

How can we decolonize Caribbean zooarchaeology? A call for conversation



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How do we decolonize the study of animals in our assemblages?

Defining 'decolonizing'

- ❑ Overuse has led to the term becoming a metaphor
- ❑ Different colonial histories of research areas call for different nuances in decolonizing practice
- ❑ **My working definition:** framework of praxis and interpretation of the archaeological record that focuses on the needs of the (indigenous) community while actively rejecting Eurocentrism



Current state of affairs

Only one paper has been written explicitly on the topic of decolonizing zooarchaeology. This paper titled '*Beyond Domestication and Subsistence: A Call for a Decolonised Zooarchaeology*' was written in 2019 by Alex Fitzpatrick and will be the jumping-off point for this conversation.

In zooarchaeology, the most common *modus operandi* is to start studying an assemblage with utilitarian questions in mind. With the turn towards a more social zooarchaeology, abstract interpretations of assemblages have come to prominence in the last decade.

- What does it mean to decolonize zooarchaeology both in theory and in practice?
- Is it possible or even useful to decolonize the study of all zooarchaeological assemblages?
- What part of our (zoo)archaeological training do we need to revisit in order to make these changes?

Here are some examples of how I try to employ a decolonized perspective in my zooarchaeological practice.

Decolonizing thought: Amerindian Perspectivism

- ❑ Eurocentric human/animal and nature/culture divide
- ❑ NOT animism
- ❑ Western approaches in zooarchaeology mainly look at subsistence and domestication which does not necessarily fit into the ontology of indigenous peoples
 - It is clear from the Caribbean archaeological record that different non-human species are treated differently in life and death. What does this mean for the validity and usefulness of perspectivism when attempting to employ it for decolonized zooarchaeology?

Caribbean Case Study



One way to interpret decolonizing zooarchaeological practice is to prioritize the needs of the local/indigenous communities over the agenda of the researcher.

- ? How to proceed when these agendas seem to be interwoven? Does that increase bias on the side of the researcher?
- ? How do we balance and effectively choose between needs if they differ within the community, or if opinions differ between different scales of community?



How can we employ our knowledge of past fishery practices for a sustainable future?

One of the ways I approach decolonization in my research into past human-animal relationships is to link it to the increased impact of the climate crisis. Climate change directly affects settler-colonial locales in greater degree due to negligence of colonial states.

As an example, by analyzing the parrotfish in my Eastern Caribbean assemblage, it can give us as archaeologists an idea of the interactions between people and parrotfish in the past, like at what size they were fished. In turn, local fisherfolk can help with the interpretation of the (zoo)archaeological record. This interplay between different stakeholders is important, because by joining together indigenous and archaeological knowledge we can create an information toolbox that can be employed for sustainable fishing practices.



- How to decide between the agendas of different stakeholders? A healthy coral reef can act as a barrier against tropical storms and a healthy population of parrotfish will feed many more generations of people. Local fisherfolk rely on the catching these parrotfish for their own livelihood. How do we meet in the middle, and **who gets to decide?**



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