Charles Darwin most certainly comes to mind when you read or hear ‘finches’. A Victorian naturalist, Darwin is arguably one of the most influential scientists, with his theory of evolution by natural selection. Less well-known is that one of his teachers, a former slave from British Guiana, John Edmonstone was instrumental in teaching Darwin the skills of taxidermy and South American flora and fauna. Darwin would go on to use these skills during his famous voyage aboard the HMS Beagle where he preserved specimens, including Galapagos finches.

Edmonstone was born into slavery in British Guiana, current day Guyana, and took his name after his slavemaster Charles Edmonstone, a plantation owner from Scotland. John Edmonstone learnt his taxidermy skills from a friend of his master, Charles Waterton, an English naturalist who worked in South America. Once freed, Edmonstone travelled to Scotland and earned a living through teaching the art of taxidermy to university students in Edinburgh, including Darwin. Darwin, in his late teenage years, received over 40 hours of tuition where he fine-tuned the craft of preserving animal specimens. These naturalists participated in the “trade triangle”, a three-way exchange of weapons to Africa; slaves to the Americas; sugar to Europe. Hitching a ride on the slave ship, Edmonstone had access to the flora and fauna of Africa and the Americas. Together with slave owners, they exploited the labour of slaves to collect samples, which would then be brought back to Europe.

One of the most successful collectors and naturalists of this time was an Englishman that few have heard of, James Petiver. Although Petiver was thought to have never set foot on a slave ship, he orchestrated the largest collection of plant and animal specimens. Many of the specimens collected by enslaved Africans have ultimately ended up in cabinets in our prestigious museums like the Natural History Museum in London. Petiver’s collections were used by other naturalists including Carl Linnaeus, the founder of taxonomy. It is likely that without access to the slave trade, we wouldn’t have the known contributions from some of these influential scientists we cherish today.

Throughout history ethnic minorities have made countless contributions to science with little or no recognition of their efforts.

A lack of Black British Naturalists

“We know what this means. We know that when you are a Black scientist, you are not even a part of the conversation. We know that there is a problem with diversity in the field. We know that there are Black scientists who are doing incredible work, but their contributions are not recognized. It’s time to change this. It’s time to acknowledge the contributions of Black scientists. It’s time to give them the recognition they deserve.”

We have a collective responsibility, as members of the ecological community to re-examine ourselves and teach the next generation of ecologists the tainted legacy of slavery, colonialism and exploitation. A decolonised curriculum must include a diverse set of scientific voices both past and present so we are as a community to tackle the great challenges of our time.

We need to acknowledge that natural sciences have a complex entangled history.

DECOLONISING ECOLOGY
UNEARTHING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF BLACK BRITISH NATURALISTS

Sara Middleton
University of Oxford, @sara_lil_plants

THE NICHE AUTUMN 2020

THE BLACK BRITISH BIOLOGY PROJECT

We have started a project where she is documenting the role of historical Black figures in biological sciences. She is looking through buried archives, articles and biological collections to unearth the forgotten contributions of Black Britons and share this resource with educators.