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## [2022 Winner] Decolonization in Higher Environmental Education

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Critical Stance

# Decolonization in Higher Environmental Education

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## Introduction

Decolonization is a form of restorative justice that works to return and center Indigenous and historically marginalized groups to narratives that have consistently excluded them. Historically, this element has been lacking in higher environmental education, which narrows down our perspectives on historical events and their significance to environmental thought and practice. The efforts of Indigenous peoples and the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) community have shaped decolonization as the practice we know of today. By incorporating decolonized thinking into upper environmental education, we can deepen and enrich our holistic understanding of the environment. Additionally, in university-level environmental education, students are seeking knowledge and education to not only better understand and comprehend environmental issues, but to also share that knowledge with others. Therefore, it is crucial that environmental education be taught from an intersectional point of view.

Critiques surrounding this topic address resistance to implementing decolonization as a practice, as well as the intentions of the implementers. Contemporary critiques of decolonization emphasize the necessity of it as a practice, but also highlight the importance of using this practice as a mode of elevating marginalized perspectives. Indigenous peoples have been stewards of this land since the beginning. They have a deep understanding of the environment, making their methods, knowledge, and technologies indispensable to environmental education.

Decolonization is not only a necessary theory and practice in upper environmental education that should be implemented in individual teaching practices and academic systems as a whole, but should also be done with substance. If not implemented properly, or at all, these upper-level institutions risk misinforming students, excluding and erasing marginalized voices, and ultimately hindering progress towards improving the state of the environment.

## Overview of the Field's Evolution

The need for decolonization stems from colonialism and the White, Western perspectives that have dominated environmentalism and environmental education throughout history. In 1868, John Muir deemed Yosemite Native peoples “unfit” to the “wilderness aesthetic” when establishing national parks (Wellock, 2007). John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt, two White men, were key determinants in defining the difference between wilderness and civilization. When establishing Yosemite National Park, Muir defined wilderness as the absence of human occupation, and labeled the Yosemite Natives as “intruders” to the land, leading to the brutal murder, removal, and exclusion of them from the area (Wellock, 2007). Despite the Yosemite Natives being the first peoples and caregivers of that land, they were excluded from their own

narrative and history. When Yosemite's history is told through the westward lens, which focuses solely on Muir and Roosevelt's perspectives, Indigenous history is erased in the process. Today, this history remains majorly untold, and is often absent from the teachings in both national park history and environmental education classes. This event is a prime example of colonization in the name of 'preserving the environment,' and highlights why incorporating a decolonized narrative of Yosemite's establishment and environmental history as a whole is so important.

Over a century later, in 1991, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit occurred. This four-day summit allowed a space for marginalized voices to define the environment on their own terms. The Summit did not permit White people to attend, allowing for People of Color (POC) to have a truly safe space to have environmental discussions from their own perspectives for the first time (Wellock, 2007). This Summit demonstrates the practice of deconstructing the dominant white ideologies, definitions, and standards present in and related to environmentalism. It also exhibits the initiative to challenge the oppressive structures that have negatively influenced environmental work and teaching. Though this Summit was not limited to higher education, it is an early example of the creation of environmental safe spaces, and was an extremely significant event that demonstrated how challenging dominant, oppressive ideologies is indispensable to environmentalism. The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit reflected decolonizing procedures that are still used today.

Decolonization as a practice in higher education is recognized by many scholars as taking off in the late 1960s with the push for ethnic studies to be taught in colleges. In 1968, the first ethnic studies classes were established when students of color and working-class students conducted the longest student strikes in United States history (Yep & Mitchell, 2017). Students at University of California, Berkeley and San Francisco State University mobilized for nearly half a year to push for underrepresented groups to be represented in ethnic studies classes. These ethnic studies courses were the foundation of integrating community engagement, service learning, political engagement, and Indigenous knowledge into university curricula (Yep & Mitchell, 2017). The inclusion of these marginalized stories and voices into university-level curricula not only set a precedent for diversity and inclusion in coursework, but also spurred the practice of decolonized thinking in higher education.

## Contemporary Critiques

As decolonization continues to evolve, both the praises and critiques of this practice's implementation continue to shape not only the practice itself, but the contexts and settings in which it is exhibited.

## Contemporary Critique I: Decolonization as a Necessary Practice

Decolonization is necessary because of the strong settler-colonialist histories embedded within the United States and its current systems that still persist today. Although decolonization both as a topic and as a practice are uncomfortable for people who have been historically and contemporarily included in the dominant narratives, it is a necessary practice that must be applied to residing systems in the United States. Decolonization is valuable because it challenges these dominant perspectives, and broadens the narratives and understandings of our current systems, practices, teachings, and viewpoints. The current standards of the systems of the United States as a whole are beginning to shift, but ultimately remain centered around this White, western narrative, which needs to change if we as a society are to make progress towards a more sustainable future.

As companies and independent contractors, such as TigerSwan, continue to oppress Indigenous peoples, decolonization has become more relevant and crucial to implement and practice. TigerSwan is a private military and security contractor, or PMSC, that was hired by the Energy Transfer Partners to gather intel on Indigenous Standing Rock activists and share that information with local police and state military (Grossman, 2019). During the Standing Rock protests in 2016, Indigenous activists and non-Indigenous allies gathered to protest the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, which would have been environmentally detrimental to the land that these Indigenous communities hold sacred. The Energy Transfer Partners, who owned the pipeline, hired TigerSwan as an independent PMSC to provide information to local police as a way to stop the protests (Grossman, 2019). These information “tip-offs” directly led to the protestors suffering from police brutality and harassment at Standing Rock. Despite Standing Rock activists continuously reiterating that the protests were non-violent acts of civil disobedience, local police, police forces from dozens of surrounding areas, the National Guard, Border Patrol, and Homeland Security were all called in to “control” activists (Grossman, 2019). This violent response to non-violent Indigenous activism is reflective of the suppression of Indigenous voices, perspectives, ideologies, and rights. As the current systems of the United States continue to contribute to the settler-colonial oppressive structures, decolonization must be practiced.

Much of the resistance to decolonized thinking is attributed to two main viewpoints: the denial that colonialism has restricted our ways of thinking and acting, and the notion that decolonization as a practice is radical, “politically correct,” and unnecessary (Atalay, 2008). When we look at decolonization as a duty instead of a radical approach, we begin to make progress towards decolonized thinking on both an individual and systemic level (Atalay, 2008). Steps towards decolonization are often seen as “radical” and “far-fetched,” and face resistance from groups that have historically been and continue to be represented in these conversations and systems. However, if we as a country hope to challenge these oppressive structures and systems of the United States, decolonization is a practice that continues to prove essential in doing so.

## Contemporary Critique II: Decolonization in Environmentalism & Environmental Education

Deconstructing White ideology when teaching and analyzing environmental work is imperative to the fields of environmentalism and environmental education. Understanding what Indigenous peoples' goals are can help to understand what work needs to be done, where, and by whom (Thompson, 2017). It is the role of the settler to go beyond acknowledging the oppression that comes with colonial systems, and to actively work to dismantle them. In addition, settlers must not only acknowledge the role that their ancestors, and that they themselves, have had in the suppression of Indigenous knowledge, but work to mend the relationships with these groups as well (Atalay, 2008).

Colonization has led to a majority of environmental issues. Industrialization and capitalist economic drive stems from settler-colonialism, and is the current standard for modern America (Kouri, 2020). The field of environmental education is training individuals to prepare for remedying the effects of environmental issues, such as climate change. If this educational field continues to teach from this westward lens, there will be direct and indirect consequences.

The exclusion of Indigenous voices, knowledge, and perspectives in particular have hindered the holistic understanding of the environment, and have prevented environmental solutions from coming to fruition. Controlled burns, for example, are an Indigenous cultural practice that help to reduce extreme wildfires, particularly in areas like California that are more susceptible to raging wildfires. However, when this practice was banned, along with numerous other religious and cultural Indigenous rituals, the United States Forest Service worked tirelessly to ensure that fires were suppressed. As a result, the vegetation continued to grow, and became dry and thick over the summer, making it more accommodating for fires to spread. Now, the United States government seeks to partner with tribes to return this practice to California land (Sommer, 2020).

Ron Goode, the tribal chairman of North Fork Mono, states: "They [European colonists] came with their concepts of being afraid of fire... They didn't understand fire in the sense of the tool that it could be to create and what it did to help generate and rejuvenate the land. So they brought in suppression" (Sommer, 2020). Although today the U.S. government is working to integrate this Indigenous knowledge into its approaches to wide-scale wildfire control, the oppression of Indigenous peoples has undeniably altered the workings of the environment, as well as the general public's understanding and perception of environmental knowledge and teachings. This is why having decolonization in environmental education is important. Our abilities to better the environment for future generations are being hindered by our own westward perspectives and teachings. The erasure of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge on the environment and on environmental teachings have caused significant, negative, changes to how environmentalism is approached, taught, and recognized. While Western society views the environment as a commodity or resource to be used, Indigenous knowledge recognizes the

importance of reciprocity and connection to the environment. Decolonization is an essential component to restoring and recentering these perspectives, which will shift how environmentalism is taught for the better.

Additionally, if these initiatives are done with a lack of sincerity or dedication, they lose their momentum. Ultimately, the objective should be to center Indigenous perspectives, while also working to rebuild the trust of Indigenous communities that has been lost and damaged (McLaughlin & Whatman, 2011). This is why educators need to be willing to work through the discomfort towards decolonized environmental education. Integrating Indigenous knowledge and facing the settler-colonialist ideologies in environmental education is uncomfortable, but instrumental in decolonizing environmental education. In order to truly understand the environment and expand our thought and practice regarding the environment, the knowledge, histories, stories, and viewpoints of Indigenous peoples and marginalized communities must be recentered in the field of environmentalism and environmental education.

### Contemporary Critique III: Decolonization in Universities

Universities must enact this practice of decolonized thinking into the upper educational sphere, including in an environmental education context. Universities are a setting designed to expand one's knowledge and perceptions of different fields, subjects, and areas of study. If university systems continue to operate within a colonized way of thinking, the education that students receive will be narrow and will be missing the key component: first-hand Indigenous knowledge and perspectives, which will lead to perpetuating damaging narratives that harm BIPOC communities. If we do not implement decolonization in upper environmental education, the next generation of environmentalists and environmental educators will not only be perpetuating harm to BIPOC communities, but will also be ill-equipped to combat significant environmental crises.

One practice that has been met with both praise and criticism is the implementation of land acknowledgements in universities. A land acknowledgement is a statement that recognizes which local tribes reside on the land that the university is physically occupying, and often pays homage to those tribes. This practice has received and continues to receive praise for its introduction in college settings, but has recently been criticized for its dormant application (Kouri, 2020).

According to the Duwamish Tribe website, land acknowledgements are “a traditional custom dating back centuries for many Native communities and nations. For non-Indigenous communities, land acknowledgement is a powerful way of showing respect and honoring the Indigenous Peoples of the land on which we work and live”(Duwamish Tribal Services, 2018). Land acknowledgements are meant to be a thank you and an honoring statement to both the land and the Indigenous people of that land (Duwamish Tribal Services, 2018).

Summer Wilkie, an Indigenous student at the University of Arkansas, expressed their opinion on land acknowledgement implementation at universities through an opinion piece on *Cherokee Phoenix*: “As a Native American person, it's sad that simple acknowledgement of stolen land and centuries of erasure feels like progress. It is, but these statements can cause some very uncomfortable cognitive dissonance when poorly worded or in certain contexts... While every land acknowledgment at the University of Arkansas at least mentions these nations [Osage, Quapaw, and Caddo], their people continue to live the consequences of upheaval and genocide” (Wilkie, 2021).

In its original form and purpose, a land acknowledgement is a way of resisting the erasure of Indigenous peoples, narratives, and histories, as well as working towards honoring and welcoming the truth. However, as more universities continue to do land acknowledgements, it is important to remember that we must go beyond simply stating that we recognize the fact that a school resides on Indigenous land. We must state land acknowledgements with sincerity and with a passion for change behind it. It is imperative that universities take more action-based steps to work towards integrating Indigenous knowledge into curricula (Kouri, 2020). Land acknowledgements are a form of decolonization, but must be recognized as a starting point for decolonized thinking, not an end point.

In addition, the success of initiatives such as, but not limited to, land acknowledgements depends on the preparation of non-Indigenous educators to challenge and investigate their field, as well as the recognition and integration of Indigenous knowledge into their subject or field (McLaughlin & Whatman, 2011). In a system that is currently still dominated by a majority of non-Indigenous educators and leaders, decolonization is a practice that would expand these historically exclusionary subjects and fields to the Indigenous and other marginalized perspectives that have been ignored. In turn, this would highly benefit universities and be an integral, driving change of the system as a whole.

Land acknowledgements are a mode of decolonization, but incorporating BIPOC teachings into university curriculum is a way to decolonize upper environmental education by embedding Indigenous knowledge into course lessons. However, it is important to recognize that simply using knowledge from these communities and not reciprocating will yield eventual harm to these groups (Hogan et al., 2019). The ways in which Indigenous knowledge and perspectives are perceived, and what “embedding” Indigenous knowledge in university curricula truly means to various educational stakeholders must be examined more thoroughly than it currently is in order to further the practice of decolonization (McLaughlin & Whatman, 2011). Therefore, Indigenous peoples and other marginalized voices must be at the forefront of these decision-making processes. It is imperative that Indigenous peoples are the primary agents of decision making and contribution. Otherwise, the cycle of taking and benefiting from Indigenous knowledge without reciprocating or returning to their communities will continue, ultimately making the university’s decolonization efforts unavailing.

Inviting Indigenous people to share their knowledge and perspectives first hand is another way to practice decolonization in universities. When reading articles in class or watching videos from Indigenous points of view, this puts Indigenous students in a position where they are looked to as an “expert” on the topic, and takes away from their studenthood (Hogan et al., 2019). Having Indigenous speakers attend university classes or events as lecturers, guests, and leaders places emphasis on their voices without isolating Indigenous university students. However, if this method is practiced, it is important to compensate the speaker appropriately. Otherwise, this may result in similar consequences: taking and using knowledge from these groups without giving back. Still, without a proper relationship to local Indigenous tribes, this method will only be temporary, and will not have the same effect as it would if it were implemented long-term. Developing strong relationships with Indigenous groups and elders will not only allow for decolonization to become ingrained into university practices, but will also restore Indigenous voices to an atmosphere that they have been excluded from for so long.

While decolonization is not a practice that is exclusive to universities, it is critical that university students studying environmental education receive a decolonized curriculum and academic atmosphere. For generations, students have been consistently taught American history and environmental history from a westward lens. A wide breadth of knowledge that is obtained and absorbed is lacking BIPOC perspectives, or even presence. Because of this, there are vast gaps in our understanding of environmental thought and practice. Thus, there is unlearning and learning to be done in order to have a truly holistic understanding of the environment and its history.

## Conclusion

Environmentalism continues to be taught through a White, western lens, lacking intersectionality and excluding minority groups from the field. Environmental education is a field that has deeply rooted settler-colonialist ideals and continues to omit the histories of marginalized groups. Decolonization as a theory and practice continues to evolve, and has been applied to numerous fields. As we continue to work towards decolonizing environmental education, it is crucial that we continue to work with Indigenous and other marginalized groups to decolonize our ways of thinking and learning about the environment. As of now, environmental education is a space dominated by White voices. An exclusive field and practice will not yield sustainable solutions, nor will it lead to a sustainable future.

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