Including Habitat Country Scientists in all Aspects of Research

Herbert H. Covert¹

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There is presently substantial discussion in professional associations, universities, and museums on the importance of excellence through diversity and inclusion. It is also apparent that diversity and inclusion resonate with professionals in overlapping but distinctive ways. When invited to participate in the Roundtable on Diversity and Inclusion in Primatology as a member of the Diversity Committee, I immediately accepted and offered to speak on the importance of including habitat country scientists as full partners in research. More broadly, I consider the inclusion of habitat country scientists in all aspects of research including decision-making, materials to be included in grant proposals, scheduling field seasons, authorship, and participation in professional meetings/congresses to be of the utmost importance. This partnership is essential for both the issue of fairness to all members of a research endeavor and the benefits the diverse perspectives directly bring to our work. To be blunt, I consider this goal consistent with my desire to avoid paternalistic, colonialist, and imperialist attitudes; and my wish to understand, appreciate, and respect the cultural norms of other countries.

I write from more than 25 years of research experience in habitat countries and from the knowledge gained by collaborating with scientists in these host countries, and specifically working in Vietnam since 1998. I also write as a tenured faculty member at a prestigious research institution in the USA and fully recognize that I am privileged by this position. I think what I share is common sense but interactions with other foreigners working in Vietnam sometimes indicate otherwise. I do recognize that some of the following thoughts may be more relevant for work in Vietnam and Southeast Asia but also assume that much of what I share is generally true in most places. For a thoughtful and timely review of primatology in Vietnam see Thach (2016).

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✉ Herbert H. Covert
Herbert.covert@Colorado.edu

¹ Department of Anthropology UCB 233, University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, CO 80309-0233, USA

My basic premise is that we should develop relationships with our habitat country colleagues that are like those with colleagues at our home institutions; we should treat habitat country colleagues how we would like to be treated. In other words, relationships should be based on trust and respect. An essential aspect of such relationships is including our habitat country colleagues in all aspects of research. This includes all facets of decision-making, as habitat country scientists are our full partners. Occasionally colleagues at the University of Colorado Boulder will refer to one of my Vietnamese colleagues as a field assistant and I am quick to correct this notion. Worst, however, is hearing other foreign personnel in Vietnam refer to these colleagues as field assistants, comments that sometimes reflect a colonial past. As full partners it is important that we ask our host country colleagues what they think should be the next step in our research, or how they think is the best way to proceed. This is critical when writing grant proposals to fund shared research endeavors. In addition to discussing research ideas, it is important to ask about what equipment is needed, what funds are needed for administrative costs and for permits, what the appropriate per diem rates are for local scientists, and what appropriate salaries are. I have been “cautioned” by other foreigners in Vietnam and by colleagues in the USA that I need to take advice about budgeting from local scientists with a grain of salt, as they may be trying to take advantage of me. I find this attitude to be a sad reflection on a colonial legacy and to be in diametric opposition of relationships based on trust and respect.

It is also of essential importance to work closely with habitat country scientists in scheduling field seasons. This requires that one needs to plan fieldwork many months out (at least 6 months and usually more). We must realize that our habitat country scientists also have scheduling constraints; they often cannot easily accommodate our academic or professional schedules. This necessitates that we be as flexible as possible to make the timing of field seasons work for all.

Ideally, the collaborative fieldwork will lead to publications. When it comes to authorship, we should follow the same standards as with colleagues at our home institution on issues such as who is included as a coauthor and the order of authors. Often habitat country colleagues have had less access to good mentoring regarding publishing so it is important to be generous in helping with a range of activities including formatting, language, editing, and the submission process.

An important part of developing an effective research network is the participation in professional meetings/congresses. I urge all to encourage habitat country colleagues to participate in professional meetings and suggest that we help in accessing funds to attend these functions. As we all know, habitat countries often have less funding available to support the professional development of their scientists and this should not be the barrier that prevents participation in professional meetings.

All these efforts help us move toward a real *International Primatological Society*. Establishing collaborative relationships built on trust and respect with habitat country scientists helps create a welcoming and inclusive environment. Such relationships enhance our ability to engage and benefit from diverse perspectives and this allows for a shared sense of success by all involved in addition to improving the quality of the work.

Acknowledgments I thank Jo Setchell for the invitation to write this commentary. I also thank fellow participants from the Diversity Roundtable at the International Primatological Society Congress in Nairobi, Kenya; it is a true honor to work with all to move the IPS toward a more inclusive organization. I also thank my colleagues and students at the University of Colorado Boulder for continuing to help me appreciate the importance of excellence through diversity and inclusion. Finally, I thank all my Vietnamese colleagues for their friendship, guidance, and partnership over the past two decades of collaboration.

Reference

Thach, H. M. (2016). Development of primatology and primate conservation in Vietnam: Challenges and prospects. *American Anthropologist*, 118, 130–158.