

FOCUS:
BLACK FACES, WHITE SPACES
AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE GREAT OUTDOORS
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I'm sitting in a canoe with Alison Austin, Director of Outreach and Communications for Audubon, South Florida, gliding slowly down the New River, a piece of the Everglades in Broward County. We are joined by Robert Butler, one of the original "Highway men" and two of his daughters. We paddle past one hundred year-old cypress trees and exotics like Australian pine and Brazilian pepper. While the sight of the "last remaining stretch of the Everglades in Broward" is amazing enough, equally astonishing is that this river runs through one of the oldest and poorest African-American neighborhoods in the United States.

Part of the New River, the North and the South Fork are surrounded by Broward County's 1.6 million residents. But while both forks are part of the same river, the South Fork runs through neighborhoods featuring million-dollar estates and fancy boats and has lost most of its wild beginnings. The North Fork has retained much of the raw nature that has characterized this waterway since the 1950's. Unfortunately, the North Fork has also suffered from neglect and misuse as a waste dump. Over the last few years, civic leaders pressed for inclusion of the North Fork in the \$7.8 billion Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan. At the same time, a \$13 million African-American Cultural Center and Research Library recently opened in a county park along the riverbank.

The synergy is not lost on African-American environmental educators and activists in the area. Audrey and Frank Peterman, who run Earthwise Productions, an organization that provides outreach and environmental education to African-American communities in South Florida, understand that ecological restoration and natural resource management cannot happen without addressing the concerns and needs of the residents. The Peterman's work to form partnerships between environmental organizations, such as Audubon and South Florida communities, to engage both ecological and human considerations.

During the two months I've spent in South Florida thus far, I've spoken with numerous African-American educators, activists, community workers and artists who have voiced similar sentiments. "It's a myth that black folks don't care about the environment" says Thaddeus Hamilton, coordinator and director of the Natural Resource Conservation Service's (NRCS) South Florida Urban Community Assistance Program. He raises pertinent questions about institutionalized racism and whether or not black communities are experiencing any of the benefits from the billion-dollar Everglades restoration project. To investigate these issues, he has organized the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Council. As part of my research, we are going to work together to design workshops and questionnaires that explore the barriers to outreach within black communities. Mr. Hamilton hopes to take this information and pass it on to National Black Emphasis Programs (part of the NRCS) throughout the U.S.

Another angle community members in South Florida are taking to increase African-American participation in natural resource management is to educate African-American residents and environmental organizations (including the National Park Service) on the historical importance of the African-American presence within "natural" environments. This includes getting certain spots placed on the Historical Preservation Registry and included in interpretive programs within the national parks.

Two projects that I have recently become involved with provide insight into untold environmental narratives that can influence environmental practices today. Biscayne National Park is home to the third largest coral reef in the world and forty-two islands. A few years ago, a local archeologist uncovered a site on Porgy Key

(one of the islands) where Parson Jones, an African-American born in the 1800's, had purchased two islands, totaling more than 250 acres, to farm, fish, and sponge. His family used unusual techniques to grow key lime trees and was so knowledgeable about the surrounding area that presidents from Harding to Nixon came to them for their fishing and sponging expertise. The last remaining member of the Jones family died a few years ago, but a project is underway to find out more about the family, their farming techniques, and their overall environmental impact on the area. Audrey Peterman has been one of the primary motivators in getting a plaque placed on the site and more importantly, getting the financial resources to make more research possible. I have been asked to continue researching this family and to write a report for the Historical Preservation Registry that can secure both protection and future funding for this site.

Virginia Key Beach was the only beach in Miami during the 1940's where African-American's could go. Home to exotic and indigenous tree species, nature trails and a sparkling coastline, this 82.5-acre park was about to fall under the ax of developers. But a concerned group of citizens banded together to form the Virginia Key Beach Trust and had the site placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2002. Guy Forchion, the Executive Director, talked to me about what this space represents to all residents in the South Florida region. As a primary part of the restoration process, over eighty oral histories will be collected from elderly residents who frequented the beach during it's hey day. These stories will become part of an archive for all visitors to enjoy when the beach is reopened to the public.

A continuing theme throughout all my conversations with black residents in South Florida about natural resource management was the need for increased visibility of African-American concerns, histories and experiences, and environmental practices, both in environmental organizations and black communities. "The same people who were responsible for the Voting Rights Act were responsible for the Forest and Wilderness Act. But while blacks were asked to sign for the passing of the Voting act, they were not asked to sign for the Forest and Wilderness Act", states a frustrated Audrey Peterman. She goes on to say how this adds to the myth that African Americans aren't concerned about the environment. "We are reclaiming a legacy...but we need sustained resources for a sustained effort. Diversity programs are disposable in the eyes of some". Others echo Ms. Peterman's concern and point out how information about our natural resources are not "targeted to us", indicating the black community. This includes forest and park users as well as black professionals who might work in natural resource management. It helps when you "see yourself reflected in the imagery or you see a park ranger that looks like you" says Carol Daniels, Cooperative EcoSystems Studies Coordinator.

For most of the people I've spoken with, building that sustained effort means making and nurturing strong connections between local organizations and individuals striving to increase the visibility of the black environmental experience in South Florida. For my part, they have asked me to participate by offering my time, my writing skills and my energy to bring some of these issues to light through official reports, academic papers and community workshops. Though I am back in Massachusetts at the moment, I feel privileged to be a part of their efforts and look forward to further collaboration when I return to Florida in June. On Martin Luther King Day, I found myself at an African-American Cultural Center in Miami. I was interviewing Gene Tinnie, a local historian, when a friend of his interrupted to say hello. Mr. Tinnie introduced us and told his friend, Renee about my research. "I'm leaving in a week" I said sadly, "but I'll be back!" Renee needed no convincing and smiled knowingly, saying she understood. "Florida presents the need to be here", she said as she winked and walked away. How right she is.

1 The Highwaymen are African-American painters (one woman among them) who, during the 1950's, '60's and '70's made a living by painting Florida landscapes. Many of these artists sold their paintings from the back of their car, hence the moniker "highway men".

2 Kloor, Kevin. 2001. A fork in the river. Audubon 103(4): 30