

Decolonizing Sea Turtle Conservation

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Sea turtles embody all that is wise and wonderful about nature. Many of us believe that through their migrations and complex life cycles, sea turtles connect biomes, hemispheres, countries, and cultures. They pick up nutrients, transport them from marine to terrestrial realms, deposit them, and vice versa. Moreover, they connect us, the community of professional researchers; conservationists; and countless volunteer beach-walkers, crowd-talkers, and enthusiasts. So it shouldn't be surprising that we—the global sea turtle community—sometimes behave like our shelled muses. Many of us also migrate—from the places we call home to places where we work, sometimes back again, and sometimes elsewhere. We follow the turtles, connecting our homes with theirs.

But as it turns out, not all migrations are benign (see *SWOT Report*, vol. XVII, pp. 36–37). In truth, the broader patterns of migration within the sea turtle community reflect imbalances of resources, power, and agency, plus the conservation values and practices that are deeply rooted in neocolonialism as a global phenomenon.

Decolonization has become a term du jour, reflecting a wave of sentiment that we need to right the wrongs of centuries of the Global North dominating the fate of the Global South. Unfortunately for us, sea turtle conservation is no exception. As researchers and resources have moved around the world, they have done so not in symmetrical patterns, following seasons or ocean conditions like turtles, but instead they have moved along a landscape that is shaped and skewed by neocolonialist structures and practices. As a result, those movements have abetted structures and hierarchies that are inimical to our notions of a fair and equitable society.

The Lost Years

Neocolonialism, in general, involves the extraction of desired resources (including knowledge) from the colonized for the enrichment of the colonizers, who give very little, if anything, in exchange. Embedded in neocolonial behavior—overtly or covertly—is the idea that some people (the colonizers) are superior to, and more worthy and deserving than others (the colonized). This system results in the elevation and perpetuation of a dominant foreign regime, philosophy, and practice at the expense of—and often resulting in the erasure of—local counterparts. Though it might sound harsh, defining the predominant sea turtle conservation practice in those terms is not far-fetched.

The first steps toward solving a problem are acknowledging that it exists and recognizing its consequences, as difficult and painful as that process might be. So we can ask ourselves, what are the telltale signs that sea turtle conservation as we know it is a colonialist construct? Starting with a big picture view of sea turtle researcher migrations, we begin to see the contours of colonialism across the globe. Sea turtle people appear to move overwhelmingly in one direction—from the Global North to the Global South—to do their work (see maps, p. 33). This movement isn't nefarious on its face. Because sea turtles tend to live in Global South countries and waters near the equator, where else would we go to work with sea turtles?

This North-to-South pattern, however, reveals a systemic, persistent, and powerful imbalance in the prevailing philosophies and practices; in the generation and flow of new knowledge and related benefits; and in generation and flow of financial, capital, political, and human resources. As with biodiversity conservation generally, early sea turtle research was done not by people whose ancestors had lived with turtles for generations, but rather

by outsiders, typically of European ancestry, who rarely lived in or engaged with local communities. Those efforts were made possible—even if unconsciously—by centuries of colonization that elevated Global North people and their values above their counterparts in the colonized Global South.

As a result, Western-centric conservation values became enshrined as best practices and standards for sea turtle research, conservation, and policy around the world, even while their proponents continued to live lifestyles that have far more negative impacts on the environment than do their southern counterparts.

This elevation of Western values means that only a particular form of research is recognized as legitimate among the global community today, because it is the only form that meets Global North standards for what is termed objectivity. In fact, social science has lifted the veil on this veneer of objectivity and emphatically revealed that prevailing conservation science is greatly influenced by a set of specific values. However, such criticisms are heartily dismissed by conservation scientists who believe in the infallibility of their methods. Meanwhile, attempts to build more-inclusive scientific approaches are dismissed or deemed too time-consuming or labor-intensive. Does this explanation sound familiar?

Maybe a concrete example will help. Let's consider the Annual Symposium on Sea Turtle Biology and Conservation. Now in its 42nd year, this gathering is considered the preeminent global meeting about sea turtle conservation and biology, sometimes drawing more than 1,000 attendees. To attend, you must first have the resources to travel, register, and stay at the symposium's location, which may cost hundreds or thousands of dollars. To present your work, you must submit an application in English, and your project must meet certain standards of science if it is to be accepted.

The main event of the symposium is several days of formal, staid presentations that are typically formatted to adhere to the Western-centric scientific method and are kept on time by diligent and sometimes intimidating moderators who must keep discussion to a minimum. Even sessions ostensibly focused on conservation consist of speaker after speaker sharing their work in highly polished presentations to an enormous ballroom of silent attendees. When those presentations include descriptions of engagement with or contributions from local communities, as they often do, the whole event becomes ... poignant? Perhaps ironic? Or ridiculous?

If you speak this "language" (English being just one part of it), and if you can navigate the dynamics, the symposium is a blast—a weeklong exchange of information and experiences in which you make and strengthen professional and personal networks and identify exciting new opportunities for collaborations. If you can't speak the language, however, you're on the outside looking in—even if you were actually there.

Look at the awards of the International Sea Turtle Society (ISTS). By our unofficial count, two-thirds of recipients of ISTS Lifetime Achievement Awards have been white men from Europe or the United States; only three recipients have been from Global South countries. Winners of the ISTS Champions Award—given to individuals or organizations whose largely field-based contributions are recognized as particularly outstanding—are more frequently from Global South countries.

The principles honored by each of the awards are undoubtedly important and reflect the ISTS's values. But whether this dichotomy reflects the perceived distinction between an intellectual contribution and grunt work, as well as how those contributions should be honored, is for us all to decide. In practice, how do the dynamics of the ISTS and its awards shape the form and function of the ISTS? Perhaps over time, as the ISTS becomes more inclusive, the patterns will change.

Axes of Colonialism

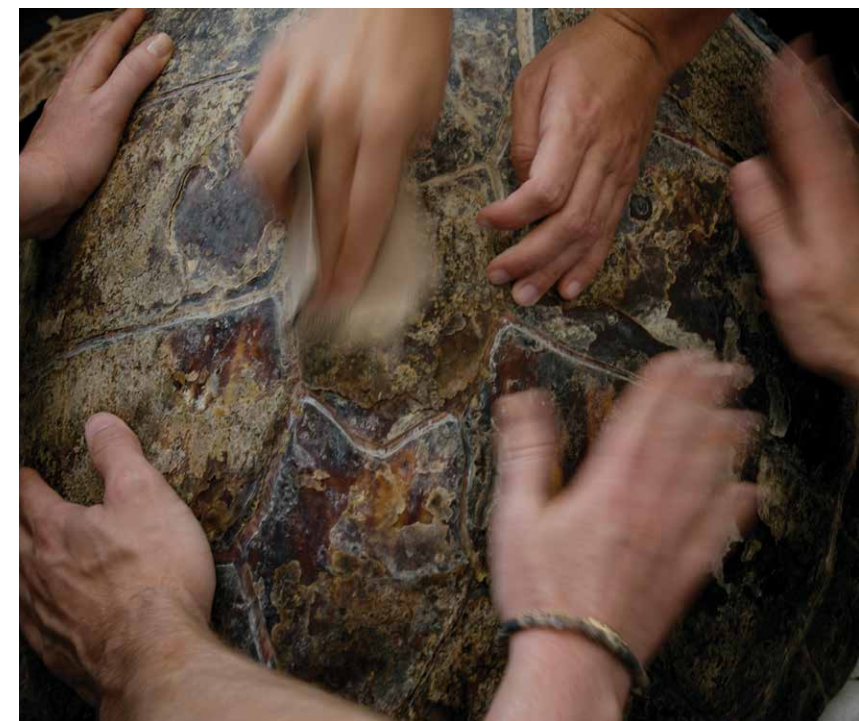
Now that we see the signs of neocolonialism in our community and how it works, what are its effects? One axis to examine is the generation and use of knowledge, ostensibly in support of sea turtle conservation. Research performed using normalized, Western-centric methods has no doubt generated incredible knowledge about sea turtles and innumerable related subjects. But we must recognize that such methods produce that knowledge by perpetuating a focus on traditionally Northern values of "objectivity" and "either/or" thinking, typically at the expense of emotional, sensorial, and experiential ways of knowing that may be common in other cultures.

In many places, it is impossible to recruit local community members with significant sea turtle expertise to work for a public institution (such as a conservation department, university, or research center) because they lack required education credentials (such as a high school certification). This lack of appreciation for local ecological knowledge is one of the reasons for its erosion—a costly loss for sea turtle conservation that could be improved by sharing all ways of knowing.

Academic research largely produces graduate students and peer-reviewed papers and attracts funding to already-established researchers and their institutions, yet it typically invests little in local conservation values, initiatives, or capacity. Even within academia, some researchers have vastly greater access to resources and to prestigious institutions that enable a particular kind of research that is suited to publication in high-profile journals.

Painful as it is to accept, such research—which is typically conducted in the Global South by people from, and living, in the Global North, or by elites within the Global South—mirrors colonialist practices of extracting valuable resources and prestige-enhancing experiences without leaving much behind. If there is any doubt, let us ask who typically benefits from this research. Are host countries and communities better off for the work of the visitors? Are sea turtles better off? Or, as we must admit, has our research probably benefited us far more than anyone we met in the field, let alone the conservation of sea turtles?

Like sea turtle research, conservation priorities and actions often are defined by actors in the Global North or elites within the Global South, whose agendas are frequently imposed on local communities rather than being cocreated with them. Once



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entrenched, colonial expertise and perspectives are valued more highly than, and are seen as superior to, the opinions of local or national experts.

In some countries, there is a "postcolonial legal stagnation," in which colonial policies and systems of governance that do not value local community knowledge and management practices simply continue as before, even after independence has been achieved. In many places, colonial policies are aligned with the views of the privileged and powerful people within Global South countries who could leverage the system to perpetuate it by purposely excluding others and reaping benefits to maintain the dominance of the privileged and powerful.

A second axis of colonization pertains to physical space or land. Many protected area systems in Global South countries were originally established to protect game species valued by hunters from colonial powers, while other systems were modeled on the exclusionary myth of "pristine nature." That myth led humans to be forcibly removed and kept out; examples of both types of systems abound in every continent, including Latin America, Africa, and Asia. In addition to the widespread displacement of people caused by this notion of conservation, privileged conservationists have also sought to impose their values on the world.

The dramatic opposition to human consumption of turtle eggs, meat, and other products—particularly for commercial ends—from conservationists is but one example of this concept. In such situations, local values and needs are overlooked or ignored or often outright devalued and considered inappropriate for advancing sea turtle conservation as defined by the dominant value system. The utilitarian use of environmental education—sometimes described as "behavior change"—is often aimed at urging communities to adjust to the priorities or sensibilities of those who define conservation agendas. In other words, "How do we get them to be more like us?" Many conservation organizations and academics have been complicit in such efforts to push their externally derived priorities even when the priorities do not align with local values.

A third axis of neocolonialism is how it concentrates resources to enshrine Western-centric values of sea turtle conservation in a systematic feedback loop that both creates and perpetuates inequities. Whether the resource is money, equipment, opportunities, connections, or people, there is more of it in Global North countries. Resources are typically acquired from funding agencies, foundations, and donors that are also mostly in the Global North, thus creating a kind of echo chamber that amplifies the priorities and values defined by the Global North. When those resources are not distributed in equitable ways that build local and in-country capacity where the work is happening, outcomes are rarely good for local communities.

By now we must sound like hypercritical, self-righteous preachers! And yet there may be a positive consequence of colonial-style sea turtle conservation, and with it comes great opportunity. Those of us who have benefited from neocolonialist structures, practices, and customs have powerful agency. We are in the room. We are listened to. Our recommendations matter. At individual and project levels, we can influence discussions and influence how things are done. So what should we do with this agency and platform?

The Brighter Horizon

Undoing centuries-old laws, policies, customs, resource flows, class systems, and other societal dynamics around the world will not be easy. It will require feeling for the cracks in the façade; gauging what the holes are; dismantling things brick-by-brick and section-by-section; and then replacing what's removed with new pieces that will eventually and hopefully provide a new structure and new opportunities. So how can we do this for sea turtle conservation?

First, there must be an honest acknowledgment of the foundational structure and dynamics we've described. This acknowledgment doesn't erase all the tremendous gains made in sea turtle research and conservation to date. Nor should it villainize anyone who has benefited from or perpetuated colonialist power structures, particularly anyone who has done so unwittingly. Instead, by recognizing the role of neocolonialism in sea turtle conservation, we focus on who has been left out, how and why they have been left out, and what we should do about it.

Going forward, we should focus on programs and practices that promote and grow capacity, talent, and expertise—whether it be for field research, data analysis, community development, or policy—within the Global South and remote communities. We should focus on fairer, more equitable, and more appropriate distribution of resources (such as people, training, equipment, or money) and credit for various types of valuable contributions. Such priorities could be incorporated by funders and permitting authorities and could be codified in collaboration agreements put in place before Global North visitors work in other parts of the world.

Perhaps such agreements could require that members of local communities be involved in field teams and serve as coauthors for related publications. The latter would imply a change in journal policies that, in some cases, require coauthors to have read the manuscript, despite the fact that some worthy coauthors may not even understand English—another way in which neocolonial structures prevent credit sharing.

In parallel with bolstering local capacity and in the conservation projects themselves, we must foreground the

needs and values of communities where turtle conservation is taking place. Global North and South collaborations should ensure that the work, responsibilities, values, and methods better reflect local and national needs and customs—not as an afterthought retrofitted onto a research project that has been already developed, but as a central principle that determines why and how a project takes place.

We should include traditional knowledge and other ways of knowing when we frame and carry out research, and we should use models that integrate different knowledge systems into project design and implementation. Global North visitors should be required to share what they learn, analyze, and produce with Global South countries. Perhaps such requirements could be enforced as a prerequisite to obtaining funding, research permits, and access from the host country.

None of this is easy. To begin with, the priorities of those of us from privileged institutions often simply do not match the priorities of the communities that we engage with. Although members of economically disadvantaged and marginal communities may accept employment because they need the money, they may or may not really care about our scientific research of sea turtles, be it on physiology, genetics, or behavior. Balancing our own sometimes esoteric priorities with more meaningful contributions to local communities requires us to rethink the larger project of our engagement and forces us to consider what we might do, besides research, that would give something back.

Most importantly, we cannot and should not wait for national or international bodies to develop and impose the protocols. Those of us from privileged backgrounds can step up and use our voices and influence to highlight and incorporate many of these actions ourselves. We can be a platform to elevate and amplify the voices, perspectives, experiences, expertise, values, needs, and concerns of our local partners, and we can ensure that local partners are as visible in our work as we are, if not more so. But before we can use that voice effectively, we must be humble, stop talking, listen to others' voices, and actually heed what we hear.

And responsibilities do not rest just with people from the Global North. Whether in the North or South, all of us who have the privilege of dedicating our lives to the pursuit of knowledge have the responsibility to build a better future beyond the academic sphere. Those of us from the Global South with power, privilege, training, and resources need to ensure that we also give back to society. We should give due recognition to local ecological knowledge holders and should create inclusive sharing platforms where their insights and understanding can be integrated to improve conservation practices. We must assist communities in asserting ownership of the places, opportunities, and resources that are of value to visitors, thereby creating change over time. We can hold local authorities more accountable for following through on commitments, and we can prioritize enhanced training and networking in the Global South.

In the years to come, we hope to create robust spaces for meaningful, honest, and participatory dialogue and action in the sea turtle community, to dismantle our colonialist foundations, and to build a new future. Someday, perhaps, we can make our migrations between our homes and “offices” as balanced as the round-trip migrations of our sea turtle friends. We all—turtles and turtle people alike—will be better for it. •

THE MIGRATIONS OF SEA TURTLE PEOPLE

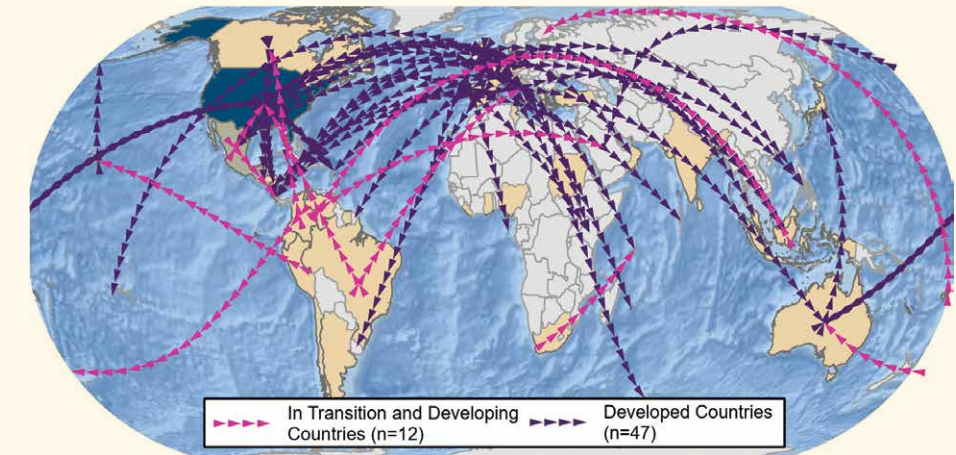
We know a lot about the migrations of sea turtles around the world, but what about the migrations of sea turtle people—those of us committed to the study and conservation of sea turtles? To determine where sea turtle people go to live (top panel), attend school (middle panel), and do fieldwork (bottom panel) relative to their home countries, SWOT conducted an online survey of the sea turtle community in 2023 that received 225 responses. The survey responses are represented by lines and arrows in the maps on this page that show the directionality and magnitude of the migrations of sea turtle people relative to their home countries. Some individuals indicated more than one school, and many respondents indicated more than one field site. Each migration—even if there were several for an individual—is represented in the maps. The thicker the arrows, the higher the number of migrations along that route. The number of people who stayed in their home countries is also shown.

We also coded countries according to their designation as “developed” (from which we had 150 respondents), or “in transition and developing” (75 respondents) by the United Nations World Economic Situation and Prospects Report (2022) to help illustrate patterns of movement between countries of differing economic status. Though the number of respondents to this survey is small relative to the total number of people in the global sea turtle community, the results show that sea turtle people's migrations follow routes forged by centuries of colonialism around the world. Specifically, people from developed countries are more likely than those from in transition and developing countries to:

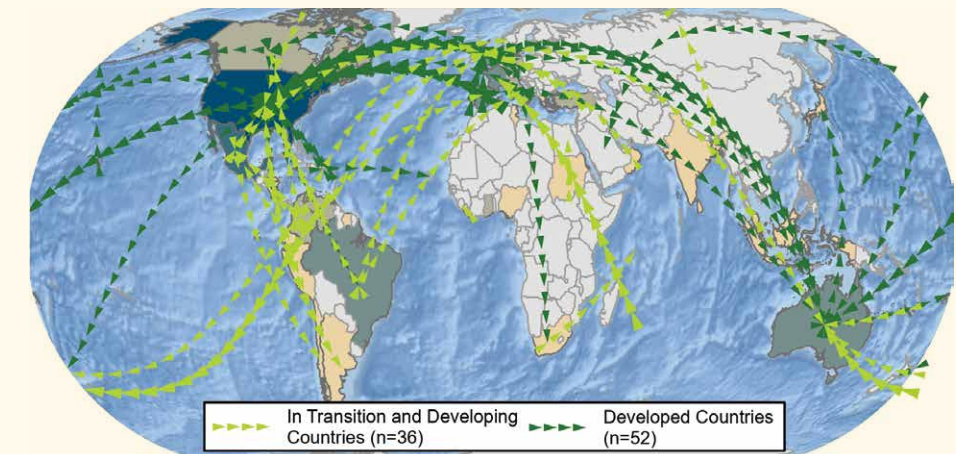
- Live *outside* their home country (more than 3 times more likely)
- Have studied *outside* their home country (more than 30 percent more likely)
- Work *outside* their home country (4 times more likely)
- Have worked in more countries other than their home country (more than twice as many countries).

As Shanker and colleagues state in the accompanying article, “the broader patterns of migration within the sea turtle community reflect imbalances of resources, power, and agency, plus the conservation values and practices that are deeply rooted in neocolonialism as a global phenomenon.” Examination of these maps and the underlying data (available at seaturtlestatus.org) provoke important questions about those imbalances. For example, considering the resources required to support these global North to South migration patterns, is the sea turtle community generating the best possible return on investment in terms of research and conservation benefits that advance our collective goals? And who is benefiting most from these patterns? The answers to those questions might be painful to accept, but confronting these hard truths will make our sea turtle conservation community truly global—and one that elevates and celebrates all contributions, regardless of where you're from.

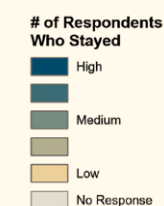
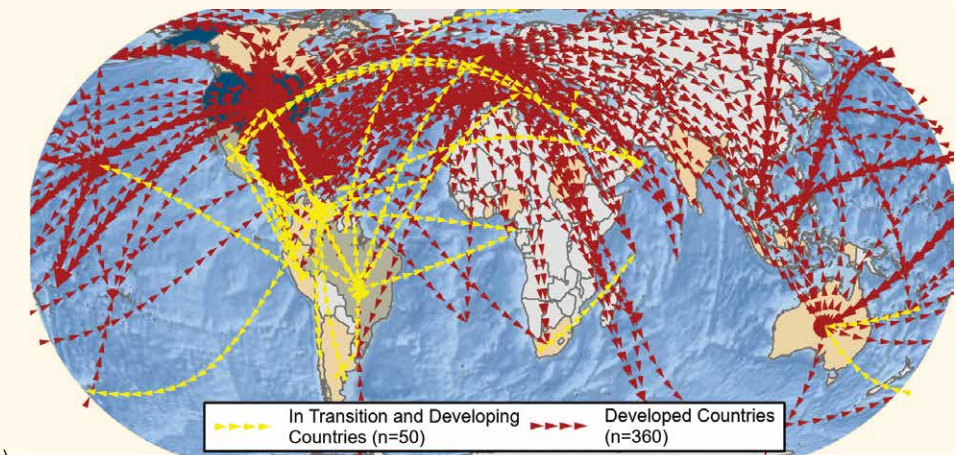
Where did you go to live?



Where did you go to school?



Where did you go to do fieldwork?



Arrow colors indicate whether the migrations originated in “in transition and developing” or “developed” countries (per World Economic Situations and Prospects 2022). Arrow size indicates the number of migrations per pathway.