African American Participation in Nature- and Heritage-Based Tourism Planning in Hamilton County, Florida

A practicum report prepared for
the Florida Natural Resources Leadership Institute
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by

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Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to identify approaches for gaining the support and participation of Hamilton County’s local African American residents in the development of the county’s recreation and tourism opportunities at an early stage of the tourism development process. It identified their perceptions of how tourism development can best provide for their desired economic and non-economic benefits. This population was singled out for this project because of the unique socioeconomic and historic circumstances that characterize their population. African Americans comprise a significant proportion of the overall population (43%) and constitute a majority of those community members’ most impoverished and disempowered.

Background

Nature- and heritage-based tourism are emerging as important economic alternatives for rural areas, offering many benefits to the host communities. Community leaders in Hamilton County have identified nature/heritage tourism as a potential strategy for conserving the county’s abundant and pristine natural ecosystems and historically significant cultural sites while simultaneously providing economic benefits to the impoverished communities. A large amount of aesthetically scenic public land in this rural county (including the Suwannee River which flows from the Okefenokee Swamp) and a rich history surrounding African-American occupation of the region, provide a rich setting for the development of nature/heritage tourism as an attractive option for Hamilton County.

At the same time, county representatives recognize that community members are stakeholders in the development of a nature/heritage tourism industry in their community. Most often, however, support for both ecological conservation and economic development is more easily attained within economically affluent and well-educated communities, unlike the socioeconomic makeup of Hamilton County. Hamilton County has been classified as low-income wherein approximately 25% of households fall below the poverty level. Additionally, minorities are a majority in every county municipality and less than 55% of residents over the age of 25 have high school diplomas. The development of a nature/heritage tourism industry could thus provide an opportunity to engage the citizenry in discourse about how industry might impact their community as well as benefit them.

This project is unique in that it seeks to involve economically-disadvantaged, culturally-diverse county citizens in the process of natural resource planning. As stated in the Hamilton County Environmental and Cultural Resource Data Report, the success of environmentally and culturally-based initiatives depend greatly on community awareness and support, especially if the community is to benefit from, as well as help conserve, the ecological integrity of its natural systems. The citizenry must possess the skills needed to understand the ecological and economic aspects of the proposed nature/heritage tourism initiative, and be empowered to participate in the development of diversified economic activities that prove sustainable.
Approach

The Suwannee River Water Management District has conducted several visioning meetings with Hamilton County residents over the last three years. Also, organizations within the County have attempted to bring local residents together to discuss and develop plans for improving Hamilton County economy and quality of life. Although many people attended these meetings, the large African American population has not been adequately represented. Representatives from the Suwannee River Water Management District, Hamilton County Extension, and Hamilton County Tourist Development Committee have all expressed the need to get African Americans more involved in community-planning initiatives. Two methods were used to gather information from African American residents: 1) individual interviews and 2) focus group meeting.

Individual Interviews. Allen Tyree, Hamilton County Extension Agent, Jennifer Hale, UF graduate research assistant, and I decided the best way to talk with any group of people in the County was to meet with members of that group on an individual basis. Although explicit examples of racism are rare in Hamilton County, there are still a variety of perceived barriers between cultures. I did not play a direct role in the individual interviews because of my background (White and from a University). It was assumed that African American participants would not be as forthcoming with me regarding their attitudes and beliefs about community participation in county decision-making. Therefore, Ms. Hale who is Latina conducted the individual interviews. Through these individual discussions, patterns, themes, and a strategy for working with this unique group of Hamilton County residents were to be identified. This process included the following steps.

- Identified potential participants (February-March, 2000)
- Sent letters (Attachment 1) to identified community members explaining project and soliciting participation (April-June, 2000).
- Phoned community members to set up interviews (April-July, 2000).
- Interviewed willing participants (April-August, 2000)
- Transcribed audio tapes (June-September, 2000)
- Analyzed interview data (June –September, 2000)

To gather quality information, these interviews were organized using qualitative research methods. For example, participants were selected to represent a diverse sample of African American residents in the County, UF researchers developed an interview guide (Attachment 2) to maintain consistency interviews were transcribed and were analyzed using qualitative data analysis software (Ethnograph).

Focus Group Meeting. At the conclusion of the individual interviews, African American residents were invited to participate in a focus group meeting to discuss recreation and tourism development on a broad scale for Hamilton County. This meeting was conducted September 11, 2000 in the Hamilton County Library in Jasper, Florida. People who participated in the individual interviews as well as other African American
residents were invited to attend the meeting. Everyone invited received a letter (Attachment 3) and a phone call about the meeting. Similar to the individual interviews, the focus group meeting was designed to be open-ended, and participants were allowed to set the agenda of the meeting as long as the discussion revolved around tourism and recreation development in the County (see Attachment 4 for agenda). Participants comments were written on flip chart sheets and posted around the room (Attachment 5). Also, the meeting was audio-taped, which will later be transcribed and analyzed.

**Project Participants.** Since this is the first study of its kind in Hamilton County, we targeted residents who have expressed some interest in County decision-making with County Extension Office. These “local knowledgeable” were assumed to represent their County’s African American population as well as have the knowledge, interest, and experience to best explain their culture’s attitudes toward community participation, nature- and heritage-based tourism development, and African American attitudes. Jennifer Hale interviewed 26 African American residents of Hamilton County.

The 26 participants in the individual interviews were invited to participate in the focus group meeting in September. Also, African American Hamilton County residents who hold elected office or other decision-making position were also invited to attend the meeting. A total of 17 people attended the meeting (nine women and eight men).

**Lessons Learned**

Results are currently being compiled from the project and final conclusions of the meeting are not currently available. This section will summarize the preliminary results of the practicum. Also, lessons learned moving through the process will be discussed.

**Project Results.** Due to Hamilton County’s high need for economic development, this practicum was designed to highlight areas where African Americans could benefit through new jobs and income. However, participants took us in a direction we were not expecting. Rarely did participants specifically talk about the need to create new jobs and income in the County. That is not to say they do not see a need for economic growth in Hamilton County – they just do not see the creation of more jobs (whether they are tourism related or for another type of business) as the sole answer to African Americans’ problems in the County.

The results discussed here represent overall findings from the project. They will not be discussed in terms of the individual interviews or focus group meeting. The notes taken from on flip chart is in Attachment 5 and an example of one of the individual interviews is in Attachment 6.

- **High Attachment to the County.** The majority of people interviewed had lived in Hamilton County the majority of their lives and did not want to live anywhere else. Although they perceived racial issues and problems in the County, these issues did not deter their attachment to the region. Because of their love for Hamilton County, they were interested in any tool used to preserve the natural and
cultural resources that they believe make the County unique and special.

- **Diversity among African American Residents.** As interviews were conducted, socio-economic differences between Hamilton County residents were differentiated. For example, African Americans who owned land and made relatively high incomes played a greater role in our interviews. Low income African Americans who did not own land were seen as the group who was most disenfranchised from County decision-making. Since this project provided some indication of the needs of this second group of African American residents but continued qualitative research that examines their needs must be conducted before we can truly say we understand the African American population in Hamilton County.

- **Strong Need for Youth Recreation and Development Opportunities.** Project participants are worried about the children in Hamilton County. In both the interviews and focus group, participants addressed a diversity of ways to work with children. They believe a Boys and Girls Club and/or a local YMCA would provide recreation and educational opportunities for African American youth that are not currently available. Without these opportunities, they believe their children are more likely to participate in delinquent behavior. They also believe these opportunities will give their children a stronger sense of attachment to the County. For example, project participants do not believe children have a strong attachment to the County like older residents do, and they believe this partly contributes the high percentage of younger residents who move out of the County.

- **Perception of Heritage Tourism as a History Preservation Tool.** Due to participants’ strong attachment to the County, they are highly supportive of activities that might preserve the things that make Hamilton County special. Therefore, when confronted with the idea of tourism as an emerging industry in Hamilton County, they saw it as a way to provide value to historical resources that were traditionally not valued by the White decision-makers in the County. If these resources could be marketed as potential tourism attractions, they perceived those resources would be protected. Future meetings will be conducted to identify these potential tourism resources.

- **African Americans and Tourism Development.** Project participants were not happy with the way they perceived their culture to be portrayed in museums and historical documents. In many cases, they say their history is ignored when people document the history of Hamilton County. They are specifically uncomfortable with the “Old Jail” in Jasper – one of the few historical attractions in Hamilton County. The majority of historical interpretation in the jail focuses on the history of Whites in the County. The only example of including an African American in the jail is a picture of an African American male who was executed (hanged) in the jail.
• **Decision-Makers Must Come to African American Neighborhoods.** The primary reason project participants said they do not participate in current County decision-making is due to the long history of being mistreated and ignored in the County. The idea that “Whites have excluded us for years, why should we believe they are ready to listen to us now?” is common among participants. Although the relationship between Whites and Blacks might always be strained, project participants suggested meetings, workshops, and other forms of community participation must take place in African American neighborhoods. In other words, it must look like the community decision makers are going out of their way to incorporate African Americans into the planning process. Community planning techniques in traditional meeting places (many buildings that African Americans were excluded from forty years ago) do not create the perception that decision-makers are ready to truly involve African Americans in community planning.

**Lessons About Process.** The practicum proved to be rather unique for two reasons. First, the project did not work to solve an existing conflict, but was designed to proactively improve community participation in Hamilton County. Second, it was determined that a variety of public participation techniques were needed to successfully complete the project. For example, a single meeting would not have provided useful information. Therefore, individual interviews were completed along with a more extensive focus group meeting to complete this practicum. Specific lessons learned from the conducting the practicum are discussed below.

• **Redefining the Need of Higher Importance.** Nature-based tourism served as the impetus of the project, but often it was not a part of the discussion with project participants. Identifying African Americans’ needs in the community proved to be the most important product of the project. Forcing participants to think about a specific issue (e.g., tourism development) would not have been a productive exercise; therefore, interviews and focus group discussions would focus on related recreation and community development issues.

• **Maintaining a Connection with the Project.** As stated earlier, I did not play a direct role in the individual interviews. Since this was the primary information source, I often felt disconnected from the project and required Ms. Hale to meet with me about the project. Although I tried to be involved in all appropriate ways, I will never fully get a feeling for participants attitudes, emotions, and beliefs about their participation in County decision-making.

• **Focusing on a Specific Population.** We were often questioned about why we were focusing on African Americans and ignoring low-income Whites in Hamilton County. Occasionally, we let this pressure get to us and attempted to plan for a meeting that integrated County decision-makers (White and Black) with project participants. However, results showed us that neither group was ready to meet with the other. Although a meeting discussing African American participation in community planning would have been extremely helpfully, we
had to come to the understanding that we were not there to solve Hamilton County’s racial issues.

- **Using Multi-Methods to Gather Information.** The decision to conduct individual interviews proved to be rather successful. It provided rich, detailed information regarding a variety of issues. The meetings also provided a solid foundation to conduct the focus group meeting. Ms. Hale was very familiar with every focus group participant and she knew where to best probe participants during focus group questioning.

- **Building a More Targeted Meeting.** Although the focus group meeting benefited from the individual interviews that preceded it, the meeting could have provided more useful results if we used the results from the interviews to develop a more structured meeting. As conducted, we let the participants set the agenda. Instead we should have asked more targeted questions based on the interviews.

**Conclusion**

Although this report treats the practicum as being completed, I believe we are in the beginning stages of a process of integrating all Hamilton County residents into an ecotourism development program. In fact, if the process ended now, it would not be successful. There are a variety of steps that now need to be taken.

1. Continue discussions with African Americans regarding specific nature- and heritage-based tourism development.

2. Develop community planning meetings, workshops, etc. that bring Hamilton County residents (White and Black), who have traditionally not participated in these exercises, together with decision-makers.

3. Develop programs for African American youth in Hamilton County. Facilities and financial resources exist for these endeavors. It is now up to parents and other Hamilton County residents to develop strategies to provide these opportunities.

4. Partner with Suwannee River Water Management District, Department of Environmental Protection, and other state agencies to develop nature-based tourism resources that work in harmony with African American residents’ desires.

5. Identify and apply for federal and state grants that highlight opportunities to improve African Americans’ ways of life in the County. A variety of programs exist that are designed to help create economic opportunities for minorities. Hamilton County representatives are in a good position to successfully compete for grants to develop tourism-related projects as well as other community development projects that will help African Americans.