

2006

## **Black Churchgoers, Environmental Activism and the Preservation of Nature in Miami, Florida**

Eileen M. Smith-Cavros  
*Nova Southeastern University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jea>

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Smith-Cavros, Eileen M.. "Black Churchgoers, Environmental Activism and the Preservation of Nature in Miami, Florida." *Journal of Ecological Anthropology* 10, no. 1 (2006): 33-44.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jea/vol10/iss1/3>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Ecological Anthropology by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@usf.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@usf.edu).

## Black Churchgoers, Environmental Activism and the Preservation of Nature in Miami, Florida

EILEEN M. SMITH-CAVROS

### Abstract

*This paper examines connections in three case studies of Black churchgoers in Miami and their views toward the natural environment, from environmental attitudes to activism. There were four major findings in the research. First, there is a link between the preservation of Black history and the preservation of the environment among Black churchgoers who feel a strong connection to rural life. Second, these case studies dispute the stereotype of Black churchgoers as less concerned about the environment due to pressing social concerns in Black neighborhoods. This stereotype artificially separates environmental and social issues. Third, public access to public lands is a basic and important right espoused by these Black churchgoing activists. Fourth, spirituality impacts environmental sentiments among Miami's churchgoing Blacks. Possessing an understanding of how Black spirituality, history and local concerns relate to the environment adds to the sparse literature on the subject. The discussion also provides information for policy makers interested in bridging gaps between Black churchgoers and the "mainstream" environmental protection movement, to the benefit of both local communities and the overall ecosystem.*

### Introduction

Deacon Baldwin, clad in overalls, stood in the searing Florida sun of September, 2001, and mused about what had brought him to this place. He had recently orchestrated the planting of over six hundred native trees by volunteers. This tree-planting project took place on the outskirts of Miami in foliage-barren Richmond Heights, a neighborhood settled by Black service men after World War II. Deacon Baldwin revealed through his actions and words the essence of how many churchgoing Blacks in South Florida connect the natural world and the environment to their lives:

I was intrigued by the nature, the sun and the rain. Belle Glade [Florida] had such rich soil. You could plant anything and it would grow there. I like to plant things. I believe in nature. Now I've got a generation coming after me that's going to be successful. The way to deal with it is history, environment and church (Baldwin, interview, 2001).

For more than two years during 2001 to 2003, I explored environmental preservation and activism through ethnographic research, including qualitative interviews and participant observation, among three groups of churchgoing Blacks in Miami, Florida. The term "Black" is used in this paper rather than African American because the majority of my interviewees seemed most comfortable with that self-description, and I attempted to respect participants' opinions and use of language throughout this study. These study groups included Blacks with ancestry in Cuba, the Bahamas, Haiti, Jamaica and the U.S. south, among other locales. I chose to examine them collectively as attendees of Black churches where most congregants had race in common, but not necessarily place of origin. Participants self-defined their volunteer projects, such as preservation of Miami's historic "Black beach," as dealing with "Black history." They described their proposed

nature camps and their realized tree plantings as dealing with people from the “neighborhood” who shared race in common, but not necessarily place of birth. This examination of the category of “Black churchgoers” might not have been a useful grouping had all of my case studies taken place in churches in a strong ethnic enclave such as Miami’s Little Haiti, where many people come from a fairly small geographic region. However, most of my research took place in neighborhoods or involved church (or multi-church) projects where the ancestry of participants was more geographically diverse, therefore the broadness of the group Black churchgoers seemed appropriate. A note must also be made that several participants clarified that their churches/projects were not “just” for Blacks but were welcoming to all.

The results of my research indicate that there are several key aspects of the relationship between Black churchgoers in South Florida and the natural environment. First, there is a linkage between the preservation of Black history and Black activism and attitudes toward the environment. I use the terms environmentalism and environmental projects in a wide, yet I believe, descriptive sense to include people who work on issues from nature camps for children to neighborhood beautification to ecosystem restoration and preservation. However, the influence of Black history on environmental projects and sentiment is critical for an understanding of the motivation behind churchgoer involvement in these local projects. The projects and attitudes toward the environment discussed in this paper encompass environmental, historic and social concerns. Second, the idea that exists, at the community level and in some published research, of Blacks as less interested in environmental issues is challenged. Community-level stereotyping of Blacks as less concerned is based in part on the over-simplified assumption that environmental issues exist separately from social issues. Some projects performed through Black churches benefit the environment but are not labeled as environmental therefore they go unrecognized. Third, public access to public lands is a basic and important right espoused

by Miami Black churchgoers in regard to the environment. Fourth, spirituality greatly impacts Miami Black churchgoers’ attitudes (including personal responsibility) and activism toward the natural environment.

There has been limited research on the environmental activism and attitudes of Black people in America. The environmental movement is primarily perceived as a social movement of middle to upper-class whites (Humphrey and Buttel 1982; Kempton et al. 1996; Mohai 1985). Stoll (2006) notes that “Despite efforts to broaden the movement, environmentalism continues to have such a low profile in the Black community that it constitutes barely a blip on the radar screen of black concerns” (p. 153). Others note that the environmental justice movement has played an important role in Black communities (Bullard 1990; Mohai and Bryant 1998).

Over the past decade, most research has solidly demonstrated that while Blacks are indeed concerned about the environment (Arp and Kenny 1996; Mohai 2003), some parts of the debate remain unresolved. Some researchers suggest that Black environmentalism differs from White environmentalism. For example, Stoll (2006) proposes that “African American environmentalism has paid little attention to such issues as endangered species, nature parks (as opposed to urban parks), and nature preservation, which do not directly affect the Black community” (p.162). Johnson et al. (2004), in an examination of ethnicity and the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP), found “significant differences between Blacks and Whites for three of four environmental behaviors: environmental reading, recycling and nature participation” (p.177) with Blacks viewed as having less engagement in each area. Other research has implied recreational differences between Blacks and Whites in regard to environmental behavior. Johnson and McDaniel (2006) cite that “Studies have documented the gap between African Americans and White interaction with the natural environment: generally, African Americans are less likely than Whites to visit wild-land recreation areas or to participate in forest-based outdoor recreation” (p. 51).

Kempton et al. (1996) comment that recent academic research finally “contradicts a misconception still heard in university seminars—that public environmental sentiment is limited to people who are educated, wealthy, White, associated with universities, or politically liberal” (p. 7). However, as also noted by Kempton et al., it is critical to understand that recent academic research refuting the idea of Blacks as having “lesser overall concern” has not necessarily translated to what is taught in the classroom or into public sentiment. Based on my research and interviews, I propose that published academic research on the subject has not filtered into the non-academic environmental community. This can be observed in the South Florida environmental community, from nonprofit organizations to educators to professionals, and is reflected in a stereotype that Blacks, especially poor Blacks, are less concerned about environmental issues than Whites. One Miami Black environmental professional, for example, commented to me anonymously in an interview that, “One of the problems we have in the African American...community in South Florida...is the fact that most of the churches that African Americans attend have a conservative perspective on nature.” A local pastor of a Black church noted his own opinion, in regard to some of his congregants that they, “just don’t have the leisure of having those concerns.” A White pastor who headed a 95% Black congregation agreed. Another Black pastor commented:

I’ll be very honest with you and say this to you. I don’t think that Black folks are caught up into the whole question of the environment as much as we should be. Why? Because we’re too busy trying to survive and make ends meet. And so you don’t find, I don’t think, from what I’ve read and what I’ve seen on television, I don’t see many Black folk waving the banner with Greenpeace kind of thing. It’s not that we don’t care, but we’re just trying to survive. That’s basically it. Certainly, I think we’re sensitive to it, and perhaps we need to be more committed to it.

I heard this attitude repeated by White, Black and Hispanic environmental professionals, by self-described mainstream environmentalists, by

religious leaders, by some academics researching the subject, and by environmental educators. People would mention the stereotype, but often did not want to be quoted in regard to it. The tone the stereotype was mentioned in was often apologetic, inferring that “lack of Black concern” over the environment was due to “crisis social issues that took precedence” in Black neighborhoods. So while it is important to note that most literature has refuted the idea, this does not negate its cultural prevalence or need for examination.

### Research Questions and Methodology

This research began as an exploratory process and progressed through word-of-mouth referrals about congregations and projects, from participants and environmental professionals, that might be of interest to me. The primary questions were simple ones. First, what are the perceptions of Black churchgoers about the natural environment? Secondly, what are the origins of these perceptions and were they transformed in any ways into environmental concern and/or activism?

Participants in three case study groups examined in this paper represent varied religious denominations and degrees of religiosity across and within the case studies. The case studies were chosen because each displayed some environmental project—either proposed, in progress, or completed—that bore examination and analysis. Participants from each of the three groups possessed vastly different educational backgrounds, from illiteracy to graduate degrees; they hailed from different states and even countries; and their economic situations ranged from extreme poverty to relative privilege. These demographic issues varied between groups but also within the same congregations, with the exception of one congregation where most participants lived on low incomes and had limited opportunities for formal education in their youth. Interviewees from all three case studies generally shared the following characteristics: weekly or more church attendance; over sixty years of age; self-described by such terms as Black, African American, Bahamian American and Afro Cuban; and were members of churches in

Miami-Dade County, where over 95 percent of the regular attendees are Black. Fifty-four Black churchgoers and project participants were interviewed individually (Table 1) and in small groups, and ten were examined through interviews performed and archived for other research projects. These other projects included a project on transportation issues (Dluhy 1998) performed through Florida International University and another Florida International University project funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and supervised by Dr. Alex Stepick, entitled "Religion, Immigration and Civic Life in Miami." In addition to interviews, I performed participant observations from church services to neighborhood clean-up projects to Bible studies and gospel music festivals. I shared meals at churches and soup kitchens, attended birthday parties for congregants, observed summer camps, and conversed informally with participants as well.

My first case study at Glorious Church of Christ examined a small, financially-challenged, semi-rural independent church whose congregants voiced shared environmental concerns. The church is situated in the waning agricultural area of Goulds, Florida, a place with stagnant economic prospects and a high level of poverty among residents. The second case study, Virginia Key, included Black churchgoing volunteers from several different churches who comprised a vocal, highly activist group that included politically connected members. This group was able to raise millions of dollars in grants and shared an interest in establishing a Civil Rights museum on the site of the historically segregated Black beach in Miami.

The third case study, in middle-class Richmond Heights included churchgoing Blacks from several congregations who were united as volunteers in an expansive community tree-planting project. This group burgeoned from a neighborhood Crime-watch organization and was also supported by the national environmental group American Forests, an important group in tree planting activities in urban communities nationwide. At face value, these three case studies, and often the individuals within them, seemed to have little in common other than their affiliation with Black churches.

The interviews, both individual and group, were semi-structured and informal. In the beginning of this project, I did not ask questions about nature or environment as I did not start out examining this subject. The subject itself and the direction it took came from the participants themselves, several of whom revealed the importance of the influence of nature and plants on their lives. These initial findings occurred while I performed exploratory research on Black church communities in a church mapping project at Florida International University through the Immigration and Ethnicity Center.

The subject matter chosen by the interviewees themselves was pivotal to the development of my research questions. It is important to note that I did not set out in search of connections between Blacks and environment, but these were revealed through my research. A young man (at one of the first churches I visited) labeled his pastor as an environmentalist and when I interviewed the pastor, he used the analogy that he was a "recycler of souls." At that point, no one in the church knew that my area of study, prior to the church mapping project, was environmental sociology. I was invited to a Bible study the next weekend where the topic happened to be the environment. After listening to three hours of environmental sentiment in the congregation, I decided that it merited further intensive research.

### **Black Churchgoers' Perceptions of Nature and Environmental Activism**

Several common elements soon became clear through the interviews, conversations, and participant observations about perspectives on the natural world, spirituality, and natural resources. The obvious common denominator was the fact that many Black churchgoers seemed to have been influenced by their rural upbringings to care about nature in a way that still impacted them in the present in terms of environmental perspectives, concerns, personal responsibility, and sometimes activism. Several groups shared either the purpose of carrying out or planning individual environmental projects. In addition, members of the groups held or acted upon strong personal values of environmental stewardship. More than 90 percent of the individuals interviewed

Table 1. Summary of Qualitative Sources and Participants.

Name	Number of Participants	Places of Origin	Church Location	Church Affiliations	Socioeconomics	Age	Project Status
Glorious Church of Christ (interviews performed by author)	18	Bahamas U.S. South Jamaica	semi-rural	independent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• low-income</li> <li>• retired</li> </ul>	60+ (2 < 60)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• idea stage</li> <li>• nature camp</li> <li>• land not purchased</li> </ul>
Virginia Key Beach (interviews performed by author)	11	Bahamas U.S. South	urban	Episcopal unaffiliated independent unknown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• middle to upper income</li> <li>• retired</li> </ul>	60+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fundraising success</li> <li>• coalition success</li> <li>• in process</li> </ul>
Richmond Heights Tree Planting (interviews performed by author)	8	Bahamas U.S. South	suburban	Church of God in Christ New Way Fellowship Baptist Episcopal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• low, middle and upper income</li> <li>• retired</li> </ul>	60+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 600 trees planted</li> <li>• project completed</li> <li>• follow-ups planned</li> </ul>
Archived Interviews <sup>1</sup> (interviews performed by other researchers)	10	U.S. South unknown		unknown independent Baptist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unknown</li> </ul>	60+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• no affiliated projects</li> </ul>
Miami Black Church Projects other than Above Case Studies (interviews performed by author)	7	Jamaica Cuba Bahamas U.S. South	urban	Episcopalian United Church of Christ Roman Catholic independent A.M.E.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• low, middle and upper income</li> <li>• retired</li> </ul>	60+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• various stages in process and completed</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup>Included Pew Religion and Civic Life Project Interviews at Florida International University Immigration and Ethnicity Center and Florida International University Transportation Interviews at Black Archives, Miami, FL.

across the three groups identified for study also referred directly and indirectly to the importance of Black history in relation to environmental concerns and activism. Another common element was concern of most participants for public access to public spaces such as beaches and parks.

At Glorious Church of Christ, the specific period in Black history that influenced the congregants was their own youth, much of which was spent in the rural southern United States. Although the South has a historic past of brutal racism, Glorious Church of Christ congregants nonetheless remembered and emphasized other aspects of this era's Black history. That history, they reminded me, also included people sharing food with the hungry and poor, self-sufficiency in the face of oppression, the "naturalness" of historic food practices and farming, strong social networks, and the overall pastoral "serenity" of life in the rural south.

I was invited to act as a participant observer at a Glorious Church of Christ Bible study, which had an environmental theme where congregants discussed environmental issues and their importance in detail. I took notes and recorded congregants' voices as I spent many hours in interviews and social/church events from children's camps to formal church services at Glorious Church of Christ. People shared their vision of the historic U.S. South: self-pay fruit stands on quiet undeveloped roads, and of life with kerosene lamps and no electricity bills. They recalled few visits to the doctors and little greed. The congregants felt that if this historic agricultural lifestyle were restored, social ills and environmental problems might be reversed by the process of, in the words of several congregants, "goin' back." One woman bemoaned development, and the "fencing off" and division of large parcels of land around Miami. She noted that by sectioning off land and favoring over-development, "Man is cuttin' down his own self."

During the Glorious Church of Christ Bible study on the environment, other participants stressed the importance of taking personal responsibility by conserving resources like electricity and water, while others stressed responsible and sustainable farming and hunting practices that they drew from Biblical quotes. These examples were consistently drawn from their youthful experiences, their histories in the U.S.

South and/or the Bahamas, and their shared history and shared present in their own Black church community.

For Virginia Key participants, who represent the second case study, the Black history they sought to preserve was also connected to the segregationist era in the South. This second group included Black churchgoers who became part of a task force with the goal of creating a Civil Rights museum on a historic natural site. Bush (2006) notes that, "Designated a 'colored beach' by the county commission in 1945...the location on Virginia Key had long been a vibrant place for African Americans" (p. 177). Post-desegregation, the beach fell into disrepair.

The task force dated back to the 1990s when the churchgoers joined White environmentalists (some of whom had actually initiated the activism on the Key as early as the 1970s) in efforts to preserve the beach from private development. The museum project is part of a larger project to restore natural vegetation on the beach and create environmentally sensitive trails.

Black history has direct pertinence to the environmental and education-oriented projects at Virginia Key today. Participants that I interviewed all reminisced with pride about Virginia Key, their "own Black beach" and pointed to undated historic signs and murals that labeled it as such. Interviews revealed the beach was an important place for recreation, church picnics and even baptisms during the decades of racial segregation in the U.S. Those interviewed remembered it as a tranquil, natural spot. The Virginia Key project was an attempt at restoration of community and natural area as well as the recognition of history. Volunteers promoted historical, physical and environmental park restoration from dune re-vegetation to educational tours to building a museum about civil rights. One of the hopes of these volunteers seemed to be that through sharing the historic, spiritual and natural significance of the beach, people might find positive forces and strength from a period of history that to outsiders may seem deplorable and better forgotten.

The organizers of the Richmond Heights tree plantings also emphasized Black history. Their tree-planting project was an extension of a deep civic pride

in what they call their community's "pioneer" history. They believe that their neighborhood, designed for returning Black war veterans in the 1940s, was quite unique and holds a special place in Black history. Organizers envision following up their initial tree-planting project with additional re-vegetation efforts as well as the construction of a pioneer monument to Richmond Heights' founders fringed by lush native greenery. All volunteers in this project who were interviewed saw themselves as historic preservationists, as an important part of greening up their neighborhood through trees, and as an integral part of the evolving history of Richmond Heights.

All of those interviewed for this project remembered nature—especially plants—in their own backyards in the rural American South, the Bahamas/Caribbean and/or early Miami. Many also mentioned the influence during their youth of the nearby ocean and its role as provider of food and beauty. Several of the participants across the three case studies expressed concern that urban Black youths of today lack similar memories and connections to nature. Intergenerational projects such as the Richmond Heights tree-planting project demonstrated that active older citizens working with youth and teaching them how to plant trees (thereby connecting youth, community and nature), appeared to have a positive social and environmental impact with minimal funding. The pastor at Glorious Church of Christ hoped to make similar connections through a nature camp for children. He wanted to purchase land in north Florida to show community youth a different and more positive worldview so they could, as he stated, "see the rest of the world, the beauty of it and just allow the mind to think on the beauty." Virginia Key participants hoped to connect Black youths to their history on the beach through the aforementioned museum.

Affiliations with other organizations greatly benefited the Black churchgoers in their projects at Virginia Key and Richmond Heights financially, practically, and politically. All parts of the coalition at Virginia Key, for example, learned from the other participants. Black churchgoers imparted their historical knowledge, concepts of preservation of beauty and firsthand memories of Virginia

Key, sportspersons shared perspectives on recreation and the ocean, and mainstream environmentalists contributed scientific resource management ideas. Affiliation with the mainstream organization American Forests inspired and enabled the project at Richmond Heights to take place. This funding, combined with strong church/community support, as well as support from a local university, appeared to be integral to the tree-planting project.

Glorious Church of Christ, in contrast, is a place where similar affiliations have not occurred. While they developed a church "relationship" with another religious group located in a more well-to-do neighborhood that helped with selected projects, they also had unrealized aspirations. For example, the pastor wanted to landscape more of the church-owned acreage, but funds were not available. Funds were also lacking for the pastor to purchase the land on which he imagined a nature camp for neighborhood children—an outdoor Bible day-camp, however, did occur. Economic challenges appeared to prevent envisioned action. Nonetheless, a social and environmental vision existed at Glorious Church of Christ that pivoted around similar memories of historic rural life and cross-denominational religious ideas about stewardship and personal responsibility, as in the two activist projects at Richmond Heights and Virginia Key. The latter projects, however, included stakeholders with more economic backing, affiliations, formal education and political connections from which to network. The Richmond Heights project was completed and appeared to have fulfilled early visions of its success. The Virginia Key project is still in process, having demonstrated fundraising success, if not always project speed, and showing promise for completion and perhaps expansion in spite of political obstacles and the large-scale nature of the project.

### **Role of Spirituality in Linking Black History and the Environment**

Black churches are at the core of Black history in the United States. For example, Stoll (2006) describes them as "Blacks' primary institutions" (p. 156). How churchgoers perceived God, their religion and/or their spirituality also had a pivotal



impact on environmental beliefs and stewardship across all participants. Their idea of themselves as stewards of “God’s earth” and its resources persisted across denominations. One anonymous interviewee’s comments are typical, “To me, nature is important...it’s like an added beauty. It’s something someone higher, God, did. Sometimes, I look at the trees and blossoms in trees and I say God did it. It brings me to a higher realm.”

At Glorious Church of Christ, Christian personal responsibility was mentioned over and over again. One Bible study participant commented, “You cannot be complacent” about the environment, pollution, and ozone-related problems. He continued, “A Christian doesn’t have this ‘I don’t care’ attitude. They care about everything.” At another point in the Bible study, a congregant said, “You can’t take it [the environment] for granted. If the Lord blesses you with something ... you better take care of it.” The pastor of Glorious Church of Christ sermonized:

Now we all have to suffer because of carelessness and greed. We who understand what’s going on...[know we’re] already paying a price for what man’s done to the earth...God holds us responsible for the wrong that we do...He’s keeping a record of His own world, ‘cause it’s his...let us respect each other, the rights of each other, and God’s creation.

A Richmond Heights tree planting volunteer noted in a similar vein:

See, it said in the Bible, we learned about creation and how God created, and the purpose of everything He created. I think it affects your life, the environmental part of it anyway. You learn [how] to treat things and you know the purpose of them and everything has a purpose.

These comments echo those of the majority of the participants and coincide with the findings of Kempton et al. (1996:84-89) that Americans’ environmental values are affected and influenced by religious beliefs and values.

### **Environmental Rights and Access to Public Lands**

All three case studies also addressed the issue of access to public land and its importance for quality of life. At Virginia Key, a core issue was public access

to public land as a fundamental right of citizens. Participants believed if Virginia Key land had been privatized as in various projects proposed but not completed from the 1970s-1990s (with access to or view of the public beach cut off by the proposed development), their identity as Black Miamians would have been lost along with their rights. At Glorious Church of Christ there were concerns about the privatization of farmland that used to be shared openly but that is now fenced off and developed for private uses. Congregants saw this as the greed of modernity versus the old idea of land as “shared by all.” In Richmond Heights, shared access to public land was emphasized through tree plantings in public areas. These included road medians, parks, the pioneer monument and at schools, with goals of beautification, unification, and even improved safety within the community. The Richmond Heights project also paired students with older mentors to plant trees, shaded and renewed entire neighborhoods, encouraged the use of native tree species, and attempted to reduce crime.

While not everyone with whom I spoke became involved in these projects for reasons that they would self-describe as environmental, nearly all cited stewardship over public resources and their beauty as some of their motivating factors. Many would not self-identify as environmentalist as they perceive this as a label specific to White middle class members of organized groups. However many of their activities and attitudes described in this paper fall squarely under the category that society labels as environmentalism. Most of the participants revealed in interviews that they were concerned with environmental issues at the community level, although they also recognized global environmental problems. The churchgoers at Glorious Church of Christ, for example, discussed degradation of topsoil through bad farming practices, depletion of native species, energy crisis and pesticide toxicity. More than 50 percent of those who spoke extensively on environmental issues at the Glorious Church of Christ Bible study addressed personal behavior as well. Some participants reported turning off the lights, turning off the running water at home, sitting outside to

cool down and taking other small steps to conserve resources. They chided society for dependence on technology and for damaging "God's earth." In addition, they advocated in this public forum that fellow churchgoers make responsible personal environmental choices.

Despite their relevance to local communities and environmental issues, the projects described briefly here should not be idealized. As noted in the previous section, there were various levels of success and completion with regards to the environmental activism considered. Several activists noted the challenges of involving urban youth, who were perceived to be disenfranchised with nature and Black history. Other project organizers described some reluctance on the part of community members who needed to be convinced to get involved. With each project, local politics sometimes interfered. The various coalitions that worked together were not without friction. At times, decisions were made that benefited people and not the environment. One environmental professional expressed great frustration that outreach from environmental professionals to area Black churches had not been particularly effective overall. Many of the aforementioned issues were stated anonymously (and could affect projects that are still underway), so specifics of these situations are not addressed here. However, in each of the case studies, and others found in related research (Smith 2003), groups led primarily by churchgoing Blacks invested significant time and effort into the literal and the metaphorical connection of social issues to environmental issues for perceived community benefit.

### Discussion of Research Findings

The implications of my findings are several. First, there is indeed a link between churchgoing Blacks in Miami, their history, spirituality and the natural environment. As I discussed earlier in this paper, published research on Black churchgoers and the natural environment is limited. Three case studies alone cannot be generalized to prove deep interest of a majority of Black churchgoers in stewardship of the environment. However, this in-depth research combined with my related broader-scale research,

encompassing a larger number of Black churchgoers and environmental projects/attitudes throughout Miami-Dade County<sup>1</sup>, do demonstrate evidence of and motivation behind Black churchgoer involvement in local environmental issues. There are a series of grassroots environmental projects being performed by hundreds of Black churchgoers in Miami, Florida. This supports published research by Cutter (1981), Burby and Strong (1997) and Arp and Kenny (1996) among others, suggesting that Black concern about environmental issues is at least equal to the concern of other groups about the environment. This is in contrast to earlier published work that suggested that Blacks express less concern about environmental issues (Hershey and Hill 1978) that may be related to more immediate social and economic issues (Kreger 1973). Johnson et al. (2004) comment that even "The environmental and outdoor recreation literature is inconclusive with respect to Black environmental beliefs/attitudes and behavior" (p. 5).

In spite of the evolving literature on the subject, many Blacks and Whites outside of the academic research world, such as a civil rights leader interviewed in 1999 by Sellers (2006), still espouse the idea that "Just to focus on [the environment]... that's a White issue..." (p. 93). The issue is not resolved at the community level. Public sentiment, in-classroom academic sentiments, as well as opinions in "mainstream" environmental groups often still run contrary to the majority of the published data.

The findings also suggest that instead of a definitive line between environmental issues and social issues, the concepts are interwoven in the ways people think about them. The idea that Black communities cannot afford to be concerned about the natural environment because of more pressing social problems was not supported in these case studies. Demonstrated concern included neighborhood cleanups, nature camps, integrating environment into church sermons and discussions, beach dunes restoration, tree planting, youth mentoring, and preservation of Black rural history. From crime issues to community shade, and concern over power bills to public green spaces, action and concern were present, and the environmental and social issues consistently overlapped.

Richmond Heights is perhaps the best example of this overlap. Over six hundred trees were planted there, in part, to provide shady places to socialize and to encourage a sense of community, which may even reduce crime (as Deacon Baldwin believes). The tree plantings allowed volunteers to get to know neighbors whom they had never met and directed energies of the youth to a positive science-related project. When a shade canopy is realized, participants hope that property values will increase and that lower power bills will result from shaded homes and air conditioning units. Related benefits for the environment may also include increased native plant nectar sources and seed sources in the area, increased animal habitat, energy conservation, water conservation and improved drainage patterns (Baldwin, interview 2001). Richmond Heights is an example that communities need not necessarily choose to invest their time and effort in either the natural environment or people. So-called environmental projects can be of benefit to both.

My findings support research by Mohai and Bryant (1998), suggesting the importance of local environmental issues to Black people. The projects at Virginia Key and Richmond Heights, as well as the proposed nature camp at Glorious Church of Christ, reflect community concern at the neighborhood and city level. However, the research also revealed attitudes of environmental concern at a wider level beyond neighborhoods. Glorious Church of Christ congregants discussed and revealed concern about global issues (from soil depletion to energy to global warming) as did participants in Richmond Heights, some of whom visited Costa Rica and discussed rainforest issues.

The research supports Williams' (1974) ethnography of a Black church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in finding specific connections between the rural Southern background of many American Blacks and their spiritual imagery and beliefs regarding nature. One might argue that some of these memories of the historic rural South present an idealized picture of a place where "everything was shared, farming was natural and sickness was rare." However, the most important concern of this research was to understand how the memories themselves, idealized

or not, affected the present attitudes and concerns of participants about nature. These memories are deeply and consistently intertwined with participants' spirituality. This was true of participants across denominations who consistently referred to "stewardship."

### **Environmental and Social Policy Implications**

The findings of the study may have implications for environmental and social issues among minority communities beyond south Florida. Moving beyond the stereotype that those who are concerned about the environment are only White and middle class could result in positive effects for people and natural ecosystems. This study may serve as a reminder that concern and action about environmental issues are not limited to those identified with more formally organized movements, or the stereotypical environmentalist. Why is it important to make this distinction? The Sierra Club (an organization considered to be at the forefront of the environmental protection movement in the U.S.), for example, remains about 90 percent white (Zakin 2004). At the same time, racial and ethnic diversity in the United States is growing rapidly. Understanding the ways in which diverse groups connect to nature may reveal how environmental protection is of broad value. In addition, if concerned populations that are under-represented in mainstream environmental organizations had opportunities to connect with the environmental protection movement, there is potential benefit for both people and the environment. This connection might assist in the diversification of the environmental protection movement and provide expanded networks for funding and support to under-represented groups. Furthermore, the connection of and importance of people's religious views to their environmental concerns may be underestimated in the mainstream environmental movement. Kempton et al. (1996:210) note, for example, that of the groups in their sample, the Sierra Club members "are the most extreme in their rejection of a religious reason to preserve the environment." This is in spite of the growing publications about, and interest in, eco-spirituality (Freedman 2006). Activities in the Miami churches discussed here provide additional

support for the idea that spirituality shapes U.S. environmental values, a potentially important message for the environmental protection movement. Indeed, with their historical roles in social movements, Black churches may be appropriate places from which to begin dialogue and action regarding the environment between congregants, the majority environmental movement and policymakers. Black churchgoers and the mainstream U.S. environmental protection movement have many broad concerns and issues in common.

Why try to bridge the gaps between these two seemingly disparate groups? Social justice, health, quality of life issues, community cohesiveness, youth issues, urban space, recreation, economic challenges and environmental issues are intertwined. Social initiatives in neighborhoods in which many Black churches are located, as well as urban environmental issues, are often under-funded and lack political support that may lead to solutions. New and innovative coalitions between Black churchgoers and the environmental protection movement could be beneficial in bringing neighborhoods and nature together in a way that benefits both.

---

Eileen M. Smith-Cavros, Division of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Nova Southeastern University  
eilesmi@nova.edu

### Note

<sup>1</sup> Further research discussed in the text was done as part of my dissertation at Florida International University, Miami, Florida. It took place from 2001 to 2003 in Miami-Dade County and Broward County, Florida. In addition to researching the three case studies described here, other projects/groups including the Goulds Coalition, water conservation initiatives, the Snake Creek Canal and greenway, a church Superfund polluted site, Pineland clean-ups and restoration projects, beach clean-ups, and neighborhood/park clean-ups were also recorded with participants interviewed. Participant observations were also performed by the author. In addition, impacts of the history of Blacks in Miami and urban renewal were examined in context to local environmental issues. Findings are chronicled in Smith (2003) and support the conclusions of this paper in emphasizing further connections between Black history and spirituality in regard to environmental concerns and activism.

### References Cited

- ARP, W., AND C. KENNY.  
1996 Black environmentalism in the local community context. *Environment and Behavior* 28(3):267-282.
- BULLARD, R.  
1990 *Dumping in Dixie: Race, class, and environmental quality*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- BURBY, R., AND D. STRONG.  
1997 Coping with chemicals: Blacks, Whites, planners and industrial pollution. *Journal of the American Planning Association* 63(4):469-481.
- BUSH, G.  
2006 "Politicized memories in the struggle for Miami's Virginia Key Beach," in *To love the wind and the rain: African Americans and environmental history*. Edited by D.D. Glave and M. Stoll, pp. 164-188. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- CUTTER, S.  
1981 Community concern for pollution: Social and environmental influences. *Environment and Behavior* 13:105-124.
- DLUHY, M. (PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR).  
1998 Historical impacts of transportation projects on the Overtown community. Miami: Metropolitan Planning Organization. Transcripts Volume 1 (appendix D).
- FREEDMAN, L.  
2006 "Churches: Linking religion to nature." *Chicago Tribune*. July 13 <http://chicagosports.chicagotribune.com/cs0607130303> [31 August 2006].
- HERSHEY, M.R., AND D. HILL.  
1978 Is pollution a 'White thing?': Racial differences in preadults' attitudes. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 41(4):439-450.

- HUMPHREY, C., AND F. BUTTEL.  
1982 *Environment, energy and society*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.
- JOHNSON, C.Y., J.M. BOWKER, AND H.K. CORDELL.  
2004 Ethnic variation in environmental belief and behavior and examination of the New Ecological Paradigm in a social psychological context. *Environment and Behavior* 36(2):157-186.
- JOHNSON, C.Y., AND J. MCDANIEL.  
2006 "Turpentine Negro," in *To love the wind and the rain: African Americans and environmental history*. Edited by D.D. Glave and M. Stoll, pp. 51-62. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- KEMPTON, W., J. BOSTER, AND J. HARTLEY.  
1996 *Environmental values in American culture*. Woburn, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- KREGER, J.  
1973 Ecology and black student opinion. *Journal of Environmental Education* 4(3):30-34.
- MOHAI, P.  
1985 Public concern and elite involvement in environmental conservation issues. *Social Science Quarterly* 66:820-838.
- MOHAI, P.  
2003 Dispelling old myths: African American concern for the environment. *Environment* 45(5):10-26.
- MOHAI, P., AND B. BRYANT.  
1998 Is there a "race" effect on concern for environmental quality? *Public Opinion Quarterly* 62:475-505.
- SELLERS, C.  
2006 "Nature and blackness in suburban passage," in *To love the wind and the rain: African Americans and environmental history*. Edited by D.D. Glave and M. Stoll, pp. 93-119. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- SMITH, E.  
2003 Black churchgoers, environmental activism and the preservation of nature in Miami, Florida. Ph.D. diss., Florida International University, Miami.
- STOLL, D.D.  
2006 "Religion and African American environmental activism," in *To love the wind and the rain: African Americans and environmental history*. Edited by D.D. Glave and M. Stoll, pp.150-163. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- WILLIAMS, M.  
1974 *Community in a Black Pentecostal church*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc.
- ZAKIN, S.  
2004 "The invasion of the Elegant Trogons: Is Sierra Club's anti-immigration insurgency for the birds?" *L.A. Weekly* April 2-8. <http://www.laweekly.com/ink/04/19/features-zakin.php> [24 December 2005].