



Dodo dilemmas: Conflicting ethical loyalties in conservation social science research

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Abstract

In a time of deepening social and ecological crises, the question of research ethics is more pertinent than ever. Our intervention grapples with the specific personal, ethical, and methodological challenges that arise at the interface of conservation and social science. We expose these challenges through the figure of Chris, a fictional anonymised composite of our fraught diverse fieldwork experiences in Australia, Burma, Indonesian Borneo, Namibia, and Vanuatu. Fundamentally, we explore fieldwork as a series of contested loyalties: loyalties to our different human and non-human research participants, to our commitments to academic rigour, and to the project of wildlife conservation itself, while reckoning with conservation's spotted (neo)colonial past. Our struggles and reflections illustrate, first, that practical research ethics do not predetermine forms of reciprocity. Second, while we need to choose our concealments carefully and follow the principle of not doing harm, we also have the responsibility to reveal social and environmental injustices. Third, we must acknowledge that as researchers we are complicit in the practices of human and non-human violence and exclusion that suffuse conservation. Finally, given how these responsibilities move the researcher beyond a position of innocence or neutrality, academic institutions should adjust their ethics support. This intervention highlights the need for greater openness about research challenges emerging from conflicting personal, ethical, and disciplinary loyalties, in order to facilitate greater cross-disciplinary understanding. Active engagement with these ethical questions through collaborative dialogue-based fora, both before and after fieldwork, would enable learning and consequently transform research practices.

KEYWORDS

conservation, interdisciplinarity, more-than-human, positionality, reflexivity, research ethics

1 | INTRODUCTION

‘Should I report that local villagers are hunting the rare dodo birds, helped by some local conservation staff? Or should I keep silent to avoid harming my research participants? Yet, am I then just letting the dodo go extinct?’ Chris¹ mulled

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over findings from their research into a conservation project that aimed at saving the dodo (*Raphus cucullatus*) from extinction, a large flightless bird living on the island of Mauritius. Chris, a thirty-something early career researcher, had a background in critical social sciences and specialised in human–environment relations. They had spent several years observing and describing the interactions between villagers and conservation organisations on the island. Yet, Chris's role had shifted to being an independent, but affiliated, researcher with a local NGO that had recently initiated the Mauritius Dodo Conservation Project (MDCP). The MDCP sought to protect the dodo in partnership with local communities, government bodies, and owners of tea and sugar plantations largely responsible for the destruction of viable dodo habitat. Land-use change, fires, hunting by local communities, and a surging population of introduced rats who fed on dodo eggs, were major factors contributing to the birds' decline. Given their long-term field experience and social science background, Chris was expected to bring expertise to the implementation of the MDCP. However, Chris soon realised that their academic journey had equipped them poorly with how to handle the various, often conflicting, views and expectations of the different parties involved. Throughout and after their research, Chris struggled with how to navigate their contested loyalties towards the MDCP's human and non-human actors.

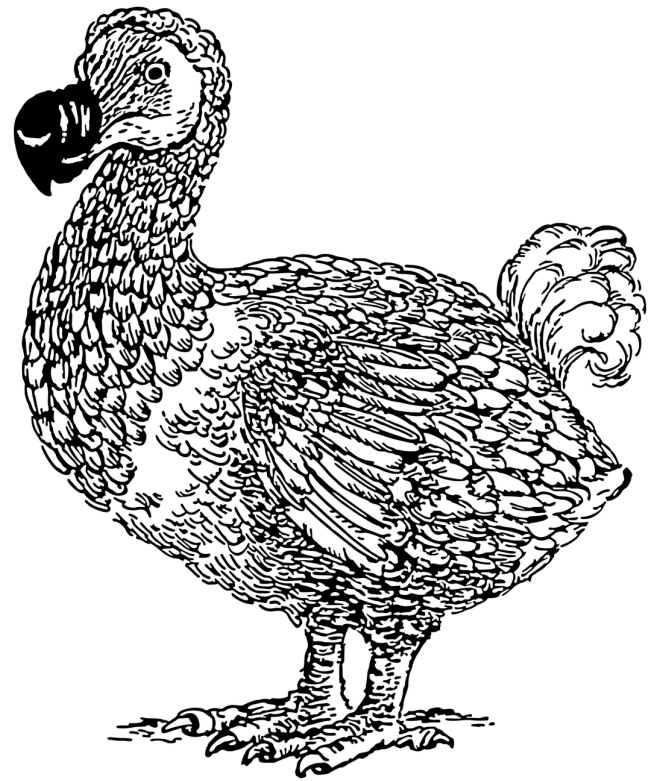
Such dilemmas concerning the ethics of transparency, reciprocity, and positionality are long-standing in geographical research. However, we contend that emerging work at the intersection of nature conservation and the social sciences presents specific ethical conundrums, which need to be both recognised and addressed. In a time of accelerating extinctions, deepening social and ecological crises, and anthropogenic impacts on a geological scale, questions of research ethics are more pertinent than ever. At the intersection of social sciences and conservation, whose interests can or should research serve? And what ethical and methodological pitfalls, dilemmas, responsibilities, and opportunities emerge, as we work at this interface? To tackle these questions, we draw on our fraught personal experiences in the field to highlight some of these specific conservation-focused conundrums and invite further openness about research challenges in order to navigate these commonly experienced yet under-acknowledged conflicting personal, ethical, and disciplinary loyalties. We suggest that such openness about challenges and failure is key to facilitating cross-disciplinary understanding and thus more productive conservation–social science collaborations, collaborations that are desperately needed to ameliorate the worst impacts of the Anthropocene. We argue that active engagement with these ethical questions is not simply the responsibility of individual researchers, but requires greater institutional support, both before and after fieldwork.

Empirically, we draw on a geographically diverse range of field sites (Australia, Burma, Indonesian Borneo, Namibia, the United Kingdom, and Vanuatu), encompassing more than seven years' worth of ethnographic fieldwork cumulatively. We foreground oft-concealed fears, failures, and uncertainties of how to deal with our conflicting loyalties towards the different actors involved in or affected by our research, notably NGOs, rural communities, farm workers, political activists, large-scale landholders, government agents, and, not least, non-human animals (wild pigs, orangutans, leopards, and cattle). To facilitate genuine openness about the ethical, practical, and methodological challenges we have faced, we present a range of composite vignettes, anonymising our individual experiences by collectively narrativising them through a fictional researcher named Chris. As both our field sites and the respective species of conservation interest could enable re-identification, we have also pseudonymised the non-humans in question, replacing them with the figure of the dodo (Figure 1).² As an archetypal symbol of anthropogenic extinction (Heise, 2010), the dodo also reminds us of what is at stake in the work of conservation social science.

Our joint reflection aims to advance debate about the relationship between conservation and the social sciences. We note a current move towards recognising the heterogeneity among conservationists by shedding light on their diverse perspectives and values (Sandbrook et al., 2011, 2019), the challenges and gratification they experience (ICCS, 2020), and the complex positionalities they embody (Kiik, 2018; Quarshie et al., 2019). Simultaneously, there is acknowledgement of conservation's lack of demographic diversity (Milner-Gulland, 2021) and the need to move towards more 'inclusive conservation' (Tallis & Lubchenco, 2014). Social anthropologists have explored how conservationists of various ranks, identities, and locations face divided loyalties between their work of conserving nature versus their kin, village, country, or local people (Lowe, 2006; Poppe, 2012; Vasan, 2002). Alongside these studies, there have been attempts to establish a more productive interdisciplinary dialogue between conservationists and critical social scientists (Chua et al., 2020; Peterson et al., 2010).

In line with this development, we situate ourselves as researchers³ who straddle the distinction between doing 'research *for* and *on* conservation' (Sandbrook et al., 2013, p. 1487; emphasis in original), due to our broader commitments to ecological justice. Hence, while conscious of the manifold benefits qualitative research can provide for conservation (Bennett et al., 2017), we also remain wary of the potential pitfalls of conservation social science research, such as the incorporation of qualitative methods without due concern for the different philosophies that can underpin

FIGURE 1 Line art drawing of a dodo. Archives of Pearson Scott Foresman, donated to the Wikimedia foundation.



research design (Moon et al., 2019). Our conflicting loyalties are thus also disciplinary and epistemological: we are committed to rigorous and accurate research, cognisant of the limitations of our situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988), but still mindful that our findings may misalign with the expectations of our conservation partners. With most of us stemming from primarily anthropocentric disciplines (social anthropology and human geography), we also possess commitments to a range of human research interlocutors, both those who have faced historic and contemporary dispossession by conservation (Rust et al., 2016) and those actively working to achieve conservation outcomes. Finally, we recognise that our research is a site of multispecies entanglement, and that our everyday practices of data collection and dissemination can have life and death consequences, both for species of conservation concern and less favoured non-human others. Amid the climate emergency, the environmental footprint of long-distance research travel is another pressing point of ethical concern, whose reduction can be linked to efforts to decolonise academia (Nevins et al., 2022). Work at the conservation–social science interface thus raises unique and pressing questions regarding what and whose goals our research can or should serve. Through reflecting on these ethical commitments, we appeal to a more expansive understanding of ethics than that provided by formal research ethics processes, either within the social or conservation sciences.

By doing so, our work moreover echoes calls for more reflexivity in conservation research (Montana et al., 2020), but places emphasis on the reflexivity of the social science researcher rather than the conservation practitioner. However, we contend that reflexivity alone is not enough. The ethical and methodological dilemmas that we present also highlight the need for greater institutional mechanisms for peer support that provide ‘safe spaces’ (Chua et al., 2020, p. 13) before, throughout, and after research. These collaborative dialogue-based open fora would enable discussion of the many facets of ethics, which institutional research ethics currently ignore. Consequently, our paper speaks both to challenges particular to conservation social science research – the bridging of multiple disciplines, reckoning with the legacy of conservation’s negative social impacts and our loyalties to the non-human world – as well as proposing ethical and methodological steps forward that are more broadly applicable to human geography and anthropology.

In the following, we showcase four ethnographic vignettes addressing questions of reciprocity and ‘being useful’, ‘ethnographic refusal’ and affirmation bias, loyalties to humans, and loyalties to non-humans. Taken together, they illustrate that conservation–social science research takes place in a complex, often messy and fraught space, which gives rise to a myriad of personal, ethical, and methodological dilemmas.

2 | JUGGLING RESEARCH EXPECTATIONS

Shortly after arriving in the field, Chris was confronted with various – and at times conflicting – expectations about what benefits their research would bring to the different actors involved in or affected by the conservation scheme. Conservation NGO staff saw Chris's research foremost as a means of improving their work on the ground. They expected Chris to collect ethnobotanical data on the local flora and fauna, and hoped they would support the organisation in redesigning their community development work. As one project manager expressed it, 'We are glad you're helping us improve our community programme and relationship with the villagers'. Many locals rejected the MDCP due to the lack of involvement of community members, unequal benefit-sharing, and restrictions on hunting and forest-use, which caused conflicts about questions of rights, ownership, and legitimacy. The villagers, by contrast, hoped that Chris would support them to secure their tenure rights. 'Hopefully, you can help us to settle the land disputes', many locals said. Others, again, hoped that Chris would bring economic improvement by 'finding a foreign investor' willing to develop the local area for tourism, 'so that people's lives improve'. Meanwhile, the local government and plantation owners expected Chris to deliver insights on how to improve the management of rats that destroyed dodo nests and damaged the tea and sugar plantations. Chris was conscious that these hopes reflected local expectations and norms of reciprocity, principles they were committed to. Still, Chris felt overwhelmed and did not know how to respond to their research partners' competing requests.

Questions of reciprocity are central to fieldwork. While some consider activism as a 'logical extension of the commitment to reciprocity' (Kirsch, 2002, p. 187) that underlies social science disciplines like anthropology (see also Hale, 2006; Sanford & Angel-Ajani, 2006), as researchers committed to both human and non-human life such an engagement poses a challenge: on whose behalf do we speak? Whose rights do we seek to protect? And how can we still be helpful, when the help desired takes such competing forms? While there may be no simple answers to these questions, we realised in practice that the benefits of our engagement were largely limited to what Myfanwy Taylor (2014) refers to as small, humble acts of 'being useful'. Instead of intellectual insights and long-lasting political influence, we engaged in a different set of modest forms of reciprocity: we helped to produce NGO budgets; arranged meeting venues and designed engagement workshops for climate activists; supplied vegetable seeds and medicine to villagers; taught them English; performed clerical tasks for wildlife charities; and helped our research partners to access the material resources that the academy provides, be it in terms of funding, international study scholarships, or stationery. We also answered questions of direct empirical and practical relevance to our collaborators, such as how to increase fundraising revenue, running the risk of a crass instrumentalism. What we were doing was far from the spectacular forms of scholar-activism, but rooted in the virtues of humility, reciprocity, and the creation of small positive and practical changes. Practical research ethics thus often means that being useful extends beyond the skills and knowledges of either conservation or social science, and transcends our positions as researchers. Rather than fixed forms or norms of reciprocity, these need to be negotiated with our different research participants and adjusted to their needs.

3 | SPEAKING 'CONSERVATION', AND STAYING SILENT

As part of the agreement with the NGO, Chris prepared a report, which summarised their major findings. This was not only a way to reciprocate the organisation's willingness to host the research, but also a means of proving that Chris' presence potentially was 'useful' for the NGO. Chris tried to strike a balance between criticism and collaboration. However, instead of providing thick descriptions, as they would usually do as an ethnographer, Chris adopted the 'language norms' (Cheyns, 2011, p. 19) of NGOs to legitimise their account. For ethical reasons, they deliberately left out anything that could possibly harm local people, such as dodo hunting episodes or the involvement of villagers hired as conservation staff in the destruction of dodo habitat. And they included clear, mundane suggestions on how to improve relationships with local people, such as initiating regular meetings or increasing the presence of conservation staff in the villages. The report was clearly not only '*on* conservation' but also '*for* conservation' (Sandbrook et al., 2013, p. 1487). While Western staff high up in the project hierarchy welcomed Chris' findings and suggestions, local staff seemed to view their engagement as interference into project affairs. Since the NGO had invited Chris, they expected their loyalty and made it a precondition of accepting the researcher's presence. To avoid further compromising their loyalty towards the NGO, Chris decided to leave gaps in their academic writings rather than criticising the organisation for its failures.

Critical portrayals could potentially damage future funding prospects for NGOs, although the impact of such scholarship is debatable. Yet, as researchers, do we have an obligation to reveal questionable practices to funding organisations or should we have a greater loyalty to the overall mission of conservation, as opposed to specific organisations (Palmer, 2020)? To navigate these tensions, we resorted to silences and gaps in our writings. These silences also included obfuscating other ethical, religious, and political commitments, such as veganism, atheism, or sustainability-orientated practices that could put us at odds with the values and norms of our research participants, or could be interpreted as critical of their actions. Yet, as Gemma Sou (2021) highlights, these acts of concealment raise questions of informed consent, deny participants the opportunity of engaging with certain dimensions of the researcher's identity (such as sexuality), and foreclose possible connections, while making potentially essentialist assumptions about participants' attitudes.

These dilemmas resonate with what Sherry Ortner has described as 'ethnographic refusal' (1995, p. 173) – that is, the way in which researchers deliberately choose not to disclose certain aspects of people's lives to avoid doing harm. While ethnographic refusal may be justified from an ethical point of view, it can also lead to 'ethnographic thinness' (1995, p. 190) that glosses over the power dynamics within groups, their cultural richness, and complex subjectivities, and consequently compromises methodological commitments to accurate and rigorous description and possibly raise questions about the researcher's credibility. Bridging Ortner and Sou, we contend that concealments lead not just to thin description of our participants' worlds, but also of ourselves. Ethnographic refusal and its thinning may thus also lead to what Nicolas Beuret has identified as an 'affirmationist stance' (2017, p. 1166) in studies of climate justice movements. He notes a tendency for researchers to highlight more intangible consequences of activism (such as movement building), to avoid openly acknowledging the organisations' failures to achieve their own stated goals due to the academic's own political investments in these groups. Yet neither such an affirmational stance nor ethnographic refusal allow space for critical insights that would further the changes needed to make conservation work better on the ground. Moreover, does the scale and urgency of non-human suffering render such silences in themselves deeply unethical (Kopnina, 2017)? While there are no clear answers to such questions, the privilege of our researcher positionality comes with its own responsibilities. As we gain insights into the world of our research participants, we are also required to strike a careful balance between openness and concealment. Following the principle of not doing harm, we have to decide from case to case what to reveal and what not. The implications of these conflicting loyalties are further realised when one chooses to end one's silence, sometimes at great personal and professional cost.

4 | HUMAN LOYALTIES OVER RESEARCH INTERESTS

During their research, Chris discovered that dodo decline was enmeshed in Mauritius' (post)colonial history and ongoing structural inequalities. The White-owned tea and sugar plantations employed an exclusively Black workforce. Most of the workers were significantly underpaid, undervalued, and sometimes subject to abhorrent treatment. Some workers were bullied, subjected to violence, and – very rarely – tortured and killed. The result was a disinterested and dispossessed workforce, some of whom responded with vengeful behaviours. Some workers poached dodos and other wildlife, either for their own consumption or to sell, which conflicted with the conservationists' biodiversity preservation goals. Others engaged in arson. Yet, the fires not only burned down plantations, but also destroyed the adjacent forest and its wildlife, further fuelling tensions between the different parties. Chris struggled with whether and how to report this in their findings, to avoid further compromising an already disenfranchised workforce that also faced livelihood impediments due to the MDCP's restrictions on resource access. Chris decided to expose the racism and ill-treatment that helped produce these vengeful behaviours in the hope that things might change, and revealed these injustices via news articles, a written report to the MDCP, and presentations to both the plantations' workers and owners. In response, the Black plantation workers praised Chris for their courage. By contrast, the White plantation owners and Western researchers collaborating with the plantation industries reacted with hatred and sharp criticism, with the latter claiming that it would hinder research access because the plantation owners had become more suspicious of researchers' motives. A year later, the Ministry of Environment indeed restricted research access, and the minimum wage of farm workers was increased (thereby potentially lessening reliance on poaching) but neither change can be necessarily attributed to Chris' disclosure.

Given conservation's colonial genealogies, conservation projects are often sites of racialised violence and conflict (e.g., Kashwan et al., 2021; Loperena, 2016). Supporting recent calls to decolonise conservation (e.g., Adams & Mulligan, 2002; Collins et al., 2021; Fair, 2021), we contend that this places a particular responsibility on social scientific researchers to unveil and challenge oppressive dynamics, even at high personal cost. To handle our contested loyalties and not to betray our own moral codes, some of us tried to mediate between groups to solve conflicts, with the consequence that we were

automatically ascribed with authority and expertise. Others openly shared their observations and opinions, which led to accusations of being overly biased in favour of one side of a conflict, being too politically engaged, or as having undermined future access for researchers. In consequence, we had to gauge what to share with our acquaintances and often felt a need to downplay or obscure relationships. This pressure to hide, however, conflicts with our belief that ethnographic relationships should be built on shared trust, transparency, and reciprocity.

5 | MORE-THAN-HUMAN LOYALTIES

One of the major threats to dodo viability were rats that destroyed the ground-laying bird's nest and ate its eggs. Introduced to Mauritius by colonialists, rats – now numbering in the tens of millions – were considered detrimental to local wildlife, particularly the dodo. Rat culling had thus become a central conservation strategy, which went hand in hand with the plantations' pest management. Classified as 'invasives' and 'pests', Chris had to realise that these animals had been reduced to an abject class of non-humans made 'killable' (Haraway, 2008). In an attempt to better understand the dodo–rat–human conflict, Chris developed sympathies both for the rats, attuning to their intentional and affective lives, and for the plantation workers exterminating them, leading to conflicting loyalties. To understand rats better, Chris established scientific collaborations with biologists, including a researcher collecting GPS tracking data on rat movement. Yet they quickly learned that the scientific knowledge of rats was solely purposed towards more efficient extermination. The collaboration was interpreted by the biologists as an opportunity to appropriate Chris' social scientific skills towards devising better strategies to eradicate rats, *en masse*. Uncomfortable with being implicated in and directly contributing to the improvement of rat culling, even if it was for the purpose of dodo conservation, Chris terminated the research collaboration.

Chris' independent attempts at naturalistic observation brought their own difficulties. Rats mostly range on tea and sugar plantations. Accessing plantations for research required negotiating which findings Chris would disclose regarding rat location, behaviour, and numbers. Given their sympathy for rat subjectivities, Chris sought to obscure information from informants to not betray the rodents. However, the workers and managers' own responsibilities further complicated the case: the workforce faced mistreatment if they did not successfully exterminate all rats, while the owners had a legal obligation to destroy rats ranging on their property.

One particularity of research at the conservation–social science interface is the competing ethical commitments not just to collaborating institutions and research interlocutors, but to the non-human subjects of conservation interventions. As the dodo–rat conflict illustrates, conservation is underpinned by different regimes of violent care (Van Dooren, 2015), in which 'unloved others' (Rose & Van Dooren, 2011) are rendered expendable in order to protect species valued for their rarity and nativity. We faced challenges due to our sometimes conflicting ethical and emotional commitments towards the goals and ethos of conservation as a discipline, the endangered species of concern, and those beings deemed detrimental to conservation efforts, particularly invasive species. The emerging 'compassionate conservation' movement critiques invasive species management for lacking sufficient regard for more-than-human communities (Wallach et al., 2018). Alternatively, some conservation biologists have argued that an empathic approach will ultimately undermine biodiversity (Griffin et al., 2020), especially as such compassion can further result in the displacement and destruction of native species (Crowley et al., 2018). As social scientists engaged in conservation worlds, we too must negotiate these tensions, remaining cognisant of our capacity to facilitate violence towards more-than-human life, but also how our critiques might serve to undermine work towards ecological resilience. We are also practically entangled in these 'tough decisions' (Van Dooren, 2015, p. 23) about which lives will be valued. To further complicate matters, commitments towards the more-than-human cannot be reconciled through conventional research ethics, as transparent and informed dialogue with our non-human interlocutors is impossible.

6 | CONCLUSION: CONFLICTING LOYALTIES AS RESPONSIBILITIES

Research at the intersection of social science and conservation entails occupying a space between different disciplines and epistemologies, human and non-human subjects, often with competing interests, ideas, powers, and needs. One of the most promising yet also challenging ways for understanding and improving the world seems to lie in the space in-between. As we have shown, this in-between position gives rise to various ethical, methodological, disciplinary, and personal dilemmas regarding questions of reciprocity, transparency, and loyalty. As Ortner contends, often 'there are no

good answers here, only a need for a lot of careful ethical and methodological thinking' (2017, n.p.) – before, throughout, and after fieldwork. This means to recognise the following. First, practical research ethics do not encompass a predetermined set of forms of reciprocity, but they dynamically evolve out of our engagement with our human and non-human interlocutors, often transcending our positions as researchers. Second, while our researcher positionalities are never fixed, the opportunity to learn about our interlocutors' lives entails its own responsibilities. While we need to choose our concealments carefully, depending on the context, and based on the principle of not doing harm, we also have the responsibility to reveal often racialised social and environmental injustices. Third, we must acknowledge that as researchers we are not just observers, but are complicit in the practices of human and non-human violence and exclusion that suffuse conservation. Consequently, our work involves uncomfortable choices and trade-offs. Finally, given how these responsibilities move the researcher beyond a position of innocence or neutrality, academic institutions need to actively adjust to this reality.

Based on these conclusions, we advocate for a greater culture of transparency about the dilemmas that conservation social science research implies. Openness about these challenges is not only necessary to overcome fear or shame about research shortcomings and enable researchers to learn from mistakes, but also can foster collaborative relationships between different disciplines. Such stories from the perspective of social scientists can help natural scientists make sense of our critical engagement with and for conservation by drawing attention to the grounded considerations that their own method and questions might overlook. But importantly, these stories and forms of reflection can articulate and reaffirm the struggles and commitment that we share across disciplinary divides – the need to live better together with human and non-human life on this planet.

Being transparent remains, and likely always will be, an ongoing problem. At the heart of many of our dilemmas are questions of honesty and concealment, of strategically revealing some pieces of knowledge and not disclosing others. These politics surrounding what we share are common concerns for ethnographers. Yet working on and within conservation implies additional factors at stake, as we need to weigh up how our critical insights might affect organisations' reputations, Indigenous and local communities' livelihoods, and non-human lives. Ironically, in order for us to discuss how we grappled with these issues, we had to avoid complete transparency and dissemble through the use of the fictional researcher 'Chris'. Hopefully, this paper is a step towards a more transparent culture and more supportive institutional environment, as we are the first to admit that dodos can only take us so far.

We thus call for a broader formulation of ethics than is currently administered through most institutional regulations, one that speaks to social relations, political actions, and personal commitments. Even though such dilemmas are deeply and personally experienced, the challenge of navigating them should not be relegated to the individual researcher, particularly one at a precarious early career stage. We believe institutions and scholarly communities have to take greater responsibility in supporting researchers with how to navigate these challenges and creating spaces for frank dialogue throughout the entire research process. Our call mirrors previous interventions that showcase the emotional challenges associated with fieldwork and that have acknowledged the inadequacies of pre-fieldwork training and in-the-field support, as well as the damaging lack of honesty surrounding these challenges and set-backs (Pollard, 2009).⁴ In addition to that, institutional fostering of ethics sessions post-fieldwork would enable researchers to openly discuss challenges, while exchanging knowledge and experience that equips others to anticipate potential dilemmas, and have a positively transformative impact on fieldwork itself. What seems critical is the ability to forge open, trusting, and supportive relationships between peers and with superiors across and within departments. These shifts in research culture are necessary and timely, both as a new generation of scholars are reckoning with the purpose and limitations of academia and because the ecological stakes are so high.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

¹ 'Chris' is a fictional composite of our diverse fieldwork experiences, with 'Mauritius' and 'the dodos' as pseudonymous stand-ins for the different locations and species of concern within our research. Chris is referred to throughout using a 'they' pronoun, to reflect their composite nature.

² Consequently, our vignettes are set in Mauritius, the former territory of the dodo.

³ For the most part, although some authors primarily identify as practitioners.

⁴ At the initial panel from which this piece developed, there was broad-based enthusiasm for an online peer support forum, creating a space for researchers to share their concerns, receive advice, and recognise that they were far from alone in facing these quandaries.

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