

Black Faces, White Spaces: African-Americans and the Great Outdoors

Final Report



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Introduction

Environmentalism and the meanings we attribute to the environment are grounded in history, race, gender and culture. For African-Americans, the everyday practices associated with environment interactions are directly related to issues of African-American identity and American history (Dominy 1997). This ideology can be at odds with thinking about and honoring the environment in the way that the dominant narrative of conservation/preservation is constructed (Agyeman 1989). On the other hand, this does not preclude a desire to care for, enjoy and utilize the environment in a sustainable fashion. The goal of my research is to broaden our understanding of African-Americans and environment interactions by exploring how the attitudes and perceptions of African-Americans are influenced by racialized constructions and representations, informing how African-Americans participate in the use of national forests and parks. The purposed research is guided by the following research questions:

What are the linkages between how the Great Outdoors is represented, the history of race relations in the United States, and African-American attitudes, beliefs and interactions pertaining to the environment?

- How are representations of the Great Outdoors racialized within environmental institutions and organizations?
- How does collective memory of race-relations in the United States inform environmental interactions?
- What are some of the ways African-Americans think about, interact and understand their "natural environment"?
- How do representations and perceptions of African-Americans in relation to the environment affect that relationship through work, leisure, literature, education and activism?

My hope is that the findings of this research will:

- Provide the National Park Service with information for increasing African-American participation
- Provide documented experiences of individual African-Americans in a format useful to decision-makers.
- Support collaborative endeavors between African-American communities and environmental institutions addressing increased participation by African-American in conservation and preservation activities and environmental equity.

Field Experience

In order to collect data that reflected the breadth and depth of my primary research question, I combined qualitative and quantitative methods in my research design. This included content analysis (of two national magazines over a ten-year period) and key informant interviews (interviews with three groups of African-Americans - nationally dispersed people whose work focuses on the environment, those local to South Florida, and local non-users). In addition, I distributed questionnaires to national park

staff at three national parks in the South Florida area (Everglades, Biscayne and Big Cypress).

I chose South Florida as my primary research site because it is an ethnically diverse community, and more money has been allocated for the reconstruction of the Everglades NP than any other national park. Both Biscayne NP and Big Cypress National Preserve are steeped in histories that include African-American interaction with the land (farming and logging) that has informed present-day environmental practices.

Participatory research was also an integral piece of my data collection process and continually challenged me to revisit what participatory research means in relation to the concerns and goals of my research.

September 2003-June 2004

In the first phase of my fieldwork, it was important to establish a working relationship with my community partner, Audrey Peterman who runs EarthWise Productions. Initially, I had to do this long distance because I was still based at my university in Massachusetts and Audrey lived in Florida. We spent numerous hours on the phone and e-mail sharing ideas and discussing potential strategies for working together. In addition, I had originally planned to do fieldwork in two sites - South Florida and Tacoma, Washington (which has proximity to Mt. Rainier NP). I visited Mt. Rainier NP and met with members of the African-American community in Tacoma. But after a few months, I realized that I had bitten off more than I could chew and had to eliminate Washington from my research. This presented my first challenge - how to disengage honestly with people whom I had begun working with to build relationships (and expectations). I contacted key people whom I had met with and explained the situation and offered the possibility of collaborating in the future. In addition, I plan to send a copy of my findings to the staff at Mt. Rainier NP.

I spent seven weeks in South Florida during December/January 2003-2004. During this period, I met with park staff at the Everglades NP and Biscayne NP to hear about their interests, concerns and priorities relating to greater African-American participation concerning the national parks. I also began interviewing African-Americans in the South Florida area that were engaged in various capacities throughout the community. I met with certain challenges: since I had the research question defined before meeting with community members and park staff, I needed to figure out how to integrate their needs and concerns in a participatory manner. I kept in mind that while working within certain frameworks such as my proposal, I needed to remain flexible. The proposal is not static and set in stone. The primary guideline is the research question(s) and the needs of the community as mutually defined by me, my community partner and the community I am engaged with. In some cases, I was asked to take on a task that would fulfill the needs of a group. In the case of Biscayne National Park, they asked me to write a historic context study on an African-American family that lived in the park during the late 1800's into the late 1900's. This study will be used to make that land a national historic site.

During the remainder of the 2003/04 academic year, I was based at Clark University and made short trips to different parts of the U.S. in order to meet with and interview African-Americans who worked in some environmental capacity. I met with people engaged in a wide-range of environmental activities including working for the

national parks, running NGO's, and writers. As this process continued during the rest of my fieldwork experience, I discovered that not only was I building working relationships, but also was potentially instrumental in bringing together individuals for coalition building. In addition to key informant interviews, I spent time in the archives of nearby libraries doing my content analysis.

June 2004-June 2005

In June of 2004, I moved to South Florida to continue my fieldwork on a full-time basis. Almost immediately, I was faced with the challenge of time-management. I was doing interviews in South Florida as well as other areas of the U.S., working on the historic study for Biscayne National Park (which required it's own travel and archive work) and spending time with community members involved in various activities. In addition, my community partner had moved to Atlanta, so we had to make arrangements that considered the distance. At times I was simply overwhelmed - was it more important to go with a participant to a community event or spend time at the library? Overall, I managed to gather a wealth of information. I visited individuals working in California (Yosemite and Pt. Reyes), New Mexico, Alabama and Georgia, to name a few. Not only did we spend time doing the interview, but I got a sense of what people were doing on the ground and we worked together to consider what kinds of questions I should be asking and how the answers might translate into practical use. I would see many of these people throughout the year (those from across the U.S. and South Florida) as I would be invited to participate in local and national events that addressed their communities concerns around environmental issues. In this way, I could update people on my progress while maintaining their involvement.

With those participants who I worked with locally, I needed to consider a number of strategies to gain their trust and create a more participatory process. This included meeting with people more than once, getting together on their turf and their time, and spending "social" time with them - going to family and community events.

During this time, I also continued meeting and working with those who worked at Biscayne NP, Everglades NP and Big Cypress National Preserve. I distributed anonymous questionnaires to the staff in hopes that they would honestly answer questions pertaining to race and their experience working for the national park. While I managed to establish a strong relationship with those at Biscayne NP and to a lesser extent, the Everglades NP, it was more challenging to do so with Big Cypress NP, largely because of time constraints and distance (I was based in Miami and Big Cypress was an hour and a half away). I also became involved with Miami Community Partners, a group made up of largely African-American community members concerned with issues relating to the environment and the national parks. I interviewed many of these people and participated in local and family events.

July 2004-present

In July I needed to move and decided it would be best to leave Miami in order to do my analysis and write-up in a timely fashion. But I didn't want to totally disengage from the participatory process. So I moved to Atlanta, where my community partner is based and I'm working together with her on a number of events and projects related to our work. I also continue to stay engaged with many people that I've been working with

over the last two years and am still participating in some events, at their request. At the same time, I am able to begin the writing process without the time constraint problem I had in Florida. In addition, I completed the historic context study of the Parson Jones site in Biscayne National Park in September.

Preliminary Findings and Analysis

I wanted to understand the links between African-American attitudes, how the environment is represented and African-American history. At this point in my analysis, much of what I hypothesized is coming into full relief. In particular, two primary issues appear to be at the top of the list - the affects of collective memory on existing environmental attitudes and media representation.

Regardless of where African-Americans live geographically, our common history of slavery, segregation and racism appears to inform our perceptions and attitudes about the environment. Issues of fear, exclusion, little sense of ownership and lack of awareness all come into play. Initial findings suggest that for African-Americans, creating a deep-seated sense of feeling and responsibility regarding the environment may NOT come primarily from telling them they need to save the trees for their children's future (this isn't meant to imply that they don't care about their children's future). Recent history shows us that African-Americans are continually using the past as a way to represent themselves and say, "we were there" and "we are here now". Why not use the same framework for understanding African-American interaction with the environment? Specifically, for African-Americans memory, both collective and individual, allows us a way to name and re-create a place, which gives us (or reaffirms) the power to recreate ourselves and the places we live in. This allows us to construct *environmental spaces* in our own image. Focusing on preserving a piece of the past is a way to say "we were there" AND indirectly allows for more control and power in deciding (collectively?) who we were and who we *are*. Consequently, memory, as a way of evoking the past, becomes an important vehicle for involving the community in environmental preservation, conservation, and participation.

Many people that I spoke with lamented the lack of visual and textual representation of African-Americans in relation to the environment, be it in the media, in the national parks, in our schools and within the mainstream environmental movement. In particular, they noted the following:

- Need for greater recognition of network of black environmentalists
- Continued acknowledgement of black stories and why stories shouldn't only be framed within usual framework of white context/gaze and/or featured only during Black History month
- Misrepresentation as a way to further one's own gain
- Greater representation in the popular media and NPS exhibits and materials
- In Outside Magazine over a ten-year period from 1991 to 2001, there were a total of 6,980 pictures. Out of 4,602 pictures with people, only 103 were African-Americans.

In addition to these two concerns, those I spoke with expressed frustration with the "old boys network" within the environmental movement and the national park system where diversity is seen as an expression of political correctness or as a goal that has to

happen within certain financial and time constraints. They felt that diversity policies within environmental organizations are often about lip service - when funding cuts are made, diversity is the first to go. While smaller organizations (non-profits and community groups) have diversity as fundamental to their mission statements, larger institutions' (government agencies) primary mission overshadows all else.

For many of the African-Americans that I've been speaking to and working with, it's also about getting policy-makers at the national and state levels to recognize and pledge a long-term commitment to communities whose needs and desires are predicated on different histories, understandings and perceptions about the natural environment. There are fundamental underlying accepted beliefs and norms that render some groups experience invisible or "lesser than" thereby making their full participation at the policy-making table challenging.

A number of people mentioned the issue of black identity and the inherent contradictions around environmental issues. On one level, there is a feeling that being involved with the environment is "something white people do". But on another level, there is a passionate acknowledgement about the importance of land, a need to claim a place, and recognizing that we have a right to it.

Finally, one of the biggest frustrations many African-Americans I spoke with had is the continual struggle with a way to deal with the racism in practical terms in conversations and decision-making contexts.

Benefit of research to the community

In order to assess the potential benefits of this research for the "community" I worked with, I've asked a number of the participants for their input. Many spoke about the power of having empirical data when involved in decision-making processes and the importance of creating a "critical mass" of stories and experiences. Many of us are working together on future projects to raise awareness and increase visibility concerning African-American issues. Since the community I worked with was both geographical and a community of common experience, this empirical data would be used in different ways (for example, my data will be used to make a case for an environmental narrative of a new park - the Great Dismal Swamp in North Carolina - that includes the histories of all peoples). Since I have not finish compiling data and writing the dissertation, it is hard to specifically address what all the benefits might be.

What can be noted thus far are two things in particular. The first is that the historic context study I completed for Biscayne National Park is going to be used to get that site on the National Historic Registry. The Miami Community Partners are actively engaged in clearing the site and the information gathered in the study will be used in a Ken Burns PBS documentary about people of color and the national parks.

Second, I have been told that I have been instrumental in bringing together people and organizations for future collaborative efforts. This includes African-Americans running non-profits now working with organizations such as Whole Communities in Vermont and the Land Trust community in various parts of the country.

Lessons Learned

One of the greatest challenges I had during this time was how to address the issues of reciprocity. There were many people who were giving their time and energy to this research, but not necessarily expecting to see returns any time soon. I decided to identify what my skills are and offered my skills to those I worked with. This worked out rather well - I did writing consultations for those writing books and proposals, give voluntary talks to middle schools during Black History month to fulfill a need to provide information and represent (many I spoke with stressed the importance of black people seeing a black person doing this work), and bringing people together to build coalitions who did not know each other previously. In some cases, it was doing something simple as driving someone to somewhere they needed to go. All of these activities helped me to build relationships and bring integrity to the participatory process.

One of the most important lessons that I learned is that of patience. I've questioned myself often, wondering if the work I've engaged in will be of use to those who have given so generously of their time, knowledge and energy. Can the work we do now have potentially long-term affects that can be equally as powerful and important as being able to see immediate change? A woman that I had the privilege of interviewing and spending time with, MaVynee Betsch, died this past September. An African-American woman who was a devout environmentalist (she gave away ALL her wealth to environmental causes) had worked hard in her own community to protect and preserve both the natural environment and the African-American history that was interwoven in place. While she had much wisdom to share about the things we needed to do to get more African-Americans consciously engaged with natural resource management, she let me know that the one thing most important to "further the cause" was this: that it is the legacy of what we have done that will determine the future for our people and our environment. We can be part of a critical mass for positive change. For this I must offer my deepest gratitude to all that share this journey with me and from whom I have learned so much.

References

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