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# The Few, The Proud, The Black and Brown in Marine Science

With a Google search you will see that the marine field is lacking diversity. The first page presents a similar view that you will find in the marine science field; it's full of white faces. In order to see the Black and Brown faces of marine scientists you must search through many pages or specifically search black or brown marine scientists. We are just like male adult sea turtles, often forgotten about until we make our presence. Female sea turtles get a lot of attention since they are more easily accessible for studies as they return ashore to nest. Whereas male sea turtles never return to land unless they are sick or injured. Continue reading below as I show similarities between Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) marine scientists and sea turtles, in our journey to survive to meaningful careers for us scientists and adulthood and reproducing for sea turtles.

**1 in 1,000** is the estimated number of sea turtle hatchlings that will survive to adulthood. I don't know the numbers of Black and Brown scientists that do not make it to their dream career, but I have heard countless stories of those who stopped before they reached the finish line. Like sea turtles, there are several reasons why Black and Brown scientists do not make it to "adulthood" in this field, reasons like: artificial lights, beach debris and depressions, and predators.

**Artificial lights** can be disorienting to freshly emerged hatchlings, instead of heading toward the sea by moonlight they travel further inland towards the lights from condos, restaurants, and other sources of unnatural lights. In the same way minorities in marine science are drawn to institutions and other programs with the promise of success and job placement; instead we get lackluster programs that use us as diversity photo opps, plastering us on posters and the website without caring whether we succeed or not and if our needs are being met. These institutions and advisors boast about their diverse programs and an abundant of opportunities only to leave you trapped in a limited resource program that is two people removed from being diverse and you're the new face of the "diversity" of the program, with the hopes that your presence will bring more diverse talents.

**Beach debris and depressions like tires tracks, sand castles holes, and footprints** are obstacles that hinder sea turtles success in reaching the ocean, in the same way minority scientists have obstacles of our own that hinder us from successfully entering and staying in the marine field like: low pay and pay to work initiatives and unintentional gatekeeping by seemingly word of mouth funding opportunities.

There are already a limited number of marine positions available, and many times these positions go to individuals that already have experiences. Many times, these opportunities to gain the experience are low paying, no pay at all, or you must pay to gain the experience. Now couple in the life experiences that many Black and Brown Individuals have, like being first generation students, coming from lower economic status families, having to care for younger siblings or grandparents. They do not have the financial resources and opportunities that their non BIPOC counterparts have to take a low or nonpaying opportunity to gain experience in their field. Paying to work is out of the question altogether for many

of these scientists, quitting a summer job to probably pay more than you would have made that summer is highly frowned upon by family and many times unfeasible.

While there are many sub-par opportunities like this out here, there are plenty of other well-funded opportunities that are available to all who have hopes of being marine scientist. Some of these opportunities are truly great and can really spearhead a career in marine sciences; the only problem is that many of these opportunities are unintentionally gatekept. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has plenty of great funding opportunities available for students like: The Office of Ocean Exploration and Research Explorer-in-Training Program, The Research Experiences for Undergraduates in Marine and Estuarine Science, and The John A. Knauss Marine Policy Fellowship amongst other scholarships and internships. Even though they have these great opportunities year after year, they are awarded to cohorts that lack diversity.

The reason is that though the information is available it is not widely made known. The university I attended in undergrad, and where I currently attend as a graduate student has partnered with NOAA numerous times throughout the years and have had many students who received funding and or fellowships from NOAA. I've even worked with NOAA employees on many different occasions over my professional career. But it was not until this year when I returned to my university that I learned about these great opportunities available form current students who were selected as fellows for the program, and a seminar that was put on by a NOAA Sea Grant employee.

**Predators** pluck off hatchlings either by them digging into the nest or predated on hatchlings as they are making their way to the sea. Minority students are predated by advisors who promise funding, attractive opportunities, and resources for those who are coming with funding. Some of these predators will befriend you and welcome you into the lab not truly caring if you succeed or not. They'll use the funding you came with to fund their work and other advisors will happily fund you and get you into their lab, but they turn out to be horrible advisors many times condemning you for work they either never showed you the correct way to do it. Or you had to figure it on your own because they make you seem like you're a burden when you ask for help.

These same advisors will hold it over your head that they gave you a position, so you owe them. Many minority scientists never publish or share their work out of fear of retribution from these predators. So even though it's something you have always been passionate about, it's better for you to cut ties and go in a different direction for your sanity than to continue dealing with the lack of support, behavior of these advisors. Other advisors are cordial and show support and glorify you to your face, but behind closed doors to colleagues and other students they bash you and make statements like they are surprised you made it this far with your lack of skills or question if the work you have published is actually yours and not the work of one your white classmates. These predatory advisors seem to seek out minority students because many of us are first generation students or know that we are less likely to report their behavior out of fear of backlash or they know from experience that they usually get a slap on the wrist if any discipline at all. The student is then either forced to find a new program or drop out of school completely due to the repercussions of sounding the alarm.

**Now** having survived the obstacles as students we enter in the career field knowing is not all rainbows and butterflies. Just like adult sea turtles we still must deal with environmental hazards. For sea turtles

that's boat strikes, fishing gear, and other human-caused hazards and naturally occurring threats. Us BIPOCs enter the field only to be entangled and battered by hostile or exhausting work environments, having to continue to fight and prove our worth collectively and as individuals.

As an African American male I have had my share of difficult work environments, but still I have the advantage of being a male over my fellow scientists that identify as women. The marine field, especially the fisheries field, can be a Good ol' Boys Club with sexist comments and beliefs that women can't do the same job or don't belong on a boat full of men for various reasons that are majorly made up by men. I know for fact that every women marine scientist, especially the BIPOCs, deserve to be in this field without the continued harassment and having to prove that they can physically and mentally handle the job as well as prove their knowledge on their study species.

We may all be people of color, but we do not know each other, and we do not speak for everyone in our race. Just like each Kemp's ridley sea turtle has different characteristics and needs from leatherbacks, I have a different needs and experiences from the black individual across from me. It is tiring for us to be seen as the all-knowing individual on everything for our race.

Being a BIPOC in a field that is lacking in diversity is draining. Sometimes that drainage extends to conferences and events where you think you will finally have the chance to meet and interact with others in your field who are also BIPOCs. A needed interaction where you can talk about the good and bad of your field and offer encouragement to your fellow BIPOC counterparts, only to expend even more energy explaining to non-POC counterparts about being an ally from the sideline and letting BIPOCs have that moment of solitude and a safe space for discussion.

Lastly it's exhausting to be one of the few individuals who looks like you in your field. It's a constant feeling and telling yourself you can't afford to make a mistake or quit because you're an example for all the other Black people to follow you. Even if you are at your limit you hold on to that glimmer of hope that things will get better, because you don't want to let anyone down and make Black people look bad.

**While** we as minority scientists continue to face many challenges throughout our career, we continue to show our resilience. Just like sea turtles, we started from the bottom and dug our way out, navigated over rough terrain, through obstacles, and escaped predators so that we can THRIVE!! After all that we have been through we give our All in the field, office, and lab. We foster relationships with younger minority scientists. We have transformed from the sea turtle hatchling that must overcome obstacles to the Biologist that are now ensuring hatchlings (the next generation of BIPOC scientists) have an even playing field, increasing their survival and further diversifying this field. Black and Brown Marine Scientists, we may be few but we are outchea (out here).

[Learn more and participate in Black In Marine Science week here.](#)

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