

# HOW INVOLVED IS ANNAPOLIS’ AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY IN THE ENVIRONMENT?

What groups should consider when seeking to diversify.

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Introduction .....1

Methodology.....1

Findings .....1

Analysis of findings .....3

Recommendations for engagement .....4

    Work with neighborhood leaders .....4

    Seek Information.....4

    Start with a project .....5

    Embrace diversity in the workplace.....5

    Be consistent.....5

References .....5

## METHODOLOGY

The groups were held on June 7<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> 2014 at the Stanton Community Center located in historic Annapolis. The total sample size consisted of 15 African American men and women living in Annapolis, MD. There were 8 men and 7 women ranging from ages 22 – 62. Many were in the 40 to 60 age range. Input shared was captured through audio/video recording and through note taking. We recruited participants through outreach to black churches, the housing authority, community centers and table events. Flyers were also posted in local shops, churches, and community centers.



1. SHANITA BROWN LEADING FOCUS GROUP OF AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY MEMBERS

## INTRODUCTION

In March 2014, I published an article<sup>1</sup> about the lack of racial and cultural diversity in the environmental field and the importance of hearing directly from non-engaged groups. As an African American woman working on finding her niche in the green arena, I volunteered to work with the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay because of their commitment to engaging citizens and bringing people together for the health of one of America’s natural treasures, the Chesapeake Bay. With the Alliance’s support, I implemented an opinion research project. Funded by a Chesapeake Bay Trust mini-grant, I was able to organize and facilitate two local focus groups.

The purpose of the focus group was to create a space for people to openly share their thoughts and opinions about their connection to the environment and views on minority participation in the Bay restoration movement. In addition, the groups allowed me to get to know the community by gauging values and issues important to them. Participants were asked a series of questions related to environmental outreach, education and social interactions between communities and environmental groups. Their responses were clear, straightforward, and informative.

## FINDINGS

Participants were asked about their personal and community concerns. Between both groups, participants had a long list of social concerns. Most dealt with increases in cost of living, crime, litter, jobs and lack of places to play for their children. The second focus group also added quality drinking water, loss of habitat to development, and degraded creeks and rivers due to siltation. Members in the second group were more in tune with environmental changes in the community. A young woman says:

*"You know when your water is polluted, when it starts disappearing. In Eastport behind Housing Authority, that was some pretty water. Now the water has totally disappeared. It starts in the middle now."*

When asked if one issue was more important than another, participants felt they were equally important. Although, participants expressed that when forced to choose, social concerns do take precedence over environmental issues.

When asked about the historical relationship of African Americans to the natural environment versus today, participants were able to discuss it on a local level. They described how black watermen depended on the Chesapeake Bay for their livelihoods in the past. Today this relationship is almost non-existent due to gentrification, development, and the fact that waterfront property is no longer easily accessible to black people. Others answered this question with their personal stories. One man, 59 years old, said:

*"I remember when Annapolis mall wasn't here. We use to catch the train as a 6 year old...to go fishing, frog giggering, and nature hikes – it's not there anymore because of quote unquote progress. All of the natural environment is getting smaller and smaller."*

To the contrary, younger people described their childhood experience with the natural environment as built up, polluted, and privatized. A young woman, age 22, answered:

*"There's trash, oil and tires and all types of nasty filthy stuff in this water. People just gonna go in this water? And let their kids go in this water?"*

Participants, young and old from both groups said that they used to swim in the Bay but not today nor will they let their children or grandchildren. Another woman, age 30, replied:

*"I never actually been to Sandy Point because it cost too much for my family to go, but we go over it a lot [the Bay]."*

Older generations really expressed how different the natural environment is today than when they were children. Although many of them had relationships with nature, they admitted that their children did not because of loss of access and pollution of natural areas. A woman from the second group who is actively involved in her church commented:

*"For instance, when I was coming up we called them lightning bugs – you don't see these things anymore. That's pollution."*

I then asked participants if they think the environment can be restored. The responses were mixed. The 59 year old man from the first group said:

*"You don't know how many fees we have in the state of Maryland to fix the Bay...because of all the runoff from the manufacturing companies, all the garbage and trash that goes into the Bay from the sewer system I don't think we'll ever be*

*able to clean it up."* However, the woman who's never been to Sandy point replied, *"If we messed it up, there's a way to clean it."*

I then asked participants what they thought needed to be done to help the environment and who was responsible for doing it. Folks in the first group leaned more towards personal responsibility, saying:

*"It's not up to one specific race, one specific type of people. It's up to everybody to pull together but if everybody not gonna jump on board like us, then it's up to us to get everybody on board."*

People in the second group discussed the need for restoring local creeks like Weems and College creeks. Everyone talked about an area of College creek behind the Glenwood Senior Citizen high rise that they think should be dealt with by various levels of government but more specifically, the local Alderman. A man, 43 years old, said:

*"It was being cleaned up a few years ago when they thought the majority was going to buy up the waterfront property, when they couldn't buy it everything stopped." In addition, one woman added, "They're beautifying it for certain people, they're not beautifying it for the community".*

Next, participants were asked, "Who is an environmentalist? What is an environmentalist?" Their responses included: "I am" or "We are" or "The community." They responded with behaviors they do that contribute to protecting the environment, including recycling and not littering. Litter was one of the biggest environmental concerns for their community. In reference to litter, someone said:

*"We need to change our thought patterns and not wait for someone else to clean it up or wait for someone else to come in and do it. We need to have enough pride to do it ourselves."*

Many people litter in their communities because they do not care and because there aren't enough trash and recycling bins. Participants expressed a strong need for more trash bins throughout the neighborhood and continual changing of cans. This is a behavioral change issue they believe could be addressed by meeting these basic needs.

Because participants identified themselves as environmentalists, they were asked what motivates them as such. The first group's response signified an absence of "community togetherness" as a motivating factor. People said things like:

*"It's now time to start putting words into action. Don't come to the meetings and voice your opinion about things you want to change and you're not doing anything."*

On the other hand, participants in the second group named public health as their main motivator. One person, 62 years

old, shared that his father died of lung cancer from breathing in fumes at work.

Another line of questioning explored the level of involvement with environmental organizations. No one was a member of one. Most, if not all, could not name many environmental groups based in or outside Annapolis. Between both groups, the Sierra Club and the Chesapeake Children's Museum were mentioned. People do not feel they have been included in outreach from these groups. Participants said they never see flyers from groups inviting people to come out and help. After hearing this, it was not surprising that many stated a reason for attending the focus groups was to be educated and to learn what they can do to help. They recognize the lack of diversity in environmental work and attribute it to lack of information shared with the minority community. Someone said:

*"The information is there, we have access to it but it's not brought into the community per se. As far as finding out the information, yeah we can seek it out but it's not brought into the community". Another stated, "We lack information, if we had the information maybe the black person could get more involved. It seems that the information is kept to certain areas."*

Many members of the African American community do not feel they are a part of the larger Annapolis community. In recognition of increasing development and highlighting the environmental changes they've witnessed over the years, they feel that the advancement of Annapolis, structurally and socially, has not been for their benefit. An older man, 62, stated:

*"Integration back in 66' – when we were separated from all black schools, we were neglected". Later he goes on, "Now, we live around this area, compared to all the boats you see around here, how many minorities own a boat? It won't happen".*

In addition, participants in both groups described African American's as poorly represented in Annapolis culture and politics.

Participants were asked for their thoughts on the level of racial and cultural diversity in the environmental field, and what they think could be done to make the field more diverse. Everyone agreed that environmental groups lack diversity but should be more diverse. Lack of information and education, is one reason for why diversity is low. The 62 year old man, in the second group, said:

*"One of the reasons why the African American community isn't as involved as you'd like is because we're not getting the message to do something, to help out."*

A different perspective was given in the first group, one person said:

*"The prominence of the Save the Bay organizations or the environmental organizations that I know of, the majority of*

*folks that work with them are not African American. There is a lack of participation in the community because it's not that important. The main concerns in the African American community – jobs, adequate housing, etc. takes precedence over the environment although the environment plays a major role in all of that."*

Participants were also asking for consistency from environmental groups and leaders. They would like to see them actively involved their communities.

Furthermore, others in the focus groups discussed the lack of diversity as it relates to the culture of "environmentalism." Some people implied that diversity may be lacking because of what is happening inside the environmental field. One person said:

*"A lot of people don't adjust well to other cultures or situations if they're only exposed to one type of way of life. I think that plays a part when looking at the environment. There's someone who is not used to being around other cultures or races then it may be harder for them to adjust to something else to help get the job done."*

## ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

In an increasingly urbanized area such as Annapolis, ecologically viable waterfront and other natural spaces are already scarce. Unfortunately, access to such spaces and the Chesapeake Bay itself is disproportionately limited to the African American community. Participants expressed their frustration with the privatization of beaches and waterfront that were once publically accessible. Today, in addition to privatization and loss of natural areas to development, high costs, and pollution are preventing people - some groups more than others - from enjoying natural spaces. This all ties into differences in socio-economic status and for the African American community, it is connected to a past of being "bought-out" and "pushed-out" of natural spaces.

Despite the limitations on access to natural areas, participants, namely older generations, are aware of the general issues facing the Chesapeake Bay and the environment. However, the younger generations seemed to be less aware but generally more optimistic for its recovery. This difference in knowledge and optimism could be attributed to how participants described their relationship to the Bay. Many of the older participants who were fortunate enough to have had positive and intimate experiences with nature in the past and know how the environment used to be. It may be hard for them to fathom the environment returning to a state they were so familiar when faced with the pollution and degradation they see today. A changing environment means that our relationship to it is changing as well. For this community as well as many others, people are not having those intimate experiences with the natural environment frequently or not at all. That however, is not stopping participants from wanting to be involved in the Bay's restoration.

The focus groups revealed that there are a number of reasons for lack of involvement of African Americans in environmental organizations. Lack of knowledge about Bay groups and how they could get involved was the number one reason. In addition, participants don't think groups are making a strong enough effort to reach out there community. Information that is available to the public, is not deliberately shared with the black community. Some also expressed that the community faces social issues that take priority over environmental concerns. There is still evidence that there are people who want to be involved across all communities. However, this also implies that while environmental groups may want more involvement of minority communities, it does not appear they are currently being effective in involving the African American community in Annapolis.

An interesting perspective was expressed by one participant on why diversity is lacking in environmental groups. She discussed how difficult it can be for an outsider to adjust to a different culture. Her response also implied how difficult it can be for members of an organization to adjust to someone with a different cultural outlook. This cultural divide can speak to the retention of minority employees and volunteers or cultural expectations of what an environmentalist is or does. In order to be successful in attracting and sustaining diverse participation in an organization or movement, there must be acceptance and understanding of different racial and class cultures and desires. If groups desire more diversity, they must be willing to embrace all that comes along with it including cultural differences, new agendas, and ways of doing business. This means they have to think about how they will "manage diversity" once they have it. Meaning, strides should be made to sustain it over the long term. For example, reviewing organizational practices and culture and being open to making changes to them in order to accommodate a diverse staff. Additionally, to be successful, environmental groups will need to expand their views in order to integrate both environmental issue they feel are a priority with the socio-environmental issues that minority communities face and feel are a priority in order to begin and sustain that engagement.

A major theme of the groups was the idea that everyone was responsible for the health of the environment. There was a sense of place and responsibility from many participants of both the older and younger generations. Some people felt that the government should be more responsible but generally, participants acknowledged community responsibility. People's discussion about litter as a big environmental and social concern reveals a problem that if their community came together could be addressed. Although, for this to occur there needs to be some leadership from community members as well as local government and environmental groups. However, some social concerns like increased cost of living and adequate housing can get in the way of environmental action. The way in which this African American community relates to the aforementioned issues are linked to racial and social inequities. For this reason, acknowledgement of this in environmental messaging and action may be necessary.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT

One of the challenges environmental group's face when looking to engage more diverse audiences is how to strategically approach their goals. For this reason, many groups are simply not incorporating diversity outreach into their programs. Focus group participants were asked what they thought could be done to diversify Bay restoration groups. Then, more specifically, how to engage Annapolis' African American residents in local environmental work. The responses of both groups centered on the visibility and involvement of environmental groups in their local communities. Although older participants were very knowledgeable about Chesapeake Bay issues, they attributed non-involvement to lack of information.

It is important to understand that traditional outreach practices like recruiting members and calling for volunteers through emails may not be the best way to reach out to these communities. Environmental organizations might be more effective by promoting their work and events through minority-serving institutions – schools, community groups, local leaders and houses of worship. Participants suggest groups share information with the Black churches who have a strong presence in their communities. They even recommended specific churches and community representatives (like Aldermen). Based on the focus group data, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter may also not be ideal for reaching this demographic. Essentially, closing the communication gap between environmental organizations and minorities is a crucial first step in beginning to diversify.

### WORK WITH NEIGHBORHOOD LEADERS

Local environmental groups based in Annapolis may benefit from utilizing Aldermen, community centers, and local newspapers to reach this minority demographic. Interactions among participants showed that the minority community is active and thus would respond to outreach that incorporates entertainment. For example, participants recommended events or activities that brought the community physically together such as concerts, fairs, and Beautification Days. As community togetherness and responsibility were significant to participants in addressing environmental problems, such community events seem appropriate. Visibility and action of environmental groups in African American communities and organizations is important to dispel the belief that their community will not get enhanced with green practices because they are black and/or less affluent than the rest of Annapolis.

### SEEK INFORMATION

In addition, it is important to learn about the community before trying to get a non-engaged group on board with the initiatives of any environmental organization, especially if members of their demographic are not already represented. This includes looking for ways environmental organizations

can speak to their existing concerns. Sometimes, environmental justice will arise as seen in concerns like access to parks and beaches. Finding opportunities where your organization's mission aligns with such concerns can create a lasting and respected partnership.

### START WITH A PROJECT

Another area Bay groups should focus their efforts on is helping to create positive experiences with the Chesapeake Bay for children and adults in these communities. Although the Bay is something participants would like to see restored, most do not currently have a relationship with it. Organizing low cost day trips for adults and children to visit parts of the Bay and learn about the resource would be a great start. Creating more access to local waterways for enjoyment and environmental connections is needed. To begin making these connections, be sure to first reach out to local leaders in the community. In general, efforts to show the community you care speak to visibility and creates trust in the organization.

In particular, participants were uniformly concerned about the health of creeks and rivers in their backyards. Namely, College creek. Many people expressed their frustration with the conditions of the creek and would like to see it restored so it could be enjoyed by the community. This could be an opportunity for a Project Clean Stream venture for the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay to build partnerships with community leaders and organizations and focus community attention on this issue.

### EMBRACE DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

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<sup>i</sup> <https://allianceforthebay.org/2014/04/how-can-we-diversify-participation-in-bay-restoration-efforts/>

For lasting success in diversity efforts, racially and culturally, I advise environmental groups to work from within to retain minority staffing and support. Supporting a diversity committee and dialogue in the workplace in order to guide outreach recommendations will be beneficial for the long run. Investing in diversity training for staff is just as important. Again, I recommend groups begin to form partnerships with houses of worship and community-based groups that work on social and environmental justice issues. Look for ways to complement each other's goals while making the environmental movement more diverse. Even more, this will begin to bridge the gap between two movements that were created separately.

### BE CONSISTENT

Lastly, as environmental groups start to make connections with minority communities, consistency will be important. At the end of both focus groups, participants were adamant about follow-up and next steps. They were excited to share their thoughts but they were more interested in how they could get involved with environmental work that benefited their communities and the Chesapeake Bay. The groups not only offered new perspectives on a variety of topics but they served as a gateway into one small community in one small town that is part of a larger effort: the restoration of the Chesapeake Bay.

### REFERENCES

The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations: Mainstream NGOs, Foundations & Government Agencies. Dorceta E. Taylor, Ph.D. <http://diversegreen.org/report/>