Participation, Power and Racial Representation: Negotiating Nature-Based and Heritage Tourism Development in the Rural South

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Nature-based and heritage tourism development provides a potentially valuable tool in the distribution of benefits to rural counties in the southeastern United States. However, tourism planners often fail in their efforts to incorporate culturally diverse populations in planning processes. This study examines African Americans' role in nature-based and heritage tourism planning in Hamilton County, Florida. While public officials have solicited community involvement, African Americans, who comprise over 40% of the county's population, continue to be underrepresented in public planning initiatives. This study uses qualitative ethnographic methods to account for African American residents' opinions regarding participation in county decision making and their role in the emerging nature-based and heritage tourism industry. It highlights issues that can impede efforts at cross-cultural collaboration and points to the need for addressing historic power relations in approaching future collaborative strategies.

Keywords African American representation, environmental justice, ethnography, tourism planning

Tourism researchers and community planners have heralded nature-based and heritage tourism as a potential revitalization strategy for rural areas experiencing declining revenues from agriculture and extractive industries (Stein 2004; Wilson et al. 2001). They have examined how heritage- and nature-based tourism can distribute benefits to populations at a community level, providing not only an ecologically sound economic alternative but also a socially responsible development strategy (Campbell 1999; Jones 1993; Scheyvens 1999; Wilson et al. 2001). However, it has been argued that community-based tourism cannot be truly successful unless local

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residents have control over and share in the benefits that emerge from tourism activities (Scheyvens 1999). As tourism researchers have discovered, ensuring the equitable allocation of economic and social benefits to host communities is not a given, especially without well-planned interventions (Campbell 1999; Marcouiller 1997; Scheyvens 1999). The community approach is considered an appropriate approach to tourism development, because “tourism is a community product” and “community and local capabilities are directly involved in tourism development and promotion networks” (Wilson et al. 2001, 133). Although many factors are important to the success of tourism in rural areas, “only the widespread participation and contribution of rural tourism entrepreneurs can ensure a broad-based foundation for successful tourism development” (Wilson et al. 2001, 133). However, even though tourism has been marketed as politically neutral, it is no less characterized by the same problems of class, race, and gender that run throughout other sectors of society (Goudie et al. 1999; Richter 1995). Thus, when the objective is to maintain or improve the quality of life of local people, it must be noted that communities are made up of heterogeneous social groups with differing access to networks, resources, and power (Caffyn and Lutz 1999). Attention must be also given to how the costs and benefits of tourism development are distributed by race, ethnicity, and income, as well as “what accounts for a particular pattern of distribution” (Floyd and Johnson 2002).

This article discusses the findings of a study conducted in 1999–2000 in Hamilton County, Florida. The study was initiated in response to both White and Black county leaders’ expressions of frustration with the community’s failure to involve a representative sample of the county’s population in community planning and tourism development initiatives. In the study, key representatives of the county’s African American population were interviewed to better understand their roles in county decision-making and the development of nature-based and heritage tourism. Although much might be learned from talking to others in the county (in this case, the White population), non-White populations remain disproportionately underresearched in sustainable tourism and natural research management literature. Therefore, we chose to focus this study on African American residents. While it is understood that tourism planning must take into account all residents, the results from this study can be used to better understand possible barriers impeding the participation of historically underrepresented social groups.

Environmental Justice and Natural Resource Management

Although race relations in the United States have largely determined the allocation of power and privileges for most of the last century (Feagin 1989; Jackson 1987; Pulido 1996), there continues to be a need to better understand how patterns of privilege are reproduced in relation to natural resources management. A number of authors have responded to this issue. Floyd and Johnson (2002) provide an assessment of the literature on natural resource management and race. Here, and in related articles, there is a strong argument for framing future research within an environmental justice perspective (Floyd 2004; Floyd and Johnson 2002; Taylor 2000). The authors argue that research perspectives prioritizing the critical examination of resource allocation within the context of recreation and tourism on public lands are compelled by today’s demand for more equitable service of society (Floyd and Johnson 2002). Studies that frame recreation and tourism in terms of environmental
justice can better inform policy and management activities in these areas, although the authors point out that they continue to remain underutilized.

Examining the Concept of Participation

Community-level nature-based and/or heritage tourism development invokes a need for inclusive participation (Cleaver 1999; Hollinshead 1998; Schelhas 2002; Scheyvens 1999). However, the concept of participation as a grass-roots panacea to civic alienation and economic inequity has been critiqued for its overemphasis on technique, resulting in the prioritization of efficiency over empowerment (Cleaver 1999). A failure to address deeper social, political, and economic realities that differentially impact people’s ability to participate in development initiatives has led to the neglect of power issues, as well as a lack of attention to the distribution of access and control of information and resources (Chabota and Duhaimea 1998; Cleaver 1999).

In fact, participatory action initiatives have been criticized for playing only a limited role in natural resource planning, serving more to rationalize and politically legitimize the economic functions of land-use allocation (Chabota and Duhaimea 1998). Consequently, researchers and community planners are calling for a more judicious accounting of the multiple interests and actors within communities and of how these actors differently interact within decision-making processes (Cleaver 1999; Floyd and Johnson 2002; Sasidharan 2002; Scheyvens 1999; Schelhas 2002). The identification of more encompassing community participation strategies can begin to redress power inequalities in community and regional decision making.

To achieve community participation goals within an environmental justice framework, a deeper consideration of the kind of participation being sought in nature-based and heritage tourism interventions is essential (Floyd 2004). Here one might differentiate between more superficial or symbolic participation (i.e., keeping neighborhoods aesthetically pleasing for the tourism industry or working in low-wage tourism service jobs) versus more empowered or effective participation (i.e., actual control of resources and receipt of benefits, as well as contributions to planning and design) (Cleaver 1999; Scheyvens 1999). This study contributes to the overall literature on community participation by questioning the utility of participatory paradigms and investigating possible barriers impeding the empowerment of populations at the peripheries of dominant cultures.

Setting

Hamilton County, located in north central Florida on the Georgia border, is composed of large tracts of scenic public and private lands (Figure 1), including the Suwannee River, one of Florida’s most aesthetic and famous rivers. The area’s ecosystems are largely intact and include the only stretch of major whitewater rapids in Florida, many natural springs, and much forest cover. The county also features various nature-based recreation resources, which include opportunities for fishing, hiking, canoeing, kayaking, wildlife watching, and bicycling.

The majority of Hamilton County’s 13,320 residents live in the towns of Jennings, Jasper, or White Springs. African Americans comprise almost 40% of the population, and Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans make up less than 5%. Whites represent just over half the county’s population. Occupational composition is fairly diverse across the county, with the highest percentage of residents
employed by government organizations (24.5%). Agriculture continues to be important in the county, with 7.4% of residents involved in agriculture, compared with 1.2% for all Florida residents (U.S. Census Bureau 2000).

Hamilton County is one of the most economically impoverished counties in Florida. It is characterized by high unemployment and low income (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). The county has relied upon an agriculturally based economy since its early history. However, in recent decades, drastic economic transitions have led to the decline of agriculture as a livelihood strategy and to the closing of significant factories and employment opportunities. As agriculture becomes an increasingly marginal economic option, residents depend more on the county’s largest employer, PCS Phosphate Mining, as well as on manufacturing industries and a recently introduced prison.

Hamilton County is an emerging nature and cultural tourism center. Both state and local government organizations have conducted visioning meetings with Hamilton County residents to explore strategies for diversifying the county’s economy, including the imminent option of tourism development. Although African Americans make up a significant proportion of the county, they are least represented in these planning meetings. Consequently, both White and Black community leaders lament a “lack of participation” from African Americans in county planning initiatives.

In the study, representatives of the county’s African American population were interviewed to achieve two research objectives: (1) to describe their perceptions of Hamilton County’s African American role in county decision making, and (2) to articulate African American stakeholders’ approaches to nature-based and heritage tourism development.

**Methods**

Floyd (2004) argues that natural resource management agencies and researchers must carefully consider the appropriateness of research methods focusing on cultural
diversity. Because of this concern and the lack of literature on rural African American participation in nature-based and heritage tourism planning and development, this study’s approach is both qualitative and exploratory. In-depth interviews are valuable for providing perspective when there is little knowledge of a population, and for critiquing a priori assumptions about people’s motivations and needs (Ervin 2000; McAvoy et al. 2000). Theoretical sampling and the collection of qualitative data on a set of questions are useful for generating “grounded theory.” Grounded theory comprises explanatory frameworks that emerge from the data when a research question is uncharted (Henderson 1991).

**Interviewing Participants**

In order to facilitate interviews with county residents, University of Florida researchers worked collaboratively with the Hamilton County Extension Office. Aside from the first informant, who was introduced to the researchers by the Suwannee River Water Management District, individuals were first contacted through a solicitation letter sent by the county extension agent and a researcher. These letters were sent to 96 residents on an extension list who had solicited service from the county extension office. The letter informed them of the study and asked them to phone or write the agent’s office if they were interested in participating in an individual interview. Only a few recipients phoned the office to schedule interviews. The rest of the interviewees resulted from direct phone solicitations, something we found to be much more effective in establishing communication.

In-depth interviews were conducted by a researcher with 24 study participants (Tables 1 and 2). A female University of Florida researcher of Cuban American descent conducted the interviews. Although she does not self-define as “White,” most informants visually identified her as such. The researcher met informants at their houses, shops/offices, and restaurants. A semistructured interview guide was used to organize the interviews and achieve the research objectives reported in this article. Interviews ranged from 1 to 3 hours each. Participants were asked to share

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their viewpoints on broadly defined topics such as tourism, community improvement, natural and cultural resources, and participation strategies. The process of interviewing lasted from January to July of 2000. Each interview was tape-recorded for later transcription. Transcription was accomplished by the researcher and a student assistant. Analysis of the data identified discursive themes present throughout the interviews.

**Interpreting the Data**

The interpretation of the data was something that evolved throughout the entire study, with each successive interview helping to define and clarify issues brought up in other interviews. The final step in data interpretation consisted of (1) entering the data into a data management program (The Ethnograph); (2) coding the data in terms of the categories and domains of reference; and (3) analyzing these data to identify thematic units and to inductively generate theory. Objectives of this research were achieved by analyzing the repetition and range of the informants’ objects of discussion.

The internal validity and reliability of the study rest on a number of methodological aspects. In an effort to achieve validity, researchers (1) solicited participant checking of emerging conclusions throughout data collection; (2) conducted a subsequent workshop attended by 90% of study participants to corroborate study findings; and (3) disseminated the final report to all participants for critique. Finally, to better ensure reliability, researchers engaged in cross-case comparison (i.e., the reiteration of emergent themes among different interviews) and triangulation of different data sources (including individual interviews and group meetings).

The narratives collected from interviews serve as the data set for this study. The choice of narratives as study data is significant for several reasons. As people relate narratives that are embedded within social, political, and historical contexts, the narratives they share reveal how people are positioned within their environments as well as what is important to them (Ochs and Capps 1996). Narratives are also potent sites of analysis, wherein perceived constraints and feelings of self-efficacy (i.e., the feeling your involvement in some effort will have an impact) can be gleaned.

**Findings**

**Understanding Participation in Hamilton County, Florida**

The first objective of this study is to gain insight into the perceived roles of African Americans in county decision making. We wanted to understand the disproportionate representation of African Americans in county-wide planning initiatives. Data interpretation generated four themes that helped describe study participants’ attitudes toward community participation in Hamilton County. These key themes revolved around obstacles perceived as inhibiting participation in collaborative tourism development, and provided insight into overcoming these obstacles. They include (1) historical experience; (2) misrepresentations of African Americans; (3) doubts about equitable distribution of tourism dollars; and (4) creating an environment for participation.

**Historical Experience.** In responding to the question of why people were choosing not to participate, study participants related the African American community’s
“nonparticipation” to the historical pattern of being excluded from dialogue on community issues. Informants revealed that the recent interest for including African Americans in countywide dialogue stands in contradiction to what they as a community have experienced in the past. The dominant community’s historical disinterest in dialoguing with non-White communities or sharing decision-making power forms a part of the memory and reality for people today.

"Every time one of you all talk to a Black person, they're thinking, "What's your agenda? What are you after, what are you coming down here for? You all ain't been coming down here. What are you coming down here for now?" They feel the same way when they're invited up to your meeting. "What am I going up there for? I ain't been called up there. They're going to do what they want to do anyway." (male business owner, Jasper)

Consequently, some informants believed that a general feeling of mistrust permeates Black county residents’ present day choices of whether or not to participate in county-wide initiatives.

"Because of the fact that there is still mistrust, people are reluctant to get involved, because they’ve been deceived so many times. And that makes it really hard to get people to become a part of something, because they say "Well, we've been there, we've done that. It’s not going to materialize.” But we have to keep trying. (male pastor, Jasper)

There is also a general sense of wariness about the actual intention of county officials who invite African American county residents to their meetings but seem reticent to make proactive amends to the legacy of “noncollaboration” previously created. It points to the need for county leaders to seriously consider, and proactively redress, the historical context that informs the present-day experience of African Americans in the county.

Misrepresentations of African Americans. A frequent theme that emerged as an obstacle to collaborative nature-based and heritage tourism development was mistrust generated from issues of representation within the county’s existing tourism heritage sites. Although the three major towns in Hamilton County offer attractions of “White” heritage for tourists, the invisibility of African American contributions to the development of the county remains an issue of contention. The dominant community’s lack of interest in remembering the historical accomplishments of African Americans in the county was discussed as an issue impeding the inclusive representation of the county’s heritage as a whole. The following narrative discusses the dismantling of a local Black school and the subsequent burning of records that were of significance to the Black community’s history.

You can’t have history unless everybody’s involved, and cares. I can remember when...in the Black school, we found that they were burning that stuff [historical records]. And we went down and just happened to see some of it down there and picked some of it out. Well they had burned up the history of a town! And until you go to looking at this type
of thing as, “this is history that we would like somebody to read about someday,” there will be no history. But they said “we’re going to burn it up because its Black folks’.” (male county official, Jasper)

Similarly, some informants doubted the county’s desire to convey African Americans’ history in tourism assemblages. This informant discussed being invited to speak by the Historic Main Street Association, but refusing because she thought that it was “all pretend” and that people didn’t want to hear “the real history”: “History? ... We don’t have any history. Not any history anyone wants to know about” (female educator, Jasper).

Informants also took issue with the incomplete representation of African American heritage in the county’s current tourism offerings. Many informants objected to the fact that the only representation of African Americans in one of the main tourism offerings of White Springs was a photograph of the last person hung in the county jail, an African American male, displayed with a demonstration of a hanging noose: “We have so much history, yet they want to hang a noose with a picture of a Black man beside it [at the historic jail], and call it heritage” (male business owner, Jasper).

**Doubts About Equitable Distribution of Tourism Dollars.** Even when the discussion specifically focused on tourism development in the county, participants had questions and concerns about the likelihood of receiving fair compensation for their expenditures of time and energy. Along these lines, one study participant actively pursuing the development of nature-based tourism sites explained that he regularly confronted questions regarding compensation from owners of potential farm tour attractions:

> Well, the first question I’m asked by these people is that, you know, “What’s in it for me?... If I maintain this area and keep it all nice, people can come and watch actual cane grinding.” But you have to compensate the people somehow. (male educator, White Springs)

A general recognition of the varying magnitude of participation was present within the narratives of county residents. For example, one informant addressed the way the county was attempting to involve African Americans in a local tourism initiative promoting the clean-up of neighborhoods.

> What they’re trying to do is trying for our community to get cleaned up. And I agree with that. But I feel like if we’re really going to benefit from this (tourism), we are going to have to come up with businesses, or we’ll be left out. (male pastor, Jennings)

Thus, in seeking participation from the community, it is important to examine what kind of participation is actually being sought. Are neighborhood cleanup initiatives the extent of the participation being solicited, or is there a vision for greater cross-cultural collaboration at higher levels of decision-making? And are government entities facilitating entrepreneurship for new entrepreneurs or are residents destined to remain left out of the resource loop?

**Creating an Environment for Participation.** Much emphasis was put on getting people together to dialogue with one another. This approach was deemed most
important but also the most difficult to accomplish. Still, study participants pointed to the necessity of establishing communication, despite its challenges, and cited the lack of cooperation among different sectors of the county as responsible for the failure of past community initiatives.

The first thing I would do is get representation... from the business community, from the pastors, the educational people, and anybody else. You don’t need 500 people to try to develop a plan ‘cause its not going to do it... You need to get some key people to bring their heads together... But I think, even with this, the first step is that you’re going to have to bring the right people together and get them in one room, and get them sitting down and talking. (male pastor, Jasper)

Among strategies for involving the African American community, it was stressed that the involvement of churches was crucial. Study informants often mentioned the historical centrality of churches as networks for disseminating information and rallying community action.

Especially in the Black community, the church has always been the center of all activity. Politically, economically, spiritually. In the Black community, the church is the only thing that we really control. (male educator, White Springs)

Informants not only addressed the need to increase involvement, but they highlighted the need to promote ownership of the process as a way to effectively bring African Americans into the process. It was pointed out that unless room is made for participation by African American county members and the priorities of the community are addressed, underrepresented groups will continue to not participate: “Now, you’re talking about what is the problem of me not wanting to participate in your idea? Why? Because it’s your idea” (male business owner, Jasper).

Along these lines, one county official expressed his disappointment with a project that had been earmarked for the African American and Latino communities, but whose participation from within these communities was not sought.

There were some things that came in and were supposed to have been for minorities. But we got it from White presenters and were never involved in it, other than indirectly. And we were told that it was something we should have been in charge of. (male government representative, Jasper)

Consequently, involvement of Black leadership in tourism development was suggested as a critical factor for promoting African American participation overall.

**Understanding Opportunities for Nature-Based and Heritage Tourism Participation**

With a better general understanding of African Americans’ perceptions of public participation in Hamilton County, this study then sought to examine the specific issue of nature-based and heritage tourism. Our second research objective entailed exploring whether study participants believed nature-based and heritage tourism was an appropriate development alternative for their county. Again, four themes emerged in
answer to this question. The first theme describes tourism as history and future: tourism as part of the county’s history, as well as a possible new future. The remaining themes discuss the perceived benefits and potential of nature-based and heritage tourism development and include: (2) tourism as a source of economic renewal; (3) tourism as cultural replenishment; and (4) tourism as a way to protect quality of life.

**Tourism as History and Future.** Nowhere was the question of the distribution of benefits better illustrated than when study participants contrasted the historical forms of nature-based tourism that had developed in the county with the possibilities of tourism development. At the turn of the 20th century, African Americans were participating in the county’s vibrant tourism industry in White Springs. For county residents who remembered these times, or who had heard stories that had been passed down about the highly popular resort built around the White Springs’ sulfur spring, the discussion of a tourism industry reemerging in the region was especially of interest. There was a sense of pride regarding White Springs’ tourism resources and its national recognition as a recreation destination. There was also recognition of the marginalized way in which their ancestors had provided services to the industry, at the same time that they had been legally excluded from using the facilities.

During times of segregation, African Americans worked in the service sectors, but received a minimum of the benefits accrued in the community. In spite of the fact that segregation excluded Black participation in tourism as direct beneficiaries, entrepreneurs, or even as patrons, study participants held a positive view of the possibilities for future tourism development in the county. These study participants saw renewed interest in tourism as an opportunity to participate in the industry in a way that their predecessors could not.

White Springs used to be a big city that even the presidents came to visit because of the Spring House. I would like to see the Spring House rebuilt to its original conditions where people would come once again to swim in the Spring House pool. My grandmother was one of the towel girls there when she was a young lady, and she used to tell us about all the people that came here...they came here for the healing because it was supposed to be a fountain of youth. So she toted towels, picked up towels, and stuff like that; cleaned up around the place... I wish I could see this town flourish with people, and see things like she saw, but in a different point of view. Because what she saw—she didn’t see Blacks getting into the pool—she saw Blacks working around the pool. (female business owner, White Springs)

**Tourism as a Source of Economic Renewal.** Some informants questioned the potential for tourism to benefit African Americans due to a lack of ownership of sites with tourism value. The following study participant pointed to the fact that former public-use resources were appropriated by White county residents and today have become very profitable tourism enterprises.

Now they’ve got the Suwannee River Park. All that area was nobody’s land, nobody wanted it... it was just a fishing hole. We used to go there and Blacks be lining up. It was a good Black fishing spot. Every now and then the White folks would come and put their boats in and take off. But
all along that area, that was where Blacks went to fish. That area right there, that’s tourism, that’s big bucks. Forty thousand people at that place at one time and you think of the money that comes in. Not one Black is making any money out of that that I know of. (male college graduate, Jasper)

With the understanding that tourism historically played a major role in the lives of all Hamilton County residents, informants expressed affirmative responses to the discussion of tourism development as a potential countywide economic strategy. The drastic livelihood transition over the past decades and the county’s economic disenfranchisement was described by informants as forcing young adults to leave the county in search of quality livelihoods.

I’m hoping we can find something to come to this community so our young people can find employment and stay home. You see students that you taught at Christmas time and you say, “Where are you now?” And they say, “I’m in Washington or I’m in Los Angeles,” because there isn’t anything here for them to do. So I’m hoping we can get some good clean industry here. (female educator, Jasper)

Tourism as Cultural Replenishment. By being attentive to what county residents deem meaningful about their ecological environs, study participants thought that heritage tourism could serve as a “vehicle to carry on folk culture,” a culture that most informants lamented was not being passed on. For most study participants, the land was strongly tied to positive cultural memories and highly meaningful as a place where their communities have come together historically. Many of the study participants envisioned nature-based and heritage tourism attractions reflecting what the community takes pride in, while at the same time “telling the land’s story” and emphasizing its conservation. Because of the region’s aesthetic beauty and the rich knowledge of African American communities in regards to living on that land, study participants saw the potential for nature-based and heritage tourism to promote community pride.

Producing natural and cultural tourism attractions was also considered an opportunity to improve youth morale and provide a cultural investment in the education of young people. Several informants proposed the development of a cultural center, which would feature the transmission of elder knowledge to younger generations through heritage craft programs such as soapmaking, woodworking, quilt making, and herbology. At the same time it could offer learning experiences for tourists. Study participants described a compatible confluence of nature-based tourism with heritage education to revitalize cultural arts.

I think if our children could really identify some of the things that their ancestors were responsible for, and let them know that this is living history of this county, not just something on the page of a book, then it would have greater meaning for them. (female educator, Jasper)

Tourism as a Way to Protect Quality of Life. As a response to multiple concerns, tourism was discussed by informants as something that might prove compatible with
their values at the same time that it contributes economically. Some informants spoke of the potential for tourism to provide a more ecologically conserving industry.

The things that concern me about our community are jobs, and industrial development. However, if we were to get industry, I would like some clean industry. We’ve had offers for things that we did not like coming to us, like incinerators. But I would be interested in maybe tourism if we could develop it to the extent where a lot of people could be employed. I don’t think you’d have any problem bringing tourism here. I think things like destroying our little quaint community with commercial stuff is what almost blew us apart. We sort of like natural things here. (female educator, Jasper)

Most study participants also expressed their appreciation for living in a rural setting and communicated their hopes that economic development would not threaten the sense of place and small town feeling of the county. Business owners in particular thought that chain stores and hotels would threaten local businesses, and believed that “something on a smaller scale” would be more appropriate for Hamilton County:

White Springs is not big enough for someone to put a big Holiday Inn.... We want something on a smaller scale, where you got a little bit of this and a little bit of that. Because if you brought Wal-Mart to White Springs... that would put me out of business, and put out a lot of other businesses. (female business owner, White Springs)

Discussion and Planning Implications

The consensus of the study’s participants was that nature-based and heritage tourism holds much potential for benefiting their communities both economically and culturally, but African Americans’ role in the development of tourism initiatives remains uncertain. Although these perspectives are not assumed to be generalizable to the entire county population, study participants’ narratives do contradict blanket assumptions of apathy or lack of interest in the process of community-based tourism planning. The study’s findings speak to deficiencies in current cross-cultural communication strategies, as well as inadequacies in approaches to building more inclusive dialogue. They also offer insight into how to possibly begin to redress these deficiencies. The following discussion details how rural community planners in Hamilton County, and probably other rural communities in the South, can begin to think about how to effectively partner with marginalized populations in tourism planning.

Taking History Seriously

Although study participants emphasized that they did not want to focus on the past, it is clear that their past experiences inform how they respond to and interpret the present. Hamilton County experienced a period of strict segregation policy based on race where those identified as Black were prohibited from entering public spaces. This experience was present in the memories of informants; their narratives speaking
to a long historicity involved in creating environments of mistrust. For example, many public spaces where county meetings are held today are spaces that Black residents were formerly prohibited from entering. Informants suggested that sending impersonal invitations by mail to attend meetings in these places might not automatically create a welcoming environment. Instead, findings suggest that the type of inclusive environment county leaders are aspiring to create will mean nothing less than reaching out in more responsible and interactive ways to reverse historical trends of racial exclusion.

Although this study was intended to be exploratory and not determinative, findings suggest that the effect of historic events on participation rates may go further in explaining the intricacies of participation than explanations based solely on socioeconomic variables. In fact, researchers have corroborated the importance of historical memory when attempting to explain rurally located people’s lack of response to development interventions (Schelhas 2002; Waltersa 1999). What is suggested by other studies, and indicated by ours, is that strategies for increasing participation of underrepresented groups will continue to fall short when a mindful awareness of historic relationships does not inform approaches taken in the present (Schelhas 2002). As one study participant related, “doing the same thing and expecting different results” makes little sense. When groups have been historically excluded from the dialogue, and/or included in marginalized ways, answering the question “Why aren’t they participating?” compels that these precedents be taken into account.

**Building Ownership of the Process**

Study participants questioned the sincerity of existing collaboration efforts. Additionally, community leaders interviewed explained that when they would ask fellow Black residents why they were not participating, residents would say that “they didn’t know anything about it.” These findings point to the need of fostering more ownership of the process, or, as one study participant explained, creating “something that would be open enough so that people can participate and feel like they are part of it.”

The narratives also suggest that building partnerships with shared ownership over the actual setting of agendas would be one of the most important strategies for increasing participation. Creating and maintaining networks as a strategy to bypass former sociopolitical constraints (Spring 2000) would be important for redirecting resources in a way that responds to the priorities of Black as well as White county members. In addition, government agency cooperation with the churches could also help promote cross-cultural collaboration, as the churches serve important spiritual, organizational, and communicative roles in the African American community. Overall, results of this research call for an approach beyond solely integrating people into an already constituted process they have been historically excluded from, to making it a priority to partner with and promote leadership within Hamilton County’s various populations.

**Soliciting African American Interpretation**

Study participants took issue with the general invisibility in the representation of the county’s African American heritage, a county in which their predecessors most certainly helped build. They also revealed contention with representations of their
heritage in current tourism attractions. Inviting African American community leaders to inform interpretations of nature-based or heritage tourism would be an important step toward promoting relations of mutual trust and respect and would actively counteract the common critique that the involvement of minority populations is often simply symbolic. Partnering with African American community members in the interpretation of sites such as the historic Black church on Main Street, or natural areas of special significance to the community’s collective memory, might be an important way to more directly initiate dialogue.

With African American input it is likely that entirely new interpretative products and messages will be created. Although this project did not examine how incorporating new perceptions into planning would alter Hamilton County’s tourism product, it can be assumed that with more diversified opinions actively being incorporated, the county might fulfill a variety of visitors’ expectations. Residents’ memories of the Black community’s cultural contributions and positive interactions with the natural landscape could be used to identify potentially marketable natural and cultural capital that county members feel invested in.

Conclusion

This study begins to fill a gap for much-needed research on culturally diverse populations and nature-based and heritage tourism development. The intervention of this research lies in reversing the line of questioning for understanding a community’s capacity to develop tourism. Instead of eliciting how the community may fit into pre-conceived models, informants reveal the constraints they face within a system replete with the jargon of participation. At the same time, they reorient the way in which representations of their community’s resources are approached. Importantly, this study emphasizes the need to recognize the historicity of certain groups’ present-day absence from countywide dialogue. It also challenges previous assumptions of disinterest in community tourism development by revealing issues that impede efforts at cross-cultural collaboration. Results highlight the need to engage the African American community as equal partners in the planning process in order to increase their participation in county decision-making. Finally, because rural counties in the U.S. South share similar historic contexts, these findings are considered potentially instructive for other regions beyond Hamilton County.

References


