtles, bats, birds, snakes, alligators, and waterfowl. Many of these species inherently pose a level of danger due to their size and physical features like teeth, claws, and tails. In addition to the physical characteristics that may lead to an unsafe interactions, we have to understand the behavioral and instinct dangers of these animals as well. Things such as: striking, death-rolling, and clawing all are defensive mechanism that the animal uses to ensure that it is safe. An individual without training and experience may miss these cues and behaviors and find themselves in a dangerous situation where they may be injured. Yet even with training, what is safe may still be subject to change. For example, it used to be safe for me to conduct a series of net checks during a day of bird banding. But now that I have a broken ankle and am required to wear a support boot that limits my mobility, it is no longer safe for me to conduct those same net checks. Even though I have done it numerous times before, the conditions have changed so that now this routine task is no longer safe for me.

Safety is not only the responsibility of the individual conducting field work; it is also the responsibility of the employer, university, organization, etc. All entities involved have an obligation to ensure that personnel conducting field work stays safe. This means that employers and superiors have a duty to ensure that everyone on the team is properly trained, has the right personal protection equipment (PPE), and has been vetted through background checks. Safety is not only important

physically, but it is equally important mentally. In short, being safe means providing the best possible option for all individuals to return back to their homes without any altering in physical or mental condition.

Staying safe in the field

All individuals who conduct fieldwork have a set of practices, and various equipment that keeps them safe before, during, and after conducting fieldwork (Table 1). Black individuals conducting field work have to follow the practices in the everyone section of (Table 1) as well as several other practices to ensure our safety, and prevent dangerous interactions, such as those with law enforcement or vigilantes, that end in our injury or murder. These techniques are extreme measures that we as Black individuals have to utilize in order to make it obvious to passersby and neighbors that we are conducting research, even though we have already been given access to these areas. Furthermore, we must take additional measures to ensure that we look like we belong, and will not be mistaken for appearing as if like we are “up to no good.”

While the safety measures for Black individuals listed in Table 1 may seem over the top to individuals who are not Black, sadly, this is the reality that many of us (Black individuals) must face. We have to don bright colored clothing or go out of our way to appear friendly and look like a “good” person, lest we are harassed, accosted by police, or even murdered. In recent years, many people of color have been murdered by both the police and private citizens while trying to enjoy everyday activities like running. One of the most recent cases of an individual being murdered by private citizens is Ahmaud Arbery (Griffith 2020), a Black man who was out for a run in his own neighborhood, when a group of white men chased him down and killed him in broad daylight due to them thinking he looked suspicious and was “up to no good” (Chaudhury and Colla 2021).

Barriers to field work

While safety in itself could be a deterrent to conducting fieldwork for Black individuals, there are several barriers that could delay or even prevent one from conducting field work (Table 2). Many Black indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) students cannot participate in field work for financial or cultural reasons, missing out on valuable work experience, networks, and job opportunities (Fournier and Bond 2015). Many students hoping to work in conservation are excluded by expectations such as that they should go above and beyond and that they should not expect a financial reward for their efforts (Fournier and Bond 2015). Just because a person is a member of the “silver sneaker” club (a.k.a., an older

individual or someone who has a long history with the organization or agencies) does not mean they get a pass on what they say and how they behave. There should never be a situation where someone degrades another individual and then pleads the ignorance card. Likewise, we have to get rid of the typical standard of tradition, because tradition is the reason why are facing the problems that we are facing now. The tradition of having an all-male or all-white office. The tradition of making someone figure out the ropes of a new position themselves, because no one showed them and they had to also figure it out on their own. Staying safe in the field requires knowledge of the task at hand; by making someone else figure it out on their own, you are contributing to the continued legacy of unsafe working practices and environments.

Healthcare advocacy advice for BIPOC professionals

A word of advice to my fellow Black individuals conducting field work: advocate for yourselves! There is no one else who knows your body better than you. When you experience a medical emergency during field work, you have to stand up for yourself!

That means being honest about your pain and discomfort levels. If one doctor does not believe you or is not providing adequate care, you have the right to seek a second and third opinion. Make sure you are using your voice.

One way to advocate for yourself is to carry cards like those shown in Fig. 2, that states you work in and or conduct research in the outdoors, and that you may have encountered an outdoor-related illness (e.g., a tick-borne disease or a mosquito-borne illness). These cards can also aid you in getting the care you need at a faster pace. Lastly, be sure to understand that rashes and skin irritation may present themselves differently on different skin complexions or differently on darker skin than on lighter skin. Because the differences in irritation appearance has to do with color, skin irritations may not always align consistently with being white versus a person of color. Understanding these differences can help you to receive the care you need.

Ways for professors, employers, and colleagues to keep black people safe during fieldwork

The following is a list of guidelines that individuals, organizations, and employers can follow to keep Black individuals safe while conducting field work (Chaudhary and Berhe 2020).

- (1) Respect boundaries.

Table 1 Safety measures that all individuals conducting field work should follow and additional safety measures that Black individuals use.

Measures that everyone should use	Additional measures that Black individuals use
Share location and planned return times	wear bright colors or organization identifying clothes
Wear proper PPE	carry job related tools
Drink and carry plenty of water	smile and wave at passersby
Understand the signs of heat related illness	when approached don't raise your voice or make sudden movements
Carry a first-aid-kit	plan to be confronted by the police and have ID easily accessible
Know the location of nearest hospital	know your research area
Carry list of known medicines and allergies	know the safest lodging and gas station near the research area
Ensure vehicles and equipment are in working condition	remove any hoods or sunglasses when entering businesses

Table 2 Barriers to conducting field work.

Type of barrier	Example or explanation
Systemic racism	e.g., Black individuals make up under 15% of the general population, yet account for over 35% of prison populations
Microaggressions	e.g., touching another person's hair, asking questions about grooming
Implicit bias	e.g., concerned neighbors and park users; "I'm worried they up to no good"
Lack Of situation awareness	e.g., not understanding why it's not safe to enter private property without prior notice or approval
Lack of financial support	e.g., unpaid work; gear and travel expenses are not reimbursed
Lack of opportunities	e.g., many opportunities to gain experience are pay to work or volunteer with no stipend provided. Others are word of mouth leaving many Black and brown individuals out of the loop.
Burnout	e.g., sense of overload, under-challenged or neglect in working environments
Gaslighting	e.g., "Oh, (insert name) didn't mean it like that"
Silver sneaker pass	someone who has a long history with the organization or agency gets a pass on inappropriate behavior
Traditions	"We have always done it this way"

- Boundaries are both mental and physical aspects of oneself. Boundaries can be established at any point in time. For example, hair and hair accessories are an attachment of oneself. You do not have the right to touch someone's hair just because you wanted to know how it felt or it is in a different style than what you have seen before. Furthermore, comments and questions asking about how long it took to complete a style or how long they plan to have the style is intrusive and form of microaggression that should be avoided.
 - On the mental front, there's a time, a place, and a privilege to talk about someone's situation. Allow that individual to open up to when they are ready. Do not nag them or force them to open up to about a situation that they have went through. Likewise, respect their boundaries and the privilege you have that they shared with you. Sharing does not give you the right to talk about it with someone else or offer unsolicited advice.
- (2) Be there for them and believe them.
 - When an incident occurs, make sure you are there to support your person. Sometimes, it may lead you to be just there as a witness, or times, you have to get involved. That could also mean that you may have to trust your Black student/colleague over someone who you have a longer relationship with.
 - (3) Provide proper safety gear.
 - Safety gear is important! Providing the proper safety gear means having gear that allows your team to function at the full potential of their body without compromising their safety. It is not sufficient or appropriate to provide an XL pair of waders to an individual who wears an XXL just because they can "fit" in them. That does not mean that they are comfortable and able to freely move. If they were to encounter a dangerous situation, this improper fitting safety gear could lead to limited mobility and or function, thus further endangering the life of the individual.
 - (4) Provide proper documentation.

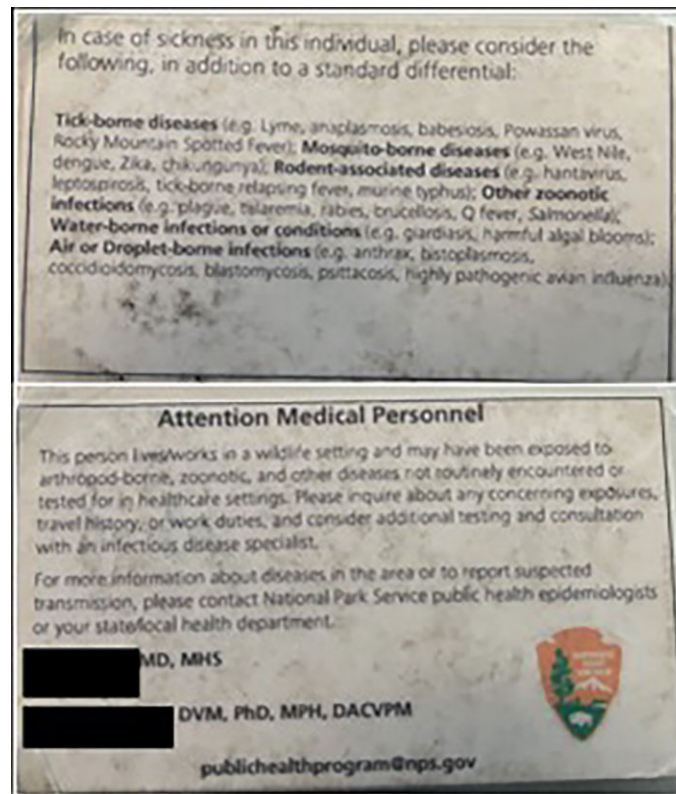


Fig. 2 Medical card (front and back) identifying that the card holder may be exposed to illness related to working outdoors.

- Proper documentation with the organization's name and logo on it. Documentation is another form of identification. Documentation aids in giving concrete justification and reasoning of being in a specific area. Be sure to give all permits, project documentation, and maps for research sites. Not only does it serve as identification, but it could be the first line of defense of a nosey or "concerned neighbor" and the police.
- (5) Issue organization-identifying equipment and gear.
 - Organization-branded clothing and equipment give an extra layer of verifiable identity and support that we belong at the location and are conducting research.
- (6) Be honest.
 - During the initial meeting, explain the culture of the organization and town. Alert us of any problems that have occurred in the area.
- (7) Be sure that you actually know the town by being part of the town (dinning at restaurants, shopping at local stores, supporting businesses, and talking to community members), instead of just working in or conducting research in the area and leaving. Allow space to address racial situations.
 - Racial situations, like the deaths of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery. Both individuals were Black men who were killed by White men months apart from each other. Both individuals had their deaths publicized over numerous media formats.
- (8) Don't downplay the racialized experiences of Black and other students/colleagues of color "Oh, (insert name) didn't mean it like that."
 - They did mean it like that! There's no need to coddle someone who is being racist, homophobic, misogynistic, etc. Downplaying the situation is a form of gaslighting.
- (9) Support inclusion and diversity in your office.
 - Seeing a familiar face goes a long way. RETAINING diverse individuals is IMPORTANT!!!
- (10) Show representation.
 - Issue safety and medical information that's representative of the student's background, such as a flyer that shows ticks/plant rashes on Black and Brown skin.

Conclusion

Dismantling the oppressive nature of the conservation field will take a lot of work. It will be uncomfortable and requires all of us to look at how we have may have been complacent in feeding the power of this racialized system (Chaudhury and Colla 2021). Especially individuals who are white and have benefited from the privileges bestowed upon them by this system.

It is not enough for us to simply try to “diversify out” racism and biases, we have to focus more on changing the norm, specifically by creating a system of inclusion that transfers support, finances, and resources from the powers at be to the individuals that are doing the work, breaking barriers and ceilings the historically and excluded marginalize groups (Chaudhury and Colla 2021). While diversity looks good, it is not as strong as inclusion.

Diversity is like having a sugar cookie with all the colors of the rainbow on top of it as sprinkles, but with just a few shakes, you can literally knock them (Diversity) all off. Inclusion, however, is like a chocolate chip cookie. The chocolate has not only been mixed in the batter, but it has also been baked in. In order to get rid of the inclusion, you have to pretty much destroy your cookie to separate the chocolate from the cookie itself. Even if you manage to separate the chocolate or individual(s) that created an inclusive atmosphere from your organization, there still be chocolate left in your cookie, and a lasting impact left behind by that individual in your office, lab, team, etc.

While we are on the subject of dismantling systemic barriers and powers, we must dismantle and destroy the **TAINTED** conservation table that we know of today. It's built on decades of lies, stolen lands, murders, and broken promises. Even if we put a clean tablecloth on it, it is still the same tainted table. We need a new table where all are welcome and can contribute input equally. This table that I am referring to is the hypothetical table many conservation agencies and organizations have boasted about, saying things like everyone is welcome, and we all have the same opportunities as others to listen, speak, influence decisions, and make a difference without judgment or punishment. Only this table is one that for centuries has excluded Black, indigenous, and people color and their ideas. While many times happily accepting our labor and the spoils or rewards that

came along with it. A table where conservation policies, laws, and discoveries were made. The same table that allowed indigenous individuals to be removed off their land and Black towns to be converted into military bases and flooded, and turned into lakes and parks. This is the table that we are now welcome at! A table that is standing on the blood, tears, and memories of our ancestors, memories that we should forget because we now “have a seat at the table.” So shall we sit at this table with the beautiful, adorned tablecloth built on privilege and betrayals, or together build a new table for all?

Data Availability Statement:

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the References section of article [and/or] can be found at the following URL: <https://datausa.io/profile/soc/forest-conservation-workers#ethnicity>

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