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In this issue

Stimulating Representation of BAME People in the Ecological Professions

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Questioning and exploring

When I saw a LinkedIn post on the work of the Royal Academy of Engineering and the Association for Black and Minority Engineers in relation to engineering and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups I was really pleased to see the activities they were doing to enhance career opportunities for this group. It got me thinking, what about ecology? I realised that quite often I was the only person of colour in a room, even at big CIEEM conferences. The representation of BAME people in England and Wales is 14%[1], Scotland 8%[2], and Northern Ireland 1.8%[3] according to the last census in 2011 (although the percentages in Scotland and NI look comparatively low, these have significantly increased since the 2001 census), so I started to wonder why. Before going further I would like to acknowledge that the use of the term 'BAME' is an ongoing debate in itself (most recently seen in the news with Priti Patel[4]), but I use it here as currently it is the most widely accepted term, and there are other limitations in the use of alternative terms. I do occasionally use alternate terms due to this same issue, as facts are reported under a range of different terms. I would encourage the reader to look into why this is as part of the exploration of this subject. I also draw on my own experience widely here as, in the end, this group is broad and I wouldn't possibly speak for everyone. Instead I make some attempt to illuminate on structural bias.

Why is it important to look at how BAME people are included within ecology practice? Apart from the moral case, if the business case were used, then £24 billion per annum to Britain's GDP could be generated if full BAME representation was achieved in the labour market[5]. As simply put in the McGregor Review, *"diverse organisations that attract and develop individuals from the widest pool of talent consistently perform better"*[6], where companies can overperform their peers by as much as 33% where ethnic diversity is fully represented[7]. Therefore, what is happening within careers and organisations within ecology to ensure this sector benefits from the full diversity of the UK?

CIEEM does not currently collect data on ethnicity alongside other diversity-related parameters. This has been a conscious decision, because under General Data Protection Regulations it has been considered that there might not be justification for storing it. Many organisations do but possibly they are storing it only to comply with legal requirements rather than to use it to inform improved practice. BAME university students have a larger representation in higher education than the general population[8] but this does not seem to follow through to the ecology workplace currently. It has previously been reported that only 0.6% of Visual Ethnic Minority (VME; i.e. excluding white ethnic minorities) are environmental professionals[9], and I conjecture as much that they are under-represented from my experience.

Sharing my story

In my own experience, as someone who is mixed white British and black Caribbean, there appears to be a few obvious factors to me: educational, cultural, socio-economic, generational and finally anything from unconscious bias to racism.

I grew up in inner-city Birmingham in the borough of Sandwell and Dudley, which at the time of my schooling had the worst secondary education attainment in the country[10]. BAME have mixed attainment at school in STEM subjects, with some sub-groups performing above and others below the national average[11]. Significantly, an Asian woman was my science teacher at secondary school and her presence was crucial in providing me with the confidence that I could pursue science in higher education.

Though my poorly performing borough didn't stop me from doing well at primary and secondary school, my geographical location was a direct barrier to my original choice of degree, veterinary science, because I did not have access to the farm environment. This can be related to ecology, as lack of access to green spaces and the rural part of the country could limit both awareness, aspiration and access to nature conservation careers. However, in my case, my white British grandma lived by the sea, which allowed me regular access to more rural areas than Birmingham every school holiday. Even my white school friends had never seen these landscapes by the end of their primary years. BAME people are significantly represented in urban locations, with the West Midlands and London being key centres[12], where BAME children visit natural spaces less frequently than their white counterparts[13]. Both ethnicity and socio-economic status are likely to affect access to nature conservation careers.

My grandad was part of the Windrush generation. He was invited to the UK to work in the '50s as an unskilled worker. My dad, benefiting from my grandad's hard graft, became a skilled welder and went on to get a degree later in life. From the black side of the family, I was one of the first (my youngest aunt was the first) to go directly to university after school. This family story is a common story of the immigrant (though strictly my grandad was a British subject which points to the crux of the matter of the Windrush Scandal), requiring time to integrate and access the opportunities afforded to those long-standing in the country. This is a consideration, as different ethnic groups are at different points in their social history in the UK, and thus will have differing requirements to access nature conservation careers.

In my early years, I would say we were in a low socio-economic bracket, though we were not on free-school meals and my mum owned our little red-brick terrace house. Socio-economic status does impact students' engagement with science[14]. I felt this began to affect me by the time I was school-leaver age (as I tried to get into veterinary as above). I also felt this keenly once I was at university, where BAME are over-represented[6]. I nearly dropped out in the first year of university because I was struggling to pay for necessities, I didn't know how I could fund it and knew my parents couldn't (BAME attend lower tariff universities[15]). In the first couple of years my grades were poorer than I would have liked. I got by on small jobs, hardship grants and exemptions from fees at in my last year of my four-year Scottish degree. I got a 2:1 in the end. Notably BAME obtain fewer first-class degrees[10]. Funding pressures take their place as a relevant factor among a spectrum of factors.

As a graduate, my parents were in a better position to allow me to take on poorly paid part-time jobs (and live rent free at home) and therefore allow me to direct my funds to running a car and volunteer in conversation activities. I sustained this for about 18 months (I was told this was expected for me to have a chance of getting into ecology) before getting a grant-funded traineeship at Warwickshire County Council. This is a known barrier in ecology to all from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, though, due to other factors discussed above, this could be compounded for BAME people. Apprenticeships could be another route into nature conservation careers, potentially helping those particularly from more difficult socio-economic backgrounds. At the same time, caution should be exercised so that BAME are not disproportionately encouraged to opt for this route, as has been shown elsewhere, particularly for those identifying as black[16].

Cultural dimensions

The UK is a global leader in both environmental practice and animal welfare. This may not be the case in other countries and so those who have come in from these countries may have other attitudes, which may filter down to first and second generations. For example, in the other country of my heritage, Nevis, West Indies, animals do not tend to be kept so much as pets but as working animals that sleep outside. This is contrary to many I know that will readily admit to letting the cat or the dog share their bed now and then! Could this anecdotal evidence point to real cultural differences and an attitude I have inherited? Could culturally inherited attitudes to nature play a role in consideration of ecology as a career choice? Certainly bias has been seen in those BAME students seemingly choosing 'solid' professions of engineering, medicine, biomedicine and dentistry with only 7% choosing to study conservation ecology in 2014-2015[17]. Though this may more likely be because of a perceived security that the former professions provide financially and socially. This makes sense in the context of the immigrant story of trying to integrate and establish in what can and has been an unwelcoming environment.

Bias and racism

I view unconscious bias as a lead to racism. Unconscious bias is the result of favouring those who are in the image of ourselves. This can occur at the individual or organisational level, which unwittingly can easily lead to racial discrimination. Unconscious bias training is being rolled out in organisations more and more, but it should be noted that measures like these on their own are not enough when there is structural bias, illustrated by my story. Whilst I have not experienced the kind of racism my grandad and dad faced it has still fundamentally affected my life from my starting position and subsequent barriers (as above) through life. It has also directly affected my confidence, which I believe has resulted in self-limiting beliefs. I believe this is why BAME people report seeing BAME people as role models in senior and mentoring positions as important to career progression[5].

Notes

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Kickstarting change

The structural barriers facing BAME people are deep, and need addressing at every stage of development, from the first day at school to university to the workplace. So what can nature conservation organisations do? Organisations can help at every level. Where partnering with schools and universities, thought can be given to how BAME personnel could help with a range of activities. At the workplace, recommendations from a 2017 report by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development[5] and the McGregor-Smith Review[6] would be well worth reading in full, consideration should be given as to how these might be applied, and then action may be taken. Many organisations do not know how they are performing in this area, when *"no company's commitment to diversity and inclusion can be taken seriously until it collects, scrutinises and is transparent with its workforce data"*[6]. We may look to another, older discipline we often work closely with for direction, as mentioned in the beginning of this piece. The Royal Academy of Engineering has done extensive work in this area and provides resources for those looking to do the same. As a leader in the work of advancing the profession, it is reasonable to expect that CIEEM would see themselves as leading in this area also. CIEEM recognises, that at the least, this could be to collect and analyse anonymised data on BAME professionals (and for that matter other diversity-related parameters). This would provide a picture of the profession for BAME people, inform professionals under its umbrella and provide a starting point for targeted action.

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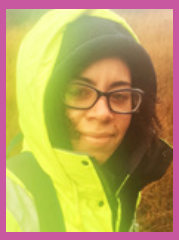
About the Author



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