

African-American Wildland Memories

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Introduction

- Maurice Halbwachs argues that memories are only retained when shared within a collective or community
 - Rather than being an individual experience, many memories are particular or especially salient to members of a certain group or mnemonic community
 - Political or cultural events, national figures, and wildland experiences can all have an influence on collective memories
 - Collective memory involves the relaying or handing down of cultural history from generation to generation, and can have an impact on identity formation for African Americans
- Social imageability, or the capacity of a place to evoke vivid and collectively held social meanings, is how symbols are assigned to a place or landscape
- White, middle-American views of wildlands are as spiritual, sanctified refuges distinct from the profanity of human modification that hold the power to help us connect to the divine
- Turner proposed that wilderness helped to establish American democracy by contrasting it with tyranny in civilized society.
- This idea of ‘environmental determinism’ posits that the behavior and ideas of a people are strongly influenced by the physical environment.
- Hammond argued that wilderness is good because it contributes to a uniquely American character and is symbolic of American national heritage
- Wild places are not objective entities which hold the same value, meaning, or symbolism for all who behold them

- Greider and Garkovich put forward that the perception of the natural environment is a social construction, heavily influenced by a group's past relationships with particular environments
 - Mainstream environmentalists see wildlands as therapeutic landscapes or fields of care, although African Americans may also associate them with toil, torture and death
 - Despite this adversarial relationship, there is also evidence of African Americans returning to wildlands to fish and hunt and establish homesteads
- Following section contains literature reviews that look at black interaction with wildlands, including African-inspired ontology, black concerns for the environment, and the progression of American environmentalism

Literature Review

African Americans and Wildlands

- Early environmentalists such as Emerson, Thoreau, Olmsted and Marsh advanced conservation and preservationist ideas, influenced by European intellectualism and romanticism
- Most visitors to federally designated wilderness areas surveyed are white, college educated, middle to upper income earners
 - Research has shown African Americans are significantly less likely to interact with wildlands or partake in outdoor activities, even when living alongside and socioeconomic factors being equal
 - National household surveys, however, have shown African Americans to hold positively with wildland and wilderness concern

- Traditional Southern culture, as a basis for contemporary black American culture, can help explain the gap between a lack of black wildland interaction and a positive sentiment towards the environment
- African American environmental interest may be expressed in non-conventional forms such as concern for community integrity (e.g. a clean and crime-free neighborhood)

American Environmentalism

- Dorceta Taylor chronicles the development of the American environmental movement and compares it to the concerns of non-white groups and women during the time when environmentalism was being defined.
- She identifies four periods of environmental thought: pre-environmental movement, early environmental movement, Silent Spring era, and the post-Three Mile Island/Love Canal era.
- During the pre-environmental movement period (1820-1913), the exploitive capitalist paradigm was the prevailing environmental ideology, emphasizing exploitation and extraction of natural resources.
 - The Hetch Hetchy controversy in 1913 marked a major turning point for the environmental movement as biocentric and utilitarian views clashed over conservation.
- The environmental movement grew to wider participation during the early environmental period (1914-1959) when environmental issues were embraced by the public and romantic views of the environment began to take hold.
- The Silent Spring era (1960s-1980s) was marked by heightened awareness of environmental issues such as air and water contamination, and the new environmental paradigm was established as the dominant frame of reference among environmentalists.

- In the post-Three Mile Island/Love Canal era (1980-present), alternative environmental thought such as environmental justice, ecofeminism, and Earth First! have emerged as competing discourses.

Pre-Movement Era: Slavery, Sharecropping, Lynching

- Slavery began in the U.S. in the early 1800s, and by then there were around 1.5 million slaves.

- Slaves were largely consigned to doing manual labor on plantations, and their freedom of movement was severely restricted by laws in each of the slaveholding states.

- Even free black people had limited freedoms and access to the wildlands of the country.

- Slaves adapted African beliefs to fit their new environment, often seeing the wilderness as a refuge from the oppression of plantation life.

- However, the wilderness could also be a source of fear and danger, as hazards like wild animals and supernatural forces were feared.

- Parents often warned their children of the dangers of wilderness exploration

- Wilderness was both perceived and used as a haven but was also kept at bay

- Whites sought to discourage blacks from entering forested areas by instilling fear of what was supposedly to be found there

- Perception of wilderness among blacks was formed by the slave experience and physical and psychological damage inflicted upon them

- Relatively few accounts exist of slave work specifically in wildland environments, such as naval stores operations (especially turpentine)

- Turpentine produced naval stores such as tar, pitch, gum, turpentine and rosin as exports from the south

- Turpentine was conducted in remote pine forests and involved hatchets and receptacles to collect crude gum

- Nineteenth century agrarian working classes did not view wildlands through the lens of romanticism or idealism due to their dependency on land resources.

- African Americans specifically were not allowed to associate themselves with elite-appropriation spaces regarding wildlands due to their subjugated position compared to that of whites.

- European racism placed black people on par with the uncivilized and primitive, while white Americans were seen as overcivilized.

- This signaled to whites a division between them and blacks, creating a racially divided society when it comes to sharing beauty in wildland spaces.

Early Environmental Movement: Black Migration, Turpentine, Lumber Camps, Sharecropping, Lynching

- Black workers at the turn of the century were mostly employed in agriculture and domestic or service positions due to limited job opportunities in the rural South.

- The 1910-1940 censuses show that more than 50% of all black labor in the deep South states were manning farm labor.

- The workers were employed in turpentine camps, were shuttled to the woods for work; or they lived in backwood shanties near the work site.

- Living quarters for Negro workers were “match-box” shacks or box cars, segregated from white workers.

- Lynchings served to further alienate blacks from wildlands due to some of these acts occurred in isolated woodland areas.

Modern Environmental Movement: Environmental Justice and Black Return to the Land

- African Americans protested the proposed siting of a hazardous waste landfill in North Carolina
- Environmental Justice movement illuminated the inequitable distribution of hazardous and toxic waste sites in lower income and minority communities
- Environmental justice movement contrasts mainstream environmental efforts to preserve federally designated wildlife areas and focuses on the preservation of home and community ‘natural environment’
- In the decade from 1970 to 1980, more than one million African Americans migrated to the South from the North, Midwest, and West
- Migration to the South was caused by better job prospects in the urban areas of the region, such as metropolitan Atlanta and Charlotte and Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina
- Blacks are returning to rural regions of the South, despite the lack of viable economic opportunities or improved racial relations
- The Black return to rural landscapes highlights the paradoxical relation of blacks towards wildland environments
- The mostly urban, black population is farther removed from the land than its rural predecessors
- There is a larger black middle-class compared to fifty years ago with greater access to information about wildland recreation resources

Possible Discussion Questions

- What similarities and differences are there between African-American wildland memories described in this paper and those of other ethnic and racial groups?

- How do the authors describe the impact of historical racism and discrimination on African-Americans' wildland memories?
- In what ways do African-American communities have a unique connection to wildland spaces?
- How might understanding African-American Wildland memories inform our approach to conservation and management efforts today?
- What are the implications of this paper for the way we tell stories about our wildland spaces?
- What forces have ultimately shaped the cultural identity of African Americans in the wildland?
- What roles do gender and generation play in forming the collective African-American wildland memory?
- How might the context of the wildland change in the future?