

The background features abstract, overlapping geometric shapes in various shades of green, ranging from light lime to dark forest green. The shapes are primarily triangles and polygons, creating a dynamic, layered effect. The overall composition is clean and modern, with the text centered in a white space.

Mitigating harms from place-based environmental research

Jen Britton & Hugh Johnson, Drexel University

Now's the time for researchers and institutions to re-examine their practices in place-based research

- ▶ Public facing research centers in higher ed are a growth industry
- ▶ Universities have big clown shoes when it comes to public engagement in research, even with the best of intentions
- ▶ Communities are increasingly holding institutions accountable for the impacts of place based and community facing research
- ▶ We presume that in a Biden administration, an increase in climate research funding will happen/is happening, and this can increase community exposure to unintentionally clumsy community-engaged research
- ▶ This matters to us at Drexel as we create a values-focused climate and sustainability agenda that dovetails with our institutional anti-racism work

What we mean by "environmental research" and "place-based"

- ▶ Environmental sciences, field ecology, environmental engineering, environmental health, and the like
- ▶ We're considering research that may or may not be human- or community-facing
- ▶ Research that is place-specific and which generates data, recommendations, or conclusions that impact the human (as well as nonhuman animal) communities local to the research site

Place-based environmental research can undermine community autonomy, and here's how

1. Research wastes community stakeholders' time without generating any direct benefit.

"Parachute research" that is merely extractive, netting researchers publications and promotion but leaving problems in place.

2. Research can be deployed to weaken community self-advocacy.

Research data may be used to derail the strategic narratives that communities have developed to advocate for themselves.

3. Research enshrines narratives about a place that reproduce unjust power arrangements.

Research that characterizes local land management practices as inadequate or irrational, or characterizes a landscape as useless can pave the way for exploitative land uses.

Place-based environmental research can undermine community autonomy, and here's how

4. Research exposes human informants to personal physical and financial risks due to information they disclose about local environmental or conservation conditions.

Consider research about endangered species that relies on human informants about poaching etc, exposing participants, families, and communities to risks from law enforcement.

5. Research can disrupt indigenous practices and systems.

Research data owned and controlled by outside researchers has been used to trivialize and undermine belief systems and practices in indigenous communities.

6. Some approaches to framing research about environmental problems can obscure possible solutions.

A focus on individual-level interventions or responses to environmental risks overlooks the system-level problems for a whole community.

Place-based environmental research can undermine community autonomy, and here's how

7. Research disregards the needs of human communities when advocating for nonhuman animal conservation measures.

Elephant research that sees the elephant population but not the entangled human community promotes policy that overlooks a unique potential for elephant protection while undercutting the local economy

8. Research disregards the safety and integrity of nonhuman animal communities.

Opening the Great Barrier Reef to high risk fishing practices to find out whether the fishing practices are high risk, or sampling practices that kill large numbers of animals to acquire data, where access to data is perceived as more important than community safety

What researchers can do about it

Researchers should approach their work with reflexivity and an acknowledgment of their positionality and power relationships.

- ▶ Ecosystems are always entangled with human systems.
- ▶ Don't assume a scientific objectivity that doesn't exist.
- ▶ Understand the positionality and privileges of being a western/Global North (and, frequently, White-identifying) researcher.
- ▶ Understand community research fatigue and the dynamics of being an outsider to a place.

What researchers can do about it

Researchers should adopt practices that elevate the safety, integrity, and agency of communities connected directly or indirectly to their research.

- ▶ Pay attention to community power relationships, and take great care with methods and choices that may elevate already powerful voices while sidelining others.
- ▶ Consider how to give a community tools and power over and from the research and its deliverables via MOUs, control of funding, control of data, co-creation of research design, participation by local scientists, co-authorship in publications, methods for local dissemination of data and outcomes, etc.

What institutions can do about it - in relation to the researcher

Institutions should cultivate a research culture that accommodates and supports careful community-facing research.

- ▶ Training and professional development for faculty and graduate students.
- ▶ Creating space and support in the procedural spaces (contracting, legal, etc) for more intensive community engagement and control of research.
- ▶ Developing funding opportunities and practices that support longer-term and slower research.
- ▶ Taking the nature of slow and careful research into account in tenure and promotion processes.

What institutions can do about it - in relation to structural practices

Institutions should examine and adjust their formal research oversight and approval processes with a broader lens for community concerns.

Where IRB can fall short in protecting communities, whether in human subjects or animal protections, explore how to integrate research oversight practices that elevate community-level outcomes.

Some useful questions for researchers and institutions

- ▶ Does this research need to be done? Am I the right researcher to do it?
- ▶ If it needs to be done, how does my positionality affect the research process and outcomes?
- ▶ How can my research design, methods, and results elevate the needs and interests of affected human and nonhuman animal communities?
- ▶ How does our research enterprise enable outcomes consistent with values of justice?
- ▶ How do we support researchers engaged in the slow work of careful community engagement?
- ▶ What is the work we must do in our formal process and oversight to protect and empower communities who may be affected by research originating in our institution?
- ▶ What conversations should we have with funders about their expectations?

Thank you!

