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## URGE Policies for Working with Communities of Color for NMNH

*These materials are based on the understanding of NMNH pod members and may not accurately reflect the official policy of the Smithsonian Institution. Always refer to official policy documents and handbooks for the most accurate information about reporting processes.*

This is what was found by the **NMNH Geosciences Pod** at the **Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History** on Policies for Working with Communities of Color as well as plans for improved processes and/or needed resources.

- **Audit of previous interactions with communities of color at our organization:**

1. Collaborations with African-American/African communities
  - a. Mentoring of minority student interns within the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History (YES!, NHRE, and others over time)
  - b. Live education/outreach interaction with African-American elementary, middle and high-school children in local area and distant schools (Smithsonian Science How, GEAR UP, MIST, etc.).
  - c. Presentations of scientific content geared towards public schools with predominantly African-American students.
  - d. Research experiences and enrichment for public school teachers in urban communities of color.
  - e. Participation of scientific staff in STEM-related events & presentations attended mainly by local African-American students.
  - f. Collaborative projects in African countries that include field trips and sampling of geologic materials with the direct assistance of Black geologists and miners.
  - g. Collaborations with SI and the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) since the mid-1980s performing research at the prehistoric Olorgesailie site.
  - h. Partnered with the SI Office of International Relations and NMK Education Department to create new school programs based on Kenyan hominin fossils and artifacts.
2. Collaborations with Hispanic/Latino communities
  - a. Collaborative planning and implementation of a workshop in Central America. The workshop included participation by Hispanic/Latino students and scientists.
  - b. Public lectures given to the Hispanic/Latino community.
  - c. Participation in a Spanish-language webinar series attended by a large Latino audience.
  - d. Developed program at NMNH to train Latin American and Caribbean collections managers

3. Collaborations with Indigenous Peoples/Tribal communities
  - a. Live interaction with Indigenous groups requesting visitation with Museum collection items.
  - b. Fieldwork conducted on land owned by First Peoples/Native communities.
  - c. Workshops and field trips for educators from predominantly Native American schools (Project CEDAR).
  
4. Collaborations with Asian and Middle Eastern communities
  - a. Fieldwork in Southeast Asia assisted by a local geologist and driver.
  - b. Collaborations with students, university professors, and museum curators in Qatar.

- **What worked well in these interactions?**

Work collaboratively with local guides and/or scientists to perform research (e.g., past experiences in Guatemala, Namibia, Madagascar). Inviting local community members to view and participate in science presentations was successful, as were holding informal activities to encourage conversations and genuine relationships with locals. Working through established tribal-agency relationships and/or trusted individuals was successful in the past. Repeat trips help to establish trust and credibility. Actively involving grad students in “real” research (and inclusion on conference abstracts/papers) increased enthusiasm. Hierarchical mentoring between museum faculty, grad students/teachers, and middle/high school classrooms also seemed to work well. Long-term collaborations, such as the Ologesailie research in partnership with the NMK, benefitted from a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that includes funding for the NMK, and involves a long-term relationship with the local community and landowners where the Ologesailie excavation takes place.

In outreach activities, build relationships with schools/organizations/communities ahead of time. Allow students to directly engage with scientists without using teachers as an intermediary. Strive to make personal connections with teachers and students of color. Place-based learning and references to familiar landmarks were particularly meaningful for participants. Designing projects around local geology (e.g., NYC outreach discussing metamorphic rocks of Central Park and fossil collections from NY state) was exciting and engaging for students of various ages. Hands-on activities with specimens were particularly effective, as were one-on-one or small group activities. Activities with middle school groups benefited from minimal text/text free activities for English language learners. Be willing to discuss your personal background during outreach events. Be willing to learn from the local community even if you are there to teach (e.g., United Tribes Technical College Educators Program).

Virtual outreach events can reach broad audiences. Receiving support from the NMNH to advertise/air virtual outreach events boosted participation: For example, advertising a Spanish-language program on Univision and social media platforms attracted families from around the US and abroad. Virtual setting allowed students to see in a scientist’s home, helping to humanize scientists and make content approachable. Speaking to students in their native language (e.g., Spanish) was beneficial for students and the presenter.

- **What did not work well, and how can this be better addressed in future plans?**

Working with communities of color has occurred in two main forms: teaching activities and field campaigns.

One of the main problems in the past was that presentations to communities of color were too scientific in nature or communicated with certain expectations of the audience's experiences or interests. In addition, school teachers failed to attend enrichment training in some instances. The teaching aspect can be addressed with more accessible presentations that are appropriate for the audience's knowledge and do not make assumptions about their prior experiences. For virtual teaching settings, it is hard to know what the real impact is, compared to in-person settings. It would be useful to receive feedback from such events.

During field campaigns in the US and abroad, one of the main issues was navigating the relationship between geoscientists (who are mostly white, and comparatively rich) and local communities, without taking a "pay and play" or "take and leave" approach. This may be a problem coming from both sides, because in some cases the local communities are highly incentivized to take the money. It doesn't help that the norm is one of little to no personal interaction with members of the community. There is no community input, spiritual permission, or reciprocity, and often little acknowledgment to local contacts and guides. This leads to difficulties such as contracting local service providers. A better understanding of local beliefs and cultural norms would facilitate the work, as well as a more reciprocal relationship. An initial step toward resolving these issues is to involve members of indigenous communities, as well as local scientists, in all stages of a project. Coordination efforts should start early, in the planning and development phases, and continue post project, including co-organizing local symposia. We need an honest and clear set of values that fits with our mission. It would help to have an opt-in ethics code for doing fieldwork abroad. A clearer assessment of our values and mission will clarify what geoscientists ought to do when interacting with communities of color.

- **Are there ways to improve the outcome of projects already undertaken?**

- Being able to continue projects over multiple years would help build trust and improve opportunities to assist the communities in multiple ways. For example, continued outreach to teach students of communities of color about our projects and the science behind them.
- Being able to offer/assist members of the community the opportunity to obtain degrees in subjects that interest them that they may not have access to otherwise
- Developing protocols that allow visitors to our Museum (who come to see objects related to their community/culture) consistently and with the appropriate, respectful attitude. This also includes our proper handling of spiritual offerings left by indigenous visitors.
  - These protocols would also address past incidents of specimens taken from communities of color without knowledge or consent (including during westward expansion).
- In our Museum – providing the proper support for employees doing the heavy lifting on the programs (educational and otherwise) that interact with communities of color. *Making*

*these full time, permanent positions would reinforce the message that the Museum thinks these projects are important and worthwhile.*

- Ensuring that, as part of a project with communities of color, a speaker of the local language, or other non-English language could help interpret
- Specimens at the Museum could be obtained as loans from Native communities

- **Are there specific resources or guidelines that are needed to improve the process for planning ahead and working with communities of color?**

- Establishment of relationships with open communication early in the process of any future projects.
- Information on how to navigate the permitting processes on native lands
- Map of native lands (e.g., to cross-reference fossil locality): <https://native-land.ca/>
- Repatriation issues can be affected by the lack of storage/curation facilities in their communities of origin. This topic should be discussed and resolved (potentially with NMNH support) early on
- Work with local partner to develop good practices for collaboration and outreach
- Be sensitive to local dynamics with host institutions; local institutions may not all have good relationships with local communities.
- Guidelines for handling approval, curation, repositories, etc. of any specimens collected from Native lands
- SI's Open Access Initiative is a key asset that will help us be more equitable in the future: the fact that we can, for instance, create 3D models of our work (and even non-SI field sites, specimens, etc) and have them shared broadly without restrictions is something that our partners (individual researchers-institutions) can point to as a sign of success.
- Awareness of (and refusal to work in) countries where colonialism and a pay-to-play mentality (stipends and/or authorship) are persistent.
- Continued effective advertisement of educational opportunities for communities of color (e.g., Spanish language outreach programs provided by Spanish speaking scientists – would require hiring more Spanish speaking scientists to expand number of topics)
- Guidelines and training resources within NMNH/SI on ethical field practices, working with communities of color, and/or international field work.

- **Ideas for future interactions with communities of color**

Future field sites may be located on, or near, current Native communities, such as the Brooks Range of Arctic Alaska to study Paleozoic fossil invertebrates. Several ideas to better engage with and work with nearby Native communities for this field work include:

1. Reach out to the Gwich'in Council (<https://gwichincouncil.com/>) and use other resources to learn more about traditional Native knowledge of geology/paleontology and respectful

field practices. Field sites are on traditional Gwich'in lands (now BLM, national park, and ANWR land), and are near current Gwich'in communities.

2. Work with existing organizations to further build relationships. Gauge interest in community collaboration and involvement. Identify potential mutually beneficial activities with Native communities, such as student/youth mentoring, paid internships, and outreach. Organizations to approach include the Alaska Native Science Commission, the Gwich'in Council, the International Arctic Research Center/UAF, and Museum of the North.
3. Be clear about the scope and current/future applications of the research during the process of relationship building. Much of the geology and paleontology done in this region has exploited or sought to exploit the environment (oil and mineral exploration; the Trans-Alaska pipeline runs directly through the field area) so it might be important to clarify this research is not for resource exploration purposes.
4. Respect the fact that this research may not be directly relevant to or of interest to Native communities, and they may wish to remain uninvolved.

**An excellent resource for future reference:**

*Relationships First and Always: A Guide to Collaborations with Indigenous Communities*  
*An EDI Community Paper to the 2020 Planetary Science and Astrobiology Decadal Survey*  
2023—2032; Lead Co-Authors: Kat Gardner-Vandy, PhD<sup>1</sup>; Daniella Scalice<sup>2</sup>

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