

**Fire Safety, Education,
Multicultural Environments,
and Land Stewardship in the
Wildland-Urban Interface**

A Qualitative Study of Factors Influencing Racial Diversity in Environmental Education: Preliminary Results¹

Kathy James Leo H. McAvoy²

Abstract: This study presents preliminary result interviews with people of color working in environmental education and interpretation throughout the United States. The three primary questions asked were these? (1) What path led each individual to a career in environmental education; (2) How does each individual define environmentalism? and (3) What are the primary issues this field must address? Identifying the common life experiences that pulled these individuals toward environmentalism may assist in attracting more people of color to the environmental professions, and may facilitate drawing support for environmental issues from a more diverse cross section of the population. The results describe three primary routes leading to interest in environmental concerns: an interest in science; positive outdoor experience; and a response to environmental degradation in one's community. Variations in definitions of environmentalism and in the goals for environmental education emerged in the interviews.

Environmental educators often address the need for biological diversity, yet the environmental professions have been criticized for a lack of human diversity. Racial diversity is missing in environmental education facility staffing, and—on a larger scale—environmental conservation and preservation organization membership (Berle 1987). Barriers to diversity in environmental education can be divided into the following seven categories: historical, communicative, attitudinal, programmatic, encouragement, companionship (Gibson 1989, Gibson and Moriah 1989), and definition of the issue (James 1991). This study was designed to determine ways to eliminate those barriers.

Study Description

This qualitative study utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews with over 50 people of color working in environmental education throughout the United States (including both formal environmental education and informal community education addressing environmental issues). Subjects were recruited by posting a call for subjects at several professional conferences, including the 1990 Association of Experiential Education Conference (St. Paul, Minnesota), the 1991 National Association for Interpretation Conference (Charleston, North Carolina), a 1991 Midwest Regional Conference on Diversity for Success in Natural Resources (Stevens Point, Wisconsin), the 1991 North American Association of Environmental Education Conference (St. Paul, Minnesota), and the 1991 National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit (Washington, DC). Respondents to these notices either volunteered to be subjects or suggested individuals they knew who might be willing to be subjects for the study.

From the pool of individuals volunteering to be interviewed, a stratified sample was selected to insure diversity in race (African American, Asian American, Latino/Hispanic, and Native American), geographic region (East, West, Midwest), and formal or informal education. Within each group, preference was given to individuals who could be interviewed in person. When this was not possible, scheduled phone interviews were conducted. The three primary questions asked were these: (1) What path led each individual to a career in environmental education? (2) How does each individual define environmentalism? and (3) What are the primary issues this field must address? All interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using qualitative data analysis procedures.

Paths to Environmental Education

Preliminary analysis of the interview indicates three primary paths for persons of color to work in environmental education. One path begins with an interest in science, often beginning with "pure" or abstract science. Pursuing this interest led to exploring applied, environmental science. Environmental education allows these individuals to share their interest in environmental science with students.

A second path to environmental education begins with positive experiences in the outdoors. This can include wilderness backpacking trips, visiting relatives' farms or simply playing in neighborhood parks. Environmental education is both a way to share this enjoyment of outdoors and a means of working to insure that there will continue to be opportunities for this type of recreation.

The third path to working in environmental education stems from recognizing the effects of environmental degradation upon a particular community, typically one's own. Environmental education becomes a way of combating community environmental degradation, and can lead to an interest in science as a tool in working to address environmental degradation. These three paths are not mutually exclusive, and there were some individuals who did not follow any of these paths to environmental education.

Definitions of Environmentalism

There were distinct variations in the study participants' definitions of environmentalism. These ranged from: "concern for the environment... [defined as] where life exists" to "issues having to do with ... the integrity of the natural resources ... also access to energy" to "a consciousness of fighting against health hazards that originate from an environment that is unhealthy, as a result of what is placed in that environment... environmentalism

¹Presented at the Symposium on Social Aspects and Recreation Research, February 19-22, 1992, Ontario, California.

²Ph.D. Candidate; and Chair and Professor of Recreation, Park and Leisure Studies, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

is also effected by economics. It becomes an issue of social justice." Many participants explicitly stated that their definition included urban environments. Regardless of which definition was used, the overall goal of environmental stewardship remained constant.

One issue common to several participants is the connection between environmental issues and social justice. One component of social justice is acknowledging and recognizing various groups of people and their cultures. In environmental education we recognize the importance of biodiversity, but we don't necessarily acknowledge this for human populations (Forbes 1991). We are more likely to view humans as a single unit. In doing this, we can overlook the economic and cultural differences, which so often follow racial lines in our country, that affect how individuals can respond to environmental issues.

Issues to Address

Preliminary analysis of the interviews points to three primary issues requiring attention. First, definitions of the field can create barriers to participation. Many perceive environmentalism as only addressing issues of wilderness preservation and endangered species. This perception will persist unless environmentalism is defined as also addressing urban issues and social justice. We must incorporate inclusive definitions while maintaining our overall goals of land stewardship.

Second, when recruiting new staff we need to distinguish between required job qualifications versus supplementary skills and recognize the variety of supplementary skills that might be an asset to this field. For example, basic knowledge of natural

science is a prerequisite for environmental educators while extensive wilderness outdoor experience and proficiency in a second language are both supplementary skills that would enhance programs in different ways. The value of an applicant's supplementary skills will depend upon whether those skills are already available within the existing staff.

Third, recruiting for staff and participants in environmental programs needs to incorporate outreach directed at specific individuals, populations or established organizations. Simple general advertising of available positions or programs will not overcome the established barriers when it comes to the environmental field.

Acknowledgment

This study was funded by a National Wildlife Federation Conservation Fellowship.

References

- Berle, P.A.A. 1987. Saving the world. Audubon 89:6.
- Forbes, A. 1991. When multicultural and environmental values overlap. Paper presented at the Midwest Regional Conference "Diversity for Success," 1991 April 23-25; Stevens Points, WI.
- Gibson, B. 1989. Parks for all people?... not Harvey... not yet. Minnesota Naturalists' Association Newsletter, Summer 1989: 4-6.
- Gibson, B.; Moriah, D. 1989. Meeting the interpretive needs of minorities. In: Proceedings National Association of Interpreters Conference Proceedings: Troy, OH: The North American Association for Environmental Education; 223-227.
- James, K. 1991. Increasing racial diversity. Legacy 2(2): 16-19.