

Working with African American and Latino Communities in the Wildland-Urban Interface¹

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It is important to understand and respect cultural differences when communicating across racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic differences. In some cases, understanding historic legacy could change the approach that is taken to working with a minority community. Research can also help extension agents and resource professionals better understand the values, concerns, and perspectives that might be common to an ethnic group.

The wildland-urban interface is an area of changing demographics. As populations shift across the South, new residents are changing the racial and cultural composition of traditional communities. Where issues around planning and resource protection arise, and where one dimension of the issue is race, a careful approach to communication may be helpful. A number of EDIS fact sheets are available on interface issues, management, planning, and communication strategies; this fact sheet focuses on the role of race, ethnicity, culture, and history in communication challenges in the interface.

African Americans and the Environment

Research shows African Americans are less likely than whites to participate in forest-based recreation, with the exception of fishing (Figure 1). Historically, studies have suggested that blacks are less concerned about the environment. More recent work indicates that blacks and whites have similar concern levels (Mohai and Bryant 1998), but still show that blacks are less likely to interact with nature. Even studies comparing rural black and white engagement with wildlands show blacks are less likely to recreate in forested areas and that they indicate less emotional attachment to wildlands.

With respect to landownership, recent data show African Americans represent just 0.9 percent of all private agricultural landowners in the United States, with a total of 7.75 million acres (USDA 1999; Gilbert, Wood, and Sharp 2002). Black landownership is further distinguished from white ownership in that blacks (61 percent) are more likely than whites (47 percent) and other groups to lease their land. This suggests a greater distance from the land for blacks compared to whites. The majority of black agricultural land is in the South.

1. This document is FOR196, one of a series of the School of Forest Resources and Conservation Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. This fact sheet was first published as part of Changing Roles: Wildland-Urban Interface Professional Development Program. Revised for EDIS July 2008. Reviewed December 2011. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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Figure 1. Fishing is a popular outdoor activity for many African Americans.

Credits: Larry Korhnak

Heirs' property. African American land ownership in the South evolved around a system of heirs' property or tenancy in common (41 percent of African American-owned land in the southeastern United States is heirs' property) (Mitchell 2001). When freed slaves purchased or were deeded land after slavery, they typically treated the land as communal property within the family. In many cases, land was passed to subsequent generations without having been probated. Heirs' property allows for extended family residence on the land. Relatives either build houses or install mobile homes on such land. Traditionally, there have been few or no restrictions on either the size of individual lots or the number of lots that could be subdivided.

Heirs' property may pose problems because of conflicting land management priorities. In some cases, heirs may not reside on the property or even in the South. They may view the property primarily as a source of income and advocate unsustainable timber harvesting. As a part of the Great Northern Migration during the first half of the twentieth century, large numbers of blacks went north in search of better economic and social opportunities. Their offspring (also heirs) may have little or no connection to their southern land. As a result of multiple, and in some cases, absentee owners, actions recommended by a resource agency or extension agent may be more difficult to carry out because of lack of agreement among owners.

Because of differences in how blacks and whites have related to the land, blacks may be less likely to contact extension agents or resource professionals regarding sustainable practices or to visit natural resource visitor centers. Natural resource professionals may have to

promote their services and information more directly to African American communities.

Consider the venue to reach your community. In reaching out to African American communities, you need to select the optimal place to deliver your message. You may consider relaying information about your agency at a predominantly black church congregation where most of the members are local. The black church in rural and interface communities may be the only place black residents gather as a collective. It is not unusual for secular concerns to be presented during or after a church service; for example, politicians have long used this venue to communicate with black constituencies.

To be effective, the information must not be disseminated from the top down. Adopting a community forestry perspective is beneficial for addressing many environmental issues. It is important also to enlist the support of a locally recognized and respected member of the community before delivering your message (for example, church pastor, deacon, elder, teacher, or businessperson). If possible, explain your program to this individual or individuals before presenting it to a wider audience and emphasize how the agency sincerely wants to serve the black community. This contact must trust you and see the merits of your message for it to be effective. Ask this contact to introduce you when you speak. Whether you present your program at a church or some other place, you will likely get people to pay more attention if you have the support or at least recognition of a local leader.

Latinos and Forest Recreation

Within the past twenty years, Latinos have either migrated or immigrated to the southeastern United States in unprecedented numbers. From 1990 to 2000, the Latino population more than doubled in Alabama and South Carolina, nearly tripled in Georgia and Tennessee, and increased almost four times in North Carolina (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). Recent studies have examined Latino employment and housing situations in the South (Atiles and Bohon 2003); however, no comprehensive, southern-wide investigation of Latino interaction with the natural environment has been initiated. Latino use of natural outdoor areas in the South is an important consideration for resource professionals because of possible differences between immigrants' and long-term residents' perceptions and uses of the region's finite natural resource base.

Recreation managers at the Chattahoochee National Forest in Georgia have noted differences in how Latinos use forest

recreation areas. Similar to Latinos in other parts of the country, Latino visitors on the Chattahoochee tend to be day-use visitors and to recreate in larger groups than white visitors (Figure 2). Family networks are important among Latino groups, and many leisure activities involve both the nuclear and the extended family. Forest managers in the Southeast know little else about how Latinos use natural recreation areas—for instance, what site features they prefer or what kinds of interpretive information they desire about the forest.



Figure 2. Hispanic families tend to recreate in larger groups than white families.

Credits: Larry Korhnak

Distributing information about natural resource programs may be achieved in much the same way as with African Americans—first by establishing a reliable and respected contact within the community or various Latino communities and using that contact as a way of introducing yourself and the agency to the community. Catholic social service organizations may be a good place to find out how to deliver information to Latino communities. When you give a presentation, consider presenting in Spanish and English, or having an interpreter accompany you in case your English-speaking contact cannot or prefers not to interpret. Initially, immigrant Latino audiences may be mistrustful of governmental agencies because of suspicions about immigration officials, even when immigrants are legal entrants. You should assure your audience that your agency is not connected with the government immigration department.

Translating brochures and other material into Spanish will greatly enhance Spanish-speaking audiences' receptivity to program offerings. Also, realize there may be a variety of Latino groups with members from various cultures including Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the countries of Central and South America. Be aware that each of these cultures,

and each member within these cultures, may have different attitudes and concerns.

Summary

Extension agents and resource professionals are aware of the need to work with all segments of the public. Because the wildland-urban interface is a region of mixed ethnicities, ages, and cultures, resource professionals will have to work with people from other races, ethnic groups, or cultures. The first step in that process may be to meet with community leaders, understand the historic factors that frame the issue, and work with leaders to develop appropriate messages and programs.

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