

# URBAN PARK AND FOREST PARTICIPATION AND LANDSCAPE PREFERENCE: A REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

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**Abstract.** Blacks and Whites are important users of urban parks and forests, and race continues to be an important factor in urban park and forest participation and landscape preference. African Americans, more than Whites, prefer developed facilities and services; Whites more likely than Blacks prefer undeveloped and more nature-based settings. It is also reasonable to assume that racial discrimination can exist in the landscapes of urban parks and forests and affect decision making and participation. Urban forests and parks can be planned, managed, and maintained to foster diversity of racial and ethnic participation and relationships much in the same way they can foster biological diversity among flora and fauna. Today, it is vital for urban foresters and arborists to understand and respond to differences in the participations and expectations of these diverse users.

**Key Words.** African Americans; attitudes; behavior; Blacks; discrimination; ethnic; landscapes; marginality; minority; participation; preferences; urban parks and forests; race; subculture; Whites.

Blacks\* and Whites have always been important users of urban parks and forests. There is an abundance of previous research documenting the differences in park participation and preferences of these two groups (ORRC 1962; Lee 1972; Washburne 1978; Edwards 1981; Dwyer 1993; Gobster and Delgado 1993; Floyd 1999; Virden and Walker 1999; Cordell et al. 2002; Shinew et al. 2004). If urban foresters, arborists, and others involved in public landscape management and maintenance are to make urban parks and forests more open, appealing, and safe to all users, they need to understand the realities of the differences among constituent groups and consider them in their planning, management, and maintenance strategies. Floyd (1999) underscored the importance of understanding racial differences and calling them into account in park management and decision making. He argued that public agencies must ensure that management and maintenance policies promote equal access and use; and that there are, and will continue to be, racial differences in patterns of participa-

tion, the style of use, and in the preferences for different landscapes, such as developed or natural. Gobster (2002) pointed out that the realities of ethnic group participation and landscape preferences should be recognized to “avoid negative reactions and charges of inequities.”

While Gobster’s admonition refers to the importance of understanding the varying preferences of *all* ethnic groups, it seems especially relevant to African Americans. For many years, this group was the most numerous and readily identified minority in the United States. Their history of bondage and often institutionalized racial discrimination has led to a distrust of how deeply African Americans views and needs are considered in public policy making, including decisions concerning parks and other public landscapes.

African Americans differ from the majority White population in regard to race, ethnicity, and minority status. Racial groups are distinguished by others or by their members primarily on the basis of real or perceived physical characteristics (Floyd 1999). Ethnic groups are set apart by cultural or nationality characteristics (Feagin 1989). Minority groups, because of race or ethnicity, may experience a wide range of discriminatory treatment, including a lower status position in the broader society (Yetman 1985). All three factors—race, ethnicity, and minority status—have likely contributed to differences between African Americans and the majority White population with regard to attitudes toward, and behaviors within, urban parks and forests. This article summarizes extant literature in this area and provides conclusions based on this information.

## PARTICIPATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS AND WHITES IN URBAN PARKS AND FORESTS

More than four decades of studies help understand the differences between Blacks and Whites in urban park and forest participation. In 1962, the Survey Research Center, a division of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, surveyed a random sample of 2,750 adults in the United States to gather information about the national demand for various outdoor recreation activities (ORRC 1962). Those authors, in a study using both socioeconomic and racial variables, found that Blacks participated less in outdoor recreation than Whites:

\*The term “Black” or “African American” is defined by the 2000 U.S. Census as “people having origins in any of the Black race groups of Africa.” Throughout this article, the terms “Black” and “African American” are used interchangeably.

*Race shows a marked relationship with outdoor activity; Blacks engaged in these activities relatively infrequently. The multivariate analysis shows that to some extent this is a reflection of other differences between Blacks and Whites (income, education, occupational status, and place of residence). Yet, race has a significant relationship of its own to outdoor recreational activity. Black men in particular are much less active participants than White men (ORRC 1962).*

In a seminal study of leisure participation among African Americans and Whites, Washburne (1978), using data from a California survey, discovered that Blacks were significantly less likely than Whites to participate in undeveloped recreation areas and in activities such as hiking. In a statewide survey of Texas residents, Adams and Thomas (1989) found that Whites comprised 70% of the participants in "appreciative" activities such as wildlife watching, photography, and hiking, while African Americans comprised 10%. In a public area recreation study, Hartman and Overdeest (1990) discovered similar results.

Phillipp (1993) found Blacks focused more on social interaction in parks and Whites more on desired environments when choosing a leisure place. Dwyer (1993, 1994) reported many important differences and similarities in leisure activities between Whites and Blacks. He wrote that Blacks tend to participate more than Whites in team sports but less in activities that take place in natural areas or undeveloped facilities. He also reported that both Blacks and Whites placed a high level of importance on recreation, but Whites had the highest level of satisfaction with parks in their neighborhoods and Blacks much lower. Gobster and Delgado (1993) found evidence that park users, both Black and White, showed many common interests, preferences, and concerns about Chicago's Lincoln Park. They reported that Whites tended to use the park individually or as couples, while Blacks came in significantly larger groups. They also found that Whites participated more in personal activities such as walking, and that Blacks participated in passive social park activities more than Whites. Floyd et al. (1994) reported a broad pattern of results consistent with earlier studies of Black and White differences in park participation: Blacks exhibited a higher involvement than Whites in team sports, fitness activities, and socializing and voluntary organizations. Floyd et al. (1995) in a study of 1,200 Black and White, male and female, middle- and high-school students discovered that levels of fear (of nature) and desire for urban environments were higher for African Americans than Whites.

Cordell et al. (2002), in an analysis of data from the National Survey on Recreation and Environment, discovered that Blacks found many individual recreational activities, such as walking, swimming, and hiking, less favorable than Whites did. In a study of park preferences, Payne et al.

(2002) found Blacks preferred that parklands serve a recreation function rather than a conservation function. Further, Blacks preferred organized recreation activities rather than nature-based activities. Gobster (2002) reported that, although all park users shared a core set of interests, preferences, and concerns about Chicago's Lincoln Park and its management, Blacks were more likely than Whites to engage in passive social activities (e.g., picnicking, talking and socializing, and festivals). Although both Blacks and Whites participated in active group sports, Whites were most involved in active individual sports such as walking and jogging and Blacks in group sports. In a study of Chicago park use, Shinew et al. (2004) reported that Blacks and Whites were significantly different in 15 out of 25 leisure activities. African Americans had a lower preference than Whites for nature-based activities. The authors, in a hierarchical cluster analysis, discovered that Blacks preferred sport/fitness, social activities/interaction, and non-outdoors, while Whites preferred leisure and outdoors activities.

#### PREFERENCES OF BLACKS AND WHITES FOR URBAN PARKS AND OPEN SPACES

Past research on Whites and Blacks has shown that these groups, in general, differ in their open space, park, and urban forest landscape preferences. Anderson (1978) found that Whites preferred landscapes of dense forests, while Blacks preferred landscapes representing more open and developed parks. Zube and Pitt (1981) found that African Americans perceived more natural landscapes to be less aesthetically pleasing than developed environments and were less likely than Whites to recreate in them. Talbot and Kaplan (1984) suggested that Blacks preferred small, carefully manicured areas with relatively few trees, as opposed to larger, more densely wooded areas. They wrote that Blacks preferred higher levels of maintenance; more open, formal tree plantings; and higher levels of facility development. Washburne and Wall (1980) reported similar findings. Kaplan and Talbot (1988) found that Whites preferred scenes with dense foliage and overgrown vegetation, but Blacks preferred scenes with paved walks and built structures. According to Dwyer and Hutchison (1990), African Americans preferred more developed facilities and conveniences, while Whites preferred more remote and preserved recreational settings. Similar to their past studies, Talbot and Kaplan (1993) wrote that adolescent Blacks had a higher preference for settings that were carefully manicured and relatively open, while Whites preferred more heavily wooded areas with less evidence of human influence. Gramann (1996) and Johnson et al. (1998) discussed that Blacks, when compared with Whites, generally perceived natural settings to be less aesthetically pleasing than developed environments and were less likely to recreate in

such settings. Further, Black focus groups preferred recreational settings that were well lit and supervised. Virden and Walker (1999) reported that Blacks and Whites shared similar views towards social-setting attributes (e.g., being by oneself or sharing experiences), but that Whites preferred less management and law enforcement presence and more forested, remote, less developed settings than did Blacks. Gobster (2002) discovered that Whites preferred trees and vegetation, and Blacks cared less about the natural environment and more about facility and maintenance aspects. In his study, Blacks favored more formal landscape designs and greater openness and visibility than did Whites.

### THEORETICAL ALTERNATIVES

Floyd (1998 and 1999) and other authors (Washburne 1978; West 1989; Gobster and Delgado 1993; Phillip 1995, 1998, 2000; Johnson et al. 1998; Henderson and Ainsworth 2001) have discussed a number of theoretical explanations historically used to account for racial variation in urban park and forest participation and landscape preference. These alternatives include marginality, ethnicity or subcultural variation, and discrimination.

#### Marginality

Marginality, as introduced by Washburne (1978), was initially used to explain low levels of African American participation in underdeveloped primitive areas of California. African Americans were seen as occupying a marginal position in society because they were alienated from many opportunities by such socioeconomic realities as limited income, education, transportation, health care, employment status, and political representation. Marginality focuses on limited access to resources, usually due to differences in income. It postulates that lower income levels result in barriers to park visitation and use because of the costs of transportation, recreational participation, or both (West 1989; Johnson et al. 1998). The theory also suggests if these barriers were removed, Blacks would participate in and perceive urban parks and forests the same as the majority White population. For example, West (1989) explained differences in park visitation by the availability of automobile transportation to Blacks.

#### Ethnicity or Subcultural Variation

In his 1978 study, Washburne also explored and introduced ethnicity or subcultural variation. He determined that when controlling for socioeconomic factors, differences between Whites and Blacks in recreation participation could be attributed to ethnic and racial factors rather than those of marginality. Ethnicity or subcultural preference theory postulates that ethnic and racial groups develop as a distinct subculture, one retaining historic values and traditions distinct from the White population. As such, they have

different lifestyle preferences; norms, styles, and value systems; practices, attitudes, behaviors; and needs based on their cultural realities and beliefs. These factors help shape urban park and forest participation and landscape preference (West 1989; Floyd 1999). Moreover, Washburne and Wall (1980) believed that certain recreational sites may be used by some ethnic or racial groups as a way to contrast and set itself apart from others, and that recreation participations and preferences, and the landscapes in which they occur, may play a role in creating, maintaining, and expressing ethnic or racial identity (Floyd and Gramann 1993; Floyd 1998).

#### Interracial Relations, Discrimination, and Prejudice

A number of major outbreaks of racial unrest that occurred during the mid-to-late 1900s in the United States were associated with instances of perceived or real discrimination in urban park and forest settings. The Chicago race riot of 1949 was precipitated by conflict over space at a public beach. The Detroit race riot of 1949 began on Belle Isle, a major public recreation area with facilities for swimming, picnicking, and outdoor sports. Racial frictions over swimming rights there developed into riots that were quelled only after the deployment of several thousand federal troops (Shogan and Thomas 1964; Kornblum 1983). Kraus (1968) cited other instances of racial disturbances, including those in Chicago, Cleveland, and Omaha, that were connected with or involved park areas. One of the major issues delineated in the Kern Commission's report on the urban riots of the 1960s was the need for improved access for all races to parks and other public landscapes (West 1989). Furthermore, West (1989) cited two instances of recreational racism, one in Chicago and one in Dearborn, Michigan, in the form of a city ordinance barring the use of Dearborn parks by nonresidents (i.e., Blacks). More recently, the issues of environmental justice and the promotion of social inclusion in the use and enjoyment of urban parks and forests have been discussed (Floyd and Johnson 2002; Johnston and Shimada 2004).

Although historical and current instances of perceived and actual discrimination are believed to be contributory factors restricting Black participation in urban parks and forests, some authors believe they are both underreported and misunderstood (West 1989; Floyd 1998, 1999; Phillip 2000; Gobster 2002). Gobster (2002) wrote, "Discrimination is a serious issue in park management that has begun to receive some attention." Shinew et al. (2004) believed that despite an increasing Black middle and upper class, "African Americans continue to experience overt and symbolic forms of racism and discrimination."

Woodward (1988) and Blahna and Black (1993) found that racism resulting from on-site or off-site experiences was an important barrier to the use and enjoyment of park

landscapes by African Americans. Themes discussed by these authors included (1) on-site experiences of racism from other park users, (2) fear of expected or potential racism, and (3) participation patterns resulting from historical experiences with racism. According to Gobster and Delgado (1993), discrimination decreases levels of satisfaction associated with a park experience by making the person feel uncomfortable, possibly resulting in antagonistic behavior such as overt anger and violence in extreme circumstances. In their study of Chicago's Lincoln Park, these authors reported that discrimination had affected one in ten minority users. This discrimination included verbal harassment, physical gestures, assaults, nonverbal messages, and harassment from law enforcement officers. Floyd et al. (1994) observed that as perceived discrimination increased, use of public facilities by Blacks decreased. Floyd (1999) discussed the different types of discrimination that must be understood by managers of public landscapes, including historical, current, perceived, individual, interpersonal, institutional, actual, and overt.

Discrimination is not always the result of overt racism; it can also result from a lack of knowledge and sensitivity by park management and maintenance personnel toward certain groups; inequities in the quality of park facilities, programs, and services in areas with high proportions of ethnic users; and racially motivated actions (Gobster and Delgado 1993). Gobster (2002) reported that prejudicial behavior of other park users, park staff, and police officers was a problem reported by Blacks in Chicago's Lincoln Park. In contrast, Shinew et al. (2004) found that within parks located in segregated neighborhoods, Blacks did not fear racial conflict or discrimination because contact with Whites was limited. These authors also discovered in their study of Chicago parks that Whites more than Blacks reported fear of racial conflict, feeling unwelcome, and fear of conflict with other users. They concluded that interracial attitudes could be a result of the racial make-up of park users and the amount and type of park areas used most frequently by certain races.

#### Other Theoretical Alternatives

Other than marginality, ethnicity, and discrimination theories, many different ideas attempt to explain the differences between Whites and Blacks in urban park and forest participation and landscape preferences. Meeker (1973) believed that Whites viewed parks as places for refuge and escape, while African Americans viewed natural landscapes as reminders of their subjugation and oppression in an agrarian past. Virden and Walker (1999) discuss the idea that Blacks, when compared to Whites, "are more apprehensive about the possibility of encounters with undesirable or dangerous animals." Blacks and Whites may have different expectations of park landscapes because of

prior personal experiences with such settings (Shinew et al. 2004). As an example, many Blacks participated in fewer outdoor activities (camping, hiking, etc.) during childhood than Whites (Virden and Walker 1999), and they are often raised in highly urbanized environments. A desire for ethnic and group activities by Blacks could be related to security, comfort, and safety. Lee (1972) reported that Blacks created a landscape of homogeneity in parks. He surmised that Blacks sought safety in numbers and created boundary maintenance in perceived hostile environments. In fact, many urban park and forest participation and landscape preference differences, both within and between races, may be related to issues of security and safety (Virden and Walker 1999).

#### CONCLUSIONS

Race continues to be an important factor in urban park and forest participation and landscape preference. African Americans, more than Whites, prefer developed facilities and services; and Whites more likely than Blacks prefer undeveloped and more nature-based settings. It is reasonable to assume that racial discrimination can exist in the landscapes of urban parks and forests and affect decision making and participation. Discrimination should be distinguished as an explanatory variable in research examining urban park and forest participation and landscape preference.

It seems likely that that no single theoretical perspective completely explains the bases of racial differences in this area. Rather, *all* of the sources of constraint described above may impact to a greater or lesser extent on Black and White park users and influence the nature of their park participations and their preferences in park landscapes. Moreover, the importance of these various factors may change across time as income differentials shift; feelings of marginality are altered; subcultural values vary; beliefs and practices decrease or become intensified; discriminatory actions decline or increase; and the opportunities for childhood experiences are expanded for all youth. Continuing analysis of the differences between African Americans and Whites is needed if urban foresters and arborists are to be successful in "providing an environment of comfort and creating welcoming spaces to visitors from diverse backgrounds" (Rodriguez and Roberts 2002).

Urban forests and parks can be planned, managed, and maintained to foster diversity of racial and ethnic participation and relationships much in the same way they can foster biological diversity among flora and fauna (Shafer and Floyd 1997). Today, it is vital for urban foresters and arborists to understand and respond to differences in the participations and the expectations of these diverse users. Design standards and plans (location, architecture, density, and types of landscape plantings and amenities); maintenance standards and activities (clearance pruning, vista pruning, tree

thinning, tree removals); and management alternatives (hiring practices, internship programs, youth employment programs, docent programs, and education and outreach programs) affect the degree of participation and landscape preferences of racial groups.

As Goodale and Godbey (1995) said, "What is not needed, in terms of parks, is more of what exists. It is not enough for park and landscape managers to merely measure what they are currently doing, make population projections into the future, and provide more of the same." The needs and desires of a growing diverse population must be better understood and considered to manage and maintain urban parks and forests.

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**Résumé.** Les Blancs et les Noirs sont d'important utilisateurs des parcs urbains ainsi que forestiers et la race continue d'être un facteur important en regard de la participation et des préférences d'aménagement de ces parcs. Les Afro-américains, plus que les Blancs, préfèrent des lieux plus aménagés avec des équipements et des services; les Blancs, plus que les Noirs, préfèrent des lieux plus naturels et moins aménagés. Il est aussi raisonnable de penser que la discrimination raciale peut exister dans l'aménagement des parcs urbains ainsi que des forêts et que cela peut affecter la prise de décision et l'implication. Les parcs urbains et les milieux forestiers peuvent être planifiés, gérés et entretenus afin de favoriser la diversité raciale, la participation ethnique et les relations entre ces ethnies, et ce un peu de la même manière qu'ils peuvent favoriser la diversité biologique parmi la faune et la flore. Aujourd'hui, il est vital que les forestiers urbains et les arboriculteurs comprennent et tiennent compte de ces différences dans l'implication et les attentes par les divers utilisateurs.

**Zusammenfassung.** Schwarze und Weiße sind wichtige Nutzer von öffentlichen Parkanlagen und Wäldern und Rassen bleiben ein wichtiger Faktor in der Park- und Waldnutzung und Landschaftsbevorzugung. Afrikanische Amerikaner, mehr als Weiße, bevorzugen entwickelte Einrichtungen und Dienste, Weiße bevorzugen mehr als Schwarze unentwickelte und mehr natürliche Landschaften. Es ist auch angesagt zu vermuten, dass Rassendiskriminierung in den

Landschaften von Park- und Waldanlagen existieren können und das beeinflusst die Entscheidungsfindung und Nutznießung. Stadtwälder und Parkanlagen können geplant, gemanagt und erhalten werden, um die Diversität von rassischen und ethischen Nutznießungen und Beziehungen in derselben Weise unterstützen als sie die biologische Diversität der Flora und Fauna positiv beeinflussen. Heute ist es lebensnotwendig für die Forstleute und Arboristen, das zu verstehen und auf die Unterschiede in der Nutzung und die Erwartungen dieser diversen Nutzer zu reagieren.

**Resumen.** Blancos y Negros son usuarios de parques y bosques urbanos y la raza sigue siendo un factor importante en la participación y preferencia por estos paisajes. Los Afro Americanos, más que los Blancos, prefieren servicios y facilidades desarrollados; los Blancos más que los Negros, prefieren espacios menos desarrollados y más naturales. Es también razonable asumir que la discriminación racial puede existir en los parques y bosques urbanos y afecta la decisión de participación. Los parques y bosques urbanos pueden ser planeados, manejados y mantenidos para fomentar una diversidad de participación étnica y racial y esta relación puede ir más allá de la forma de fomentar la diversidad biológica entre flora y fauna. Hoy, es vital para los dasónomos urbanos y los arboristas entender y responder a diferencias en la participación y expectativas de estos usuarios diversos.