



Science

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Concordia's Marine Biologist Aims to Inspire Future Black Scientists

Concordia University

Nicola Smith: 'I'm an advocate for Black representation in STEM. I believe that having a role model that you can relate to is a strong motivator for success.'

Marine biologist Nicola S. Smith grew up in the Bahamas, surrounded by the ocean. Her house was filled with nature magazines like Chickadee, Owl and National Geographic.

Smith's mother, a biology teacher, nurtured her keen interest in science. She passed



away when Smith was 16, and Smith left the Caribbean to attend boarding school in Toronto, then the University of Toronto.

Growing up, she had never considered a research career in science as a viable option for a Black woman - she hadn't had any role models to look up to. That's something Smith wants to change.

"I'm an advocate for Black representation in STEM," Smith says. "I believe that having a role model that you can relate to is a strong motivator for success.

"I would tell young Black scientists to know your worth and to continue to fight for a place not just in the room, but also at the table where major decisions are made. I would tell them that you are more than enough, and that you are not alone."

Smith recently joined Concordia's Department of Biology as an assistant professor, where she'll study the impacts of climate change on marine systems, marine invasions, and their intersection.

She has over 10 years of experience researching biological invasions, coral reef ecology and tropical fisheries. She has published several studies on the Indo-Pacific lionfish invasion in the Caribbean arch and providing nplishments.



Invasive species and coral reef ecology

Broadly speaking, Smith's research focuses on biological invasions and coral reef fish ecology. Currently, she is studying the effects of climate change on the success of marine invasive species globally.

As she points out, invasive species are one of the greatest threats to biodiversity worldwide. Also, coral reef fish are vital to the ecology and economy of small island states.

Smith has received numerous awards including the 2018 Bullitt Environmental Prize, a graduate scholarship from the Organization of American States and a professional development grant from the Society for Conservation Biology, Latin America and Caribbean Section.

She has also headed two Global Environment Facility/United Nations Environment Programme (GEF/UNEP)-funded projects on marine invasive species in the Caribbean.

"During my Masters, a consultant in The Bahamas was writing a grant to study and control invasive species," she says. "I wrote the section of the UN grant about lionfish. By the time we got the grant, I was just graduating."



Smith took a position as a Liber Ero Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Changing Oceans Research Unit at the Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries at the University of British Columbia. She worked with William Cheung studying how climate change might affect invasive species on Canadian coastlines and worldwide.

Smith was attracted to Concordia by the opportunity to create a field course on tropical coral reef ecology and conservation. She was also impressed by the Faculty of Arts and Science's Applied Science Hub, which houses laboratories and research space for interdisciplinary research in agriculture, health and sustainable development, among other fields.

The facility has a cold-water area for breeding and rearing salmonids, a stream channel, static cold water experimental space, a warm water space for breeding tropical fish, and six experimental warm water rooms with temperature and lighting control. Researchers are also capable of modifying other water-quality parameters such as oxygen levels, pH and turbidity separately.

In preparation for her research projects in The Bahamas, Smith is working closely with the facility's animal care team. They are connecting 75-gallon aquariums and 50-pound nitrogen cylinders to the facility's pumps, in order to drop the oxygen levels in the tanks and simulate future ocean conditions under climate change.



"It's going to be incredible," she says.

Aside from Concordia's research potential, Smith was also attracted by the university's diverse student body, its Black Perspectives Office, how its embracing equity, diversity and inclusion, and decolonizing the curriculum.

'It's time to tear down the barriers that Black people had to overcome'

In addition to her mother, her nature magazines and the ocean, Smith credits Daniel Pauly, the only Black professor she ever had, and Isabella Côté, her PhD supervisor, as major inspirations.

Smith said she had to concentrate to do her research and that her mentors have contributed so

much to society but received so little credit and recognition for their work," she says.

"It's also a time to recognize, appreciate and tear down the barriers and obstacles that Black people had to overcome and are still fighting to overcome to be treated fairly, and with dignity."

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