MINORITY PERCEPTION AND PARTICIPATION IN URBAN AND COMMUNITY FORESTRY

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ABSTRACT. Three focus groups, consisting of minority high school students, inner-city citizens groups, and natural resource professionals, were targeted for this case study to obtain minority perception and participation of youth, inner-city citizens, and professionals in urban and community forestry. Surveys, interviews, and group discussions were used to collect data. The results can serve as a foundation for future case studies as well as provide important information for urban foresters; natural resource professionals; and policy makers in making decisions related to urban and community forestry education and outreach to minority communities.

KEYWORDS. Urban forestry, Minority participation, Minority perception

Introduction

America’s inner cities are renowned for the state of inequality that plagues many minorities (especially African-Americans and Hispanics) with social and economic instability, perpetuating substandard living conditions, social isolation, lack of pertinent institutions, and unsettling discrimination. More importantly, inner cities are communities that lack community – strong institutions like businesses, schools, social services, and green spaces (Rankin and Quane, 2000). Because these elements are missing in America’s inner cities, there exists an environment of despair for their minority residents.

Low-income urban youth are at high risk for developmental problems, including academic underachievement, juvenile delinquency, withdrawal, apathy, aggression, depression, and more. In seeking ways to offset these negative outcomes, studies in the past have concentrated on youth’s social and economic environments (Sullivan, 1998). Specialists in child development consider play, “the work of children,” very important for social and cognitive development.

Urban trees become safe-havens for some of the very activities that give disadvantaged youth the skills to succeed in life: creative play that builds language, communication, collaboration skills, and higher levels of adult-child supervision and interaction where values and communications skills are instilled in the younger generation. Trees may promote healthy development in a population of youth at the center of some inner cities’ most pressing public concerns (USDA, 2001). Researches suggest that administrators, planners, designers, landscape architects, and urban foresters should include more trees
and green space in public housing developments to promote healthy developments in youth. These additions of greenery and nature will not only benefit the youth, but also their families and their communities.

**Literature Review**

*MInority attitudes toward urban forestry*

America’s cities are places where people of diverse cultural backgrounds live, yet this demographic richness is often not reflected in urban and community forest tree programs. In the poorest neighborhoods throughout this country where Blacks, Hispanics, and other minorities too often find themselves living, the planting of trees and gardens is a low priority when day-to-day survival is tested by crime, poor housing, inferior education, health issues, and drugs. Minorities are needed in forestry professions so that their different cultural viewpoints are included in policy and decision-making processes; but barriers to their hiring include resistance to change by natural resource professionals, urban orientation of minority groups, racial discrimination, a lack of role models, and low interest in hiring or recruiting minorities (Coleman, 1971).

Payne and Theoe (1971) cited the lack of African-American recruitment by forestry schools as a primary cause of a shortage of African-American foresters, along with biases of current professionals. They also speculated that African-Americans might be reluctant to enter forestry professions due to an anti-agricultural bias and the feeling that such professions are low in status and opportunity. Leatherberry and Wellman (1988) and Wellman (1987) found that high school guidance counselors may inadequately inform minority students or may even give negative impressions of forestry careers. Women are not entering forestry because it is perceived as a profession for men. Women felt that gender discrimination existed in their workplace, and did not think that they received the same opportunities as men in the profession (Kuhns, Bragg, and Blahna, 2002).

Research has been conducted over the years to determine the level of concern minorities express for environmental concerns. Kellert (1984) found black adults to be substantially less interested, concerned and informed about the natural environment than whites, and Kellert and Westerfelt (1983) found non-white children to be less knowledgeable about, and less interested in, wildlife.

An earlier study of 28 black students at Michigan State University conducted by Kreger (1973) found that 89% of the respondents thought that blacks did not have as much interest in, and concern for ecological problems and goals as Whites. Respondents believed that Blacks had more pressing priorities; ecology was a white, middle-class issue; ecological concern diverted attention from social unrest; ecological problems did not affect Blacks as personally as Whites because Blacks did not have the same access to the physical environment, did not destroy it, and should not be responsible for its repairs;
and that there were no ecology courses in black high schools so blacks were not informed about the topic.

Other studies have also found that Blacks were less informed, less aware, and concerned with environmental issues than Whites (Ostheimer and Ritt, 1976; Crenson, 1971; LaHart, 1978; Giles, 1957) and less likely to consider environmental quality of a problem worthy of community support or to favor environmental goals (Hershey and Hill, 1977-1978; Horvat, 1974).

Barry Commoner (1971) claimed that the disaffiliation of Blacks from the environment movement is due in part to the fact that Blacks regard environmental protection as an irrelevant diversion of funds from the plight of Blacks. Most Blacks have limited economic resources and cannot afford environmental concerns because they have to place a higher priority on other basic social needs.

Another explanation, the hierarchy of needs theory, assumes that environmental issues are luxury items that can be attended to only after the more basic needs are met (Maslow, 1975; Van Ardson et al, 1965; Kreger, 1973; Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983; Taylor, 1982).

Meeker et al. (1973) have also hypothesized about the historical effects of slavery. They claimed that through slavery, blacks learned in pain that their association with the land was a source of misery and humiliation, not of peace and fulfillment. They cited Eldridge Cleaver’s work (written during the civil rights and black nationalism movements in 1969), which stated that an important consequence of slavery is that because of it Blacks have learned to hate the land. Cleaver argued that the American land was a place of punishment and imprisonment for slaves, not the source of liberation that the white settlers found in it. Blacks’ image of the land is tied with hatred and servitude, rather than love and ownership. He believed Blacks have come to measure social mobility in degrees of movement away from the soil (Taylor, 1982).

**Opportunities for minorities in urban and community forestry**
The goals of urban and community forestry are to create a responsible public and responsive government by promoting an understanding of stewardship, emphasizing the social, economic, and environmental values of trees, forests, and related natural resources in cities and communities to the public and others. Outreach and environmental equity are also the goals of the natural resource professionals who hope to achieve them by expanding participation by involving minorities and under-served populations in all aspects of urban and community forestry.

Urban forestry might be attractive to minorities in urban areas since opportunities exist for those interested in urban and community forestry-related fields (Chesney, 1981;
Wright and Floyd, 1990). The National Urban and Community Forestry Council sponsored a study to learn more about and to increase involvement of women and minorities in urban forestry professions. Such involvement is very important for the urban forestry profession, especially in today’s tight labor market.

Women and minorities in college urban forestry programs represent future opportunities for diversifying urban and community forestry professions. However, it will take quite a few years, and possibly some changes in attitudes toward urban forestry before theses graduates start having a great effect on the profession’s demographics. There were only 45 urban forestry B.S. graduates in 1997 in the United States, including only 11 women and one minority (FAEIS, 1999b). These low numbers may reflect the forestry profession’s lack of attention to urban forestry and urban forestry education. A recent issue of the Journal of Forestry focusing on forestry education (SAF, 1999) had six articles on various education topics, none of which mentioned urban forestry education.

Minorities are under-represented in urban forestry positions compared to national labor and Forest Service statistics. Education and demographic trends indicate minority representation may be increasing. Certainly urban forestry can benefit from the diverse skill and outlooks of minorities and from having a larger pool of potential employees in a tight labor market. In addition, it seems that urban forestry professionals might better represent their diverse clientele if they, as a group, were similarly diverse. However, with the current low levels of minorities in the profession, the benefits of their participation are not realized. Minority participation in urban and community forestry professions will only increase substantially when these professions become attractive to them and appreciative of their skills and abilities.

Government agencies exist that sponsor workshops which focus on issues of minority leadership and career development (Forest Service-0230). National conferences are organized on the state of diversity efforts in the environmental field. According to the University of Michigan’s School of Natural Resources and Environment, a variety of employment opportunities are available to those who are interested in working in the environmental field such as internship opportunities, full and part-time jobs, positions with specific environmental organizations and government agencies, corporate environmental jobs, and international environmental jobs. Also available to minorities are career development opportunities, career resource guides, environmental directories, and information guides.

**Minorities and Participation**

Social service agencies desiring to recruit and retain minorities as volunteer staff are hampered by insufficient knowledge about the characteristics and motivations of minorities who choose to volunteer. Most studies investigating volunteer motivations have been applied indiscriminately to minorities despite increasing evidence that ethnic
groups differ behaviorally, in their cognitive assessments, and in their “world views” (Sue, 1978; Pederson, 1985). Consequently, generalizations from one culture to another are both inappropriate and dysfunctional.

A review of the literature on minority volunteering suggested that both attributional and moral development theories could help us understand black volunteerism. One group of theorists speculated that Blacks and other minorities compensate for the denial of opportunities for ego gratification, prestige, and achievement within the majority society through their voluntary participation activities (Myrdal, Sterner, and Rose, 1944; Oram, 1966). Others proposed that Blacks’ participation stems from high levels of race and class-consciousness by virtue of their membership in an ethnic community (Olsen, 1970; London and Giles, 1987). These theorists suggest that post-civil rights blacks particularly are apt to identify strongly with their ethnic group and to view organizational activity as a means of instigating changes of potential benefit to the black community.

Edward and Klobus (1984) imply that black social participation is based on an underlying norm of caring and responsibility for the black community, a desire to right historical wrongs, and a belief in the black community’s lack of responsibility for its disadvantaged position in the majority society. Largely ignored in the debate about the declining significance of race, volunteer work is a strategic site for examining the interplay of caste and class. Class is relevant because it is believed that volunteers are largely drawn from the middle stratum (Smith, 1994). But class is not the sole determinant of volunteering. While the ability to volunteer might be contingent on personal resources, deciding to do so is an expression of identity, a feeling of being linked to those who will benefit from one’s labor (McAdam and Paulsen, 1993). People volunteer partly as a result of ties to other people and their desire to maintain and strengthen those ties, and partly because they think it is the right thing to do.

In recent years, social scientists have altered the way society thinks about volunteering. Instead of asking why people volunteer, it is now regarded as more appropriate, given the norms supporting it, to ask why people do not volunteer. “Three answers immediately suggest themselves: because they can’t, because they don’t want to, or because nobody asked” (Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995). In short, without resources people cannot volunteer.

Few people reported having begun volunteering on their own (Hodgkinson, 1995). Rather, their friends, neighbors, work colleagues, and fellow club and association members provided them with information, acted as role models, and built up a level of trust sufficient to persuade them that their efforts would be worthwhile and they would not be acting on their own.

Survey data showed that Americans are much more likely to volunteer when they are compassionate toward those in need, feel an obligation to give back some of the benefits
they have acquired, and believe that enhancing the moral basis of society is an important personal goal, independent of whatever personal and social resources they might possess (Sokolowski, 1996). They have what Coleman (1971) would call “ideological resources.”

Social ties are important not only because they help compensate for lack of personal resources by providing information about volunteer work, helping organize it, and furnishing social support and encouragement. They also increase the chances of being invited to volunteer, and we know that this is a powerful inducement to giving one’s time to help others. In a recent survey, nearly half of all Americans said they had been asked to volunteer at some point over the last twelve months, and more than eight of ten had agreed to do so (Hodgkinson and Weitzman, 1996).

As it turns out, Blacks are less likely to be asked to volunteer than Whites. Blacks who are not currently volunteering are more likely than Whites who are not currently volunteering to say the reason is that nobody asked them (Ferree, Barry and Manno, 1998). By most accounts, Blacks attach a great deal of importance to their religion (Robinson and Godbey, 1997; Taylor, 1998; Taylor et. al., 1996). A recent survey suggests that the church is a very powerful influence on the decision to volunteer for Blacks.

One reason personal resources have less impact on black volunteering is the inclusive influence of religious belief and practice in the black community: “black churches, on the whole, are more socially active in their communities than white churches and they also tend to participate in a greater range of community programs” (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990). The black church is a platform for political and social activism and a gateway to “informal and formal social opportunities, including ties to voluntary associations” (Ellison and Sherkat, 1995).

Musick, Wilson, and Bynum’s (2000) research supported that there are no socioeconomic differences in volunteering among blacks: high school dropouts are just as likely to volunteer as college graduates, and the poor are just as likely to give time as the rich. Volunteer work needs to get done, and the black church ensures that the need is met. Church activity seems to provide the “social capital” on which volunteering in the black community depends.

Their research also found that Whites are more responsive to being asked than are Blacks. The tendency for people to respond more favorably to requests from people like themselves would yield a higher volunteer rate for Whites than for Blacks. It could also be that Whites are more trusting than minorities across all measures. Finally it is possible that Blacks volunteer less than Whites because they choose not to see charity as the best way to deal with social problems. They might be more likely to see volunteerism as a
“form of privatized and individualized response to our human social problems” (Lisman, 1998) that assumes that hunger, poverty, illiteracy, homelessness, and other social ills and rooted in individual shortcomings rather than structural causes that must be tackled by social reform and political action.

**Methodology**

**Procedures of the study**
This project was designed to provide some insight on the roles that the urban and community forests play in the lives of minority residents of Louisiana. When the sampling units are human beings, the main methods of collecting information are: face-to-face interviewing, postal surveys, telephone surveys, and direct observation. For this study, a combination of face-to-face interviewing and a survey were used. In June 2003, a survey was distributed to various focus groups including high school students, inner city citizens, and natural resource professionals. Participants were given questionnaires, which asked them to rate their knowledge of urban and community forestry and also disclose their level of commitment to the same. The surveys were then analyzed by race, age, gender, occupation, socioeconomic background, and residency. In addition to the surveys, five random sampled participants from each focus group were interviewed concerning their views of urban and community forestry and possible strategies that could be used to increase participation among minorities.

**Study sample**
To avoid bias, a random sampling method was utilized. Data was then collected from people of various ages, education levels, and socioeconomic backgrounds. In order to reach a broad audience, high schools were targeted to reach youth, an inner-city church was used to get input from citizens of all ages with various occupations and socioeconomic backgrounds, and a national urban forestry conference proved resourceful in getting feedback from natural resource professionals. In total, three hundred and four people were interviewed and/or surveyed from these focus groups. All the participants completed surveys; however, five persons were randomly selected from each focus group and interviewed to determine what perceptions they have of urban and community forestry and what strategies they think could help improve participation among minorities.

The sample reflected the characteristics of the population from which it was drawn. Random sampling is often used in exploratory research where the researcher is interested in getting an inexpensive approximation of the truth. This non-probability method is often used during preliminary research efforts to get a gross estimate of the results, without incurring the cost or time required to select a random sample.
Youth sample

Two high schools in Southeastern Louisiana, located in two different socio-economic areas were chosen as participating schools. Administrators were contacted prior to the project and were informed of the nature of the project. Both schools consented to distributing the questionnaires amongst the students. The two schools that participated were: Northshore High School, Slidell, Louisiana, students attending this school are residents of upper middle income, suburban neighborhoods; and John F. Kennedy High School, New Orleans, Louisiana, students attending this school are primarily residents of an urban, African-American, lower-middle income section of New Orleans.

Inner-city citizen sample

New Hope Missionary Baptist Church, New Orleans, Louisiana, participated in the study. Members of this church are from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds which range from poverty level to upper-middle class level. The Sunday School President of this church granted permission for members to take part in the sampling. Young adult and adult classes completed the questionnaires during class.

This same church hosted a seminar for women age groups ranged from teenagers to senior citizens. Permission was requested of the event coordinator and consent was granted for all seminar attendees to participate in the survey.

Sampled natural resource professionals

The group sampled was from the participants at the first National Urban and Community Forestry Education and Outreach Conference for Minority and Under-served Communities. The location of this conference was the Marriott Hotel, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Conference attendants who came from across the United States were asked to complete the questionnaires and return them to the researcher by the end of the conference. These attendants possess a variety of professional occupations and most expressed some sort of concern for urban and community forestry in their respective communities.

Study Objectives

1. To evaluate the sampled population’s knowledge of urban forestry,
2. To document the perceptions and participation of the sampled population,
3. To explore best ways to disseminate urban forestry related information to minority communities, and
4. To involve minorities in urban and community forestry

Design of Questionnaire

The survey questions were designed to evaluate the current knowledge of the participants and determine the most effective form of dissemination for future urban and community forestry information throughout minority communities.
Collection of the Data
In this case study, the selected instruments were the questionnaires and the random interviews of participants from each of the focus groups. Ninety-four high school students, thirty-seven churchgoers, sixty-five women’s seminar attendees, and one hundred and eight urban forestry conference attendees were surveyed for this project. In addition, five respondents from each group were interviewed concerning their perceptions of urban and community forestry and what could be done to increase participation among minorities. Participants were advised that the purpose of this investigation was to determine how residents felt about urban forestry and to what extent they were willing to get involved.

In this study, gender was defined as male or female. The respondents were asked to indicate how informed they felt about the benefits of trees by selecting one of the five choices which ranged from very well informed to not at all informed. The level of awareness was measured by the respondent indicating how well informed they are about the impact of trees. Age was measured by ten-year increments and ranged from under twenty-five to sixty-five and older. There were five options for income level ranging from below thirty thousand dollars per year to seventy thousand dollars per year or more. Appreciation for nature in their communities was measured by their answer to the question, “Do you like the appearance of trees, shrubs, and plants in your neighborhood?” and the answer choices were yes or no. Also included were questions concerning their interests in possible educational seminars regarding urban and community forestry in their neighborhoods. Participants’ willingness to participate was inquired of and they were also asked what types of changes they would like to see implemented in their residential areas as it relates to urban and community forestry.

Analysis of the Data
Once the questionnaires and interviews were completed, the quantitative data were entered into Microsoft Excel, where it was analyzed using percentage point method. Qualitative data were recorded during the interviews and reviewed after the interview.

Results and Suggestions

Results from youth sampled population - high school students
At Kennedy High School, approximately one third of the participants were male and two-thirds were female. All of the participants were minorities. When asked to rate their knowledge of urban and community forestry, 38% of these youth felt that they were not at all informed.

The corresponding rural Northshore High School had a slightly higher percentage (44%) of males to participate. Caucasians made up the majority of the respondents (56%).
Only 19% of these rural participants felt not at all informed about urban and community forestry. When the totals are combined from both high schools, the percentage of students who are not at all informed about urban and community forestry is 32%.

Results from the two high school sampled populations showed that the population with all minorities had 38% of youth who felt that they were not at all informed about urban forestry. However, only 19% of youth felt the same in the sampled population with only 44% minorities. These numbers are evidence that approaches need to be taken to spread the word about urban forestry and get the minority youth involved.

The general consensus of the students interviewed from both high schools was that they didn’t know how to increase participation in urban and community forestry among minorities. Only one student recommended getting high school athletic organizations involved. Because many of the athletes tend to be popular, other students might jump on the bandwagon and soon start to participate in planned community projects.

**Results from inner-city citizens sampled population**
The percentage of males and females of the sampled population was almost the same. 54% considered themselves not at all informed about the subject. When asked why during the interview, the overwhelming response was that they didn’t have time to focus on trees. They have more pressing issues like finding a job and paying their bills.

They offered suggestions such as getting the church involved since it has such a powerful influence in the African-American community. Another suggestion that was worth considering was having people who “look like them” request them to get involved. They advised that they’d be more willing to take part in a project if another minority as opposed to a Caucasian approached them. According to the participants, in predominantly minority communities, residents do not readily trust Caucasians, even if what they’re saying sounds like it would be something beneficial to them.

The participants from the women’s seminar were all female and their ages ranged from under twenty-five to over 66 years of age. Those who considered themselves to be very well informed and well informed made up almost 50% of the group.

Although they did not offer any suggestions regarding how minority participation could be increased, they did reason that the cause for lack of interest among minorities lies in slavery. They suggested that African-Americans relate trees and anything dealing with the land as sub-standard and demeaning. Once the slaves were freed, they tried to lose all connection with the land, as it was a painful reminder of the injustices that this country forced upon them.
Results from sampled natural resource professionals
Over two-thirds (66%) of the survey participants were male, indicating this line of work is male-dominated. As expected, the natural resource professionals knew all about urban and community forestry. They were very interested in devising plans to increase participation across the boards.

Breakout session aiming at finding answers on how to effectively reaching out to minority communities was conducted at the conference. Participants suggested that minority participation in urban and community forestry might be increased through the efforts of 4-H (head, heart, hands, and health), which is a program that helps young people learn useful skills, serve their communities, and have fun together. Members learn skills through a variety of projects that deal with clothing, food, health, raising animals, safety, and many other subjects. Each state has a 4-H leader at the state land-grant university. They also advised that Southern University and A&M College get a full-time extension coordinator in urban forestry to reach out to minority populations. They further suggested that television commercials on urban network stations and magazine advertisements that urban minority youth and adults read may be used as attention grabbers to attract minorities to urban and community forestry. Allowing minorities to star in these commercials and be the focal points of the ads are also techniques that could work. These methods could prove very practical in this effort to increase minority participation in urban and community forestry. If these outlets become saturated with the message of getting involved in urban forestry, eventually the idea will catch on.

Summary and conclusions
The case study findings provided important implications for policymakers, urban foresters, and natural resource professionals in making decisions related to environmental education. The results indicated that the minorities need to be more educated in programs relating to urban and community forestry. The findings have also given insight on minority perceptions of urban forestry.

The sampled population was largely female (64%) and most respondents were in the under 25-year old age bracket (49%). Most participants were African-American (86%); however, 8% were Caucasian, 2% were Hispanic, 2% were Multi-cultural, and 2% were Asian. Of the sampled population, 40% had a high school diploma, 32% had some college training, and 8% had a bachelor’s degree. Most of the sampled population (93%) resides in Louisiana. Of the sample participants, most of them were high school students (40%). Percentages indicated that the level of awareness of urban and community forestry is not high among minority populations. Future study needs to be done with a larger sample to further document minority perceptions and participation of urban and community forestry as well as develop strategies to target this population.
According to the participants who were interviewed, the best way to disseminate information on urban and community forestry in African-American communities is through the voice of the church. Documentation exists that proves that the church is very influential in African-American communities. Respondents also believed that formal education arenas are a good way to disseminate future information on urban and community forestry to minority populations. They believe if youth are introduced to and educated about urban forestry at an early age, they grow up with an understanding and an appreciation for nature. Lastly, the respondents indicated that television commercials and advertisements in magazines would be an effective means to spread the word.

The results and suggestions obtained in this case study have important implications for policymakers and natural resource professionals. Agency and academic information campaigns should use the aforementioned methods to reach minority populations. Little effort has been made to disseminate information relevant to urban and community forestry in minority communities. Local, state, and federal policymakers have a responsibility to provide equal access to information that will help provide minority communities with the leverage they need to enhance and protect their neighborhoods and increase their quality of life.

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