Diversity, inclusion, and structural racism in ecology and evolution

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and others, and the interaction between Amy Cooper and Christian Cooper have transformed perceptions and exposed the consequences of racism in the U.S. and around the world. Racism underlies privilege in U.S. society and institutions as revealed, for example, by the disproportionate number of COVID-19 deaths among African-Americans. Academic institutions are not immune as shown by chronically low participation of underrepresented minorities, particularly African-Americans, despite much investment in diversity enhancement initiatives.

The myriad ways in which structural inequities influence the STEM academy, including ecology and evolution, are now openly acknowledged, and examined. For meaningful change to occur, institutions, broadly defined, need to do more than admit that they have been operating under a paradigm that implicitly supports racial biases. Because these paradigms have persistently and consistently disadvantaged underrepresented minorities, another lens is that these institutions benefit from structural racism. To make the changes that have been stated in many forums, we need to understand what is meant by structural racism and its influences in ecology and evolution.

We propose a graduate seminar to address structural racism in ecology and evolution. The objective is to examine the ways in which racism is woven into daily life and how that informs scientific practice, values, and education. We strive to create a forum that includes as many in the department as is possible. An ongoing issue is that those most negatively affected by structural inequity are those who are most involved in improving diverse participation. However, the advantages of societal racism are as much a part of daily life as the disadvantages, whether you are rich, poor, educated, or uneducated. To truly move forward, the conversation must include many voices and experiences.

This seminar will include documentary presentations and readings that present structural racism, faculty presentations on the role of identity in our career paths, and structured discussions directed towards confronting structural racism in ecology and evolution. An anticipated outcome of this seminar is to develop a clear, consistent strategy for improving diversity and inclusion in our department, and in our discipline.